

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 00:27

Hello, everyone, welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. And I'm going to be your host for today. And I have one of my dearest dearest Community of Christ friends on today to share her story of faith transition into Community of Christ. So this is a Fairtrade episode with my dear friend Shandra Brooks, so Shandra thank you so much for being willing to come on the podcast today and to share your story about what brought you to Community of Christ.

Shandra Brooks 01:06

Thanks, Brittany, I am excited to be here with you today.

Brittany Mangelson 01:10

So why don't you just give us just a quick brief overview of who you are, where you live, that kind of stuff.

Shandra Brooks 01:18

I am in Utah, I attend the Salt Lake congregation. I am born and raised Utah, I've only ever lived in Utah. I am a former Brighamite you know good old pioneer stock, trace my roots at to pioneers coming here, originally. And before that, depending on which branch of the family you look at, either back to the early formation of the church, or to Denmark and England and those parts that got convinced to come over.

Brittany Mangelson 02:05

Yeah, I have that exact same heritage story as well. Yeah. And I've only ever lived in Utah as well. So we are off on a start that understands each other. So this is great. So, usually with these faith transition stories, I just kind of start wherever you want to start. Usually we talk about what your childhood was like as far as church attendance as far as what you knew about God, how active were you in your LDS Ward, that kind of thing. So just talk about faith and your formative years of growing up.

Shandra Brooks 02:46

Growing up, I grew up in the current area of the Salt Lake Valley. And it was actually for a long time a pretty tight community knew a lot of my neighbors, my parents, very active in the

community, fairly active in the church. My dad was a member of the bishopric, my mom had been in primary primary leader, she had been in the Relief Society presidency. When I, the year that I was turning eight, my dad was my primary teacher. So that was a really unique experience. After I was baptized, and I had my dad baptize me, much to my disappointment, because I wanted my grandpa to do it. And my dad was not happy about that. So I had to cave in, and let my dad do it. And it was probably about a year and a half after that, that my family quit going to church on a regular basis. My mom kind of quit going and then my dad quit going. My siblings that were home still, for the most part quit going. And I was kind of the one last little bit of a holdout. And even at that, by the time I was middle of Fifth grade I had quit going, and at that point, it was just pretty much hit and miss into my teen years. To the point that by the time, I went ahead and signed up to take Seminary in ninth grade. I really questioned if there was even a God. So I did a lot of questioning and Even though I thought that might not be a God, I was still praying and saying, you know, if you exist, you have to tell me, you're gonna have to be really obvious and blatant about it. Because otherwise, I'm not going to believe one way or the other if God ever exists, because only something really blatant is going to prove it to me. And I kept going to seminary and went through my freshman year went into my sophomore year, all the way through. And when I hit my junior year of high school, I just decided, you know, I'm not taking seminary again, this is stupid. Why should I be learning about a church that I still am not convinced? is true? Why should I go to religion class when I'm not sure God is true or real. And it took being in choir and singing at the LDS church administrative building at 6:30 in the morning, which is way too early for anyone to be singing. But somehow we did that. And I was up at the top of the staircase, because I've short and I was an alto. And I was at the just about the tail end of the alto was there's only one other alto was shorter than me. And so we couldn't even see the director. So we were just going off of the emotion and the feeling of the choir at that point. And we got done and it was just a really, really amazing experience. And as we came down the stairs, we got to meet the LDS Church's First Presidency, which was kind of neat. Ezra Taft Benson looked like if you blew on him, he would fall over. He very obviously was quite ill. Thomas S. Monson. I will always remember him as being very robust and really not looking old at all. As same with Gordon B Hinckley. And as I shook their hand, should hands with Monson first and then Ezra Taft Benson. And as I went to shake hands with Gordon B. Hinckley, he also said he stopped, and he looked at me, and he grabbed me and gave me this great big huge hug. And it just, it caught me off guard. And I was the last one. Somehow I ended up the last one in the whole line, and he gives me out of 28 students, he gives me this hug. And I'm like, Okay, why is this dude hugging me? Not really cool with this. And he just whispers in my ear, and he is Jesus loves you. And I thought, Oh, this is weird. This is really weird. Why on earth would this person be telling me this thing right now? At this moment. And we, we all leave the building. And we get in to our cars to go back to the school to change into school clothes, to go to classes, and I'm in the car with friends that I had grown up with since we were babies. And I'm talking to these two guys. And I'm like, "Hey, since you know, I was towards the, since I was at the end of the line there. I

didn't see how they were with everyone else. Did anyone else get hurt by anyone?" And they're like, "No, you were the only one who got hugged" and I'm like, "Okay, that's weird." I'm like, "Do you know if they were saying anything, but thank you to anyone else?" They're like, "No." And one of them looked at me. Trevor looked at me and he said, "Why did one of them say something to you?" And I said, "Yeah, one of them do." And he said, "What?" And I said, "he told me Jesus loves me." And he goes, "Okay, well, why do you think he said that to you?" And I go, "I know I was hoping you could tell me" and he looked at me and he laughed and his, Trevor's little brother and I are just about four and a half months apart in age. He says oh let's get to school, find Nephi and talk to him about it. Like okay, fine. Went to school, talk to Nephi about it. And Nephi I and I had sat and talked countless times. I leave I was probably the one person who was guaranteed to get me to go to the weekday us activities and it was more go hanging out with friends than anything. But I would talk to him. He knew where I was at with my faith. And so I sat down, I talked to him, I'm like, Hey, so this weird thing happened. And he looked at me and he goes, "Well, I would figure that as a pretty decent answer that God exists". He goes, "Where is the last place you would expect someone randomly to say that to you when you are questioning all of it?" and I go, "Right there. Why out of 20 kids, would that be said to me?" He goes okay. And he goes, now the question is, do you believe the church is true? And I said, No. And he looked at me, and he laughed and gave me a hug. And he's like, "As long as you have a belief in God, that's all that's really the basis for everything." He was one never to push religion, any religion at me. And we just went on with our day from there. And that moment, probably did more for my face, I think, than anything. But it also taught me that if I was really earnest enough and ask the right questions, then an answer would come if I really paid attention to where the answer was coming from, because answers will come in different ways in different places from what you expect. And that's kind of been the basis of everything along my faith journey.

Brittany Mangelson 11:44

What a story! I had not heard that story before. And just I mean, to be clear, like, that's a really unique story. I know a lot of people that have lived in Utah, myself included our entire lives, and we don't meet the First Presidency like that. Church leadership, even in the 80s with Benson was still pretty behind closed doors and didn't necessarily mingle with folks a whole lot. So to have a unique experience like that, to meet all of them, and to be pulled aside by Gordon B. Hinckley to be told that and then to have a friend back at school, who, I kind of got a kick out of the friend's name being Nephi I also went to school with a couple of Nephis the most Utah thing ever, but um, yeah. To be able to process that with him and to, you know, be able to have it sounds like a good social support in your ward and through the youth activities and things. That's just a really interesting and unique, unique story of kind of what brought you back to your LDS community, you know, not necessarily like active, well maybe did you did you go to church, like, were you going to church during this time, or just mostly like youth activities and stuff?

Shandra Brooks 13:12

Mostly youth activities, I would show up for church every now and then. Typically, I would show up, when they'd say, Hey, we're, we've got something different that we're doing this Sunday, we want you to come and I'd show up. It would usually take some convincing, especially when church was at nine o'clock in the morning. They'd be like, come to church, we'll have a soda there for you. They knew how to bribe me even back then it was a Dr. Pepper.

Brittany Mangelson 13:46

I was just going to ask if it was Dr. Pepper!

Shandra Brooks 13:48

Yep. I mean, I see called the Salt Lake congregation knows that if I'm there without a Dr. Pepper that someone better be worried. Yeah, they knew even back then. And they knew there was no chance of ever getting me to show up on a fast Sunday, because there was no way it was showing up without eating first. So but it I really do think I was fortunate in the fact that my ward was kind of this little subdivision that was off in its own little spot. We weren't part of the bigger neighborhood. We were just a little entity. And we were all just an extremely tight knit group of friends through the bulk of our high school up through the bulk of our high school years. It wasn't until halfway through my senior year that we stayed super close. And it it was actually because of Nephi that we really hate to say it was because of him that we fell apart. But in a way it was. He was hit by a car and killed. And I don't think any of us realize how much he was the key to our group until he was gone. And none of us quite knew how to be together without having him as part of us.

Shandra Brooks 14:17

I'm so sorry to hear that. That is, and that happened when you all were young still? When you were,

Shandra Brooks 15:36

we were still in high school. It was right before the end of the first semester in high school of our of my senior year of high school.

Brittany Mangelson 15:48

Wow, I'm sorry. That's really tragic.

Shandra Brooks 15:54

I, I felt so bad for not just that it happened not for his not just for his family. He pushed he will he and his cousin crossing a crosswalk. He pushed his cousin out of the way and saved his

cousin, which was probably the most hymn thing to do any out of anything. But it was crossing the crosswalk was going from the seminary building over to the high school. And early morning seminary, he just let out. And so all of the early morning, seminary students watched him get hit by a car and hills. Oh, my gosh. That is awful. So it, it was something that just it ripped through our school. Our high school just wasn't the same the rest of the year.

Brittany Mangelson 16:46

Yeah. So can I ask if that impacted your faith at all? Because it sounds like your parents at this point, were not active. And if you had this friend that was keeping you connected to the community. It's not like your parents were making you go or anything. So did Nephi his death then impact the interest that you had in the church? Or did it ruffle your disbelief in God? I mean, it seems like it would be logical for a kid to then feel angry towards God or something like that. But did that impact it at all?

Shandra Brooks 17:24

It really didn't. Simply because I started talking to a lot of classmates who of all things had been in seminary with Nephi had been there the week before the Friday before, because he was hit on a Monday. Monday morning and the Friday before for whatever reason, the teacher had gotten on a weird tangent with the class. And it made the comment, you know, if you were, if you knew you were to die, you were going to die today, who would be ready, and Nephi rose hand or lifted his hand in the air. And then told everyone he loved them. And it completely unnerved the teacher. And then when he was hit and killed, the teacher ended up having to take like a month's leave. The teacher could not cope with it. (Wow.) But I thought if there is, if anyone were going to know that they were about to die would be him. And he that's exactly what he would do. He would tell everyone around him that he loved him, loved them. And to say his cousin Davey would be exactly what he did and Davey lived in our ward to debut live just down the street from me. We all I mean, we all grew up together. And for him to save Davey was just the most perfect, most like him thing to do he always protected the people around him.

Brittany Mangelson 19:01

Wow. Well, thank you for sharing that story. That that's tough. And I yeah, I had not heard that story before from you. So did your parents, did they give you any indication of why they had stopped going? Or did you have conversations about it as a family? What was the dynamic like with religion in your home at that time?

Shandra Brooks 19:32

My mom really wouldn't say a whole lot. She just said that she had a lot of issues with a lot of things. And my dad just kept saying he didn't want to go to church unless my mom was going and years later after they separated we finally convinced my dad to start going back to church

because we figured it would be good for him. Part of me now seeing how he is, and how he's really turned his back on my family. Part of me kind of wishes I hadn't encouraged him. And I know that sounds selfish and sounds bad, but I kind of miss the the guy he was for a long time. But it is what it is, at this point, did some good things for me got him out of the house during the divorce. It got him around people and helped him through the depression he was definitely in while they while my parents divorced. And that was, that was something he needed, he needed to find community again. And he found it. My mom was, was a whole different story. Once she heard that me and my first husband were gonna go through the temple, she sat down privately, and discuss some things about the temple with me. And talk to me out the blood oaths to prepare me, and I was just like, you gotta do what. And, thankfully, that had been removed by the time I went through. I was five or so months pregnant with Karalyn, my 25 year old at the time, and they claimed that because of how pregnant I was that none of the sheets they had, or the drapes they had would cover me appropriately during the Initiatory. So I didn't have one. So I sat there with nothing on. And that felt rather exposed and we went through this. Then we went and did the endowment. And I refuse to bow my head and say yes to covenants my husband or whatever that was, I don't remember what the exact line was. But I I refused it. I bowed my head said no, not yes, my sister in law at the time, which means like, you can't do that. I'm like, I did it anyways. It seemed very wrong. There were certain certain parts of being within the temple that I did enjoy, but the actual signs and tokens just felt weird. But I said to my ex husband, later that day, when we drove home, I looked at her and go, I didn't know how handshaking kinda remind you of the whole Gatton robbers in the Book of Mormon. And he got mad at me. So that, from the get go was kind of how I felt about that. I'm like, it just feels it doesn't feel right. I went to my father and I said, I need to talk to you. I found out quickly that my ex husband's dad was someone I could really go to with question with my faith. And he said, it's, it's not that you shouldn't ask questions. It's the manner in which you question. You don't question to prove something wrong, you question to find the right answer.

Shandra Brooks 24:03

And I have stuck with that. And so I I talked to him. And I said, I have a question that I'm trying to understand about the, the endowment. And we sat down and we talked and he said, Why does this bother you so much? And I said, because the secrecy and I said it doesn't feel sacred to me, it feels secret. It feels like we're doing something that came from somewhere else. This is not feel of God. And he said, Okay, then maybe you need to search and research and understand that about the creation of the endowment ceremony. And I think I caught him off guard when I came back to him with a stack of book books about Masons since his he had never seen any of that. He's like, okay, so he read everything. And we, we continue to talk even after the divorce from my first husband, up until a few months before he passed away last year, we saw he was still one that I could still say, Hey, I have a question. And he would say, Okay, let's, let's talk it out.

Brittany Mangelson 25:33

That sounds like a beautiful relationship and to have a support through deep, deep questioning like that. So I do, I want to like repeat some of the stuff you said and put it in context for folks that might not know much about the LDS endowment. But it's you know, it's a, it's a series of rituals, that the full thing is a series of rituals that every LDS Mormon person has to do before they get sealed to their spouse. So, if I'm understanding correctly, you were already married, you were already a mom, you were pregnant with your second child, third child, yes. third child. And, um, before you get sealed, you have to be endowed. And then before you're endowed, you have to go through the initiatory is and the initiatory is is where you get your garments, your temple garments. And so it is not typical that someone is completely unclothed. But it sounds like because you were so pregnant, they claimed or I mean, I don't know claimed is, is the right word, but you were not able to be clothed. Which, which adds a whole nother layer of what is already a traumatic experience that adds a whole nother layer of trauma to that experience. And then to go through the endowment and to well be told about some things that are no longer in there, but they still actually kind of are there, if you know what you're looking for. And it has been made very clear that men and women are unequal in the ceremony and that women are supposed to obey, hearken, whatever the word happens to be at any given moment, to their husbands. So I'm just trying to affirm that what you experienced was intense, and what is often a tricky place for LDS folks in general, to go through what you went through in a very atypical manner, because you were pregnant, etc, etc. Like it just this is a lot like that's a lot. And so to be able to have someone who you feel safe to ask questions to, even though he didn't understand the historical development of the endowment, he was a safe person for you to ask questions to. Which is really important, absolutely important when you are struggling with something and questioning something that you're told to never question. It's a big deal. I mean, and you have little kids, so when you got sealed, like you were living the Mormon, the Mormon way, right? Like you were you were trying to raise your kids in the LDS church, I'm assuming that getting to the point of being able to be sealed to your husband took some work. What was that like? Like? What was it like trying to just be the quote unquote, perfect Mormon wife?

Shandra Brooks 28:44

Just to get to the point where we could get a bishop and State President to say yes, and sign the paperwork for us to go to the temple was really difficult. Our our oldest daughter was born out of wedlock. And we got married when she was about three and a half months old. It definitely compounded things. And we had been until we had gotten into the ward we were living in at the time that we were sealed. We had been inactive. We had only started attending church once we had gotten in that ward. And it was it was not easy. I had some very definite feelings towards tithing that have never changed. I never agreed with paying 10% off the top and then paying all the bills I've always felt like tithing should come from what is left, you know, giving of your true capacity not take it off the top. And then hopefully you have enough to pay

everything else. And then when you don't you turn around and ask the church for help. That was always backwards to me. And it just puts you in a position where you're depending on the church. And it's not right, I spent way too many years at continuing circle. And it, you never seem to get out of it once you get into it. And so for us to get to the point just to be able to go through the temple was, there was a lot of fights between me and my ex husband, a lot of fights. And I honestly have to say, probably 95% of them are based around tithing. He was very, very definite about how tithing worked. And today, he told me that we had to pay tithing off of some money that we had received for Christmas. And I melted down over it. Yeah, he realized that there was a definite difference of viewpoint on tithing there, that was going to be very difficult to surmount. Because to me, that was a gift not a part of our income. And to him, it was part of our income, not just a gift.

Brittany Mangelson 31:46

That's intense. And when you had covenanted, even though, it sounds like you did not quite do that, to, you know, essentially obey him or hearken his counsel, like, the culture is still there, right? Like whether you agree to it or not, the culture of the family dynamics are still such that, you know, you can't even push back with any hope of equity in your relationship. Because if he's that devoted to want to pay tithing on gifts, he's obviously going to what Mormons would say, have unrighteous dominion over you. Right? And use his position as a priesthood authority in your home against you. Like, I'm like, this is this is a, this is a tragic story, but it's also a predictable one because it happens to so many women particularly, right?

Shandra Brooks 32:51

Yeah. It is. And I think what caught him off guard the most is when it came to pretty much everything else. I went along with whatever he said, except tithing.

Brittany Mangelson 33:05

Because he needs to feed!

Shandra Brooks 33:09

I did it. Not just that but you know, there are things like, hey, they need coats, it's winter, and they need shoes. And, you know, sometimes, you know, I needed to wear something more than threadbare clothes. And I you know, it would be nice to wear clothing that wasn't maternity clothes when I wasn't pregnant. So it, you know it just and he he would still go out and buy his fishing gear and stuff like that. But he was very weird about me spending any money on anything. So he would even question how much the power bill and the gas bill were but he didn't want to manage the the checkbook. He would question everything. And I was like, either take over the finances or don't. But if you're not going to take over the finances, be quiet about it.

Brittany Mangelson 34:10

Yeah, yeah.

Shandra Brooks 34:12

So it was just as it was probably. It's like they say finances can be one of the biggest areas that a couple comes up against. And we did have for a long time. We had a lot of issues with finances. So but yeah, tithing was definitely we I don't think we ever truly came to an agreement on tithing. Not for single day of our marriage. Because he would go we need to pay tithing and I say no, we need to make sure that the kids have this this and this first. Then we can pay tithing. And it was just stayed pretty much that way. For the full 10 years we were living, living as a married couple.

Brittany Mangelson 35:06

Yeah, yeah. So as you alluded to a couple of times that marriage ended, and we don't need to dwell on that too much. But, you know, how? How was your faith? As your kids were growing up as you were trying to raise them? As your marriage dissolved? Like, what did what did faith look like for you through all of this? And then I guess, we can jump ahead to you know, when did your, because it sounds like your faith has always been in flux. And you've always question and you've always, you know, pushed against just the cultural idea within Mormonism to just obey and believe what you're told, like, you've always had a critical thinking mind, but when did that shift into an actual faith transition, that you were then willing and interested to look into another faith? So I know that was like a giant question, but we can move in that direction.

Shandra Brooks 36:10

So during my divorce, I moved in with my mom and stepdad, they lived out in the Roosevelt area of Utah. And just for a sense of community, I went started going to church out there, it was just more of a way to get to know some people. Because I was isolated in a small town. I really didn't know anyone. And I just needed to get to know people. And I, typically a fairly social person. So small town, life was not fun for me. And so church was a way just to find community. And I taught Relief Society a little bit. I was a primary teacher for a while. Then I looked at the bishop, homeland, you know, I'm a single mom, Sunday's, I don't want to have to teach little kids because my time not working is with kids. Sunday, I want to have a brief little breaks with other adults. And that bishop was really a sweet guy. And he goes, I completely understand and found me a different thing to do. I can't even remember what I was doing after that in the ward, but he was really good about it. He was just really salt of the earth type of person, both him and his wife, just absolutely wonderful people. That he was one that if anyone in the ward lost a job, he put them to work for his company, just to make sure that they still had a job because he owned his own business. So that I liked it was like, Oh, you're out of work, here come work for me while you're looking for a job somewhere else. So you know, he's a good person. And he knew that I struggled with a lot of stuff he saw. He saw how much I

really struggled when the more negative things happened through my divorce, and my ex husband fell into legal issues, not involving our divorce. And he saw how that affected me and our children. He more than anything that should let me know that. You know, it's not worrying about being true to anyone faith, but about remembering to pray to whoever. Whatever God I believe in this that it doesn't have to be Mormon God, it can be whatever God is, he gets the right God. He's like, I just I don't care who you believe is the right God, just pray to whoever you think is the right God. And I think it was people like him that helped me stay longer in the Mormon church than anyone else because they gave me that space to be in the fringes and still maintain membership. As I moved back into the Salt Lake Valley from out in Roosevelt, and I came back to a ward that I had been in before with my exhusband when my kids knew had, you know, came back to existing friends. I came back to existing friends, I started to realize that it, it didn't fit any more there, there was not a way to make who I was how I believed fit into this neat little box anymore. And I struggled. I ended up being formally disfellowshipped. And then I had a bishop who made it, his job to remind me in front of groups of people, every time I showed up to church, to tell me that I was disfellowshipped and couldn't do anything at church, but sit and listen. Which was highly embarrassing. I already knew where I stood, I didn't need to be reminded like I was a child. And I finally reached a point where I was like, I don't need this, I need to be where I can hear the teachings of Christ, where I can find peace, and find my path. And I reached out to one of my friends from college, who I knew, attended a Christian church and said, Hey, I'm curious about your church, can you know what time are your worship services on Sunday? I'd like to come and bring the kids. And so she let me know. And I showed up and for over a year, we attended Ranger Christian church. We are still considered members of record there. And they really were the church that helped me find my, my way to accepting that I really was moving away from the LDS church.

Brittany Mangelson 42:29

And how did that feel?

Shandra Brooks 42:36

It felt really good and also felt really scary. It felt scary enough that after a little better than a year I still I still turned around and went back to the LDS church. It it was a little too much. Part of what I'll see, let me go back to the LDS church is that bishop that felt the need to remind me of everything moved to Utah Valley to or Utah County. And I felt safe to go back to church go back to that ward. Partly because the bishop who was put in was one that I had met through my ex husband's family back when we were dating in high school. So I had known him for a very long time. And I felt comfortable with him. And Dan and I had recently been married. And he, he and I had talked about being sealed to each other in the temple. Which ended up never happening because no matter how many times I turned in the paperwork to get the sealing canceled. Every time I went to the State President it got lost.

Brittany Mangelson 44:05

"Lost" with air quotes?

Shandra Brooks 44:07

Yes, with air quotes.

Brittany Mangelson 44:11

Oh, it's so frustrating. I'm

Shandra Brooks 44:13

sorry, I have no doubt that it was lost with air quotes because the state president and my ex husband used to be scoutmasters together with that stake. And we're still friends and I believe are still friends to this day.

Brittany Mangelson 44:27

And again, to add some context, the idea that a woman has to be sealed to a man in order to get to the highest level of heaven. And there's definitely some sense of ownership right? When you have a priesthood head, a priesthood authority in your home and if he's active, and if you're not at this point, or you know, like you've you've gone to check out another church. I mean, that's a huge social taboo. So just to add some context of like, you're being controlled and manipulated, manipulated, in a sense to to still be sealed to your ex. Yeah. Which is frustrating to say the least.

Shandra Brooks 45:18

Yes. And then I started having kids come out of the closet. Hmm, yes. And my second oldest came out and came out that mom, I'm gay. Now I think I'm bisexual. The No, I'm gay. No, I'm bisexual, back and forth between the two could not, neither one felt completely accurate to me. And I'm looking at this kid going. I don't know. It just I knew there was something up I just I didn't feel like there was the truth was quite there. But I had always sensed that something was different with with him. And it wasn't until he had moved, moved out and moved out of Utah, and had come back to Utah. That he came out as transgender. And the minute he said, I'm transgender I went. That's it. That makes perfect sense. Everything just fell into place. And then it was like, it was like, and he's like, Well, do you want to know if I'm, I'm straight or are gay or bisexual or I'm like, I don't care. If you're transgender. It makes sense. We're good.

Brittany Mangelson 47:00

And that's a really good piece to your identity.

Shandra Brooks 47:05

As the rest of it, you know, it's great. Whatever your whatever else here is great, because you don't now I understand what we've been fighting with. For years trying to figure out what is going on with you. We finally have the missing piece. We are good. We're good to go. And then my third one when she came out to me. I know she was expecting some really big like, oh my gosh, really think she came up to me. I went okay, and she went, That's it? Yeah. Why? You're not surprised? No. Why aren't you surprised? I've known since you were two years old. Seriously, yes.

Brittany Mangelson 47:52

Knowing this kiddo, I'm like, Yep, I can see how that went.

Shandra Brooks 47:58

Just yeah, from the time she was like to I'm looking at her. I'm like, Oh, how are we going to deal with this with her dad and our dad's family because they are so phobic. This is gonna be a rough one. And then when the divorce happened, I thought, well, hopefully we'll be able to deal with it a little bit easier. Still hasn't been the easiest. But yeah. Her dad's family still asked her all the time. If she has a boyfriend. She's like, Nope, don't like boys.

Brittany Mangelson 48:37

Yeah, yeah. And having LGBTQ kids in the LDS church is really really tricky. Well, and you have more!

Shandra Brooks 48:46

I do. My youngest, Sam is. Sam is their own unique. I don't even try to there's not a label there. Sam is Sam. Sam is Sam. Sam is sometimes Kai. Sam is their own unique person who I love dearly. Sam's pronouns are she/they, Sam is who Sam chooses to be and I love the kid. Oh, so are the four kids or two parents who came from extremely large, Mormon families whose parents came from large Mormon families whose grandparents came from Yeah, generations of large Mormon families. We ended up with three out of four kids who are in the LGBT community. We have our oldest who is cishet. Her and her husband, we learned, are going to be I'm moving to Nevada, which will be interesting, because I know she hates the heat desperately hates the hate. But it's a good career move for him. And they, from everything I know they are LDS, I do not know how active they are or are not. I know their dad is still active, their dad has been sealed in the temple to his second, to his current wife. And when their dad decided to marry his wife in the temple or be sealed to his wife in the temple, he got a temple divorce for me. And that, that kind of stung, to be honest. Like I tried for well over two years, that and it didn't happen. He got it in about six weeks. It kind of, even though I've resigned from the LDS church saying that kind of burned.

Brittany Mangelson 51:21

Yeah, because he could get it probably relatively easily and when you wanted it when it was important to you. You weren't able to get that. Yeah. So how did you find Community of Christ?

Shandra Brooks 51:40

Ben Kelsey, ah, I should say my husband found it because of Ben Kelsey. Well, if I had realized that the RLDS church had changed its name, because I hadn't stayed up on things. Since I very first heard about the RLDS church, as a kid I was enamored. I had to know more about them. Emma always fascinated me. And the fact that she stood up to Brigham I was just, I love the fact that she stuck to Brigham. There's just no I'm not moving. I'm staying here. And that I just always loved it that was that she had done that and whatever tidbits showed up in the Utah papers about the RLDS church, I just would cut them out hang on to the clippings as long as I could. Drove my parents nuts. I remember when I remember women, getting the priesthood and hearing my dad say, the only reason women in the RLDS church are getting the priesthood is because there are no more male descendants to give it to and that always kind of stuck in my head. And then when Parliament of World Religions was here a few years back and a bunch of the church leadership came to Salt Lake and I mentioned it to someone just kind off hand And the person I mentioned it to his luck and lock burst out laughing. And he goes, I'm a descendant. I about died.

Brittany Mangelson 54:13

I'm here!

Shandra Brooks 54:16

Yeah, that's kind of what he needed to get. He goes, Well, I descendant. And I was like, Oh my gosh! It was just like the best moment ever. And it was funny too, because my dad was still arguing that exact point with me and I'm like, there are two male descendants. There are there are still plenty of male descendants. It didn't have they did not give women the priesthood because there were no male descendants. That is a lie and it angered my father currently. He still thinks me wanting priesthood that is why I left the Mormon church and it has nothing to do with it. The the final The final straw was the treatment of the LGBT community. And what absolutely solidified it if we hadn't already resigned prior to would have been the November 6 policy. And that broke my kids. My cheating is absolutely gutted by that.

Brittany Mangelson 55:27

Yeah. So just to clarify, we have talked about that a little bit on the podcast before we've mentioned it, but that was the policy in the LDS church that barred children of gay couples from being baptized or blessed, or anything like that within the church. And basically, I think it at the time it like guaranteed excommunication of LGBTQIA+ couples or families. So it was it was devastating.

Shandra Brooks 55:56

Yeah, I just I don't know. I don't think I, I, I know they've changed a lot of that, but it's gonna be hard for me to, even though I know, they've been some of the wording of it. And now it's still gonna be a hard one for me to get past. Because so many people still feel that they shouldn't have changed it. At least people I've come into contact with. Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 56:25

So by that point, you had been looking into Community of Christ. And yeah, what were what were some of your first impressions like what, what stuck out to you?

Shandra Brooks 56:36

Well, once I realized Community of Christ and the RLDS church were one in the same, kind of. I say, kind of just because RLDS was their past, is the past and Community of Christ is who they are now. And really kind of digging in and looking at it, because once I, we knew that we knew Ben before they left the LDS, before he left the LDS church, and when he started coming to Community of Christ, and then when they they joined Community of Christ. And so I started getting curious as to what was the draw was for him, to want to go to Community of Christ rather than an LDS church. And unbeknownst to my husband, I like, check it out website, and I've redone every little thing on the website that I possibly can. And I'm looking up other things about it. Which I think if my husband had realized I was anywhere near as deep into my, my faith crisis, as it were, at the time, he would have been saying a whole lot more to me. But at that point, I had finally given up trying to get him to go to church. I had quit going to church, I wasn't making kids go to church, I was just like, I had given up, it was just like, I couldn't, I couldn't do it anymore. I was done. And the more I read, and I kept coming back to the worth of all persons. And it just, every time I read it was just like this is this is true. That's all it came to every time I read through, it's like, this is just truth. There is no other way to put it. And finally I looked at Dan and I went ask ask Ben about services on Sunday. And if Dan could have fallen off the bed, he would have been shoved up against the wall and his sights would fall off it but if he could have he would have. He was absolutely shocked and he looked at me and he goes, What do you mean and I said, I want to go check them out. But let's go check them out. Dan had been checked had been following stuff with Community of Christ for I don't I'm honestly I'm not sure how long for quite a long time. So he had been following it long enough to I guess when the vote for the US church to just sign it on LGBT ministers. The vote for that was then he watched is that vote went from no to yes. and saw that all happened go so strongly towards Yes. And he hit that back to them that that was the church that he wanted to be a part of. But he knew he couldn't push me one way or another that it was something I had to come to on my own. So he just sat back and waited. So I think I really kind of caught him off guard, because I was very quiet about it, because Dan is a very, very persuasive person. And I knew if I said anything, you would persuade me. And I didn't want him to because I knew I would be

persuaded. I would just give in and let him talk me into it is more accurate. And so Ben, let us know. He's like, come, you know, this is what time Sunday school is, this is what time worship services are. So we get I'll just step in our Sunday best, which I think is most people the first week they come, maybe first two or three weeks they come. Not a lot of people do much longer much after that. And that's okay. And if you keep doing it after that, that's great. If that's how you want to come. We show up all in our Sunday best and first person we meet in the park is Monica.

Shandra Brooks 1:01:30

And we're like, where are the doors that we go in? Like, parking lot. Those don't look like the doors you go in. Because it's where the preschool entrances and she's like, Oh, I'm this way. And she walks in and everything and Ben was just shocked that we even that we were really there and enjoy enjoyed the meeting, Sam was the only teenager at the time. And was said, Well, you can go to Sunday school with the littler kids. Or you can join the adults for Sunday school. It's really up to you and Sam. I'll just go with the adults and then sat off by herself. Which was kind of funny. Okay, and worship services came and there's not a whole lot I can honestly say I remember about that first worship service other than I remember you giving the Disciples Generous Response and explaining about it. And you were wearing Grant. He was over a year old but you're wearing him because when you went to get up started screaming so you threw him in the in the pack. And he'd put screaming and you explained it. You explain what what it was and you talked about it being your true capacity not 10% off the top but what you can truly afford to give and that hit me I was like that's how I've always thought tanks should be that's not that's more what it sounds like in the Scriptures not what it's taught in an LDS wards. So that made me really happy that here's the thought I've had in my own head for years and years and years and here's this young person at the front, because to me you looked very young aat the moment especially with this baby on you. I thought here she is saying everything that I I feel is is right like this is pretty cool and as I sat there, I heard a voice behind me and I look over my shoulder but no one was sitting in the behind down and I that weird and I hear someone again and I turn and look back because I'm seeing is someone in the doorway maybe what's going on. There is nothing back the there's no one back there. We are the furthest back in the sanctuary. There's no one back there. And I hear it a third time and as I hear it, I hear fully hear what it says and says you've come home and I'm I realize it's speaking to me letting me know that I've this is where I should be. And it just I was so moved at the moment like tears came to my eyes. And I thought oh my gosh, if you We're gonna turn around and look and see me crying and things I have lost my mind. Dan's with us like you, okay? And I'm like, Yeah, I'm fine. Like, Yeah, I'm good. Just give me a minute. And he's just thinking, I'm so moved by all of it. So, and I'm seeking is, you know, how can I've been here, you know, 190, even a folk VT service, and something knows that this is where I'm supposed to be, you know, whether this is for good, or whether this is for now, I don't know. But at this

point, this is my spiritual home, this is where I'm supposed to be. And so for you guys are stuck with me.

Brittany Mangelson 1:05:39

And I'm glad that we're stuck with you. I feel like you're stuck with us. But, but really, I mean, I do remember when you all were very, very first brand new and feeling like, you know, because we didn't have anything routinely, we had several young young kids, but we didn't really have any teens at the time. And so to have a family with a teen, and with a young adults child come we were like, oh, you know, we weren't, we didn't have a established class. And so when that happens, I'm always worried that the family will not feel welcomed, or they won't want to stick around. But I'm really glad that Sam did come to the adult class. And I totally remember them attending that every single week. And, you know, I feel like I got to know them really well in in that class. And it was, it ended up being really good to just kind of meet all of you at once through class, and then and then worship. So yeah, what a what a journey. So can you talk a little bit then about, I guess, just overall, how, or, or what you would share to people who are interested in Community of Christ or who are seeking?

Shandra Brooks 1:07:07

We felt automatically welcome for I mean, from that very first moment in the parking lot, where we kind of hesitated looking at the building. And Monica was just like, hi. I mean, at that moment, it was like, Okay, we're not just going to be ignored right here. Monica walked along with us and talk to us from that, that very first moment. I know, for us when we're in the parking lot, and we see someone kind of hesitating, and looking in the building, we say hello, when, you know, is this your first time here? I think all of us that have been going there for a while. We recognize the look of someone who's been there the first time and we try and speak to them, let them know that oh, this is where we go? And do you have any questions? And, you know, try and be open and friendly with them. It is a shock to go in and see that there's not a lot of people. The first week we were there, I think there might have been 20 people total. Maybe that might even be pushing it. I just know that there weren't very many. And everyone was just really nice and really friendly. And some are talking I can't. It was Emily, and you and I don't remember who else was talking about, like a woman's gathering later in the week. And I'm like, I'm kind of curious. Can you tell me about that? And you're like, Oh, yes, you have to be invited that you're welcome to it and made sure that I you guys made sure I had all the information on it. Emily right then in there had me added on Facebook and had all the info sent me. It was just right away. I was made to feel like I was part of the group. And just just knowing that I had no, I guess it didn't. I wasn't so hesitant because it was such a small crowd. It just, I in a way I kind of knew it wasn't going to be a whole lot of people. And for me it was just a matter of being able to associate what I knew. They used to be called with who they are now and realizing we're in Utah and so it's naturally going to be a smaller congregation is just kind of how my mind worked with it. And when you get out of Utah, I figured you're going to have

some you're going to have those congregations that are going to be larger, just like you would with any other church, I've been to other churches in Utah, that are not LDS to have quite large congregations. I've been to some that only, you know, they meet and there's like 10 people. So it's just, you want to go in just thinking, you know, however many people's there is just how many people were able to come that day, because you never know what is going on with people's lives. And some families may have some kind of family event going on. Because they don't put they they've made the choice to, you know, families, what's important this week, so we're doing the family seeing not, we're gonna go make sure we're at church. And then if there's enough time left in the day, we'll go to the family thing. Which, honestly, I'd rather that they were with their family, if they've got some big family thing going, we'll see him at church the next time. That's okay. They'll be missed. But family is important. And, you know, those bonds are to build to.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:18

Yeah, and I think that not having this expectation, this high, high expectation of attending every Sunday or there's something wrong with you gives people have flexibility and spiritual autonomy, to be able to be in charge of their own spiritual life. And and they don't, they're not like compelled to go to church, I guess, is what I'm trying to say. And so there is just a lot of people that are in flux, especially here in Utah who are going through a fake transition. So

Shandra Brooks 1:11:54

yeah. I kind of like to look at it sometimes to is have my husband gets once in a while. And he did this for a long time, when we first started getting to Community of Christ. He backed off for a while, but he's been a little bit more towards it again lately, and it's okay. It's Sunday, we get to go to church. I'm so excited. Not a great, it's Sunday. It's so he's, you know, if you stop and think, you know, oh my gosh, it's Sunday, I get to go to church, and I get to spend time in community, with the people I like, and just enjoy being around people. And if I happen to be irreverent, it's not a big deal, because odds are, I am not the only one. And it's okay. Is, I promise you, you're not going to be the only one. That's your reverend. If you think you're being the only one irreverent find me, come sit by me.

Brittany Mangelson 1:12:57

So I'd like to end these conversations just with a simple Is there anything that you wanted to share that you weren't able to share? Or just any any final thoughts about anything that you've shared already?

Shandra Brooks 1:13:12

Potlucks are so much fun. They've been so missed. And I know, I'm like the weird potluck person. I really do know that. And I've loved doing it. And I still love doing it. And I know I'm the weirdo out there that's like this.

Brittany Mangelson 1:13:31

No, but friend, I think that is like what makes you Community of Christ! Because people say they are, it is our next sacra,

Shandra Brooks 1:13:39

potlucks is another sacrament. So you totally fit in. You think about it, though, wherever Jesus was, he sat, and he broke bread with people. So you know, that's the best form of of Christ. I mean, the more I think about it, the more I think, you know, how did Jesus meet people? He met them across the table. So if we're gonna meet Christ, we're gonna meet him across the table. So those are my favorite Sundays, even even if I get ornery because people don't like to stay and help clean up and I do get ornery about it. I won't lie, but I still enjoy it because those are the times where I see connections being made and that those are the times when friendships deepen.

Brittany Mangelson 1:14:39

Absolutely, I agree. And I think that, you know, as you indicated during COVID, and not being able to meet physically and not being able to break bread together was something that we missed as a as a community and it is church at large. It is something that is deeply part of our DNA. And it has been fun to see that be resurrected in our congregation. And just knowing that that is a tradition and a legacy within Community of Christ that will absolutely carry on through congregation with with your help, so

Shandra Brooks 1:15:17

Definitely we just need to get a few more people to jump on board with us.

Brittany Mangelson 1:15:21

Yeah. It takes a lot it takes a lot of work.

Shandra Brooks 1:15:24

It does. I can't do it all alone and Candy, Candy and I can't do it all alone.

Brittany Mangelson 1:15:32

Okay, friend. Well, thank you so much. And again, thank you for sharing your story.

Shandra Brooks 1:15:39

Of course, I've enjoyed it.

Josh Mangelson 1:15:48

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