

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, everyone, This is Brittany Mangelson. And welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast, we are going to be chatting with Cheyenne Koerth as part of our Chai Can't Even series where we talk about being in Community of Christ as a young adult as an adult, and figuring out how to live out our principles and our values in this ever changing world. So I'm actually really excited about this interview, because I do not know Cheyenne much at all. We both kind of admitted that we, you know, have secretly stalked each other on Facebook, and we've liked each other's posts and things. And so I kind of went out on a limb and I was like, Hey, do you want to be on the podcast? So I'm just really excited. So, Jan, why don't you just briefly tell us a little bit about yourself what you do, where you're at general, just stuff and then we're gonna dive on into the interview. Awesome.

Cheyenne Koerth 01:27

I first super excited to be here and appreciate you reaching out Absolutely. On board for just having a conversation. Like you said, my name is Cheyenne Koerth, and I am a fourth generation Community of Christ member grew up and still live in Austin, Texas, I went away to college, to Indiana, and then immediately came right back. And I work right now as a school counselor in a title one school here in Austin and the Dell Valley area, which if you've ever been to the Austin airport, you've been to Dell Valley. And that's kind of my story. I'm live here, have a wife, no kids, lots of pets and live in the dream.

Brittany Mangelson 02:13

Awesome. I love it. I'm so excited to have this conversation. So you said that you were fourth generation Community of Christ, which I'm assuming we can interpret that mean that you grew up Community of Christ, that you were active and involved in the church as a kid. So I'm wondering how that looked for you. So did you attend camps? How were you treated? As a kid? I'm always interested in that question, because I think that Community of Christ, you know, in certain pockets does a really, really good job at empowering our youth. And so, you know, was that you? Like, were you mentored? Did you feel like you were supported and that your congregation? Was the camping program strong, just kind of talk to us a little bit about growing up in Community of Christ?

Cheyenne Koerth 03:00

Absolutely. I was incredibly lucky to grow up where I didn't Community of Christ, the Austin congregation, I think one of our great values is they really, really value kids. And they really value the voice of kids, and they make sure kids know that they have a voice and that it's worth listening to. And so that really was foundational to growing up in the church with me, we always had adults that were willing to do classes with us that were willing to sign up for youth activities. We were incredibly lucky. And I know, this isn't true for everyone in the church. But we were incredibly lucky to have a robust amount of youth. I think growing up we had between seven to 10 youth all in the same kind of age

group. So we were having lock ins at church, we were helping with our church's breakfast program, we were having services that the kids were in charge of. I absolutely participate in the camping program. From age seven to graduating high school I went every summer it was I keep using the word foundational but it was such a foundational part of my life and my faith journey. We were really lucky in Austin. And in the Texas area, I guess, to have some really robust youth ministers from the transformation 2000s. We I was on that cusp when we had some dedicated youth ministers and I think that was really important to us and really important to why we have so many of our young adults that are still active in the Austin congregation. Because there was a lot of dedication to making sure we knew we had a place in the church and we had things to share. The one thing I think that's kind of special about Austin that I don't know happened anywhere else was we're such an open congregation that growing up, they really encouraged a lot of exploration of not just Community of Christ, but other faiths as well. The Sunday school class I remember the most was when I was in middle school. One of our our leaders in the church offered a world religions class to our youth group. And so we learned very respectfully about different religions and then went during that Sunday School hour and participated in we went to a Hindu temple and went through one of their rituals, we went to a Buddhist temple and went through that. So that foundation of not just you have a voice, but then also, the foundation of exploration was a big part of growing up in Community of Christ. And I think that's been vital to why I'm still here, and where I'm at in my faith journey.

Brittany Mangelson 05:53

So I love that you pointed out that you think that there's a sizable amount of young adults in your congregation today because of how you were all nurtured and grew up in the congregation. And I think that that is so important, because when younger kids when teenagers, when kids are really brought into the congregation as part of the congregation not as like this add on, or this side thing, it really, Foster's, you know, like an ownership of the congregation and this shared sense of responsibility. And it Yeah, it sounds like that. That is what the experience in Austin has been like. So thank you. Thank you for sharing that. So I know that it's not always super common to go back to you know, your quote unquote, home congregation, but it sounds like that. Yeah. You grew up in the Austin congregation, you're still there. So what did your church involvement in college look like? I mean, did you go away? Or were you engaged in church life, etc? How was your church involvement in college and things,

Cheyenne Koerth 07:05

and here's where I'm just going to step in it and hopefully not offend the wonderful people of the Evansville Indiana congregation of Community of Christ. So I went to school in Evansville, Indiana, which is just it's, at the time was the third largest city in Indiana, but it only has 120,000 people. And I'm coming from the Metropolitan bubble that is Austin. And then I went to what I would call almost rural Indiana. And I think I found face first fell face first into what not having a dogmatic church means regionally. And so I came from a congregation that was very open, very progressive, sometimes to, you know, to level of discomfort for some of our members, but a very progressive urban congregation that was kind of moving and shaken to, you know, I call it like they were some of the most wonderful people I have ever met good, like salt of the earth, lovely, lovely people. But Sunday's looked incredibly different. I grew up in a congregation where women were at the forefront of our congregation. Women preached women led the congregation, we had a female pastor, to a congregation where there was

maybe one Female Speaker through the entire quarter rotation. And not that there weren't women there. And they did offer wonderful testimony and wonderful connection in a community sense, they really reached out they were wonderful to me when I came in, they picked me up from college and drove me to the to the the church, but I will fully admit that my attendance was about a semester. And I couldn't really hang with the hymn sandwich of just, it was a struggle for me. And it wasn't anything they did. It was just a different way of worship that didn't really fill my cup. And I, at that time was taking religion classes in university and so I feel like that became more of my faith journey in college was I on a whim decided to take the elective God's Suffering and Evil, where they talked about like the theodicies and like, grappling with those really big subjects of like, How can God be all loving and all powerful, but then bad things still happen? And so, for me, that became where I filled my cup of, you know, these intellectual discussions that I was having with my peers and with religion professors and we actually, in one of those classes studied Bob Messley's book from Community of Christ. So there was still a little bit of Community of Christ filtered in as we talked about process theology. But I did kind of move away from the church, I call it my my Methodist sabbatical because it was a Methodist University and I, you know, tried being Methodist for a while. And that was what college was, for me. It wasn't as participatory and Community of Christ, but it was a really interesting eye opener in how different our church can look in different parts of the country. Because I think if you took the Evansville congregation in the Austin congregation and tried to put them together, it would be a learning curve for both of those groups of people. And we have a lot to learn from each other. I don't want to elevate one over the other, it was just a different worship style that filled different needs.

Brittany Mangelson 11:03

Well, and that's so interesting, because I'm assuming? Well, I mean, as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I'm sure that that just added another layer. And I mean, I haven't really asked you about that. But like, how was that? I mean, to, to know that there's I mean, and I don't know, like when you came out or anything, but like, yeah, to know that there's like, not only are you a woman, and it sounds like you know, the ministry of Women was not at the same level of Ministry of men, but then to know that you're also a gay woman. And I'm just assuming that that was also not a super comfortable experience when you're like from this big, progressive congregation that supported me to then like not knowing anyone and having this big cultural difference.

Cheyenne Koerth 11:51

Yeah, I have a funny story about it. And I again, I really hope that it's not offensive to anyone listening, because it's all meant with great love. But the first Sunday I attended, there was a Sunday school class, and it was me and one other youth there. And the the teacher was like, Oh, we're going to talk about Ruth. And I was like, great, there's no way for me to step in it with Ruth, like, I will just keep my mouth closed and like get to know people and like Ruth is a safe scripture. And so we read through the Scripture of Ruth. And then the first question that the, the leader brought up was, well, in, so let's talk about same sex marriage in the church and what the church is grappling with right now. And I was like, oh, no, like, I am going to just start my first day with these people, establishing myself as that like, super liberal person. And to her credit, like, you know, I can't remember exactly what I said, but I think it was, I was a little less outspoken then. But it was something of like, I really think that's where church should be headed, like, inclusion, acceptance, like, I think that's really important. And I think I took the leader a little bit by surprise. And she was like, Oh, well, you know, as long as it's somebody who's in the

church, and that was the first time I had ever encountered the idea that you were supposed to marry someone who was Community of Christ, or at the, you know, previously RLDS, it was pretty close to the name change. So that was my kind of stepping right into the thick of it. Culture shock of, oh, it's a whole different world here. And and they were incredibly gracious, incredibly welcoming. They didn't change anything of accepting me once they knew those were my views, but it definitely was within the first five minutes. We knew we were having a different conversation with each other. Well, I'm then you're like,

Brittany Mangelson 14:05

I mean, for me, I would, I would be like, great. I just put this Scarlet a on my chest. I'm not branded. It's this like, Oh, goodness. Yeah, that's, that's a little intense.

Cheyenne Koerth 14:20

Yeah, and I mean, I just I'm sure those conversations happened it in my congregation here in Austin, but I had just never heard that idea. We joke now that like, you can't marry somebody who's in the church, because then we never grow as a congregation, like all of the growth in our congregation has been young adults in our congregation, marrying other people and dragging them to church. So that's our conversion story. Like we're just like, you gotta go marry somebody who isn't Community of Christ. And then you've done bring them to church, so we have more members.

Brittany Mangelson 14:54

Oh, gosh, and at some point, yeah, you're like, okay, the dating pool is getting pretty small. I think oh, this is not sustainable friends.

Cheyenne Koerth 15:05

Yeah, like we gotta we gotta that's how I'm gonna bring people in. That's the future of the church. Everybody marry somebody else. And

Brittany Mangelson 15:13

oh, goodness, yeah, that would be a Yeah, another layer of cultural shock where you're like, okay, the conversations here are a little bit different than the ones we have back at home.

Cheyenne Koerth 15:24

Yeah, that's what it was. And again, I mean, wonderful people. But we were in definitely different places on our face dirty. And I think it did. To go back to my favorite word of this interview, it was like foundational to like my understanding of being like, Your journey is no less valid than mine, even though we're in totally different places like super kind, super welcoming, dedicated members of Community of Christ, who really had testimonies and genuine beliefs. But we're willing to engage in community with this, like, liberal progressive kid that just showed up and was like, here, I am, like, these are my beliefs. And they were just like, cool. Let's go, like, we'll pick you up and bring in a church in the snow. They were they were great people.

Brittany Mangelson 16:14

Yeah, and I think that that highlights something that I absolutely love about Community of Christ, like even my own congregation in Salt Lake, I mean, we are all relatively on the same page as far as theology goes. But I every once in a while I sit back and think, you know, if this were any other context, these are folks that I probably wouldn't. You know, some of them are folks that like our paths wouldn't have crossed, like, these are folks that I wouldn't just naturally find myself gravitating towards. And so in Community of Christ, because we do have such a diversity in beliefs and in culture, it really creates just a community that is diverse, and as long as they're respectful, I mean, that's important, then it can work out really well. If we're willing to listen to one another. If we're willing to put our biases aside and just listen to each other. I mean, it can work out, even if there is a great deal of discomfort, or culture shock.

Cheyenne Koerth 17:21

Yeah. Well, and I think that's that's the reason I think that I am still a member of this church. I think that real engagement and encouragement to engage with like, where you are in theology, and like, discuss these topics, think about these things. Not the you have to believe this, or you can't be a member of our church. Because if I had that, I don't think I could be a member of a church that told because my brain is wired to question and to think about and to, you know, let's discuss that. What are the implications of that? What's that going to mean? And the fact that Community of Christ says, You can wrestle with this stuff. And in fact, being a faithful follower means that you're wrestling with this, you're not just taking it on blind faith of somebody told me I have to believe this. So I'm believing this. I think that's really important. And I'm noticing that as I talk to other young adults, that that is kind of a through line for all of us is that idea of being encouraged to question and debate and wrestle with is what keeps us with this faith movement, as opposed to something that's more dogmatic, more top down?

Brittany Mangelson 18:40

Yeah, absolutely. And I know for me, when I converted to Community of Christ, seeing folks like you, who were born and raised in the church, you know, I had this vision of what kind of humans Community of Christ produced, what kind of adults, and I was just so impressed with all of my peers, my contemporaries, and just seeing how strong and empowered they were, and how they were raised in a community that was that allow for questions and personal exploration. And I recognize, like, that's what I want for my kids, you know, this might be a good community for me, but to have a place where my kids are faced with diversity, and they're encouraged to ask questions, and they're encouraged to get out of their own little bubble, whatever that looks like for them. And to face some amount of encouraging opposition to their own worldview, like that was really important for me. And so thank you for sharing all of that because that that is what I was able to recognize when I was just stalking all of you on Facebook. You don't mean like, Okay, what kind of adults does this church produce? Because if I'm gonna bring my kids here, I want to make sure that, you know, they're empowered, capable, folks, and that's what I've repeatedly found, even with folks who are not currently engaged in church life, you know, in like congregational life on a Sunday. I really think that so many of you know, the millennials, that Community of Christ has produced particularly that's, you know, our generation. But are...you guys are just awesome!

Cheyenne Koerth 20:19

Thank you. But no, I do think it comes a lot from that dedicated engagement with kids and that dedicated encouragement of a voice and saying, like you have valid things to say, and people are going to listen when you talk. I think that's, I think everybody in our congregation right now is obsessed with For Everyone Born the hymn. But one of the lines that's really important to me is the, you know, for young and for old, a place at the table. And I think that that's something Community of Christ does well, is it lifts up the voices of kids, and it was lifts up the voices of our elders, and they learned from each other. And I think that's important.

Brittany Mangelson 21:07

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. So I'm a little bit curious now, just about your personal timeline. So you're in Indiana, you're realizing that not every congregation is like the Austin congregation. So where do you go from there? I mean, what took you back to Austin? And what got you reengaged? Just continue to tell your story, pretty pleased.

Cheyenne Koerth 21:33

Absolutely. So I spent four wonderful years in Evansville, Indiana, really thankful for my university journey. That engagement with theology as kind of an intellectual exercise was really important for me, I think, to like, having a religion minor and asking those big questions. And then I came back to Austin, right after I graduated. I loved the weather in Indiana. The people were great, but I'm a Texas girl at the end of the day. And so I came home. And I worked for AmeriCorps right after I kind of jumped in my degree was in political science. And you can be an unpaid intern, you can go to grad school, or you can kind of do volunteer work. And so I didn't want to do any more school, and I didn't want to be unpaid. And so I was almost unpaid. And I volunteered for AmeriCorps. And that was great. It brought me home. And then I will fully admit, after school, my grandparents made me a deal that they said, If you come to church, we will buy you lunch afterwards. And I said free food is great. And so for the first you know, I would say first bit. It was definitely just to get free lunch and to hang out with my church family was really important to me. Throughout college, they sent care packages, they send salsa to Indiana, which is great because Indiana doesn't know what salsa is. And kind of they took care of me throughout that, that journey. And then so coming home was nice to see the people theology wise it was just to get a free lunch. And then as I kind of reengaged with the church family, you know, it's kind of through osmosis. You sit there and you listen, even though you are pretending that you're not listening. And then somebody at some point, and I don't know who it was. But somebody was like, Hey, why don't you talk this Sunday? And I was like, I don't know. I'm not not a priesthood member, you know, I'll coordinate a service. I can coordinate everybody. That's one of my skills, but talking... and they were like, no, why don't you talk and so I volunteered for that was able to sit and like craft a sermon, and then presented that sermon. And I think I was hooked because I really enjoyed that exploration. I've always enjoyed public speaking. But I think there's something special about, again, going back to the things that make Community of Christ special, I think there's something special about lay people presenting sermons and being able to present their testimony and their thoughts on the word. And so that kind of reengaged me pretty significantly, and then after that, the dates kind of get muddled because what is time lately, but at some point, I was able to join the exploration group here in Texas, which was young adults and some older adults as well as getting together over the course of two and a half years. And we would meet once a quarter in Austin, Dallas or Houston and then Duke kind of a weekend deep dive into some pretty sticky theological subjects. And that kind of fed that part of my

brain that really enjoys discussion about theology and discussion about belief, and enjoys being challenged in the things that I believe, because I think we can get comfortable in our beliefs, especially if you're in kind of an echo chamber, which I fully admit, a lot of times in Austin, we have some voices that are a little this way, and some voices that are a little that way. But overall, we're pretty all on the same page. And so sermons are thought provoking, but not necessarily challenging, if that makes sense. So it was great to, to meet with people who, just an example, people who really engaged with the Book of Mormon, and that was really important to them. Before the exploration group, I had not encountered that, because it's not something we pick up a lot in Austin. But to be able to hear the testimony of people that that book means a lot to was fascinating and really enlightening for me, because it was just not part of my faith exploration. So that class was really great. And then kind of continued my engagement. And then I was lucky enough to participate in the next faithful step with Larry and Dave need.

Cheyenne Koerth 23:08

That kind of went on this past year, where young adults, we met on Zoom once a month, and did that same kind of theological discussion. So that's kind of where my traverse took me, in Community of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson 26:40

That's really cool that you were still able to reconnect in a in a congregation that, you know, you were familiar with, that you felt safe in that you could be yourself. And yet, you were still able to connect with people who, again, had diverse opinions, and explored different, I don't know, corners of the church or history that, you know, like, I've always kind of been around. I mean, obviously, the Book of Mormon has always been around. But if you hadn't, you know, encountered it a whole lot, then you can have conversations with people who, like you said, it's a meaningful text for. And again, like, it's not a threatening thing, it doesn't threaten your faith. It doesn't, you know, you're not threatening to them, I just, yeah, I just really appreciate that you're pulling out the, the threads of our community that are really respectful and diverse at the same time, you know, and it's like it people don't have to be threatened that the Book of Mormon maybe doesn't mean as much to you as it does to them. And that's not, you know, negating their place at the table. But you can sit and learn from each other and have dialogue in a respectful way. So I feel like I'm just repeating myself, but you're hitting so many points that I'm like, Yes, this is why I love community.

Cheyenne Koerth 27:59

I think it is, and I, you know, just in my congregation, I you know, we have a couple of people here to help people there we talk about, like, we have people who speak on Sunday who are full into faith healing, or into angels among us, you know, which, and like full evangelical. And to me, that is uncombed feet, you know, I'm, that's not me, I'm not there, that's not my strength, I'm a big, like, let's just make room and if they want to sit down, they can, like we're not gonna force them to. But then on the other end, we also have our, you know, my wife is one of them. So I feel like I can call her out. But we have a little contingent in our congregation and people that have been in the congregation for years to who you know, are self avowed atheists, and they're like, we're here for the community, not the Christ. But the fact that both of those sides and then also, you know, those of us somewhere along the spectrum in the middle, we all come together on Sunday, we all eat potluck together, we all go to each

other's events, like that community, I think is really special. And I don't think it's something that happens a lot of other places than Community of Christ. And I think that's what brings people especially younger people, young adults to our faith movement and keeps us here and I think it's something we should celebrate a little bit more loudly than we do as a church movement.

Brittany Mangelson 29:26

Absolutely, it's honestly one of my favorite things I know several couples where one is a proud proclaimed atheist and the other is a more traditional or you know, whatever whatever label they would want to put believing member or believing seeker and yet they're like we both have a place here we both in our diverse belief system we both can find a home in Community of Christ and I just think like what a what a great badge of honor like that kind of sounds cheesy but it is like I, I don't know of very many other institutions that truly allow for that amount of space. And again, it's a really fine line, because, you know, we're talking about really dearly held beliefs, and we're talking about really tricky, theological beliefs that might, you know, be harmful to other people. And, and I will say, that's why I'm grateful that we have scripture that very plainly lays out how scripture should be used and how it should not be used to harm etc. But yeah, when community is done, right, when Community of Christ gets that community part, right, I think it's just brilliant and I love absolutely love seeing it. So yeah, I

Cheyenne Koerth 30:49

just a side tangent, but yeah, the fact that like, it's incredibly meaningful to me that I was able to be married in the church to my atheist wife, by a pastor in our church, and the entire congregation attended, like, just that. A nobody ever was like, Well, are you sure? Is she gonna get baptized? Are you gonna convert her? Like, it was never a discussion. And I really appreciated that as well, that it's just the acceptance of people where they are in their faith journey, or lack of faith journey, just where they are as a human, I think is special.

Brittany Mangelson 31:25

Yeah, it absolutely is. And it, I think that it just takes so much pressure off of members and friends of the church. And so then we can just all sit together and enjoy one another's company, because there's not that foundation of, you know, oh, we got to convert them, or we got to change their way of thinking or we've got to, you know, we can just get to know each other for who we are and appreciate each other for who we are. And there's not that that like underpinning of you're actually wrong. So I'm going to be benevolently kind to you. But in reality,

Cheyenne Koerth 32:05

I'm waiting for the moment to convert

Brittany Mangelson 32:09

Exactly. That bait and switch where you're like, Okay, now you're a Christian, you know? Yeah, it just, it creates, I think, a really authentic, just honest, transparent community again, when it's done right.

Cheyenne Koerth 32:23

So Right, absolutely. And delicately, because it is a it's a delicate thing.

Brittany Mangelson 32:28

Yeah. Yeah. Arduous. Creating communities arduous. The doctrine says, so, um, okay, so you talked a little bit about being married in the church? Can I ask how your experience was during National Conference? Were you watching that play out? How did that go?

Cheyenne Koerth 32:50

Yeah, so um, I did watch national conference and watched it play out it was. I actually got married, later got married in 2016. So it had had become legal countrywide at that point, but National Conference, I can't express how meaningful it was to be affirmed. As part of the faith movement, to be affirmed as a person that was, you know, even if it's not legal, we can, you know, do the ceremony, we can, you know, we affirm you as being worthwhile. We affirm you as valid members of, of this community. And there are still I have, I have a lot of friends because of that religion minor in other faith traditions that I keep up with through Facebook. And there are other faith traditions that are still struggling through that. And I see the hurt it inflicts on their members. I see it shut down voices that have testimonies that have pastoral offerings to give people that that would be in the priesthood of these different religious faiths and have such depth of, of God in them to offer to other people, but they're being shut out of it. And so, it is such a source of pride for me, that we work to uplift those voices that we, you know, boldly say, you know, we believe in the worth of all persons we believe in the ability of people in the LGBT Q plus community to provide ministry to be married to participate fully in church life. And I think that is a really powerful position that we don't even realize how powerful it is to offer to other people we had A member come visit our congregation a few years ago. And he sat with us and it was New Year's Eve. And so it was our it was our New Year's Day service. So he sat with us, you know, we we were in this congregation, it was a communion service. He was given communion, you know, I'm always kind of like, oh, no, are we talking too much about ourselves? are we chasing this person off, like, you know, I get to in my head whenever we have a visitor. And then he left pretty much after the service that really quickly and left and then he wrote an email to the congregation about how he was a member of the LDS faith. And that was the first time he had been offered communion in a decade, and the meaningfulness of being offered communion. And so I think that really speaks to that opening the table, and allowing people to sit with us and affirming their humanity and their self worth. And then it was actually kind of fitting, I was at camp when the Supreme Court ruling. And so like, four of the counselors, I was the director that week, and like four of the counselors came up, and we're like, did you see Did you see, and so having the church community there with me to celebrate, you know, the National legalization was also great. So just that affirmation of the church have, you are worthwhile is such a powerful thing, and I wish we shouted it from the rooftops. Because I think there's a lot of healing that needs to be done between, not our church necessarily, but the church capital C as a whole, and the LGBTQ community, to be told for so long that you know, God doesn't love you, your lifestyle is a sin. There's so much power and saying, you are worthwhile and worthy the way that you are, God made you the way that you are, and God loves you the way that you are. And not only that, but you are affirmed as a person in the eyes of God. That's such a powerful statement. And I think sometimes we sleep on it, and I wish we did as much.

Brittany Mangelson 37:23

Amen. Thank you for sharing that. And

Cheyenne Koerth 37:26

That's my soapbox. I'll step off it now.

Brittany Mangelson 37:28

No, and I think it's so important. And I, yeah, I wish that we were louder about it as well. I think that, you know, Community of Christ has made really good progress. And I'm hopeful that that progress will continue, and that we'll be more comfortable with our private stances, and that we'll be able to articulate it in a more public way. Because it's important, and knowing that Religions can and do cause so much harm. I think when the work of reconciliation is, again, done, right, and done well and done thoroughly, we should be able to be very public about that. And so I do think that there still is work to do in Community of Christ, because I think that we're quietly excited about queer inclusion, and we recognize that we are a global community. And so the talking point is that, you know, not everyone is there and, and like, I get that, but I do think that when we have voted to expand a place at the table, that we really, truly should be able to be proud of that. And so yeah, thank you for sharing your experience, and then also like, nudging us, to just not be so quiet about it, and to be able to articulate, you know, this is a process that we went through in the United States and many, many other countries through common consent, it's scripturally based, you know, it's theologically sound. And we've done the work to get there. And now there's still more work to be done as far as reconciling those two communities and just being able to fully live out who we we say we're going to be so yeah, thank you, thank you for sharing all of that. And I do say I have to say, you know, this idea that you were at camp and that you were directing, and people came up to you and they were so excited like that just that warms my heart because to be excited for the LGBTQIA plus people in your life to me shows the depth of relationship that you had that it wasn't just like this, you know, box that was checked off and or whatever, you know, like they actually came together and celebrated with you like that. That's really heartwarming to hear. I was just like, oh,

Cheyenne Koerth 39:53

No, it was! It was. I you know, it's one of those, you know, core memories that I have of just You know, and it was in the middle of theme class when we're doing music and the kids are dancing. And so the kids are celebrating and in a different way, but then like the little congregation in the back of, of people, it was it was wonderful. It was.

Brittany Mangelson 40:13

I love it. Ah, this has been such a great conversation. Let's keep going a little bit. I, yes. Yeah, this has just been great. Um, so yeah, thank you for telling your story. And you know, kind of what brought you back to Community of Christ, what keeps you sane. So I'm, I am wondering, though, if you can speak a little bit to, because again, it sounds like your congregation really did do a good job empowering you making sure that you knew that you had a voice. But were there like specific leadership skills that you learned or, you know, just like actual stories that you can tell us about how you were empowered as a kid and as a young adult?

Cheyenne Koerth 40:59

So the story that comes to mind, I spent all this time talking about my congregation, but then I'm going to switch to camp really quick. But because I do think another special thing about Community of Christ

is our camping culture is phenomenal. And I think it's something that's really special. But we had a youth minister here in the Texas area, his name was Roy Marley, who I think if you asked any millennial youth, the one person that was really foundational to their, to their faith journey, I think his name would come up for every single one of them. He was the first one who really brought in the idea that faith and God and all of this was supposed to be a raucous, joyous, kind of crazy, radical thing. And the idea of like, being a part of this community and following God and trying to live a Christ life like and life and making community and all of that it's it's radical, it's a crazy thing. Like if you jump in with both feet, you do not know where you're gonna end up on the other end. And so he he really leaned into that idea. And then he presented something to me that's been important. My entire faith journey was the idea of what is Jesus look like to you? And the idea that Jesus is so different to every single person that encounters the divine. For Roy, his Jesus, he told us, you know, was crazy haired guy on a bicycle, listening to Jimmy Buffett in a Hawaiian shirt. And so that was like his idea. And so for me, that became the foundation of asking that question throughout my faith journey of who is Jesus to me right now. Right now, the Jesus I'm most identifying with is like, Temple money changers Jesus, like I'm over here braiding a whip to get you guys out of the temple, Jesus is right now. And my faith journey, that's where I'm at. That's not where I've been before. It's not where I'll be in the future. But that idea of let me check in and that this can change throughout your life. And that's okay. I also think we did have youth services, and they weren't youth Services, flipping back to Austin. Now, they weren't youth services where it was like, and now the kids are going to stand up at the front and sing a song. It was the youth guided by their youth minister are going to plan this entire service, including the sermon portion, and the sermon portion was never a sermon. It was usually like a thought provoking, theological question, who is Jesus to you? What does love look like? Question like that? And then having kids answer that question to the congregation, and then the congregation afterwards responding to them the same way that you do when it's you know, somebody who gives a sermon coming up, saying thank you for your message. I really liked what you said, just kind of that intentional affirmation of like, the stuff you said was valuable. And then also that then led to that skill and planning of like, here's what it looks like, here's what here's how we access the worship helps. These are the songs that they suggest which ones do you think fit better? So that cultivation of turning it over. And I'm sure it was really hard for the adults in our congregation because now as like a young adult, I'm like, are we sure like they're very small, like, are we sure we want to just give it all but I think that leap of faith that they took was, was powerful and just kind of laughing at the mistakes, because there are going to be hiccups. You know, there was a phrase, somebody, I read somewhere, and I'm gonna paraphrase it and mess it up and not quote the right person. But they said, you know, the sound of kids in the congregation means your congregation is alive. You know, we sometimes want to shush kids and be like, you know, please don't run up there when your grandfather's is giving the sermon, you know, you shouldn't be running around in the congregation. But that idea that that's really what keeps our church alive. I think it's important. I'm not sure that I answered your question at all. I think I just went on a tangent, but

Brittany Mangelson 45:41

no, you absolutely did. And I must say, thank you, because I recently became the worship coordinator in my congregation. And I'm now going to have the kids plan a service like this.

Cheyenne Koerth 45:54

You know, the one great thing about it is they're only like, 30 minutes long, because kids are quick, and they don't have time for silly other things. So everybody gets to lunch early. It's great.

Brittany Mangelson 46:03

Oh, that's so exciting. And I mean, like, again, what a way to allow the next generation to take ownership and to take part of, you know, again, like not to be a side a side thing, but to actually got the part of the congregation and, you know, in Community of Christ, this aligns with our identity. So well, because once a kid is baptized, I mean, they have voice and vote.

Cheyenne Koerth 46:28

Yeah, a full voting memeber.

Brittany Mangelson 46:31

Yeah, thank you for that idea. I'm absolutely going to use it.

Cheyenne Koerth 46:36

I will say, I know I kind of if it hasn't come across the latter day roots of our tradition, is kind of an uncomfy place for me. I don't usually spend a lot of time there. It wasn't a part of my upbringing. But I will say one thing that stuck out to me that was important was Roy at Camp brought up once at a senior high camp, he was like, you know, Joseph Smith was 15, when he started our church, and you know, we can go into the all of the theology of how it's split off and all of that, but just that idea of like, teenagers, kids, like you are valid members of this congregation with things to offer, and this community needs your voices to keep us progressing.

Brittany Mangelson 47:22

That's yeah, absolutely. And I just to be clear, I'm glad that you said that the latter day part of our church is not like your most comfortable spot, because, yeah, I'm kind of there as well. I mean, I that was my heritage growing up Mormon, obviously. But that's not what drew me to Community of Christ, right, like who we are today is something that I'm so excited about and fascinated that all of these different expressions of Joseph Smith's original theological ideas have formed into just radically different ways and places, and we've all ended up in different places and GAP who Community of Christ today is definitely I think, at this point in history, our best selves, we're living our best life.

Cheyenne Koerth 48:13

I agree with you. Yes, absolutely. I think growth to do, but yes, I there's a reason that I am a member of this church and not a different church. And and that's, it's who we are today and not who we were 20 years ago, 100 years ago. It's who we are today and where we're looking towards going.

Brittany Mangelson 48:33

Yeah, absolutely. Amen, sister. So I think we've kind of touched on this a decent amount. But what do you think are the benefits of religious communities in society today? Our generation stereotypically is becoming more disenfranchised with organized religion. But it sounds like you are still interested in sitting in the pews and being part of ministry on the ground. So what are the benefits that you see of still being involved in our faith community?

Cheyenne Koerth 49:11

I will be honest, that I think if I was a member of a different faith movement, I would be there with the rest of of my generation, I fully understand where people come from with their disenfranchisement and especially being a member previously of said of the LGBT community, I see a lot of the trauma there. But what the benefit I find from it goes back to the community. It goes back to that support system, that faithful engagement with people who have different stories than you. And I think that there is something special about gathering together with intention to be a part of that community. You know, I don't I know that I'll go so far as to say like, I think that's where God is the most present because for me a lot of times, it's not necessarily, you know, I, I can't say that I'm a person that finds God the most in the four walls of the church. But I do think that there is God there. And it's worth cultivating that community to continue that work, if that makes any sort of sense. The idea that we all come together with the same goal, and we come from different walks of life with different experiences, coming together in an intentional way, I think, provide something that you don't get by going to brunch on Sunday. So sometimes I do that, because sometimes we worship at the table with brunch, and that is what we do. But I do think there is something special in the communities that we create. And that's some days I go to church more for the community than the Christ. But I think that that's valid too. And a valid engagement with religion and organized religion. I do think we have the ability as organized religion, especially the Community of Christ, we've we've talked about it, but to start repairing that harm, that a lot of religion has done to a lot of people like, just logistically, I'm like, we want to know where we could get more people from, I'm like, there are people desperate for a church family, that need the message that we have. But like you've said, we kind of are quiet about the radical positions that we have in this church, and they are radical, for a church to come out and say, all are worthy, unity, and diversity, all are called like, that is an incredibly radical statement. If we parse down through what that means. And it's an uncomfortable thing, it can be like, I feel like the stretching and growing that comes with saying, everybody is called to be a part and provide things. I think we have that calling as a community to reach out to those people that have been disenfranchised that have been hurt, and start to repair that trauma. I think that's a real space that we have to grow as organized religion. And I think something we could do as a church is to say, we know you were hurt before. We can't promise to fix it. But we can at least promise you a place where you're welcome at the table. Even with those hurts, we want to listen to them and start that healing process.

Brittany Mangelson 52:52

Thank you for that. And when I think of, you know, our little tagline of the temple, that it's a place of reconciliation and healing of the spirit, there's so much potential there. And there's so much collective work to do. And there's so much mess and baggage, especially that a restoration church has. And recognizing that, you know, there has been hurt. On the more progressive side, there's been hurt on the more conservative side. And this being in Latter-day Seeker Ministries, it's something that I feel like I'm faced with a lot is like how do we reconcile our collective past our contemporary history, you know, just the last few years? And how do we actually be a community of reconciliation, and I think that there's so much work to be done. And yet, you know, we have the tools, I just, I hope that into the future. We can do that work and we can be louder about our place of inclusion and not to try to win people back but to say we're sorry. And to really live out the principles like you said, you uplifted several enduring principles like that's, that's a it's a lot. I mean, it's it is radical. I've recently come

across some other statements of faith of, of other religions that are very, very, very much the opposite of who we are. And it's, you know, like, some theologies, just like straight out of The Handmaid's Tale and it's it's like we actually have a counter view of Jesus and a counter view of Scripture, and a place that worships a God that is loving and inclusive and caring and nurturing and wants to heal the world and bring peace. And I think that that is The message that is so needed right now, especially in our polarized world. And so, it this is just a constant struggle for me like how do we take our own baggage of our history and of our harmful past and theology? And then how do we actually live out our principles and be the church in the world today like this, I mean, these are, this is massive stuff. And this is what everyone's talking about. And it's just like, oh, wood, there's so much potential here, we just gotta like, put our brains together and go, do it, go do the work. So I really liked the way that you articulated all of that thing.

55:36

I think step one is we got to make we've been trying to figure it out in Austin, we haven't made it happen yet. But we got to put our Enduring Principles on signs, and we have to put them outside our churches, like I wish we, I love the Enduring Principles, I really engaged with them as a faithful document, I really, they're really important to me in my faith journey, and are part of what keeps me here. And I wish that we talked about them more outside of our church. And I think that we should just hang them from our church buildings, so people can read them as they walk past.

Brittany Mangelson 56:08

Absolutely. And, you know,

Cheyenne Koerth 56:10

If I walked past a church that was like, All Are Called, Unity in Diversity, I'd be like, I'm curious enough to go into that church like, Yeah, they're hiding it on our website, like, let's throw it out there. It should be on church signs, like, let's go.

Brittany Mangelson 56:25

Yeah, that's such a good point. Because and I think I've shared this before, but when I get talking to friends who have walked away from religion, and or family members that have walked away from religion, when we start talking about the values that we hold, or you know, the values that we want to teach our kids or bring into our schools, or, you know, base our friendships off of, they're talking about the Enduring Principles they're just using. Sometimes they're actually using very, very, very similar, if not exact words, but we're all talking about the same thing. I think that the Enduring Principles, the values that we have, are our biggest asset into creating communities of hope, joy, love and peace, right? So I love the idea to have them publicly facing out loud, proud, because that's where our theology is. That's where our mission lies. So that's, again, you're just full of great ideas, kids planning services, and having the Enduring Principles being physically public, on our actual buildings, and in our spaces. Brilliant.

Cheyenne Koerth 57:31

I'll be here all week,

Brittany Mangelson 57:33

You've solved all of our problems! This is great.

Cheyenne Koerth 57:35

I wish!

Brittany Mangelson 57:37

So I just have a couple more questions for you. What do you think are some of the biggest challenges being a young adult and Community of Christ? And then just collectively as we move forward together? What what do you identify some of our biggest challenges as a faith community?

Cheyenne Koerth 57:55

I think first and foremost, it's the balancing of time. And I think that's our curse as being a volunteer based organization for a lot of our congregations. And it sounds kind of like an excuse to be like, Well, I'm busy, because I understand everybody's busy, but especially millennials and young adults, like carving out that time to do the work is hard, especially when it's, you know, it's important work. You know, we volunteer right now at our church does a breakfast for the homeless, I think that's a really vital part of our mission, you know, participate in that. But that's one hour, two hours, once a month. I would love for us to be out in the community and doing the reconciliation work, but it's finding the time around life. I think. Well, let me just step on toes as I can. I don't think this is an official position from the church at all. But some of the messaging that has come out to millennials, has been that a lot of us, or a lot of we as a generation are responsible for the financial crisis of the church, because we don't give enough money. And that is frustrating. Because it's just frustrating. It's it's hard. It's hard out here to, you know, have money dollars. And I do see a lot of millennials trying to give time and talent to kind of compensate for that. And so I know people are working to elevate that, that time and talent as equally important, but then I also understand that money is important. And so I think that is kind of a struggle of how can we give more but then also afford rent in the world that we live in right now. And then I think it finally kind of that big struggle is that kind of disenfranchisement away from religion I am fully aware that Austin is is an abnormal congregation to have five to 10 young adults that regularly attend and participate. I know that that's not common throughout. And we have, you know, that core group that does get together for retreats or gets together for Hangouts, church sponsored or otherwise, I know, that isn't everywhere, and so that balancing the desire to do the work and the desire to move forward and the want to spread all of these great things that we know about. And the capacity to do so I think is the real struggle. Facing facing millennials and facing the future of our church, I think that's, that's kind of the crossroads that we're at is we have all this stuff, but who's going to do it? And I think there's kind of a passing of the baton, and I hope that the young adults of the church like our sorry, I hope that the young adults of the church are ready to pick it up. And I think there are people that really are, but I know that there are less of us than they are of the older generations. And so there's a part of me, that's like, we have to start recruiting now. Because the five of us can't do what the 25 older members currently do. Like there's only five of us. But it's not from lack of wanting. And I think sometimes that's the message that young adults get is like, well, if you guys just tried harder. And that is a message that's going to chase people away from the church pretty quick, because especially in you know, pandemic, general worlds NISS that exists, like something that adds guilt to people is going to be

something that's kind of let go. And I hope that that's not the message that's getting out to people. If that makes

Brittany Mangelson 1:02:24

Yeah, I am fervently nodding my head, like aggressively nodding my head, because I absolutely agree. And I think that when I think of the future of the church, it is overwhelming. Because all the good things that we've just said, we have a ton of really, really exciting theology and a framework to talk about healing and reconciliation, and inclusion. And yet, there is this pressure on the younger generation, the under 50, the emerging leaders of the church, as I've heard us being called like it, and it's scary because there aren't, there isn't the the focus on organized religion in our generation, as there has been in generations past. And people don't just stick with tradition, for the sake of sticking with tradition. And so it's like, we have to come up with a compelling reason for people to want to be engaged in church life. And it's like us just being like, Oh, that's great. You know, that might not work.

Cheyenne Koerth 1:03:26

Exactly like that. It's so cool! Just try it!

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:30

Yeah, I promise you, we're cool. Will you be my friend?

Cheyenne Koerth 1:03:37

Nobody will tell you, you're going to hell in my church, please come.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:41

Yeah, yeah, it's a tough sell. It's a tough sell for our generation. And it's, yeah, it's a little bit daunting. But the reverse of that, I guess, would be what gives you hope, what gives you hope for the future of Community of Christ,

Cheyenne Koerth 1:04:00

I find so much hope in where we're going. As a church, I think that we really are doing the work to move towards, progressive is a loaded term, but I can't think of a different one. So moving towards something more progressive, something more inclusive, something more engaging, that does speak to a lot of people and fills a void that people have that isn't being filled by something else in their lives right now. I do think there are a lot of people that grew up in the church that want to come not just our church, but Church "capital C", that want to come back to the church, but they don't know where they would be welcomed. And so I do think we have this amazing message of inclusivity we have this amazing message of Faithful Disagreement of saying you can believe what you believe, and that is as valid as somebody who believes something different, we have all of that to offer. And I think that that, as I've said previously, that's really unique. And it's really special. And if we can figure out our messaging and get it outside of just our bubble, I think it's, it's going to change the world, I think we really do have the ability to change the discussion of faith in, in our communities in our larger world where we say, you know, we don't sit here and pray to a wrathful God, we don't sit here and pray to an abusive God, we don't sit here and uphold these traumatic things that have harmed people in the past. And I'm not saying we're perfect, and we still have so much work to do about unpacking that. And there are

definitely people in our church, I've probably done it myself, where we do still bring up those things that cause people harm. But I feel like we are genuinely working to reconcile that harm. We are genuinely working to recognize what we've done in the past that's hurt people and fix it. And, you know, as a mental health professional in my normal life, that is so important to me, that reconciliation and that work to get better to look critically at ourselves and say, "Hey, we did mess up. Like, let's fix it." And I that's something I especially think is is rare in faith communities, and church bodies. So the thing that gives me hope is what we have to offer people. And I really think it's a unique message. I think it's a message that fills a hole that is gaping and ready for us to step into it. And I think that it's a special message that is is divinely inspired, I think God is is asking for someone to start healing. And I, you know, I'm not into the we're the one true church because that's just not me as a human being ever or my faith journey. But I do think that we are at the precipice of answering that call. And I think if we are brave enough to step forward into that unknown, knowing that it's going to be messy, knowing that it's going to be chaotic, knowing that it's going to upset people, and be uncomfy for all of us. But if we're willing to lean into it and kind of go off the other side, there is this whole world that needs us. And that can be healed a lot by what we have to offer. And I think that's really cool.

Brittany Mangelson 1:07:50

Again, I'm over here just enthusiastically nodding my head, because everything you said is what gives me hope, and what keeps me motivated to remain connected to this faith community. And I think that we do have a lot to offer. And we do have an important message that is timeless and relevant, and is built on a rich culture and a heritage of trying to just be a little bit better than we were the day before. And I think that that is what the world needs. So thank you so much. This has been such a fun conversation. Oh, my goodness. Usually, I kind of wrap these up with just is there anything else you'd like to leave us with? I think we've covered a lot of territory, but I also know that I don't know I could I feel like I keep talking for like three more hours. So is there anything else that I didn't ask you or you weren't able to get out in a way that you wanted to just anything else to leave us with?

Cheyenne Koerth 1:08:51

Um, I also could just sit and talk like talking has never been a weakness. Like, I can talk all day, especially about things that I'm passionate about. But I appreciate the voice that you're giving to young adults to share our theology and to share beliefs that we have. If I could leave, you know, one final soundbite to anyone listening, it would just be that leaning into the discomfort of trying to be a little bit better. And acknowledging that you didn't do it right. The first time is hard, but it's an important part of growth. I have to do it all the time. I don't know how often I have reflected on like, oh, that could have gotten a lot better. Oh, I mess that up. But instead of seeing that as a Well, I gotta give up, I'm out. Like, I'm going home. I'm not coming back to church again. I'm seeing that as like, Well, I'm gonna learn from that. I'm gonna make the reconciliations that I need to make. I'm gonna do the work of repairing harm. And then I'm gonna try to be a little bit better the next day I think that's how we're going to move forward. And I also hope that Community of Christ is every pride parade that exists anywhere near in congregation because I think that that would be really meaningful.

Brittany Mangelson 1:10:15

A man what a good first step at reconciliation, right. And again, we have all the tools right there, we have the enthusiasm, you know, among those of us who are really striving to create more inclusive

communities. And I firmly, firmly, firmly believe that that is the message that the world needs to hear and the message that gets our generation excited about participating in community. So just a big round of applause for everything you've said Cheyenne, thank you so much for sharing. This has been an absolute joy. And I'm glad that our internet stalking has now turned into what I would consider a genuine friendship. So thank you.

Cheyenne Koerth 1:10:59

Absolutely. Thank you again for inviting me. I really appreciate it.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:04

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for saying yes and for sharing your story.

Josh Mangelson 1:11:17

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