

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 00:27

Welcome, this is the show where we explore Restoration history. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. Now here at Cuppa Joe, we partner with the Historic Sites Foundation to interview the presenters from their Lecture Series. And right now we're interviewing folks from their Spring 2022 Lecture Series. And our guest today is Michael Wright. Michael lives in Rome and has for the past 20 years. He is director of the European Programs for Duquesne University. Michael has Restoration roots that began as early as the Kirtland era of the church, and relatives, such as Kirtland Temple architect Truman O. Angell and Brigham Young. He was born and raised in the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and his faith journey led him to be baptized and Community of Christ in Italy in 2019. As an Italian citizen, he is currently the only member of Community of Christ in Italy, where he serves as the National Ministry Coordinator. He also serves on the leadership team of Community of Christ's fully online congregation, Community Circle in Western Europe, and is a student. Like you're not busy enough! He's a student in master of religion program in Community of Christ Seminary, part of Graceland University. So with all of that in the back of our mind, Hi, Michael.

Michael Wright 02:00

Hello, Karin. It's great to be with you.

Karin Peter 02:03

It's so good to have you back here at Cuppa Joe. And I'm really excited about this because your contribution to the Historic Sites Foundation Spring Lecture Series this time around, and John Avondet was the first Italian missionary of the Reorganization. And you gave a little description of your lecture which I was happy to see that he was born among the Waldensian Valleys of the Piedmont Region in 1828. At a time of great change in Italy, born as a Waldensian in a primitivist dissenting faith tradition, Avondet's faith journey, introduces him to the Restoration, and takes him on a literal journey from the Italian Dolomites to the Wasatch Mountains of the American West, to the prairies of Nebraska, and back again to his native Italy as the Reorganisation's first Italian missionary. So in your lecture, you're going to explore the places, the denominations, the historic events, and the folks who he encountered and get to know him a little bit better and he certainly is a little known saint. I have not heard of John Avondet. So how did you first learn about him?

Michael Wright 03:17

Well, before I joined Community of Christ in 2019, I went through a a thorough period of seeking or investigating in LDS terms with this new found denomination. I ordered copies of the Book of Mormon and Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants in a very meaty three volumes set of church history by Mark Shearer called "The Journey of A People." As I was reading his work, I came across John's

name in Volume Two The Era of the Reorganization 1844 to 1946, where there is one mention of him about his missionary calling in 1872, to serve in Switzerland, France and Italy. Now his Anglicized first name, and his French last name did not make me think he was initially Italian. But I was really curious about him, and I started to search for more information, especially since he served a mission in Italy, my home, but I kept finding the Avondet was shown would show up in works by other historians too, such as Michael Homer. But again, just a quick line mentioning that the RLDS church had tried their hand at missionary work in Italy without much success. Now, my two cheerleaders during these past two years of research and searching for Avondet have been Barbara Walden, Executive Director of Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation, and Rachel Killebrew the librarian and archivist at the temple in Independence. I have to thank them for their encouragement, and to Rachel for finding a picture of John Avondet in the Community of Christ archives for me, this really brought him to life for me. I also traveled to his home village Prarostino last week! I've been trying to get there forever, but COVID has not made that possible. So I finally was able to get there along with other places you will hear about in the interview today. Although Prarostino is now a modern Italian village, it still has an ancientness about it, looking probably very similar to the way it did when John was a boy. A mountain village, with terraced landscaping for grapes for wine production. And the Waldensian church of San Bartolameo in the center of town. The local cemetery holds the name of, of generations of Avondet and other last names like Guardiola that you will hear about later. This too, brought John and his family to life for me.

Karin Peter 05:43

All of that from a one line mentioned in the third volume, you make me want to go back and mine those volumes again for other nuggets of information that can lead us on wonderful explorations. And it sounds like you did just that. So why don't you tell us a bit about him? We don't want to, we don't want to steal everything that you're going to share from your lecture because we hope our folks will go and listen to your lecture and participate in the question and answer. But let's let's hear a little bit about John Avondet.

Michael Wright 06:20

I've kind of brought some things together that will give you an idea about him in case you can't come. But I hope you will come because I'm not going to be giving the whole story and I've got a lot of great nuggets that will be during the lecture. But I also have a little candy bag grab today that I'll share with you that I won't share in the lecture. So just to just to kind of reward people that come to both places.

Karin Peter 06:42

Cup of Joe listeners Excellent.

Michael Wright 06:43

Yes, yeah. He has a fascinating story like so many who travailed the challenges of immigration in the 19th century. As I mentioned before, his name does not sound very Italian because he it isn't. The geographic area that he comes from in the Piedmont region of Italy, where Turin is the capital today is an was a multicultural mix of identities separated by the Cochin Alps. The French and Swiss borders are very close. Today, you can easily drive between Turin and Geneva in Switzerland, or Grenoble in France in about three hours. This is a part of modern Italy that has a difficult story as the valleys just

west of Turin in the foothills of the Alps called the Waldensian Valleys, where the location of the Walencian people and the first location where Restoration missionaries came looking for conference. These valleys spoke four languages, including the daily use of dialects that come from Provençal and the Occitan languages, including the Waldensian dialect, along with French since it was the cultural connection to these valleys and Italian as the language of the court and all things legal. This is the reason why his name is John Avondet, a French name, but he is absolutely Italian. So most listeners are probably asking themselves, what does Waldensian mean? When folks think of Italy, they automatically think of Roman Catholicism. The Holy Father Pope Francis, who lives in the smallest state in the world, the Vatican City, which is just about 30 minutes driving from my house here in Rome. And they think of 1000s of years of church history in the Eternal City, including St. Peter's Basilica, where Peter is supposedly buried. When we think of Protestantism, we normally do not think of Italy. Yet Torre Pellice, a little village not far from John Avondet's home village, is today the headquarters of the Waldensian Faith. This Italian Protestant denomination today would look much more like Community of Christ than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Yet in the 19th century, there was quite a bit of intersection between Mormonism and the vaulted see and faith. And today they are in fellowship and connected with the Methodist Church in Italy. In fact, the head of the Tavola Valdese today, which leads their annual Synod which would be like our World Conference or an LDS General Conference, is a Methodist woman minister. So yes, the Waldensians have ordained women since the 1960s. And in 2010, they began to bless same sex couples, as marriage is not a sacrament in their tradition. But this is a persecuted people. And John lives right at the end of the persecution. The Waldensian and movement was started by a disillusioned Catholic merchant in Lyon, France named Peter Waldo. His last name is what gives the group its name. He lived in the 12th century. He heard of a monk who practiced extreme poverty and was moved by and decided to devote himself to a life of poverty and preaching. He critiqued the rich and the corruption within the Catholic Church. His group of ollars followers which included other Mendicant preachers, including women, were excommunicated. Women preachers were accused of witchcraft and executed in a horrific Medieval style. There was not a great time to be a woman in the Middle Ages.

Michael Wright 10:18

After being almost annihilated by the church, they moved across the Alps into what is known today as Waldensian Valleys of Italy. Here, they would be confined by the Duke of Savoy to their ghetto, which are the valleys. I just remind listeners, that ghetto that we use also in English is an Italian word and unfortunately, was used as a place to individualize Jews. It's an anti semitic term in Italy, and it will apply to the Waldensian people. They would lose their civil rights and be forced to work the rugged land of the mountains to ensure they were poor, and unlearned. Even if they could see from their mountain heights the fertile valleys below that ran towards Turin. Their churches had to be built above 800 meters, so 2400 feet above sea level, by law, making sure that these people of faith would stay high in the mountains and not tread on the valleys below. Coming into the valleys below meant certain death for those who try. But in February of 1848, the Duke of Savoy returned civil rights to the Palestinian people and to the Jews, allowing them to come out of their ghettos. Centuries of persecution and poverty meant that they started to look beyond their mountain homes for a better life. February 16, is still celebrated annually as a day of liberation for the Waldensian people where they light bonfires and their mountain villages that can be seen from the valleys below. It is in this environment that apostle Lorenzo Snow, an early missionary of the Restoration would, who would be chosen by Brigham Young,

he followed Brigham Young during the schism and would and would be called by him. he'll also become the president of the LDS church in 1898. And his missionary companion Joseph Toronto, as he's known today, but he would be Giuseppe Toronto, as his Italian name. He was the first Italian member of the Restoration of Sardinian, who was raised in Sicily, who joined the Restoration movement in Boston, and he too, would follow Brigham Young on off to Salt Lake. He was called with Lorenzo Snow on a mission to these people in 1850. In my lecture, I'll speak about why young felt that the Mormon church was a natural fit for the Waldensian people. So you have to come to the lecture to find out.

Michael Wright 12:42

Yes, Avondet, was from the little Valencian village of Prarostino. I already said that name. It's a hard one to pronounce, which strings up the mountainside for about five miles above the Chisone river and the Pinerolo Valley. He joins the Mormon church in 1863 and immigrates to the US that same year with his wife and three year old son John Louis. He and his wife Marie are 35 at this time. They accepted the offer by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to fund their move to Salt Lake through the Perpetual Immigration Fund. They went with a few other folks from their village. The thing that gets me is the commitment to travel to their desired Zion of Utah. The trip took five months from their village to arrive in Salt Lake Valley. I will tell you how they got there. This is crazy to me. I'm upset when I'm in economy between Rome and New York City on a 10 hour flight. Here's what they did. The trip would begin by moving down the mountain to the valleys close to Turn, where they would take the train to Mount Cenis. From here they would board coaches on skis led by horses over the very high Alps into France. There they would take the train to Lyon, and another to Paris. at Paris, they would board a train to Calais, where they would change to a ferry across the English Channel again, on train to London, where they would switch again and take a train to the northern English city of Liverpool. Because of their poverty, they would board almost immediately the immigrant ship the arc in the Antarctic, which would set sail on May 23 for New York City, with nearly 500 seats on board divided into branches by nationality. So it was over a month just to get to Liverpool. The Avondets were assigned to the French branch. After nearly two months at sea, they would arrive in the United States where they would board immediately trains that would take them on a long journey across the country, from New York City, to Albany, to Niagara, to Detroit, on to Chicago, down to St. Joseph, Missouri, where they switch to a riverboat that will take them to Florence, Nebraska, which is Omaha today. Now there, they joined one of multiple church organized wagon trains that would depart across the plains until they arrived in Salt Lake City in September of 1863. They would have been welcomed by other church members of public square in the eighth ward of Salt Lake, which today is called Washington Square in Salt Lake City. For reasons I have not yet found Avondet would not follow other immigrants from Italy to Ogden, Utah, where most of the prior families from his valleys had established their homes. Rather, he would stay in the eighth ward in Salt Lake to establish a shop and buy a home. I remind everyone that they did this with a three year old boy, as the American Civil War was raging. Journals from those travels, those who traveled along with him spoke of measles outbreaks on the ship. And deaths along the way of loved ones and children of marriages between single new Mormons heading designed together. They spoke of singing and worshiping along the way, and even encounters with Smith relatives on their train stops across America as they traverse the United States. It sounds like the story could stop here Karin, I'm already exhausted recounting the geographical journey they took to get to their new home. But this is really just the beginning for the Arvind debt family, the beginning of what must have been an excruciating and complicated decision to make. After just two years of being in Salt Lake, something

happened, and the Avondets decide to leave Utah. During the lecture, I'll speak more about their time in Salt Lake City. But we do know why they left in a Herald article we got we get to hear the voice of Marie Avondet De Foury, which is John's wife. And she explains a vision she had. This is really special because as I searched both for more information about John's wife and son, and it is it is in Marie's letter that we get confirmation about their faith journey, and what would take them elsewhere. So I want to share a little bit about that from that, that Herald article. That Herald article is in volume 16 from 1869. A letter she writes to Joseph Smith, the Third, I'll share just a little bit about it. "Brother Joseph, the faith without practice is broken, lost and become ineffectual to sustain us. This just came to pass with me when I discovered the work of polygamy. Before I was very happy thinking I was a member of the true church. From that time I was troubled in my petition, my position regard to the Brighamism. Sometime after that I found the reorganization, but the doubt came out again. But after one long struggle, the Lord in His tender mercy reserved for me a great and unspeakable joy. There is nothing in this natural world to express my feelings. It must be understood in consciousness of the mercy of God. One evening in July 1868, after my supplication in prayer, and calling with faith, believing and hoping for an answer, according to my desire, having known many times already whom it is not in vain we search nor needlessly we found, I went to bed and fell asleep calmly and profoundly. When about midnight, I was awakened by a strong blow on my breast, which I cannot explain otherwise. Then, if it were like a stroke of thunder, that commotion did not do me any harm. The noise left off softly, I opened my eyes and I saw one immense block of cloud, very white, and then the middle, like the body of a man clothed in a white mantle, and bright. This beautiful sight did not move until I had plenty of time to note this vision. Great was my amazement and admiration I explained "The Kingdom of God!" And immediately one voice like thunder answered, "Oui, yes!" This voice came from behind the cloud. I know it was the voice of my husband. And I said, "Thou was not deceived." The same voice answered. "No." I said again, "Then it is the church of God." The same voice of thunder answered "Oui, yes." This picture only I saw the eyes of that heavenly being were fixed steadily upon me. I looked always with admiration. And then after a few moments, it disappeared gently. Behold, this is my testimony. And I thank my God with all my heart." Madam Marie of Avondet. There's a note that says this is translated into English from the French, and the Herald welcomes other languages as submissions. Which I thought was really beautiful. So I think that's maybe why the English is a little bit choppy there, too. But we hear her voice and her vision that she was seeking and she was very nervous to leave the LDS faith.

Karin Peter 20:21

I find that doubly interesting, Michael, because we so seldom get to hear women's voices when we look at church history. And so to hear her concerns her supplication and what she she experienced as a response to that is marvelous.

Michael Wright 20:39

Absolutely. I was so excited to find that. We certainly know that they would have come into contact with josephite or those from the Reorganization, who were preaching and warning new European immigrants headed for Utah, what laid in store for them. Both Thomas Henry White and Samuel HB Smith, who were traveling west with the Avondet's write of these experiences in their journals. And we know that the first Reorganized missionaries were called to preach in Utah the same year the Avondets arrived in 1863. From the saints Herald to we know that reorganize missionaries were preaching mainly

in Salt Lake City town. So I asked myself, did John have any contact with Reorganization on the way to or during those years in Salt Lake City? A question I don't know, but as plausible. Well, their house and shop were put up for sale in mid 1865. And they moved to Omaha at the end of that year or the beginning of 1866. Again, this must have been a fearful moment for the Avondets, as there were rumors at the time that Brigham Young and his Danites might force them to turn over their home shop and maybe even their child to repay their debt of immigration. However, the Avondets made it safely to Nebraska, and set up a home and a clothes repair shop. The history of the church in Omaha, Nebraska in the Journal of History, speaks of Avondets baptism in 1868 by Elder Joseph Gilbert and speaks of him as one, quote, one who lived for many years in Omaha, and was known among all the saints for his kindness in times of sickness and his effective administration's. Now administration's and elder RLDS-speak is laying on of hands. In September 1871, at the semi annual general conference in Council Bluffs, Iowa, John Avondet's name was suggested to the Quorum of 12 for a foreign mission, and at General Conference in April 1872, he is officially called to serve in Switzerland, France and his native Italy. His missionary companions would be Swiss natives, John Bear and a Brother Ursenbach.. During the two years that he labored back in Europe, he spent most of the time in his home village of Prarostino. Among the Valencia and valleys, his mission was difficult and he reflected in multiple letters to the Saints Herald, and with reports to the General Conference about this, a co written article in the Swiss Times by Avondet and John Bear also mentioned the difficulty of convincing LDS members and ex-Brighamites to join the Eeorganization. You could say Karin, that the RLDS missionaries in the 19th century were the first Latter-day Seeker ministers as their main approach was to seek out those who had left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Even though many wanted to believe the words that Avondet was preaching, they were afraid it was a trick, and that they were Mormons trying to convince people to come to Utah, where they would be forced into polygamy. You can hear Avondet's frustrations in his writings, which I will share during the lecture. To help with the economics of supporting his mission. He lived with his mother Prarostino on the family farm. His father had passed away by this time when he served his mission and he tended to the grapes for wine production on the farm. He worked all day, and they would find time to preach in the evenings and on Sundays. In a letter to the General Conference after his release in 1875, he names the two baptisms that he had in Petrosino, Italy, from the Gardiol family, Judith Marie, and Jeanne Clarisse in August of 1874. So Karin, these ladies would have been the first Community of Christ members to join the church in their native Italy. Two ladies, two women. When I found this information about their baptism into Community of Christ, I quickly took the opportunity to update their genealogical records online to show their religious affiliation with us.

Karin Peter 24:41

Good job, Michael! Fabulous. I love that it was women were the first Community of Christ, RLDS folks in Italy and from his hometown, it sounds like so both. That's marvelous. So he had he had quite an experience of travel. I mean that that whole immigration, five month trip just mortifies me. Even when I just learned about the people who traveled from Independence, Missouri to Oregon, I can't believe it. So that that's amazing dedication for a matter of faith and amazing journey for a matter of faith, both geographical and emotional, with, with family in tow. What were the most important aspects of not just this journey, but his experience that you you absolutely felt like you had to include no matter what, in your, in your lecture? Were there certain things that stood out as some of the most important aspects of his life?

Michael Wright 25:46

Yes, definitely. I'm really amazed by his entire story, mostly about how you drag your family across the world, while Italy and the US are both in civil wars, to go off to the deserts of Mexico to join a community building Zion, literally from the ground up. I don't know what that brochure looks like, but I'm not sure I would have signed up. (I'm not doing it.) Yeah, two quick stories were surprising to me.

Avondet that's business was that of being a dyer a clothes dyer. This this would have been very normal where he was from. I already told you that he worked on a wine production, which of course, grapes would have been used to dye as well. And then also these valleys were really known for the for silk production with silk worms. And this is this is a trade in Italy throughout the Middle Ages, people came to Italy to look for, for silk and also for precious dyeing of silk. You often hear about places like Siena or Tuscan places where they were using saffron and all these things to make beautiful, beautiful clothes. Italy still makes beautiful, beautiful clothes today. But this is what he did. He was a he was a clothes dyer. And he was had a clothes repair shop. So he was arrested and taken to court in Salt Lake City in 1864 for distilling and selling illegal spirits. So remember, his family is in the wine business, right? So he knows how to ferment right? And this is this must be his side hustle, right? To take care of his family. He was fined by the court and reprimanded and I would say humiliated in the Desert News. And in Omaha, he suffered multiple breakins to his home and his shop. I think these things make him sound like a human being instead of this pioneer missionary. So one of these exciting incidents sparked a real ruckus in Omaha. I probably won't have time to share this during the lecture. So I wanted to share it here with our readers. I want to read a little bit from this. This is from the Omaha Baily Bee in, oh I don't have the date here. I'm very sorry, but this would have been in the 1870s for sure. The article says "Big crowd chases thieves. Sprightly race of 10 blocks terminating in the fight between officers and prisoners. Two men dropped in at John Avondet's dye shop; 1350 California Street Thursday afternoon and when the proprietor wasn't looking, each helped himself to a coat and vest and walked out." Now they're in Omaha living at this time. "The little incident that got him it got in motion a chain of circumstances which included a 10 block foot race a fight in which five men participated to black eyes, a broken head to arrest and more excitement in and about Hoagland Lumberyard than the vicinity had seen for months. It all came about through old man Avondet seing the thieves as they left his place He took after them being like a fox hound on a hot scent. Block after block they ran. T thieves just out of arm's reach down 13th Street to Dodge and then to eastward on to Dodge. The crowd behind behind him taking on every leap at Ninth and Dodge Officer Mike McCarthy joined in the race a black further down chief Donahue and Captain Hayes fell into the rock. And from this point on the race became a scramble. It was no longer possible to recognize individuals. To the main current of the chase, the chasing throng every cross street added its quota of humanity. People of all ages and conditions converged upon it from every direction. The wreck traveled fast, but news have traveled faster. And by the time the fugitives concluded to take cover, Hogan's lumberyard and advanced guard bore down upon them from the front and they stood at bay." There were some injuries, some fighting these just ends up with for some time it was thought that that Brennan who was the person that confessed to the theft would not survive the blow to the head, but he spat blood for for some time, and then lapsed into unconsciousness. But he was better at last accounts. The thieves were booked in Dan Williams and John Brennan. And the stolen property was recovered for old man Avondet. So it's just a it's just a great little piece to find. You can tell they're they're on the frontier things are violent. People are doing what they can. It doesn't seem that Avondet was he was, he was howling like a hound down the street.

Karin Peter 30:37

Well and he was old at this point. They said, "old man Avondet" I can picture this, like one of those old time movies where you see somebody running and then pretty soon everybody's joining in the prey. (Exactly.) Marvelous. So yeah, that does make him a little bit more human than his arrest in Salt Lake. It's just some of the other aspects of frontier life. We forget this is frontier life, when we're talking about what's going on. Here. Especially we talked about it in the context of the church. So you live in Italy, obviously. And so this had some special connections for you. But I assume there also were some challenges to finding enough information about Avondet. So what were some of the jump besides COVID? What were some of the challenges you had?

Michael Wright 31:26

COVID was really complicated for me, because I had had trips set up to go to Salt Lake City and to meet with some people and meet with the LDS church History Department and the museum to go and take some pictures of some of these places that I was learning that maybe he was at. I had some real questions. And that never happened. I still haven't been to Salt Lake. And then I wanted to go to the Waldensian Valleys. And I just was able to do it last week. So it was really quite complicated, but I'm so glad I got to go. But the story of John Avondet his family, it's difficult. I have to I have had to rely on 19th century newspaper resources and both Utah and Nebraska. The accounts from the Saint's Herald in the Journal of History from about 1868 to 1950. He dies in 1910, but his son won't die until 1915. So really kind of a long time of scouring through these documents. Along with piecing together parts of the story with journals of people who are journeying with them, and history books and scholarly journals on people who had similar stories to Avondet at the same time period. I wish there was more information available from his youth. But I know only a bit about his family's business and when he was christened in the Waldensian church. From the time he joins the Mormon church, there is much more information about him probably if he had remained a faithful member of that church, we would have even more information about him. And then he starts to be a prominent member of the RLDS church in Nebraska along with serving a mission in Italy. But with this now two year long project hobby for myself, I have at least found articles and letters written by all three members of his little family, and the Community of Christ archive, which only had a photo of John, which you'll see in the lecture along with a handwritten letter by Joseph Smith III, writing that Avondet is an official representative of the church and a minister of Christ. Asking for safe passage and respect to him while he serves his mission in Europe. These are fun artifacts. But I hope with diligence I will continue to find more about him. I gave a small talk on him last year as part of Community Circle's The Disciples Toolbox series, and even from that talk, I have found corrected information on his story, which I'm excited to share. Another difficult aspect of understanding John's story is that that which I spoke of at the beginning of the interview, about where he comes from, in my research, I have found his name spelled in many ways, sometimes using his wife's last name, sometimes with an Italianisation, they Italianised of his last name of Avendeto, sometimes misspelled last names and wrong geographic locations. In fact, his ship passage showed his family being from Ireland, not Italy, even though at Ellis Island, they were able to correct that information. Because he was French speaking, he's often said to be from France or from Switzerland. We're called a French saint, even though he was indeed an Italian saint. He just happened to be a French speaking Italian saint.

Karin Peter 34:32

Which helped when he got assigned to the French berth on the ship over I would assume, being the only Italian. So one of the things I'm always interested in is, is the kind of the hope as we listen to church history, that we each make a difference in the greater faith community that each of us as we participate somehow makes a difference. So do you see any reflections of John Avondet or or maybe he has the DNA of his ministry floating around and Community of Christ today?

Michael Wright 35:06

Yes, absolutely, Karin. Avondet took up the literal long road to correcting what he and his family saw as injustice in polygamy. He was willing to sell all he had to take up the trail with his wife, and now five year old son to go east. A foreigner in a far off land, and now an outcast apostate in two traditions, not just one Waldensian and the Mormons. He went fervently seeking for where the Spirit was moving him and his family. I have met so many Latter-day Seekers and members of Community of Christ who have done the same in their own contexts. They have been fearless, but that doesn't mean they didn't feel fear, and have gone where the Spirit has taken them. Community of Christ history is one of seeking an identity, and wrestling with theology in order to better understand our desired Zion. Avondet's family did just that, through discernment and Revelation and complete sacrifice as a family, they strive to bring peace and justice to their communities, whether that was in Omaha, or in their beloved Italy.

Karin Peter 36:14

Thank you, Michel, for that. I think that facing injustice might be a long thread of DNA that we can give thanks to the Waldensians for as well, that experience. So what effect has your study about John Avondet? Oh has that informed your own journey, your own journey of discipleship, it's been two years since you've engaged with him, how has it affected you?

Michael Wright 36:39

A lot. I never really kind of thought I would, I would have this affinity for him, you know, but there was something really pulling me to him. In the lecture I'll talk much more about the life his life in Omaha, Nebraska and his his his time amongst the Reorganizites, as he would call them. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and what his family was going through. But, you know, we already talked about the geographic challenge of going west, but we rarely talk about the path east. As a kid growing up in Nebraska and Oklahoma. I knew of the Reorganized church and had heard the awkward stories of Emma Smith in my childhood tradition, I say awkward because it seemed no one knew how to speak about Emma in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. My own lovely mother in hushed tones would tell me that she thought the Lord would be very merciful with Emma for leaving the true church because she had been through so much trauma, including the loss of children, and her beloved husband, Joseph Smith, Jr. I went to Independence with my high school seminary class seminary and the LDS tradition is a high school course that we take in scripture. And just as the Independence Temple was being completed in the mid 90s, my well intentioned and loving seminary teacher took us to the LDS historic sites where we could gaze safely onto the sights of the other Restoration churches. Also, interestingly enough during my steak Youth Conference trip to Nauvoo, while I was in high school, I got to tour the RLDS Visitor Center, where two European sister missionaries spoke to us and gave us a tour of the sites. I think we have now figured out that that might have been Eva Erickson from Germany, and Kirsten Jeske, who lives in Norway. They serve on the

Western European Mission Center council with me and I have been able to get to know them better through the ministry in Europe, and yet they they knew my 16 year old self on that one tour. (That's marvelous!) Yeah, come full circle. And like I said before, I spent many of my teenage years living in just south of Omaha, Nebraska in my LDS ward or congregation was in Nebraska city, which I learned in Community of Christ seminary almost became the gathering spot for the reorganization. But alas, Lamone, Iowa offered a better deal to Joseph Smith III. Florence, Nebraska, which is now part of Omaha, is where Winter Quarters was located. The frontier spot where the saints following Brigham Young to the Great Salt Lake Valley, we're preparing for the long crossing with handcarts and wagon trains. I myself have relatives buried at Winter Quarters. But for us folks who come from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints tradition, the hardness of that faith journey towards Salt Lake is only told with Western bound itineraries. It is as if the Mormon trail was a one way highway, taking folks from the United States to Mexico, where Deseret or the Utah territory was located. But the idea of only Western bound folks makes no sense. Even my own great great great grandfather Truman O. Angell who was an architect on the Kirtland Temple, and go on to build the Salt Lake Temple and Tabernacle, along with the St. George, Manti, and Logan temples in the LDS tradition, would be sent on a mission in 1856 to Europe to study the great cathedrals of the United Kingdom and France. To bring it to temple building. This meant that he had to travel east on that trail, the Postal Service, pioneers, visitors and tourists to the west returning home. And yes, in the words of my own great, great great uncle Brigham Young, even "nasty apostates" are traveling in opposite direction on the trail between Utah and Nebraska. Yet we hear so little about the east bound to folks and their journeys of faith. All of this is critical to understanding the life of Avondet and his family. But I also have this great affinity for John because I see multiple intersections in our live, in my life with his as I said before, I grew up just south of Omaha, where Avondet spent the second half of his life building the rfe RLDS church. He helped preach given ministrations poor laying on of hands, and attending conferences in Nebraska city, the place where my LDS congregation of my youth was. He joined the LDS church and became disillusioned with the tradition because of the injustice of polygamy. This could no longer be the place where he envisioned his Zion and that of his family and community. So he headed east and continued search for his community, and to help build the Zion he dreamed of. I was born in the LDS tradition, but was marginalized by the theology of that tradition. I too, could no longer stay and need to seek my own Zion, and I did that by heading east to Italy. Avondet's native land. We both became immigrants as adults. We both joined Community of Christ. Avondet on March 26, 1868, and I joined on March 25, 2019. Our baptism anniversaries are just one day apart. We both are Italian and US citizens. I became an Italian not through heritage, but by full participation in Italian society. And he did the same in the US were both Italian second language speakers. His native tongue was most likely Occitan or French, he would have spoken Italian as a secondary language. And I also learned to speak Italian after my move here 20 years ago. He served a heart mission for two years in Italy, for Community of Christ. And I served a two year mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Spain, which was a hard mission, too. We both served people we loved. And we're often frustrated with peoples of the Mediterranean lands. He served as an elder in Community of Christ. And I am preparing to serve as an elder and Community of Christ, too. I look at his beautiful ministry he provided and hope that I might bring that to the church and to people as well.

Karin Peter 43:03

Well, Michael, I would say you do already. This is a wonderful conversation about John Avondet And I want to thank you for sharing his life with us. Before we close our conversation, do you have any last thoughts about this experience you'd like to share?

Michael Wright 43:23

It's kinda hard to think there's more that will be shared in the lecture after this long conversation. But I always have a more thoughts, so I wanted to just leave with these thoughts. As you mentioned in the introduction, I'm currently the only member of Community of Christ in Italy. We have several seekers right now interested in the church and one preparing for baptism this summer. The church has never had much of a presence from the 19th century to the present in Italy. There are stories of members of the armed forces, Mission Center Presidents and those who came in the diplomatic corps were on business to Italy over the years, but Italians joining the church has never been part of our robust story. However, Italians have and are part of the story of Community of Christ. I see Community of Christ vision of Zion or the peaceable kingdom, and restoration in the healing sense, very applicable to the society I live in, and the people I live amongst. As I served a mission in Spain. I know how frustrated Avondet must have been at the lack of response to his message in southern Europe, especially after hearing and seeing so much success in the United Kingdom and Northern Europe. After all the Italian mission was part of the English mission at the time. Plus Avondet would have been wanting his own family and friends in his close and tight knit village of Prarostino to join him in the Reorganization. Yet Prophet President Grant McMurray is comforting key to the church and Doctrine and Covenants 163, which was given to the church in 2004 speaks to Italy past and present, quote Do not be unduly concerned with numbers. Be fervent in your minute witness passionate in your discipleship and vigorous and your labor on behalf of peace and justice, where two or three such disciples form community, there will be the Spirit, and many will come to see, close quote. These are comforting words to me. And I think they would have been to John Avondet as well.

Karin Peter 45:28

Thank you, Michael, for joining us today for this conversation about John Avondet. And for our listeners, we want to really encourage you to view Michael's lecture, John Avondet, the first Italian missionary of the reorganization, and it will air at on May 5 at 12pm Central time 7pm Rome time, I'm assuming, that part of Europe. (Yes, yes.) Or if you cannot watch it at that time, you can view it later. It will be in the Historic Sites Foundation archives. And you can find that at historicsitesfoundation.org And be sure to check out the other lectures from the spring series at historicsitesfoundation.org. This is Cuppa Joe part of the Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karin Peter, we've been chatting with Michael Wright from Rome. Thank you so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 46:36

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