

**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 another episode of *Project Zion Podcast*. This is Brittany Mangelson and I'm going to be your host for today, for another edition in our "Fair Trade" series where we talk all about faith transitions. I am here with my friend Spencer Greenhalgh, who is a professor of technology at the University of Kentucky and I've known Spencer for a couple of years now. He's been attending the online ministry called *Forward with Community* that is for Latter-day Seekers, but he was recently confirmed into Community of Christ, and so, we are going to talk a little bit about his faith transition story. So, Spencer, welcome, and why don't you introduce yourself to our listeners?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 01:19**

Hi, Brittany. Thank you so much. Really excited to be here. So, I'm Spencer. I live with my partner and our young daughter in central Kentucky, Lexington, Fayette County. And, as Brittany mentioned, I am a professor at the University of Kentucky. I'm a former French teacher, actually my bachelor's degree is in French teaching. I have a graduate degree in educational technology, and so, I transitioned from one education job to another, and then I transitioned from one technology field to another. It's been, kind of, fun to do that. And I really like my job at UK. In my particular case, being a professor means that about half my job is teaching classes on computer fundamentals, data science, web content management, lots of nerdy things, and then the other half of my job is doing research, which is also nerdy and wonderful. I study how social media is used in contexts like education, which is my real specialty, but then also, sometimes in religious or political communities. And I am just a nerd across the board, even when I'm not at work. I love lots of nerdy things; books, comics, podcasts, tabletop games, and if any of it is in French, then I turn into a mega nerd, because even though that's not part of my professional life anymore, it's a real big passion of mine. And so, I try and keep up with the language skills that I've developed over the years.

**Brittany Mangelson 02:42**

That is awesome. I am, as you know, I am very intrigued by your work with social media and how it is impacting the religious landscape and just communities in general so, I'm excited to have this conversation and to learn a little bit more about you and your faith transition story. So, Spencer, with these interviews, we just kind of start at the beginning, whatever the beginning looks like for you. Growing up, what did church look like? What did faith look like? How important was God, spirituality? I'm not sure where you grew up, but just start telling your story.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 03:21**

So, I grew up, well, I moved around a lot when I was a kid, but if there was one thing that was constant, it was church. I was born and raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and with a long family history in that church going all the way back to the mid-19th century. I was telling you before we

started recording that, in a weird sort of way, my first and last names are both, kind of, Mormon, right? They're not particularly common, even within Mormon circles, but they're more common in Mormon circles than they are in the U.S. broadly, and that was kind of a culture shock when I moved to Utah for college, and people actually recognized my last name. It was a little bit weird. So, that was the consistency. But we did move around a lot when I was a kid. That was mostly a great experience, got to live in a few different places. I don't remember a lot of it though because when I was still pretty young, we moved to Northern Kentucky. So, just south of the Cincinnati, on the other side of the Ohio River. I grew up in a town called Florence, which has a semi-famous water tower. If you're from the area, it is notable, but people from outside don't recognize it all that well. And church was really, really important for me personally, and also for my whole family. And I think a lot of that was true, just on its own, but also in Northern Kentucky, there are not a lot of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. So, in some ways, it was a really important part of my identity, both because I appreciated it on its own terms, but also because it, kind of, set me apart in the classroom or in whatever social situation that I was in that wasn't church. That was one of my defining features and I think that that is, kind of, an important thing for me to keep in mind. So, church was really important. I was a good church kid, right? I was always talking to, I remember in, you know, first or second grade, talking to a classmate about my beliefs on the bus, as though I knew anything and as though she were interested. I remember talking to social study teachers about mixing up the U.S. President, Woodrow Wilson with the LDS President, Wilford Woodruff. That was really bothering me in fifth grade. I felt like my social studies teacher needed to know about that. I don't know that she cared, but she got an earful about it. And even, like, as a teenager, I think one of my biggest fights with my parents, maybe my biggest fight, was that they had family plans for a general conference weekend, and I just thought that was unacceptable. Like, I was totally invested. This was a big part of my identity and also a lot of my self worth, I think, were tied up in a religious identity, not always in negative ways, but I think especially that part where my conception of self and my understanding of how I was doing as a person were tied in with religion in ways that would become difficult a little bit later on.

**Brittany Mangelson 06:15**

I can just imagine that conversation with teenager Spencer about your parents planning a trip and then you'd being, like, "No, it's the..."

**Spencer Greenhalgh 06:28**

We can't do this. And that's who I was, right?

**Brittany Mangelson 06:31**

Yeah.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 06:32**

It was, church came naturally to me. I was good at church. I liked being good at church and it was so much of who I was, not just because it distinguished me from other kids in the classroom. I don't think that explains the whole thing, but that was also a part of it, right? There just, I thought of so much through those terms, which, you know, later on, spoilers, made it difficult when I started to reevaluate that some. In some ways, it was as much a transition of identity and transition of self-conception as it was a transition of faith.

**Brittany Mangelson 07:11**

Yeah, and I'm curious about your reflections on maybe, like, why it worked so well to you. I mean, I can guess, I mean the LDS church is very program related, and it, there's, like, a formula to it, and there's a right and a wrong, and there's, you know, a way to process, like, think through the process. Yeah. But I'm just wondering, you know, like, why do you think it worked so well for you?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 07:35**

I am not someone, even now, as an adult, I appreciate ambiguity, but just, like, down at the core of my being, I don't deal well with it. I don't deal with conflict. I like things to be black and white and clear. You know, speaking again, about childhood memories, I remember asking my mom before a snowy day, "You know, Mom, what's the chance that school gets closed tomorrow?" And no one knows that, right? You can't put a number on that. But as a kid, it was really important for me to have a sense, like, an exact percentage point of whether I was going to school the next day or not. And so, just having things straight forward, having checklists to tick off, knowing exactly where I was, and having some confidence in having right answers and in not having wrong answers, all of those things were really important to me. Even at a pretty young age, I was pretty anxious about all of these things and I think church and school, especially church, both gave me environments where it was easy to tell if I was in the right or in the wrong. And I think I really gravitated to that.

**Brittany Mangelson 08:45**

Yeah, and that's basically what I was getting at. And because I relate to it, knowing exactly where the line was that you shouldn't cross, whether it's a theological line about beliefs, or whether it was something like morality, or what TV shows you should watch or what clothes you should wear, etc., etc. Knowing that there's, like, this formula of, you follow this and then this is the outcome. There's a lot of security and safety in that when it works for you, right?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 09:13**

Absolutely.

**Brittany Mangelson 9:14**

And then, when you are in that process of thinking and shaping your life. So, that brings me to my next question is, you know, how did Mormonism shape the kind of adult that you hoped to be? What kinds of things were you planning for for the future, whether it be a mission, college, who you dated, where you got married, etc. You know, how was your forward thinking when you were a child about what kind of adult you were going to be? How did the church impact that?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 09:45**

I think it impacted a lot. I think I always had a vision and frankly, up until very recently, I had a vision of this as a lifetime commitment and so, I was going to take the steps that were related to that. So, I really only applied to one college, one university, and it was church owned Brigham Young University. And I probably should have applied to a couple of others just in case, but I was lucky and, you know, got in because that's where I wanted to go. I'd grown up in Northern Kentucky. I was proud and excited to be the only Mormon in a lot of my classes, but I wanted to go and be among my people for a while. And

so, I did that and that was a really important part of my life. And, you know, I look back and there are things I might have done differently and things that I interpret a little bit differently now. It was, but in many ways, it was also a really great experience. That's where I met my partner, met a lot of good friends there, had a lot of good experiences. The same is true for the mission that I served in eastern France, and western Switzerland, western Switzerland being the French speaking area of it. And, again, you know, I look back and interpret a lot of those memories differently. But it was, in some ways, also a really great experience. I will still, you know, I gave you the warning about nerdiness earlier, sometimes at work, if I just need some background noise, I will pull up a YouTube video of a train going through the Swiss countryside, and just listen to the train tracks go and I will watch the beautiful countryside go by and think, oh, well, you know, had I been to this train station during my year in Switzerland? And just it was a great experience. I think a lot of my anxieties about being in the right were also present there in a way that I didn't really, that I did recognize at the time, but later on, it became a little bit easier to realize how wound up I was about a few things and how concerned I was that I do things right. And so, even though my mission was a good experience, I found myself for, you know, nearly a decade afterwards, still thinking back, did I do things right? Did I do things right? And it was, kind of, this mix of wonderful memories that came along with it, but also like an anxiety, 5, 8, 9 years later, wondering if I had measured up during that time in my life.

**Brittany Mangelson** 12:13

That's really significant. I mean, I know that a lot of folks will talk about anxiety on the mission. I did not serve a mission, but to have that follow you for that many years afterwards and still think, you know, did I do enough? Was I, did I do that right? That expands the pressure longer than I've heard most people talk about. So, that's significant.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 12:36

And I, yeah, and I mean, it wasn't every day. It certainly wasn't every week, but every couple of months that the thought would pop into my head.

**Brittany Mangelson** 12:44

Yeah.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 12:45

And there was a time, right around when I started to really think about my religious identity and about faith that I was reading a beautifully done mission memoir by someone who had done it in comic form. And it was actually really difficult to read, because all of the anxiety that this young woman had felt when she was serving as a missionary, like, I felt all of that come back to me in that moment, even though it was years and years later, and, just, it was, it's a wonderfully done piece, but there was something about where I was in that time, you know, starting to really, starting to have some trouble in terms of beliefs and in terms of religious identity that that particular thing became especially difficult in that moment. And I think it was maybe the first time that I realized that things didn't have to be that way, maybe things shouldn't be that way. And it, you know, I still bring up the Swiss train videos. I still have great memories of the time that I spent there and the friends that I made there, but I, that was one of the things where I had to start to ask myself if I had everything sorted right in my head and how I was thinking about religion.

**Brittany Mangelson** 14:00

Oh, well, and I know, again, I did not serve a mission but I do know that a lot of folks are, those are questions that they face on their mission too. I know my spouse definitely faced those and he often will have reoccurring dreams that he's back on his mission and, kind of, stuck in this stage of, you know, starting to question, starting to doubt, feeling that religious scrupulosity weigh down on him all while he's trying to, you know, quote, "share the gospel with others", and it is stressful and he usually wakes up pretty grumpy with those dreams. Oh, it's tough. It's really tough. And yeah. So, the mission, it sounds like, there were some struggles on the mission. When you came back from your mission. I'm assuming you were still all gung ho about being LDS and...

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 14:50

Absolutely.

**Brittany Mangelson** 14:51

...continued, planned to continue on that path and get married in the temple, etc. So...

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 14:56

Yup.

**Brittany Mangelson** 14:57

...yeah, just keep talking about your story.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 15:00

So, yeah, I mean, I was gung ho. I was, got married in the temple pretty shortly after that, and then it wasn't, so, my partner and I both finished our degrees at BYU and then eventually we moved to Michigan for, so that I could do graduate school there. And eventually my partner did a master's degree there at the same time that I was doing my degree and so, that ended up being great for both of us. And Michigan was wonderful. It was really lovely. This graduate school became a time of transition in a lot of different places. So, I had gone in after a short career as a French teacher, pretty short career, and I was expecting to change careers, and then careers ended up changing a little bit more than I even expected. And so, like, there were, there was professional transition during that time. It was also living in a new place. It was not home in the sense that it was not Kentucky. It was also not Utah. And so, it was a new place to live out our lives and figure things out, that it was transition in that sense. And then just also, you know, graduate school is a bunch of really smart people pouring really important ideas into your head and really re-inviting you to think differently about the world. I had research classes, you know, where we had to say, what is truth? What is reality, really? Can we perceive these well enough to write it up in research? And that was really interesting, in a sense that, you know, I came to graduate school, with very strong opinions about truth and absolute truth and being able to understand things well, not only from a religious sense, but again, you know, personally, I like things in nice, neat little boxes. It is comforting to me to be able to have a grip on things and to be invited to consider how much is a little bit more ambiguous than maybe we think it is. And that was, it was a real growth experience, but it was also difficult at certain times. And then also through, I really appreciated being able to serve in the church during my time in Michigan, loved those opportunities, but at the same

time, there were just decisions being made at church levels that were a little bit difficult, and I was committed to riding them out, to being committed to sustaining, but I was also meeting queer Latter-day Saints for the first time, for the first time that I knew of at least. And I was meeting, you know, women and people of color who were struggling with the church, and I started to realize, in some ways, that something that was terribly meaningful for me, and really, really important for me, was that it was becoming difficult, was even causing harm to some people. And that was really difficult to wrestle with. I did not know how to deal with that all in graduate school. I benefited from participating in an online Mormon communities, often on the periphery, but I was really grateful for people who modeled for me at that time, ways that they reconciled that the meaning that they found in the tradition with disagreements that they had with the church. And that was really hard for me to wrap my head around at first. Just the idea of disagreeing with the church was, that took me a long time to think that you could do that. But I had good models for that. And so, for most of that time, in graduate school, even though a lot of transition was happening, a lot of change was happening, I still felt like I was able to at least keep the basic shape of what I wanted the rest of my life to look like intact.

**Brittany Mangelson 18:57**

That makes a lot of sense. So, being introduced to a diverse type of Mormon experience, right, a diverse community of Latter-day Saints, it sounds like that really opened your eyes to the idea that what was so certain and true and not ambiguous to you, suddenly it became ambiguous for you in, through the lens of other people. Which, again, I can absolutely relate to being, you know, a white straight girl from Provo, Utah. So, what kinds of things would you say were on your shelf? So, this analogy you know that you have things that you struggle with in the LDS church and if you struggle with it, you just kind of forget about it and put it quote unquote, "on your shelf" and then eventually the idea is that your shelf breaks and you are in, you know, full blown faith crisis. So, what would you say some of those issues were that you just, kind of, put on your shelf and maybe tried to keep, like you said, the shape intact.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 20:00**

I think meeting queer Latter-day Saints, either in the literal sense, right, there were a couple in the congregation that I was attending, I was happy to know both of them, and just sitting with their experiences. And I'll be honest, I was not always good about sitting with their experiences, instead of, like, trying to push back a little bit and keep us on the straight and narrow. And I have a lot of regrets about that. I don't have a lot of regrets about the life that I've lived up to this point, but when I've, you know, caused harm to others, failed to be there for others, that, those are things that I do have regrets about. And just sitting with other people's experiences, and seeing their pain, in a way that was opposed to the joy that I was feeling, or at least trying to feel, that that was difficult, and it just, it wore on me after a while. And you know, it was in Michigan that I became a parent and started to ask questions. Well, you know, what if my kid does not fit into one of these nice, neat little boxes? What am I going to do as a parent? What choice am I going to make at this point, right? And I had been, you know, pushing back against friends, kind of, a jerk to friends, who have, at least in one case, been charitable enough to forgive me since, but something about bringing that into my family and asking, okay, so what if this happens really, really close to me? What choices am I going to make at that point? It started, I don't know, I, it's, I don't think it's something that I put on the shelf in necessarily the traditional sense of it, but I at least started to need to carve out some space for myself and think, okay,

well, if I'm gonna, if I am going to continue in this path, and that was still my commitment, at that point, I need to rethink how I do that. I need to make sure that I am not causing pain to others, that I am serving other people, instead of trying to tell them what to do, that I am ministering to them, rather than trying to teach them, right. Instead of trying to get people on the right path, I want to start walking paths with them. That's a change that I need to make in how I think about my religion and in the way that I serve other people.

**Brittany Mangelson 22:25**

I really like the way that you phrased that, because I absolutely had that moment in my life as well. And I have regrets, of folks, you know, who I tried to get back on the straight and narrow or to try to essentially gaslight them into, you know, trying to help them understand that it really isn't as bad as you think it is. Whereas, like, of course, the lenses that I'm wearing are totally different for a variety of reasons. Yeah, so I absolutely relate to that. So, Spencer, it, this is a lot, right? And you said that you were becoming a parent at this time, and you and your partner were in graduate school, were, you know, graduating, trying to, I'm assuming, find settlement in careers, etc.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 23:10**

Yup.

**Brittany Mangelson 22:11**

So, there's just a lot of transition and a lot of big life moments, all while you're trying to juggle this question of faith. So, would you say that it ever got to the point, I don't know if you like the word faith crisis? I know, it's, kind of, one of those things that's a little bit controversial in this space, but would you have considered it a crisis at any point, or was it just, kind of, a gradual transition out? Or what did that look like, just the process of facing the reality of your doubts, of this ambiguous space that you were thrown into based on your relationships? Yeah, what did that look like for you?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 23:54**

So, the way that I've been thinking about it is that my faith transition was, in some ways, soft and slow and gentle up until it wasn't. That time that I spent in graduate school, that time that I spent in Michigan, not that it was anything particular in Michigan, that's just where I was living, those, all of that time was a time of deconstruction and reconstruction in a way that was really helpful and became important later on because I was setting foundation for something that I did not know was yet to come. Because, after I graduated, after my partner and I both graduated, we got this job here in Kentucky and moved here and thought okay, we, you know, I've done the deconstruction. I've done the reconstruction. We're doing great now, but then, you know, I had a really bad January where just, like, I've a few different things happened all at once. I, my daughter was reaching an age where my own imperfections at a parent were becoming really obvious. And I was in a job that I did not expect to have during graduate school. I loved my job, it's wonderful, but I thought that I was going to be an education professor. I'm a full up technology professor. And the first year on the job came with a lot of imposter syndrome, a lot of wondering, do I even belong here? Did they make a mistake when they hired me? And then around the same time, I was asked to take some responsibility in our new Latter-day Saint congregation working with young people. And that just really raised some new questions. Do I feel comfortable teaching this in class? Is this something that I can do and at the same time, you know, my partner is having some

questions of her own, resolving them in her own way. And for her, it's becoming a little bit more clear, what she's going to do and it's probably going to be stepping away from the church. And so, what does that mean for me? What does that mean for our kid? Just all of a sudden, a whole bunch of things poured on me at once. And I would absolutely use the term faith crisis at that point, because it felt like, as much reconstruction and deconstruction that I had previously done, I was now, I felt like I was now being faced with a threat to my, I don't know. For the first time, I felt like, I am no longer a good Latter-day Saint and that felt like failure. And I was already feeling a little bit of failure as a parent. I was feeling some failure at work. And to have it happen in this third important area of my life too, just, I, it, I needed some time. And I needed to really sit down and think things through, because a lot of my previous beliefs about who I was and who I was going to be for the rest of my life seemed to not hold up to the ideals that I had set up for myself. And so, it was time to really start reevaluating at that point.

**Brittany Mangelson 26:56**

That sounds really rough, because like you said, your, a lot of your worth had come from church. You were the little boy that was resisting a vacation over general conference weekend, and then to suddenly find yourself on the wrong side of that line that you knew existed. That's really, really tough, even if, you know, your testimony isn't what it was, or, you know, your beliefs have shifted. It's a whole cultural identity that then suddenly you're like, whoa! This is who I have been my entire life. Now, who am I? So, yeah, and that's one reason why I appreciate or identify with the word "faith crisis", because, for me, it was also a crisis, a complete crisis of identity, really. So.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 27:46**

Yeah, and I appreciate you saying that last part. I was, journaling is a big spiritual practice for me. It's something I've done for almost all of my life. I don't think I used the word "spiritual practice" to describe it earlier, but a pastor loaned that word to me to describe what I do with journaling. And I think it's great. So, I was flipping through some of the things that I had written in the early days of this, to prepare for this discussion that we're having. And just early on, I recognized, you know, I wrote down, "I'm not sure this is a faith crisis so much as an identity crisis." I think it's both at the same time. So, I appreciate you bringing that up because it was absolutely how I felt in the moment.

**Brittany Mangelson 28:28**

Yeah, well, and I think it's interesting, because when you look at religions, there are some that are, you know, the buy in is deeper. And some folks that, you know, maybe just become Easter and Christmas Christians, you know, where they go when it's convenient, or when there's a holiday, and they're culturally part of the community. But with Mormonism, I mean, if you're all in, it really does impact everything about you, including your worth. And so, if that starts to crumble, then your worth and your purpose completely can crumble as well, which is really traumatic. And so, again, to be doing, to be going through that while you're trying to be a parent, which again, I relate to, it's just, it's a lot and there's so much to unpack. And when you're trying to then also raise a child and have a career etc., like, it's a crisis man. It's a crisis.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 29:25**

Yeah.



**Brittany Mangelson 29:28**

So, from there, I mean, did, how did you discover Community of Christ? What was that transition like? I mean, did you, I'm curious, because I don't know the answer this, but did you leave officially and then find Community of Christ or was it a lot more crossover where you were still trying to remain in, but were curious. I mean, what did that process look like?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 29:52**

So, there was a huge amount of crossover. I was trying to cover all my bases for a long time, because I still felt so invested in that identity. And I was wondering, you know, could I make this work? And, in a way, again, I had had a lot of modeling, from people in online Mormonism, of people who had found ways to make it work, and I admired and still admire them. And part of me really, really wanted to take that route. And I still think about that a lot, to be honest with you. But, to flash back a little bit, shortly before moving to Kentucky, I had this moment of realization. That sounds, kind of, silly in hindsight. In Michigan, in East Lansing, Michigan, on Grand River Avenue, right on the route that my bus took me into campus, there was a building that had the words Community of Christ on it. I think, it's a Campus Ministry Center for MSU. And so, I would see this every once in a while, maybe from the bus or maybe from the car, but in my naive little mind, I knew that Community of Christ existed. I'd been to Kirtland. I'd been to the Kirtland Temple. I knew that this cousin faith was out there, but in my mind, Community of Christ only existed in Independence, in Kirtland and in Nauvoo. And so, I was, like, oh, how interesting that here in Michigan, there's this other denomination also named Community of Christ that has the same name as this denomination that I'm vaguely familiar with. And so, for a long time, passing this building, I thought, you know, that's so interesting. Eventually, I put two and two together and I realized, which sounds ridiculous now, that I know that there's a huge Community of Christ presence in Michigan. Of course, it's the same Community of Christ, that I had been familiar with. And so, I realized this kind of late and just, sort of, out of intellectual curiosity, I look up Community of Christ on Wikipedia. I do a little bit of reading. I promptly forget about it, because, you know, it's a Sunday afternoon on Wikipedia. It's not that much of a commitment. But then flash forward, you know, nine months later, I'm in this midst of crisis, if that, you know, let's keep using that word, that there's just a thought that pops into my head, right, that, hey, Spencer, you've read about this denomination before. You know just the briefest amount of things about them, but it might be worth reading a little bit more. So, sometime, a couple of months after it feels like things are falling apart, this thought pops into my head, and I do my tech nerd thing, and I just scour the internet for everything that I can find. And so, I find the *Project Zion Podcast*. I find a wonderful booklet called *Continuing Your Discipleship in Community of Christ*, which I just read as quickly as I can. And I look up the things that I can. I entertain this idea for a while, and then eventually I start to take more steps.

**Brittany Mangelson 32:56**

It's interesting, because I think a lot of folks think that they can't begin to explore other things until they're actually out or until they close one door, but the reality is that you can do whatever you want, right? Like, it's your spiritual life...

**Spencer Greenhalgh 33:13**

Yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 33:14**

...and you are in control of it. And so, the fact that you were still trying to make it work, and I'm glad that you acknowledge that you still, kind of, wrestle with this in between space, because there are some really important placeholders in that fringe area of Mormonism that are really working hard to help the church be more inclusive and honest and transparent, and trying to figure out, do you want to be an active participant in that community, or do you want to leave it behind, or do you want to go somewhere else and still strive to, try to straddle that community? It, it's a lot of energy. And you know, so it, there's important decisions to be made. And so, to know that you're still wrestling with it, I know that there's a lot of people who are wrestling with those questions, too, and where do you want to put your emotional energy? And at the end of the day, what feeds you? Where do you encounter God? Where can you do the most good? Those are really big questions to carry. So.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 34:17**

Yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 34:18**

Yeah, I did not realize, though, that you had done that much research on Community of Christ before you showed up, at least at *Forward With Community*. But I know you do have a local congregation. So, I'm curious to know what the timeline was between coming to *Forward With Community* and checking out your local congregation, etc. How did that play out?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 34:40**

So local-ish. So, I live in Lexington, Kentucky. There was a congregation in Lexington, Kentucky. Just weeks before, maybe months before I had seriously started looking into Community of Christ, a decision was made to close the congregation and to merge it with one of a couple different congregations in Louisville, Kentucky. So, I reached out, you know, to the local pastor. I was like, great, there's a local congregation. He connects me with the Mission Center President who connects me with the pastor of another congregation. They explain the situation. And so, my partner and I decided that we're going to drive out one Sunday. This is about an hour, hour and 15 minutes away from where we live, and that's weighing on my mind a little bit as I'm considering this, you know, is this really sustainable? And we drive out to Louisville. We visit and we just have a wonderful time with the congregation. They have been just absolutely welcoming the whole time to me, and my daughter often comes with me. My partner has taken a different route on her faith transition and we're very mutually self-supportive, mutually supportive, in our respective faith transitions. But that, actually, you know, you were talking earlier about trying to decide where to invest your energy? What space do you want to live in, in the different spaces that are available to you during and after a faith transition? And, ultimately, you know, my family had a lot to do with it. And I quickly realized that Community of Christ, as a denomination, but also this particular congregation, were places where I could spend time with my daughter and share a religious experience with her that was not going to be threatening to my non-religious partner, that was not going to force my daughter to choose between us or send messages to her about what her family was like, now that not everyone was participating in the same tradition. That was really, really important to me. And also, it was, you know, very important for my mental health to feel like I could be in that space. I think those were the big drivers for me for deciding that this congregation, and more largely this nomination, were where I wanted to put my emotional effort, where

I wanted to live among all these spaces. I think it was maybe a week after that visit that I attended *Forward With Community* for the first time. So, at the same time, I'm checking out the local-ish congregation, and then I'm also interested in this online ministry that's happening. And that was also just a beautiful, wonderful experience right away, you know, realizing that this was a space where I could set aside some of the anxieties that I had had before, but still also hold on to everything, maybe not everything, but, like, the most important parts of what had been meaningful to me in my previous religious life.

**Brittany Mangelson 37:43**

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And, gosh, what timing to contact the pastor right as they decided to close the local congregation, but then also to find *Forward With Community* with other, you know, transitioning Mormons around that same time. So, you have the local-ish congregation that's, I'm assuming, made up of primarily lifelong Community of Christ, or longtime Community of Christ folks...

**Spencer Greenhalgh 38:08**

Yes.

**Brittany Mangelson 38:08**

...and then have the online space that's, kind of, trying to bridge that gap a little bit. I am curious to know just what some of your first impressions were about either group. You know, what was different than you expected? What were you curious about? What kinds of things were, like, you know, made you keep coming back, etc.? Just what were your impressions?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 38:31**

I don't think I realized how much I needed to hear a message of grace, not, to be able to think of God in a way where acceptance comes first, and then encouragement comes after, to know, to not have to worry so much if I was good enough for God. That was just tremendously important to me. And, you know, one thing that I noticed is how, not that they were wildly different, but *Forward With Community* is a different group than my local congregation, and that was great, in a sort of way, because I may not agree with everything that's said in *Forward With Community*. I may not agree with everything that's said in the local congregation, but the coexistence of both of those send a clear message to me that I didn't have to feel so much pressure before. So, going back to times when I was deconstructing and reconstructing, when I noticed myself getting out of sync with my fellow congregation members in Michigan, that was a source of worry to me. Like, am I doing something wrong because I disagree with the people that are around me? And it was mostly a fleeting thing, but I would write this down in my journal sometimes, that I was concerned about it, that I was getting out of sync. And understanding that Community of Christ, as a whole, is a place where multiple views, multiple perspectives, are encouraged, that was great for me, first of all, because I was still figuring out what my perspectives were, and second because I felt some confidence that they could change and that they could be different than other peoples', but that I would still be welcomed as part of the community, that I would still have a role to play in the groups that I was participating in.

**Brittany Mangelson 40:22**

That, for me was a massive culture shock, but I, culture shock sounds like it's something that, you know, it's, kind of, on the surface, but it's like the doctrinal shock too, right?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 40:35**

Yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 40:36**

That you can have deep disagreements or believe in a very different version of Christ even or, you know, your Christology, or how you imagine God or, I mean, there can be very big disagreements, and hopefully, nobody's going to, you know, try to pound a belief out of you or pound a view out of you, and that you can sit with somebody on Zoom, or in a pew, and just have a different perspective, and it's not a threat and one of you is not wrong. And to contrast that from, you know, a more religious scrupulosity place of feeling like you have to always live up, that you have to always be worthy, that you have to answer the questions right. The gap between those two places is just so big and it can be stressful. I mean, it really can be, it's liberating but it can also be stressful, and just feel like you are totally free falling. So, yeah, it's intriguing, but also terrifying. At least it was for me.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 41:44**

Yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 41:47**

So, as you continue to attend, I know now that you are a confirmed member of Community of Christ. So, what did that process to confirmation look like? How long were you journeying with the church before you officially decided to join? And then maybe can you talk about some of your hang ups? Were there any hang ups joining the church?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 42:09**

So, I mentioned before that I was, kind of, playing both ways for a while. I visited the local Community of Christ congregation a couple of times, but was usually attending my LDS ward. I was attending *Forward With Community*. That didn't conflict and so, like, I could do that as much as I wanted, and I was still trying to figure things out. And it's, kind of, horrible to say, the pandemic made things really easy. A lot of terrible things happened out of the pandemic, but, you know, one week I was teaching the men's lesson in my LDS congregation, and the next week I had no obligation to go to church anymore. And it wasn't, it was, kind of, freeing because I, before that, I had felt this pressure that I needed to do both and do both well, so that I could figure out which of these two paths I was considering was going to be the right one. And then all of a sudden, some of those obligations disappeared. And so, I did some poking around for a couple of months. I attended the Toronto Beyond the Walls Congregation. And then I eventually realized that my local congregation was doing Zoom meetings and so I jumped in and did that with them, and it was just wonderful, and I felt so welcomed. And so, from that point on, I don't remember when my LDS ward started meeting again but I had, kind of, figured out at that point that Community of Christ was where I wanted to be, the place that was good for me to be, the place that was good for my family, for me to be. And then, after that, I was always thinking about confirmation, but I still needed some time. Like, this was still a decision that for a huge amount of my life had seemed unthinkable, and so as much as I loved being in that space, I put some pressure on

myself to make sure that I was doing it right. And so, I took time. You know, I prayed. I studied. And it was always in the back of my mind that confirmation was a possibility. And then I just, I'd let myself take it slow. I didn't pressure myself into anything. And then eventually, I think it was right before a *Forward With Community* meeting, I said, "I am going to email my pastors and I'm going to say, 'Look, this is something I'm interested in pursuing.'" And so, we did. I sat down with them. We did some, you know, very informal classes, basically, whatever I wanted to talk about, just to make sure that I felt comfortable about it, and then, you know, I think they were pretty comfortable with the idea from the beginning. But then, about, so at that point, it had been about a year and a half that I had been regularly attending this congregation and I went for it, and I was confirmed.

**Brittany Mangelson 45:02**

And how was that experience? I'm guessing that by this point you were back in person with your local congregation so that that confirmation happened face to face.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 45:13**

The confirmation happened face to face, but my congregation has been great about allowing Zoom worship since then, especially because you know, there's a cluster of us here in Lexington that we don't have our own congregation anymore. It just does not make sense for all of us to drive out there every week, and we've been really, really grateful for all the hard work that our congregation has put into making sure that we can continue to attend remotely. But, you know what, I decided that I wanted to be confirmed in person. I was intrigued by the possibility of being confirmed from a distance, but it was important for me to be there in person and then to go and do that.

**Brittany Mangelson 45:50**

Yeah, that makes sense. Having been part of both online and in person confirmation, it's not like one is better than the other, but if there's an opportunity to hang out face to face, you know, afterwards, before, during and after, I think that most folks would agree that that is preferred. So, I'm glad that you were able to have that opportunity. So, what has your life looked like since you joined? I know, it hasn't been very long, but I'm curious to know if there are things you've been able to get involved with in your local community or just online conversations that you've been able to have with folks. But yeah, what does your quote unquote "church life" look like now?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 46:34**

So, I attend most weeks over zoom. Some, you know, some weekends we're traveling and I don't show up and that, that's different than how I used to think about church. I'd feel a lot of guilt for missing something. And as much as I love my congregation, there's also something freeing about feeling, like, oh, we're traveling this week. We're driving during church, and I could dial into zoom, but, you know, maybe it's not the end of the world if I don't. So, but Sunday mornings, my daughter and I log into zoom. We do a lot of coloring while the sermon is going on, and it's a load of fun. So, that is great. In terms of congregation life, starting in January, I've been helping out with a new website for the congregation, which is fun for me because I get to dust off and improve some skills that are a little rusty. And hopefully, it'll be good for the congregation as well. And again, you know, one of the first things that I did when I was thinking about Community of Christ is I found everything online that I could and so part of me thinks I don't know if there's anyone else out there who is also wondering if there are

Community of Christ congregations in Kentucky for them to visit, but I want there to be something there, so something not only for the congregation, but also an outward presence. I'm moving a little slower on that than I would like to be but it's a lot of fun work to do that. On Thursdays, my daughter attends a children's book club, which is just the perfect children's ministry for our family. Like, it checks off all of our needs. Even though there are different religious beliefs in my family, we share core values, and that this is a kind of children's ministry that hits those values perfectly every week. And it's a wonderful way, it was especially wonderful when the pandemic was raging a little bit more, and our kid did not get a lot of interaction with other kids. But even now, it's something that we just all look forward to. It fits our needs perfectly. And then on Saturday mornings, if I have the time, which we're a busy family, so I don't always get the time, but the Beyond the Walls Congregation in Toronto has a *Book of Mormon* discussion group and I just loved that. It was important for me to hold on to the *Book of Mormon*, not in the same way that I grew up in, but to hold on to it as a text and to learn to read it in new ways, and to let it inspire me in different ways, but still in ways that continue to be important to me. And so, if I get a chance, I pop in there and, you know, bunch of different people with a bunch of different perspectives on the *Book of Mormon*. I'm learning to read the text in new ways. It's a whole lot of fun. I really appreciate all of those different things that are a part of my week.

**Brittany Mangelson** 49:20

That is exciting. And as a parent of someone who is also involved with that book club, I echo my appreciation. And I know it was a really good thing for my little kiddo when we were in the early, early weeks of the pandemic as well, because I definitely recognize that it takes a village to instill good values into children. And so, when their community disappeared, it was really easy for adults to hop on Zoom, etc., but we, kind of, lost that village for our kids. And so, to have, you know, this core group of five to 10 kids spread out all over the United States, being able to read books together that have, you know, common values and, that I want to teach my kids, has been really helpful. And I know Grant just always talks about his little book club buddies.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 50:12

Yeah. It's so much fun.

**Brittany Mangelson** 50:14

It's been really good. And, oh.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 50:17

And, go ahead.

**Brittany Mangelson** 50:18

No, you go.

**Spencer Greenhalgh** 50:20

I think one of my favorite things is when we go to the library, and I'm picking out a book, or my partner is picking out a book and our kid looks at it and says, "Oh, we read that in the Kids Book Club", because that just tells me, okay, we're on the same wavelength here. Like, this is what we need as a family. This is what we want as a family. And it's great for me, because I am sharing a religious

experience with my kid, but at the same time, it's something that I know is compatible with our broader family and the diversity within our family. That's so important to me. And, you know, I love my Sunday activities, but that Thursday Kids Book Club plays a special role in Community of Christ experiences in our family,

**Brittany Mangelson 51:01**

It is a lot of fun. It is a lot of fun. And I do think for me, the books and the delivery of the books probably comes different from the ministers who are doing that, as opposed to if I were just to say, "Hey, kids, let's pull this book out." You know, I mean, I'm not as cool as book club. So, well, that's great. And I actually, thanks for putting the plug in for the Beyond the Walls *Book of Mormon* discussion, because I will admit that reframing the *Book of Mormon* is not something that I've spent a lot of time doing, but I know that I need to, and it's like this shadow lurking in the background, like, Brittany, you need to address this. And I truthfully think that the, there's no other community that I'd rather do it with than the Beyond the Walls community. So, I need to start attending those discussion groups, for sure, because I just, I don't know how to put those pieces back together. Like, I don't think I can do them on my own. And so, to have a community who is discussing diverse viewpoints about the *Book of Mormon*, that's exactly what I need. So, thank you for that plug.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 52:10**

Yeah, of course, I think, you know, the *Book of Mormon* is a hard thing for a lot of people to wrestle with. Just because I have a great love for it doesn't mean I reckon-, you know, I still recognize that it's difficult for other folks. I'm not trying to impose my love for the book on anybody, but I think there's so much potential in there, right? There are chapters that you can read as queer affirming. There are chapters that you can read as challenging the idea of the necessity of authority to connect with God, and these ways that I never learned to read the text as a child, but they are in there, and they are powerful, and they are great. I think there's so much potential in there. I'm still learning it. There're still, you know, issues with the book that we have to wrestle with at the same time that we're doing that, but it's a great love of mine. And I'm grateful for the chance to do that in Community of Christ, to continue to spend time with the book and wrestle with it.

**Brittany Mangelson 53:09**

Yeah, and I just want to say real quick that I do appreciate that there are different ways to read it. I know folks that find a lot of liberation theology and, like you said, that it can be queer affirming, or that it is, you know, the message of equality and, you know, income equality, etc. Like, those messages are very prevalent through the book. And so, if we can find a way to reclaim that book in a way that is healthy and also acknowledges, you know, healthy while acknowledging the problems in it, I think is really important. And honestly, again, something that I, as a Latter-day Seeker Minister, need to do more. So, you will likely see me on those Saturday mornings every once in a while as well because I could use it. So, Spencer, this has been really interesting to get to know you a little bit better. And it's just so interesting, because, you know, like, we've never met in person, and yet, you feel like a great friend. Your daughter feels like a great friend, right? Like, I see her every week on book club as well, and it's just, I don't know. I'm just grateful for this group of Latter-day Seekers who have come from the LDS church, who don't necessarily want to move completely away from the Restoration tradition and are trying to reclaim the things that work for them, the beliefs that work for them, all while trying to view

this in a way that is healthier for them, that can, you know, bring peace into their own communities. So, thank you for sharing your story. And I am curious to know, what are your hopes for Community of Christ as you, you know, have really deep, took a, taking a deep dive into everything that you could find online and you've had different experiences with, you know, at least what, four different groups between book club, Toronto, *Forward With Community*, your local congregation? What are some of the hopes that you see, and then, or the hopes that you have? And then what would you tell other Latter-day Seekers who are looking into Community of Christ?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 55:28**

Oh, well, let me start by also thanking you. I haven't done a good enough job of talking up *Forward With Community* and you, and everyone else there who has become real friends for me. Now, as I've been in a more comfortable place, I haven't been attending as much as earlier, partly because of time zones, I'll be perfectly honest with you, but...

**Brittany Mangelson 55:47**

Well, yeah, that's fair.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 55:49**

Yeah, but *Forward With Community* has just been a tremendous resource for me. You know, of the four groups that you mentioned, I have experienced every one of those groups online. I love face to face church, but I am so excited for the ways that we, as a faith community, are figuring out what we can do over great distances. That, it just fits in with experiences I've had, you know, online friendships that I've kept for a long time. And for, you know, even the work that I do at work, describing how people do meaningful things with online technologies, I'm really excited for the direction that we go with that. I hope we never have to let go of face to face experiences. I would love to, you know, to see more face to face experiences happen in Lexington so that I could have those more often, but at the same time, it's great to see us be flexible and see what we can do with the opportunities that we have before us. I'm, I have a lot of hope in our efforts to be a peace and justice denomination. I've said to other people before that one of the reasons I chose to come into Community of Christ was because it was a place that would push me more in that direction, rather than a place that I needed to push in a direction, because I know I have so much work left to do. I am trying but I have a lot to learn and a lot to do. And I take a lot of inspiration not just in church on Sundays, but thinking how could I get involved with my community that feels like something church wants me to do. So, that's an exciting thing for me. In particular, my nerdy little corner of the world, I'd love to see us combine those some. There are some peace and justice issues involving modern technologies and involving the internet. I think as we, as a denomination, get more and more excited about both of those, it makes sense for us to bring it together and to figure out what we can do to make a more just world on the world wide web, if you will. So, those are some of the great hopes that I see, the things that I'm excited for in the future. If I were to talk to other Latter-day Seekers, I'd go back to something that I said earlier, and just emphasize that Community of Christ is a space that you can turn into the space that you need it to be. There're, sometimes I hang out in the subreddit for Community of Christ, and there are folks who pop in, and they'll say, "Interested in Community of Christ", but, you know, "is such and such a thing required? Do I have to believe this and that or the other?" And the answers come each time. There's so much flexibility here for you to bring what you're looking for. I think we can, you know, we can provide some of that.



And I think just knowing that there is grace in the space, there's flexibility in this space that maybe you spend a week here, maybe you find a place that you want for the rest of your life, but whatever you're looking for, chances are that you can find some of that here. And whatever you're worried about, chances are that that's not going to be important here.

**Brittany Mangelson 59:03**

Ah, that last line, it was so good. And that's my hope in all of the ministry that we do, particularly with Latter-day Seekers, is that helping them understand that this community can be what they make of it. And the last part that you said, of the things that you're worried about probably aren't going to be important here, I have found that to be true time and time and time again. And again, that can be so hard to wrap your mind around when those things are super-duper, duper important in the LDS church. But the reality is, is that you don't have to hang on to everything and you don't have to let go of everything. And as long as your core values are aligned with us at some point, like, you're gonna be able to find a place here. So yeah, thank you for the way that you articulated that. That was really, that was really great. Um, do you have any final thoughts? I usually like to just leave an open-ended question at the end of, was there anything that you wanted to share that you didn't get a chance to? But, yeah, any final thoughts?

**Spencer Greenhalgh 1:00:10**

No, I think that's everything. I really appreciate this opportunity to chat with you.

**Brittany Mangelson 1:00:15**

Awesome. Thanks so much, Spencer, and we will definitely be seeing more of you on the internet.

**Spencer Greenhalgh 1:00:21**

Thanks, Brittany.

**Josh Mangelson 1:00:30**

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