881856-episode-148-cuppa-joe-joseph-smith-s-plural-wives-with-kelly-mcafee...

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**SPEAKERS**

Josh Mangelson, Karin Peter

**Josh Mangelson** 00:17

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

**Karin Peter** 00:33

Welcome to Cuppa Joe, part of the Project Zion Podcast where we talk about Restoration history. Today, we're going to touch on what is for many people in Community of Christ, the number one taboo topic, and that is the plural wives of Joseph Smith. My guest today for our conversation is Kelly McAfee. Kelly, did I say that correctly?

**Kelly McAfee** 00:57

You did, absolutely.

**Karin Peter** 00:59

Wonderful. Kelly lives in Kirtland, Ohio, which is an important historical setting for all of us in the Restoration traditions. So Kelly, I'm going to guess that you are or were raised LDS?

**Kelly McAfee** 01:13

That is correct. Yes, and remained LDS until a couple of years ago. I'm 50—so that tells you how long I was a member.

**Karin Peter** 01:23

Uh huh…just a blip in the historical [*inaudible*-narrative?]. And you are—as I discovered a little while ago when we talked briefly—you are in education. You are a teacher?

**Kelly McAfee** 01:13

That is right, yeah.

**Karin Peter** 01:23

First grade and special education, so there's a special place in one of the three levels of heaven for you…

**Kelly McAfee** 01:43

Oh, thank goodness…

**Karin Peter** 01:44

…if you believe in three levels of heaven..

**Kelly McAfee** 01:47

Thank goodness.

**Karin Peter** 01:23

Yeah, definitely. Hi, Kelly. Thanks for being with us today.

**Kelly McAfee** 01:52

Oh, thank you for having me.

**Karin Peter** 01:54

So my friend Katherine—your friend Katherine—connected us, and it was because you did an unusual thing.

**Kelly McAfee** 02:09

Yes.

**Karin Peter** 01:54

Yes. I laughed just thinking about it. You create...

**Kelly McAfee** 02:09

I was just gonna say…let me say it surprised even me. The project surprised even me—it was not planned.

**Karin Peter** 02:14

Oh my gosh, this is going to be such a wonderful conversation. So you created a collection of dolls, each one representing a plural wife of Joseph Smith, Jr.?

**Kelly McAfee** 02:24

Right…Yes, and Joseph.

**Karin Peter** 02:28

I did see Joseph. I'm gonna send the photos into Project Zion so that hopefully we can link to those photos and everyone can get a look at your handiwork. So my first question right off the bat is; What?!

**Kelly McAfee** 02:47

Do you have a few minutes because it's…I came out here in April. I was dating a man who worked at the Kirtland Temple, who I'm now married to. We were going back and forth between Georgia and Ohio to visit each other. I had been out to Kirtland a few times to visit, and I came out last April. We were talking about Fanny Alger, who lives in the Smith home here in Kirtland when she was a teenager and the Temple was being built. I started to learn more about her and I found out that she married a Custer after she left Kirtland. Well I know that I'm related to General George Custer, and I looked at Tom and I said, “I might be related to Fannie Alger.” So I started to do some research while I was here, and found out that I, indeed, am related to her as a cousin through her husband.

I paint portraits and so I got out my paper and my watercolors and I painted a portrait of Fanny Alger. That started me painting the portraits of all of Joseph Smith's plural wives. I also did some of the other plural wives from people that I'm related to, and people my children are related to, and people that my husband are related to. I have about 100 portraits that I did. I sat one day and I was looking at the stack of portraits this summer, and I was thinking about what an overwhelming number 40 wives is—who needs 40 wives? I keep asking, “Who needs 40 wives?” The answer is “No one.” That's an overwhelming number of wives, and this stack of paper though, just didn't really show it. I thought, “What's another way I could show it?”

Then I was sitting one day, and I used to paint these Bratz dolls; remove their faces and repaint them and dress them, and I would make character dolls that I would sell at the Comic Con in Utah. I pulled out my Bratz dolls one day as I was going through my themes, and I thought, “You know, this kind of looks like Elizabeth Rollins.” So I made an Elizabeth Rollins doll. Then I thought, “This one kind of looks like Helen Mark Kimball.” So I made a Helen doll. Then I just kept going and five weeks later, I had all of them done. And that includes making most of their clothing.

**Karin Peter** 05:09

And Joseph.

**Kelly McAfee** 05:10

And Joseph and Jane Manning as well.

**Karin Peter** 05:12

And Jane Manning…oh my goodness. I think I'm even more stunned that it only took five weeks as opposed to just being stunned that you did it at all.

**Kelly McAfee** 05:24

Yes, I hear that—I was stunned too, but you know, I'm a teacher so I was off for the summer. I just…for five weeks, that's mostly what I did all day.

**Karin Peter** 05:34

I can see where the connection grew…you’re in Kirtland, Fanny Alger-related, blah, blah, blah, and then okay, all of the wives. As this started to play out for you, in this setting of Kirtland, Ohio (which I find just fascinating to be kind of the place where this happened), I have to ask: what was your history in even knowing about polygamy, plural marriage, spiritual wifery, whatever it's called, in the used-to-be-called-Mormon community?

**Kelly McAfee** 06:09

I knew very little growing up, and as an adult, I knew very little. I remember my first husband took a class when he was in college, and it was on Mormon history. It wasn't an LDS school, it was just a mainstream college. I remember him telling me that Joseph had other wives that he married without Emma's knowledge. I thought, “Well, that can't be right.” I just thought that can't be right. I remember being taught that it was for the widows—that was the reason that they married was to take care of the widows and to take care of orphaned young girls. That was just my assumption that that was the truth of it.

Then when I walked away from the Mormon faith, I really started to study the history, I started reading books about the history—not anti-Mormon literature at all—just historical representations of what happened with evidence to back it all up. It made me very sad for these women. I recognize that a lot of what they went through was really abusive, not that that was the intent of what was happening. That's an abusive lifestyle, and to be told, “Well either you marry me or your family is not going to get into heaven,” that's manipulative, in my perspective. So I felt like these stories needed to be shared; I don't want these women's stories to be unknown, and I don't want them to be forgotten because I feel like it's an important part of history. Whether it happened with good intentions or not, I feel like it's a really important part of history that we need to remember and to honor them as well—to remember their stories.

**Karin Peter** 07:53

You said that you had learned growing up that polygamy was a way to take care of widows and orphans, and I remember hearing a similar kind of explanation growing up in the RLDS church that “It may have happened, but Brigham was responsible, and it happened in Utah, and here's probably why it happened” kind of a thing. I'm just wondering, as I've listened to many young women who talk about their first discovery from the gospel topic essays that were written and put on the lds.org website—which is the official Latter Day Saint church website—that Joseph Smith Jr, was indeed the originator of the practice, that that was new information for them and that they were mortified to discover that this was the case. Have you encountered people struggling in the same way? Did you have a similar kind of sense of ‘how could this be’ when that isn't what you were taught?

**Kelly McAfee** 09:02

Yes, absolutely. There is so much evidence, and I still run across people on Facebook, who say, “Oh, but there's this theory that Joseph Smith didn't practice, and that Brigham Young again, was the one who started it.” There's so much evidence that shows Brig-…sorry…that Joseph Smith did start polygamy. My husband, he's an LDS historian; he has been for decades. He knows all the historians—I'm now friends with many of them—who've written these books and found this information and put it together. There's no question among them whether or not Joseph practiced polygamy. They may question some of the details...they may argue about some of the small details, but there's no question in any LDS historian’s mind as to whether or not he practiced polygamy. As far as it being for the widows, we have many statements from Joseph Smith that said, “Oh, no—you need to find yourself a young one—a young, attractive woman who you can have babies with.” So it wasn't just about the widows. When I posted…when I originally posted the portraits…I was painting the portraits, and as I would paint one, I would post it on Facebook and I would put a little bit of history of the woman who the portrait was of. I had some of my LDS friends who kind of got on and scolded me for reading anti-Mormon things. I said, “This is not anti Mormon—this is our history.” This is a history that we can either accept it and embrace it, or what? What happens if we don't? That's why I felt so strongly to get these stories out there and make these stories known, because these women are being forgotten. Whenever somebody says, “Oh, that didn't happen.”—this is our family you're talking about, this is my husband's relatives, my relatives, my kids’ relatives, and you're saying that what they went through didn't happen. That's kind of a slap in the face to these women who went through so much.

**Karin Peter** 11:09

Right. So in Community of Christ, because the RLDS church—kind of as its core DNA—was anti-polygamy, and as part of that denied that Joseph Smith had any participation in it, many Community of Christ folks…older folks…just don't want to hear it. It's kind of a fingers-in-the-ears “la-la-la-la-la, I can't hear what you're saying.” But in the recent couple of decades, our official church history has begun to acknowledge that yes, the preponderance of evidence—as you have stated—points that he did participate in this for whatever reasons. People are finding that in the three-volume *Journey of A People* Community of Christ history, and the first one deals with the 1830 to 1844 time period. Also for the first time in one of our smaller resources that we hand out pretty regularly called *The Illustrated History of the Church*, we try to paint an authentic picture of that and acknowledge that in that text as well, trying to get that information into the hands of people even…

**Kelly McAfee** 12:22

I think that’s so important.

**Karin Peter** 12:23

…people who don’t take the history, so you don’t have to take a class, you can find it yourself. But our tradition of denial comes from the fact that we are out of—we're Emma's church; we’re the people that didn't go west or some of the other places with some of the other leaders from the succession crisis. Emma throughout her life proclaimed that she was the only wife of Joseph Smith Jr. and the church based its “Joseph didn't do it” claim on those denials that…those proclamations. What do you think about Emma, when you went through this and these denials? What do you think she knew? Or what did she not want to know?

**Kelly McAfee** 13:09

Emma's story breaks my heart. I love Emma and every once in a while, somebody will say something negative about Emma Smith, and I say “You may not talk about her in front of me like that.” Don't talk about Emma in front of me like that, because whatever she went through and whatever she did, she was an abused woman. She was abused from the very beginning. This is my perspective, so I apologize to anybody who's listening who doesn't have the same perspective. She had a husband who had all of these affairs, and he called him marriages, but she didn't know about it, so that's still an affair, even if he felt like he was married to these woman and had a right to be with them. To me, it was still an affair. She had women who lived in her home—many, many women who lived in her home; teenage girls who she treated like daughter's; good friends who worked with her in the Relief Society, who behind her back were married to her husband. That's heartbreaking.

Then she discovered it…she discovered these affairs along the way. She would get angry and she would kick these women out of the house. Other…her husband and other men from the church were telling her what a terrible person she was, how God was going to curse her and send her to hell because she wouldn't accept polygamy when she finally was told about it. She went…she met a friend out in the street—this is his report: she said, “He tells me that that I'm going to be cursed if I don't accept it. So I guess I have to accept it.” And she really tried—she tried. There were sisters who were living in their home and Joseph married these sisters without Emma's knowledge. Then he came to her and said, “You know, we've got this polygamy thing that we're supposed to be following, so you need to let me marry other women—who can I marry?” She agreed to let him marry those sisters, not knowing he'd already married them the week before. So then he had a fake ceremony with her there, where she handed them off to her husband. It about killed her—within a week she said, “No, I can't have them here. I can't do this,” and sent them out of the house.

Her story is heartbreaking. Then I look at the fact that she then denied…denied all of it. She didn't want her kids to know, that's obvious to me—she did not want her children to know. I think just for that reason alone, she would have gone to her grave saying “No, it never happened.” I also believe that she was embarrassed, she was hurt by it, she was embarrassed that she lived through that, and that she accepted that to some extent. I think that's where the denial comes from.

**Karin Peter** 15:53

We see in the news cycles…we read about women…men, women, people…in situations where sexual abuse takes place, whether it's emotional abuse, or physical abuse, and we have a hard time naming it as such. So your comment that she was abused will be unsettling to Community of Christ women who view her as strong and willful and determined and a definite counterbalance to her husband's erratic behavior—that she was this strong, stable rock. Can you be a strong woman and still suffer emotional, or sexual abuse? I think we can look in our current narrative in the United States and say it happens all the time.

**Kelly McAfee** 16:44

Yeah. I think she was one of the strongest women ever. She survived it—she survived. She accepted some of it because she was told that's what God wanted from her, and she tried her best to accept that because she was a faithful woman, which is a good quality…yes? Yes, a good quality. It was killing her on the inside. It was a betrayal, one after the other betrayals from her husband and from these other leaders of the church as well, who…there was one point where they were accusing her of trying to poison her husband. I thought to myself, “Well if she did, he might have deserved it.” Of that's what he was doing, then maybe she got that angry. (I don't think she really did it. Some people do though.) She had a lot of strength to be able to make it through what she did. She didn't just lie back and accept it all—she pushed back as much as she felt like she could.

**Karin Peter** 17:42

Yes, she did quite often. Now let's go back to your project—your five-week project constructing these dolls. What did you discover, just in general, about the Restoration movement, about church history, about your place in that as you were going through the five weeks of creating these dolls?

**Kelly McAfee** 18:04

That's a really tough question. I don't know that I discovered anything new, but I remember the moment…I was putting the dolls on bookshelves—I had two empty bookshelves that I was putting the dolls on as I finished them. I remember filling up one shelf and I looked up there and I said, “That's not even half the wives, I think I'm not even halfway done.” I told my husband, I said, “Darn it, if he hadn't had so many wives, I'd have a lot less work to do.” When I finished all of the dolls and I put them out on the table to take the photographs—which are the photographs that I sent to you—it was just overwhelming to look at that and to see all of their faces and I just…I kept wondering what were they thinking. Some of them were thrilled to marry the Prophet of the church. They loved and admired him and it was a status thing for them. Some families were happy to give their daughters to Joseph Smith as his wife. So I just wondered what were they all thinking? Some are not happy. Some were not happy about it. And some…Helen Mark Kimball if you read her accounts of what happened, it's heartbreaking. She's actually my husband's aunt and so she has a very special place in our heart. She talks about how her dad gave away his ewe lamb. He sacrificed his ewe lamb to Joseph Smith. She was 14 years old when she married him and she said “If I had known it came with everything marriage comes with, I never would have agreed to it.” And again, she was told this…that the salvation of your family depends on this. So she felt like she needed to do it.

**Karin Peter** 19:50

What did you learn about yourself doing this project?

**Kelly McAfee** 19:55

I learned that…the fact that I did it in five weeks…I learned that I'm definitely passionate about this subject. It really opened up some wounds of my own abusive relationships from the past. I've had to face some things that I put away for a very long time. But like I said, these women…they were so faithful and they had so much strength to go through what they went through. I gained from that—I gained from their strength, if that makes sense.

**Karin Peter** 20:30

Yeah, it does make sense. In reading about the plural wives and in listening to Lindsay Hansen Parks’ Year of Polygamy podcast that she did—you do learn from them, you have an affinity for them, you have a respect for them, you have empathy, you have pity. It's all of that [inaudible]…experience.

**Kelly McAfee** 20:57

It made me love them more. Doing the portraits I was falling in love with these women; making the dolls it is…for whatever reason that 3D image of these women and dressing them and doing their hair, painting on their faces—and I tried very hard for the ones we had photographs of to make them look as much like the women as I could. It just made me love them more and appreciate what they went through. I go to the Kirtland Temple, and many of the dolls that I've made were here—they were in this building that I get to walk…this building that I get to sit in and to reflect and I'm sitting on the same pews where they sat. It's really kind of overwhelming and a very special experience that I get to have here.

**Karin Peter** 21:45

It brings it into the forefront of a history that was recorded by and for men—where men are the players, men are the doers and women were the accompaniers.

**Kelly McAfee** 22:00

Yes, absolutely. And we're still living that a little bit.

**Karin Peter** 22:03

We are…women in religious communities, women in our culture in general are still fighting for equal rights, equal understanding, equal access. When I think about women in the Restoration tradition and what we've learned, it's very different in the LDS tradition than how that learning has affected the Community of Christ tradition. But both of them…the roles of women in both of these traditions—as different as they are—have stemmed from this experience of polygamy. In the LDS tradition, what do you think that this experience that these women went through—how does it resonate in the experience of women today, in the LDS tradition?

**Kelly McAfee** 23:00

There was so much that I didn't recognize when I was in the church—that I recognize outside—because I chose not to look at it. Polygamy was one of those things that I chose not to look at. Somebody pointed out to me recently that polygamy still exists in the Mormon church—it's not done on earth, but if a man is married to one woman and that woman dies or he leaves her for some reason, he can marry another woman and then he has two wives, or three wives, or four wives. We're taught that in heaven, we will be in these polygamous relationships. So it's still being practiced in a way in the LDS faith, and that's damaging in my perspective. I don't believe that God commanded Joseph—and other people can believe what they want—I don't believe God commanded Joseph to practice polygamy, I believe he was a man who had his own thoughts and ideas about it, and that was a way to make it okay. Maybe there was a point where he believed it was coming from God, I'm not sure. But I certainly don't believe it was from God.

I think that just that mindset of polygamous relationships and thinking that you will be one of many wives to your husband, I think that's very damaging. I think it puts women in a role of being ‘less than’ and you see that in the LDS church, with women not holding any leadership roles. We looked at General Conference this last weekend, and I think there were four women who spoke and—how many men?…a dozen? sixteen men?—however many men spoke. I remember being in meetings in church, when our ideas may or may not be even listened to because we're women, and what do we know? It was always up to the men, and the young men are getting money to do their activities and they're going on all these big camps and these expensive things, and the young women are told we have to do whatever's free. Even the money that's allocated to the young men versus the young women is not equal, so I still see a lot of damage created from that sort of mindset.

**Karin Peter** 25:18

So if you ran the world, Kelly, …

**Kelly McAfee** 25:21

Yes, [inaudible]… right there.

**Karin Peter** 25:27

…and you could say, here's what I would want for women in religious traditions, what would that look like?

**Kelly McAfee** 25:37

Well, there would be equality…in religious tradition, life in general. Women are just as intelligent as men. We're just as strong as men—physically no, that's just biology—but just as strong emotionally. Our ideas are just as good. If we could manage to work together, men and women, without there being this sort of push and pull where men feel like we're trying to take over. We're not trying to take over, we're just trying to work together. We just…there's so much that has to change. There's so much that has to change. Just that equality—and not just equal pay and equal rights—but recognizing that we're just as good as each other, and that if we work together—wow, what great things we could do in this world.

**Karin Peter** 26:32

Absolutely. I could say “Preach it sister!”

**Kelly McAfee** 26:35

Yeah—there you go.

**Karin Peter** 26:36

So you have kids in the house?

**Kelly McAfee** 26:38

Yes.

**Karin Peter** 26:39

And you have a spouse?

**Kelly McAfee** 26:41

Yes.

**Karin Peter** 26:42

What do they think about your collection of Joseph's wives?

**Kelly McAfee** 26:44

Oh, that's a good question. My husband loves it. He thinks it's…he's just so proud of my artwork, and my projects, and he thinks it's fantastic. All of my children, but one, appreciate it. I have one child who is still not sure what they think about the church, and they just don't like anything that might cause contention. So it's kind of not…don't love it, but most of them think it's pretty great. I've brought friends in and they loved it, and my aunt who's not…she's not any related to the LDS faith at all, not related to, to any of the expressions of the Restoration at all. She just absolutely thought it was fantastic. I was telling her the stories, because as I pull out the dolls, I'm like, “and this is such and such, and this is her story. And this is her story.” She was in tears—she was in tears.

**Karin Peter** 27:42

Well, again, especially as we struggle through a culture where women are still striving to be heard, to be believed, to be…have their voices be the authentic voice of something that has transpired. The whole idea of a group of women who lived through this to varying degrees of success, who endured poverty, who endured, in some cases, humiliation, in other cases spent their time with Joseph Smith as a time of status or social power—all the different things that happen in community. It's still a group of women who suggest to us the feminine quest to be in community with the divine in the most faithful way they can.

**Kelly McAfee** 28:37

Absolutely. And the women of the day back in those times in the church, did have access to the priesthood in ways that women don't know in the LDS church—they were able to give blessings and they were they were receiving priesthood. I don't know the word for it, but they were…they were with the men in receiving the priesthood. So it was very different for them. Brigham Young, I believe, is the one who changed that.

**Karin Peter** 29:06

So it was the receiving the laying on of hands for the blessing of the women, for the ministering to women for giving blessings to women, for teaching women. There's so much about this, whether it's the plural wives, the Relief Society, Emma's role in that—there's so much about that that is absent from the teaching for several generations of Community of Christ women. I'm hoping that your project and our discussion about it will spark some interest in women going back and taking the opportunity to learn more about what is shared history, and to avail themselves of the information for the purpose of having a better idea of women's experience in the Restoration and women's contributions.

**Kelly McAfee** 29:58

Absolutely. There's much to learn.

**Karin Peter** 30:01

There are…I have some of my favorite books that touch on this—*Mormon Enigma:* *Emma Hale Smith* is probably one that is a good beginner for people to see. What are some others that you could recommend?

**Kelly McAfee** 30:17

Okay, *Mormon Enigma*, *In Sacred Loneliness*, and *Nauvoo Polygamy* are the top three that I would recommend. I've read all of them. Another fun one to read that is not necessarily based on historical data, but from what I've read of it so far—I'm in the middle of reading it now—from what I've read of it so far, it seems pretty accurate. It's written by one of Brigham Young's wives, so she lived through it. It's called *Wife No. 19*.

**Karin Peter** 30:52

Ah yes, and it sparked the movie *The 19th Wife*

**Kelly McAfee** 30:56

Oh—I didn’t even know that.

**Karin Peter** 30:58

…[inaudible]…movie a long time ago. It compares the fundamentalist polygamous groups that are still active in Utah, to the experience of the wives of Brigham Young, who…Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball married the wives of Joseph Smith, and in order to kind of take them into their family communities. So it's all connected in there. Another one that would address some comments you made—Carolyn Pearson wrote *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy*.

**Kelly McAfee** 31:26

Yes. That was the…my first…that was the first one that I read.

**Karin Peter** 31:33

…really good exploration into that topic. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience with this—with the making the dolls that are the representation of the wives?

**Kelly McAfee** 31:49

Well, I'm sure I'm not finished. We're still finding more wives. There were two that were found recently, that…it’s been published that they were found, and so I did make dolls of those two. There's a third that has not been published yet, that was found by a friend of ours who is a historian. I did make a doll of her; I call her “the unknown wife.” I don't know a lot about her, but what I've been told is that she was living in the Smith home in Nauvoo. Joseph at the time had made a rule that girls could get married at 14 and boys at 17, so you couldn't get married if you were younger. He waited for this girl's 14th birthday and then married her.

**Karin Peter** 32:36

Which is one of the issues with this that so many people have such a hard time with. Was marrying of very young girls or the marrying of other men's wives.

**Kelly McAfee** 32:46

Yes, yes. That one was quite disturbing to find out.

**Karin Peter** 32:50

I think you need another small shelf for the few women that said, “No, thank you.”

**Kelly McAfee** 32:56

Yes, I did do a couple portraits of those. Another cute thing to mention about my dolls, I do have a couple of ‘tells’ for them. There were five sets of sisters; all of my sisters have matching dresses. There were two sets of mothers and daughters; the mothers and daughters have coordinating outfits. There were three who were under the age of 15; they're all in bare feet.

**Karin Peter** 33:21

We'll note that when we look at the photos. I'm looking forward to a visit to Kirtland, and I'm hoping at that time you can have a cappuccino together somewhere and I can view in person your collection of wives.

**Kelly McAfee** 33:39

Yes. I would love that.

**Karin Peter** 33:40

I really appreciate you taking time to talk to us. I'm so glad that Katherine introduced us via texting and cell phones. I'm just appreciative that you're willing to be with us here on Cuppa Joe, part of the Project Zion Podcast, and talk about this kind of thorny issue in our history…an uncomfortable issue for Community of Christ. Hopefully you've made it a little less uncomfortable, and a little more accessible for women to learn more about the tradition of women in the Restoration.

**Kelly McAfee** 34:12

I hope so. Thank you.

**Karin Peter** 34:14

Thank you so much. For our listeners, I’m Karin Peter, thanks for being with us today.

**Josh Mangelson** 34:27

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