

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 the Project Zion Podcast. We are going to be, uh, giving you an episode in our Fair Trade series where we talk about faith transitions and converts to Community of Christ. Uh, these are some of my favorite conversations to have, uh, being a convert to Community of Christ myself. So, today we have on, uh, a new friend of mine. I don't know him too well. So, I'm really excited to get to know him better. But we've got on Ken Bowen, uh, on the podcast who is going to share about his recent conversion to Community of Christ. So, Ken, thank you for joining us today and why don't you just tell us a little bit about yourself?

Ken Bowen 01:14

Well, thank you so much for having me on Brittany. Uh, I am an elder in Community of Christ. Uh, I'm a member of the Huxford, Alabama congregation. I live in Monroeville, Alabama, the home of Harper Lee of To Kill a Mockingbird. And I'm also a high school math and science teacher, as well.

Brittany Mangelson 01:37

Awesome, I did not realize that you were, that you lived in the home of Harper Lee. That is ack, To Kill a Mockingbird is a really, really good book. So, that's exciting. All right, so let's just dive right on in. We always start, um, in childhood or in our adolescent years in these faith transition stories. So, what did church look like for you? What did faith look like? And how important was, uh, learning about God and spirituality as you were growing up?

Ken Bowen 02:10

Well, I often tell people, I was basically born in the church. Uh, my mother and my grandmother were both very involved in church. Uh, so, soon as I was able to attend, I did and I grew up in the Church of the Nazarene. And I was blessed to be a part of a congregation that really put a lot of effort into the spiritual well being of its younger people. Um, that went all the way from childhood, where we had a lot of volunteers that would help to lead children's church, and on up to when I became a teenager, those same people would continue to make sure that we had a good youth ministry and that they helped develop our spirituality. Uh, we would have these youth Sundays where the younger people were in charge of most of the service, uh, and that included teaching Sunday school and leading the music and on some occasions, uh, there would even be a teenager that would give the message for that day. And in fact, that's where I gave my very first sermon, if you want to call it that, was on one of those youth Sundays. Uh, it was probably terrible. But the, uh, older generations were willing to put up with that a little bit, uh, for the sake of our own growth in our relationship with Christ.

Brittany Mangelson 03:29

That's really cool because I, that's really cool because I guess I always grew up with this idea that other churches outside of my community, uh, didn't have a lot of youth participation, or, you know, they were, they were led by a pastor who just ran everything and there wasn't a lot of, uh, you know, lay people, if you will, especially youth, uh, that were contributing. But it sounds like that's not the experience that you had. That you were able to get involved, um, and, yeah, speak to the, to the congregation, to the community, to plan things. I mean, that's really significant to have, uh, youth and teenagers be able to form and shape, you know, what a, what a Sunday service looks like. So, just continue telling your story. Um, how was it? How was, uh, your church involvement, um, as far as, like, uh, growing up, going to college? Um, I'm think, I think you were pretty active and, and really involved. So, just keep telling your story.

Ken Bowen 04:28

Yeah, Brittany, I was, I was very involved. It, uh, church was probably one of the most important things in my life. And, you know, I had a lot of good friends and a good sense of community, uh, with my church family. Uh, I, I am an only child, so I didn't have a very big family at home. And a lot of my family lived off somewhere else. So, having that church family, uh, the village, as they call it, to help raise me, uh, it really made a difference, I think, and keeping me in church when I got into those college years. Uh, started out at a community college, so, I basically stayed at home. Uh, and then when I went, when I finally left home to go to college, I found another Nazarene church to attend and they got me involved there pretty quickly. I, I had already met some of the people through different district events. And it was while I was in college, I guess, that I got my first call to ministry. Um, and I was almost finished with my education degree when I got that call. And there's been times in my life, I'm like, God, you know, you could have called me a little earlier and then I could have got a degree in, uh, in religion to start with, but, uh, I probably wouldn't have been ready earlier in my life. Uh, but I got that call to ministry and after I finished at Auburn University, uh, I decided I did want to further my education, uh, to work toward being ordained in Nazarene Church. So, I went to Nashville to Trevecca Nazarene University at that point.

Brittany Mangelson 06:01

So, I'm curious, when you say you got a call to ministry, what did that look like? Was that an inner, inward sense of call? Or was someone identifying that within you? Um, what was the context of that?

Ken Bowen 06:13

Uh, I guess, in my tradition, growing up, it was more of an individual, uh, feeling a call from the Holy Spirit. And then that calling would sort of be confirmed by, uh, leaders in the church. Uh, at the time when I was attending the, the church, uh, it wasn't in Auburn, but it was close to Auburn, uh, that pastor told me when I, when I said, I think I feel like I might be called to ministry. And he said, immediately, I've kind of felt the same way and I'm glad you, uh, it was almost like I was finally getting on board with what other people said. So, it was a big, uh, confirmation for me to, uh, accept that call and to start working toward learning more about, uh, not just the church, but about, about Christ and about how to share him with others.

Brittany Mangelson 07:04

That's really beautiful. I really like that process that it starts with you and then to have that confirmation by others, um, who were close to you, who knew you, um, that's really affirming and really, just, just really cool. So, you took steps towards that? Uh, what did, what did that look like?

Ken Bowen 07:25

I moved to Nashville to attend Trevecca. And, uh, the first thing you get is a local license. And that's usually given by the local church and, you know, the pastor and the church board, as they call it. Uh, and, so, that pastor gave me my first local license. And then when I went to Nashville, you have to complete a certain amount of the educational requirements toward ordination. And the Nazarene church has a pretty extensive requirement. You have to take a lot of classes. I think you have to take about 1/4 of the requirements and then you can be given a district license. Um, and a, a district licensed minister can perform a lot of the duties of a pastor. In fact, I was a pastor while I was just district licensed and before I was ordained. Uh, so, it's a little different, you know, then Community of Christ. Uh, and so I finished my master's degree at Trevecca. A, and even with that, I still had to take more classes online to fulfill all the requirements, uh, to get ordained. But I eventually did, uh, become ordained in the Church of the Nazarene. And, you know, over the years, I served as a youth minister to start with, uh, and then I transitioned into being a lead pastor and I, I was a lead pastor at a couple of very small congregations. You know, we ran anywhere from 10 to 20 members a week. Um, you know, and the, and the high points it was 20, in the low points, it was 10 or less. Uh, but that's what most of our congregations looked like. The, the congregation I grew up in, we would run 100, you know, when I, in my teenage years, which was pretty good size for the area. Um, but yeah, you know, once I became ordained, I, I kind of began working as a pastor and also teaching at the same time, so, I was a bivocational pastor at both of the churches that I lead.

Brittany Mangelson 09:27

And, so, overall, was it a good experience?

Ken Bowen 09:28

Uh, I would say it had its ups and downs. (Okay.) And I imagine every ministry did. Uh, one of the challenges I faced was there, there seemed to be a disconnect between the academia in the Church of the Nazarene, the university, and leadership of the church and some of the local congregations. And, uh, I would imagine that had a little bit to do with the area that congregations were in--rural Alabama. Uh, they were heavily influenced by the other evangelical congregations in that area. And even though I would try to preach, you know, our doctrine and what I learned, there was a lot of pushback from that, uh, between those that knew better from watching TV preachers, you know. But, you know, there were also people who were very open and accepting, uh, to the word. So, it was a little bit of both. (Hmm.) And one of the hardest things, I guess, during this time of ministry, uh, was I had a very troubled marriage. Uh, I got married while I was at Trevecca and my wife at the time struggled off and on over the years with eating disorders. And she never got the help she needed and it, it really impacted our ministry, I believe, uh, because she was going through that during tho, during those times.

Brittany Mangelson 10:59

That's really difficult to juggle the family stuff behind the scenes. Uh, and, you know, especially maybe if, if, it's something like an eating disorder, maybe everyone's not fully aware of what you're trying to juggle, and then also to show up and be a minister and be present for other people. Um, yeah, that, that's, that's a lot to juggle. Um, so, so where did you go next? I, I'm curious to, to know, uh, maybe the, the rumblings that had you starting to look for other faith communities, your eventual, you know, leaving that church and then finding Community of Christ. So, so how did you get from being pastor to where you are today?

Ken Bowen 11:42

Uh, so, in 2019, uh, I went through a divorce. Um, and that, I guess, that's one of the hardest things I've had to go through. And it really made me start thinking about, you know, what do I do next? Um, the church where I was pastoring at the time, uh, they were supportive in that they, they let me stay on as pastor. I've heard stories of pastors going through divorces and the church immediately just says, you know, you're gone. Uh, this congregation didn't do that. So, I, I, I always speak well of them for that. But at the same time, I didn't feel a lot of friendship and support from that congregation. Uh, there, there was a lot of Sundays it would have been nice if someone had said, Hey, do you want to go to lunch? But that never happened. And there was not a lot of outreach from the people, um, asking, How are you doing? You know, that sort of thing. Uh, it was almost expected that it not be talked about. And, in fact, I had a member say one time, um, I, I said something about it in a, at a Wednesday Bible study about, you know, I, I basically told them I was struggling a little bit and, um, the gentleman, maybe well meaning, but he, but he said, It's probably better if you just don't bring her up. And, so, I didn't feel like I could talk about it, uh, there. And at that point, I had honestly made plans to resign and move back to my home area in Randolph County, Alabama, East Alabama, and kind of start over from there and see, you know, where I wanted to go next. Um, but it was, it was during that time in, in early 2020, or March of 2020, that was when I met, uh, Alicia, my current wife. And, um, I guess that was what Alicia was, is my reason for being in Community of Christ, you know, give, give God the credit. But God sent Alicia to, uh, lead me in that direction. And we started dating in March of 2020, right at the beginning of COVID, the pandemic. And, so, we say, you know, the pandemic was good to us. Uh, it's, it's one of those things you hate to say, but, you know, it gave us a chance to get close and learn about each other's faith and decide pretty quickly that we wanted to be together and spend our lives together. Um, and, you know, originally I thought, well, Alicia is going to join me in the Church of the Nazarene and she's gonna make a great pastor's wife, you know. And, so, uh, she, at the time we were meeting online because of the pandemic, uh, and I had introduced her to a few of the church members that I had just seen in person here and there, but she had not been with me in a congregation aspect yet. Um, but also during this time, you know, I believe it was in, it was either late May or early June. I don't remember the exact date. But, you know, the whole nation watched on TV, uh, as George Floyd was murdered by police on camera right in front of all of us. And that and the protests that sparked after that, uh, led our little hometown of Monroeville, uh, to have its own local protest. And I was a pastor that had made an effort, you know, our church was mostly white people, uh, but I had made an effort to reach out to the black community. And we had, uh, some black members attend. We had one join the church. And I just, after prayer, really felt like, as a pastor, I needed to reach out to the black community and let them know, Hey, we are here to support you. We love you. So, I went to one of those local protests and met some of the people and everything. And, well, after that, I preached a sermon

about racism that following Sunday, and it included a statement from our church, from the Church of Nazarene official statement about racism. And a couple of days after that, I got a phone call from the church secretary. And she said, you know, a lot of people are upset about you going to that protest and about what you said in your sermon. And, so, I tried to reach out to those people.

Ken Bowen 16:26

The, thankfully the Secretary, she was okay. While she didn't like it, but she wasn't going to hold it against me or stop attending church. But the other people, they wouldn't answer their phones. The one that did answer his phone, I, I tried to get him to sit down and talk to me. He wouldn't. Uh, so, you know, it was just complete ghosting from, uh, from full grown adults that wouldn't even have a conversation about a disagreement. And, so, at that point, um, it wasn't long after that, we actually started meeting in person again, but only had one member to attend for, for like three weeks in a row. And then Alicia and her mother also attended, uh, to support me. But, uh, we talked, Alicia and I talked, prayed a lot about it. And I decided, you know, I'm gonna have to resign for my good and the good to this congregation. So, uh, I put in my resignation. We set a date for my last Sunday, which was, uh, very soon after that. Again, one member showed up my final Sunday. And, you know, I knew that was the right call to make. At that point, we had, we had planned on attending a different Nazarene church. We have a few in our area. Uh, so we attended one of the other congregations and there was just some things that made us feel, uh, unease. Oh, one thing is they didn't, some of the people there didn't go by the mask and social distancing regulations. Also, there was just some theology that was going on that Alicia and I both were uncomfortable with. Um, so, we said, Well, we'll try the other Nazarene church. Well, we got in the car on a Sunday morning and Alicia got very sick on the way to that church. So, we had to turn around and come home. And we never went to that church because it was after that that Alicia asked me, um, Can we try my church. And I had already, you know, looked into Community of Christ. I'd gone on the website. I, I, I checked y'all out, so to speak. And I liked what I saw. I love the enduring principles and the mission initiatives. They really spoke to me, uh, in, in the kind of ministry I wanted to do. And, so, at that point, I didn't really have any reservations about attending. And, so, I went with Alicia, uh, one Sunday when they started back meeting in person. And immediately I was welcomed as family. And I guess that was why I stuck around because not just at that congregation, but anywhere I've gone in Community of Christ, whether it was reunion or, uh, priesthood retreat, or any, anywhere I've gone, the people were loving and welcoming and treated me like family even though they didn't know me at the time. So, that, the community aspect is what I really love about Community of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson 19:37

Wow. First of all, I'm sorry. I'm, I'm sorry that you had put your whole life and soul into this church community. And I find it so interesting that what broke it all down for you was standing for those who society is oppressing, and, and I find a bit of irony that you were stating your church's official statement, right, like you were, you weren't just trying to change the whole culture of the church. You were using in-house and I, you know, use air quotes, but like you were using in-house statements and, um, documents and responsible use of Scripture to show that, that these things that are happening that are the reality of our society are not okay. And I, I find it so unfortunate that that's what really had caused you to have to cut your ties with your community. Um, but also, I really admire you for it. I mean, the bold standing up for what's right and, um, using the gospel in a way that, uh, should be challenging

tho, those who are, um, not being oppressed, right, and, and the, the charge, the call to look outside of ourselves and to look at, um, who is being harmed by our, uh, beliefs and the way that society is structured. And I just, I really admire you for pointing that out in such a bold way. But then I'm simultaneously devastated for you that that's what, um, caused you to lose that community. So, yeah, I just, I just wanted to start my commentary with that, um, that I admire you for that. And I'm also really sorry that that's what, um, broke your involvement with, uh, with your faith community. That's, that's really sad to have to give it up. So, yeah, I think it's interesting, too, that it sounds like you, it sounds like you were on board with a more, uh, inclusive church. And, um, but that was also supported by the denomination at large. And, yet, you know, your local congregation, your local area was maybe, um, out of bounds with some of those ideas. And I think it's interesting, because there's so much diversity in Community of Christ and, you know, not being creedal and, and you can have different cultures and style of worship and, um, different things that congregations focus on. And it sounds like that's, you know, kind of similar to, to your experience where your local congregation, um, might be espousing values or focusing on different values. And if you're trying to push people, um, to be more inclusive, to be more open minded, you used the word open minded, um, that would be, that would be a struggle, that would be a struggle to try to lead a congregation down that path when there's such strong resistance. So, so I'm interested, though, I, you know, to be honest, I don't know much about the Church of the Nazarene. So, is it, uh, more like a formal style of worship? Or is it more casual?

Ken Bowen 22:56

Well, for me, uh, I, I where I grew up, it was mostly (. . .) casual in worship. Um, there, I guess there was a sense like many rural churches of you should dress up to go to church. Uh, but there, there wasn't the robes and, you know, everybody didn't have on suits and that type of thing. Um, it was mostly casual. So, that aspect has been, you know, easy to transition because it's what I was used to. Uh, but at large, it depends on where you, where you are, I think. The Church of the Nazarene's also very diverse and, uh, there're probably some out there that do more liturgy and high church type worship. But most of the ones I've attended have been very casual. Uh, Church of the Nazarene is, uh, I guess, you would say it's a Wesleyan foundation. So, some similarities to the Methodist Church. It also has roots in the Holiness Movement as well. Um, so, a little bit of combination of those things. Uh, but theologically, it's very Wesleyan, uh, as opposed to Calvinist or, or, uh, any of the, any of the other fundamentalist. You know, for, for years, I was proud of the fact that Church of the Nazarene ordains women and have pretty much since the beginning of their church in the early 1900s. Um, the Church of Nazarene is all over the world in, in over 100 countries. So, it's very diverse all over the world. Um, but unfortunately, I think they allowed themselves to be influenced by the fundamentalist movement in the United States in the 80s and 90s. And so there was a period of time where you hardly saw any, any female clergy. Thankfully, that trend has reversed and there, there are a lot more now, uh, starting in the 2000s. But to me, it was a pitfall that the church fell in, uh, that in some ways it did not recover from, uh, and people like me, and I'm not the only one, there's many others like me that have had to find another place. Uh, I still love the Church of the Nazarene. And going to Trevecca is one of the best decisions I ever made. Uh, the faculty there, the professors I had there, they, uh, they helped me to become more like Christ and learn, learn who Christ really was and learn to follow him more closely. And I'll forever be indebted to the Church of the Nazarene for my upbringing and for shaping me into the person I am. I think it was just that the area I'm in, many of the congregations allowed themselves to be pulled in by what was popular in the, in the region as opposed to sticking to their theology and

their roots, uh, which is more progressive if they went by it. But, again, I think there's a disconnect between, uh, the top level leadership and what's taught in the universities and what is being said in the local congregations.

Brittany Mangelson 26:07

And that's got to be really tricky as a pastor who's really grateful for the more, uh, open mindedness and progressive and inclusive theology and culture as well. Um, but then to, to try to push your local congregation in that direction and then just be met with that's not, not where we're at. So, um, yeah, that, that's got to be tricky. Uh, but it does sound like there, you know, was, it's a good, Community of Christ would be like a good transition church, right, um, because there are some of those similarities. And even, like you said, the cultural diverse, diversity, um, where, you know, you have this headquarter church that has these values, um, you named the enduring principles, and then, you know, they're lived out differently in each local context. But it sounds like you've got a good local community, so, um, good local Community of Christ. So, how, how was it different? Or like, what were some of your first impressions of actually, you know, going to Community of Christ? Um, you've, you've shared a little bit about it, but I also am curious to know, and not to bring this up too much, but I feel like some Christian denominations look at anything that started by Joseph Smith as a cult, or, you know, there's this strong tendency to lump Community of Christ in with Mormonism. So, I'm curious to know how, what your perception of that was, maybe before attending, did you even know much about Community of Christ? Um, did you know much about Mormonism in general? And, like, what were your perceptions on that because, you know, Community of Christ does have the Book of Mormon so we often get lumped in with that, uh, larger movement of the restoration. But, yeah, can you just speak to the, maybe the Mormon aspect of coming to Community of Christ?

Ken Bowen 28:08

Sure, yeah. I guess Alicia shared that with me from the beginning that that Community of Christ was rooted in, you know, the Mormon church started by Joseph Smith. And so, you know, honestly, when I first heard that it was, uh, a little concerning because, as, as with most people, we don't hear much good about the LDS church in, in our area growing up. Um, but Alicia, I would almost say, is an expert on the history of the church. Uh, she is a history major and, uh, did some of her research in the Mormon Church and the, and the Community of Christ Church. And, you know, when she explained things to me, I trusted her and, and understood and knew that the church is very far removed from when it first started. Uh, and also that there was a point where the original intent probably diverted to a different path, uh, and that was when the split happened. Uh, but it, it was a bit of a hang up at first, but once she explained it to me and I read what the church was about, you know, the, as I said, enduring principles and everything, uh, I didn't really have that concern. As far as the Book of Mormon, whenever I first was thinking of joining Community of Christ, uh, I met with two of our evangelists in our area, Gary and Marsha Howard. Not sure if you know them. Uh, but awesome people. Uh, Alicia has known them pretty much all of her life and they were very influential in her upbringing in the church. And when I was trying to make that decision, Alicia said, I want you to talk to Gary and Marsha. So, they had us at their, their home and we met with them. And after that conversation, and I want aren't that, you know, the Book of Mormon is not something you have to treat as everything's 100% accurate in there and you have to believe it or you're out. You know, once I learned that it was more of a supplemental scripture, uh, uh, I guess that, that set me at ease. Um, it's something I want to read more of and learn more

about, but it's good to know that I'm not going to be excluded, um, because I don't know much about it. Uh, that's, that was a blessing when I learned that. Uh, but Gary and Marsha, the conversation I had with them, I guess that was, that was the moment I decided it, it's, it's time to make that decision and join the church. And when I made that decision, and honestly, it was, I guess, after my confirmation, and I posted the pictures online and on Facebook and, uh, talked about joining Community of Christ and, uh, I had one well meaning individual message me on Facebook, You know that church is part of the LDS church, don't you? Uh, this is another Nazarene minister. Uh, and I said to her, uh, I just replied, My, my wife is pretty much an expert in that area and we've, we've already talked through all of this. And she said, Well, she sent me a link to Wikipedia, uh, to prove her point, uh, which somehow is supposed to be, mean more to me than, uh, what I had already researched myself and learned. Uh, then I had another pastor who, this was after I was already, uh, ordained as an elder, this other pastor messaged me, uh, You should sit down and have a conversation with, uh, an older minister in the Church of the Nazarene before you make this decision. And I told him, First of all, I've already made this decision. I'm ordained. Uh, and second of all, I've, I've had a lot of conversations. Uh, but yeah, there, there's a few well meaning people that were concerned, uh, and I'm not sure they were convinced otherwise, uh, but I was. And that's, in the end, that's what really matters is that I, I was convinced and I believe I'm in the right place. Uh, and I trust Alicia, uh, to help me navigate the history of the church and that aspect of everything.

Brittany Mangelson 32:30

No, I thank you so much for sharing that. I really appreciate it because I know that it can be challenging to try to explain who we are and how we have same foundational roots. But that does not mean that the, the, the deeply Mormon, if you will, parts of us, like the Book of Mormon, um, are any sort of requirement to have belief in or a test of fellowship or, you know, something that, uh, you must adhere to, um, to, to be part of the community. So, I really appreciate, you know, your honesty in saying, you know, I don't know much about this book. It's, I see it as supplementary to, you know, something like the Bible, um, that we, we are more rooted and grounded in. And then it doesn't have to be a big hang up, because no one's requiring you to believe anything about it. So, I really appreciate the way that you articulated that. And, uh, the way that you were able to have honest conversations with folks that you still know from the Church of the Nazarene that, uh, you know, you, you trust your wife, you trust, you trust Community of Christ when we tell our own story and say how we do, um, differ from the LDS church. And, um, yeah, that those would be really tricky conversations to have I think and so I admire that you've been able to, to navigate that. It sounds, it sounds like you've been able to navigate that really well. So, uh, okay, so, I'm curious to know what kept you coming back to Community of Christ. So, it seems like if you, um, you know, you have obviously church leadership skills, and I'm, I'm fascinated with this idea of being a leader in a church, to then being the new kid on the block, if you will, right, like going from, from leading a congregation to then learning about a new church. I mean, that's, when you're in ministry, it can become your life, right? It impacts every part of your life and then to suddenly be the person on the other side of that experience, learning about a new church, what were the things that, that kept you coming back and how, I'm, I'm just so curious more about your conversion? What was that like to suddenly be on the other side of, of ministry and what kept you coming back?

Ken Bowen 34:59

Well, I think one of the big things is I, I really love how the priesthood is done in Community of Christ. Um, I love how one person doesn't have to do everything. At least that's how it is in our congregation. Before I resigned from my last pastorate in the Nazarene church, uh, I had reached a point where I didn't like church anymore because I was burned out and it was just a job that I had to do on Sunday and sometimes Wednesday. Um, and I felt like if anybody was out, I had to step in because there was, there weren't enough volunteers willing to serve in the church. So, I often found myself having to lead the music and preach and sometimes teach Sunday school. And it, it, just so many things fell on me. And coming into a church where you have deacons and priests and elders and teachers and, uh, in the same congregation that shared duties, it was such a breath of fresh air. Uh, it did help that when I joined Community of Christ, my mother-in-law is the pastor of the church. So, she, she got me involved right away. Even before I was ordained, she gave me opportunities to, to speak. And, of course, Alicia plays piano and so I would help her. We, we would work together to lead music. And, uh, so, I didn't have to completely transition to a, from, from being up front to in the pew all the time. Thankfully, it was a good transition where I was still allowed to participate in worship and still the lead in certain areas. And, you know, eventually leading up my ordination, where I was, I've been able to take even more of a role. Um, but I think the fact that I can sometimes sit in a pew and enjoy worship, whereas I have not been able to do that very often, for many years, uh, as a lead pastor in my previous, uh, tradition. So just the, the aspect of priesthood was one thing that, you know, kept me around and convinced me to become part of the priesthood myself.

Brittany Mangelson 37:18

That's a really reasonable perspective to be able to, uh, kind of take a step back and, and relax and sit in the pews while also having opportunity to still serve. So, um, it sounds like you were able to find a good balance and a good, um, way to plug yourself into the community while also not feeling like you have to do everything and, you know, fueling this burnout that you were already feeling from your last congregation. Um, so, yeah, it sounds, it sounds like a really good community to, for you to have started attending. So, we've ar, we've already touched on some of this, but I am curious to know, um, if you had any additional hang ups in joining the church and then what were some of the reactions of maybe your family and friends. And, again, I know we've talked a little bit about this, um, some of the people that contacted you, but as far as family relationships, or you know, maybe former colleagues, what, what were some of those reactions like?

Ken Bowen 38:24

Well, my, my family, again, I've mentioned before that I don't have a lot of family that I'm close to. Uh, I mainly have my mother. Uh, I lost my father way back in 2001 to cancer, so, it's mainly been my mother and then my grandmother are the two individuals I'm still closest with. And they have both been nothing but supportive. Um, they, they both told me, you know, if you feel led by the Spirit to do this, uh, then, you know, I'm happy for you. Because they, they both knew how hard it was for me before that and how, how much I struggled in ministry before that. Um, my mother also had a bad experience with the Church of the Nazarene that she attended for a while. Uh, it's not the one we grew up in. It was a different congregation. And, uh, my mother is basically, has not really been part of a congregation for a few years now. Uh, I'm working on her try to get her to join the local Community of Christ, though. She did go with us there when we, we, uh, we went and visited that church and I spoke and Alicia played

music and my mother went with me. So, I'm trying to get, I'm trying to convert my mom to the, the church, uh, but we're, we're praying and seeing how that goes. But my family's been very supportive. The, the people, the other people that I respect a lot in the Church of the Nazarene, uh, they have also been very supportive, as well. Uh, the, the one honestly, the ones that had the problem were people that didn't really reach out to me before. It's just like all of a sudden, uh, it's almost like they took it as an affront that I was leaving the denomination. And, so, they were lashing out about it. Whereas, the ones that know me, they, they know that I'm not going to make a rash decision in my faith and they have been very supportive, uh, especially as they have learned about what we believe. And the aspect that we welcome all people, love all people, right where they're at. Uh, they, they've been very supportive.

Brittany Mangelson 40:37

That's really interesting that the folks that maybe gave you more pushback were the ones that didn't necessarily know you very well. And the ones who knew you well trusted your ability to go where God was calling you to go. And, um, even if maybe they weren't celebrating you leaving, uh, they were supportive, supportive and wanted the best for you. And I love that you're trying to get your mom connected to her local Community of Christ congregation as well. Uh, that's great. So, you have shared a little bit what kinds of things, uh, you've been able to do at church since you joined, but, and your now ordained an elder, but what does your, uh, you know, weekly involvement to, with Community of Christ look like? How are you able to serve your congregation as an elder?

Ken Bowen 41:25

I do speak some weeks, probably once or twice a month. Uh, I guess I've, I've always felt that, um, that, that's been an area where God has led me is preaching. In fact, what my master's degree is in, is preaching. And I've always enjoyed preaching, uh, the preaching aspect of ministry. Uh, when I was younger, I didn't like being in front of people. But after I accepted my call to ministry, it seems as if that, I still get nervous. I mean, I'm nervous right now and people can't even see me. But, uh, I guess that, uh, being so nervous I couldn't speak, that kind of went away and, uh, I feel God has really been with me in my ability to preach the gospel. Uh, I also help with music some. I play a little bit of guitar and, uh, I try to sing a little as well. And Alicia plays piano and sings. So, we, we try to play music together. So, it, it's honestly varied from week to week. One week, I may speak. Uh, another week, I may help out leading worship. Sometimes I may be asked to do prayer for peace, or, and I like that. I like, I like that it's not always the same, that my role, uh, shifts from week and that we have enough people in our congregation, even though we're a very small congregation, we run, you know, 15 to 20 people, we have enough priesthood members to share the duties. And if one of us has to be out or two of us have to be out, then, uh, we have others that step up. Also, Alicia and I are kind of helping to restart what, what we used to call the pulpit exchange where, uh, ministers would go to other congregations to speak once a month. Uh, we're, we've changed the name of it to sharing ministry and we're trying to kind of reboot that after the pandemic. And it's going well, so far. We have a few congregations on board and, uh, several that are interested in speaking. So, that's, that's going to be another aspect of, uh, my ministry as an elder is visiting other congregations and sharing what God has on my heart, maybe sharing my story in some places. Uh, I also have participated in reunion. I really enjoyed that. Um, I went into reunion thinking, I have to do this and this. And when I got there also had to do that and that and that. So, they, they have gotten me involved very quickly, uh, in many things and, and I enjoy it. I, I, after many years of ministry, I don't like to always be a spectator. I like to be involved. And, uh, also,

Alicia and I feel very strongly about our ministry in our community. Whether, whether it brings people to the pews or not, we, we feel strongly about reaching out to people in our community that may have been hurt by religion in the past, or people in the LGBTQ community that may have been rejected by churches, uh, to let them know there is a place for you. Uh, we, we care about you right where you're at. And if you want a place to worship, you would be welcome at our congregation, uh, but otherwise, you're also welcome to just be our friend and hang out and play board games at our house or, uh, whatever you need. You know, that's that's the type of ministry we're trying to do in our community.

Brittany Mangelson 44:54

I love it. I love that there's the variety that you were hoping for and, uh, but not all the responsibilities are on you. Um, something as simple yet beautiful and powerful as the prayer for peace bringing ministry in that way, um, you know, it, it, it's, you're not carrying the burden, the whole burden and the whole weight of the congregation, but you're still able to provide good ministry. So, I really love that. And I definitely got a good chuckle when you talked about reunion and the things that, you know, you thought you were going to be doing and then maybe you showed up and other things were added or changed. And that is, that has been my experience as well. But the flexibility and being able to say yes to the things that you want to do and no to the things that you don't want to do and, uh, just knowing that you're part of this larger community and that things will, will get taken care of and more opportunities will come, um, and that you can really tap into ministry in a way that feels balanced and healthy, um, to not lead to that burnout that you very much have experienced. So, I, I really like that. So, well, first of all, thank you for sharing your story. This has been really, really fascinating. And, um, you know, you and I, we, I think really first met when we hopped on to some of those calls midweek, um, with other millennials in Community of Christ, um, and I, I really have appreciated getting to know you and your perspective. And I was so intrigued by your story because, uh, while we do have a handful of, um, convert stories that, uh, don't come from the LDS church on Fair Trade, uh, most of them do. And, so, whenever I can talk to somebody who did not come from a restoration church, um, who's a convert, I'm always really, really interested in the things that brought them to Community of Christ. Uh, and, and with that, I'm always really interested to share about your hopes for Community of Christ. So, you've talked about the things that have led you here, the things that have kept you here. Wha, what are your hopes for the future of the church? And if, if you could, if Community of Christ could be our best selves, what would that look like, in your opinion?

Ken Bowen 47:14

Well, I think it comes down to loving your neighbor and what, whoever that neighbor is, uh, whether they love you back or not. And I, I think whatever direction we go in the future, uh, that, that's what it looks like, is who, who feels unloved and that, that's who we should be going after. Uh, and, again, uh, one thing I've loved about Community of Christ is, it, it doesn't, at least in, in my experience, it doesn't emphasize how many numbers you have at church. For years and years, I had to sit through, uh, things where people were given awards for numbers and growth and often I sat there with no awards because the numbers were small. And I love that Community of Christ, it's, it's just about loving people and ministering in the community whether or not they show up on Sunday. And I think that's a role that we can really play because there's so many out there that, that think that that's what it's about, that it's about getting people in your churches on Sundays or whatever day of the week, when it really should just be about loving, going out into the community and loving people. I mean, I wonder if they counted

Jesus', uh, ministry based on how many people he had at Temple. Well, we know he, he crowded them out sometimes, but Jesus had 5000 people on a hillside that he ministered to, that he fed that were hungry. And Jesus had people that were, uh, possessed with evil spirits that needed his ministry and those people weren't in the tur, in the churches, in the temples. And I think that's what our church should continue to do. I love that, I don't remember, again, I'm, I'm a newbie, I don't remember what Doctrine and Covenants it is, but the one that says, uh, Set your eyes on the horizon, uh, sorry, set your eyes beyond the horizon to which you are sent. And, you know, the horizon is what we can see now. But we are to look beyond that, and see, where is God calling us to next? And, to me, it always looks like, um, the ones that need love the most.

Brittany Mangelson 49:26

You know, I love the simplicity in that answer. And the openness. Religion so often gets in our own way and we so often overcomplicate things, especially when it comes to, uh, how different churches interact with each other and the labels that we put on one another and, um, the, the things that we resist as humans, right? But when it comes down to it, you started off that comment which is simply loving your neighbor no matter who they are. Uh, and I think what a beautiful takeaway from religion, right? After all of your theological education, after all of your experience leading congregations and transitioning to a new church, um, that that's what it comes down to is just loving your neighbor and being in a place where you can do that more fully, um, backed up with scripture. I, I love that scripture. And, honestly, I can't remember the reference either and I've been around just a little bit longer, but, still, I consider myself a newbie.

Ken Bowen 50:28

I know it's 160 something. (Yeah.) Maybe 161, I'm not sure. I'll, I'll try to be a, I'll try to be a better, uh, Community of Christ elder and, and learn my scripture references.

Brittany Mangelson 50:41

Well, you've, you've got the most important part down, right? Uh, and that, that's, that's great, like, that, that's the whole purpose of this, um, living Christ's mission as our own, looking beyond the horizon, looking beyond our wildest dreams of what this inclusive community can look like. And I, I think that that's the vision that we need to collectively have as a church. And I really appreciate, you know, the new folks who are coming in that remind us that that's, those are the things that have drawn us in. I can say the exact same thing. Those are the same reasons that kept me coming back. Those are my hopes for Community of Christ that we can just further live into our mission of, of, uh, being Christ's peaceable kingdom in the world today. So, thank you so much. Uh, it's been really fun getting to know you. And I, I kind of feel like this went by super fast, so, I'm almost worried that I, uh, left stuff out. But is there anything else that you, uh, weren't able to share that I didn't ask, um, that you, that you want to make sure you got in? Or just any general final thoughts?

Ken Bowen 51:50

Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me on here. I really appreciate the opportunity to share my story. And, uh, I think, I think maybe my story is, is many others' story. Uh, I personally know others who've gone through similar experiences to me and, uh, I pray that all of them are able to be as blessed as I was to, to land somewhere that will pick me up and, you know, pick them up and love them

the way that I've been loved by Community of Christ. And whether that is Community of Christ or some other tradition, uh, I just, I've been very blessed that whenever I felt like religion turned its back on me, that I had, I had a, a place that immediately accepted me. And I know there's a lot of people out there that haven't had that, uh, luxury that may still be trying to find their home. And I just pray that they're able to do that.

Brittany Mangelson 52:46

Thank you so much. And, again, I just love the grace that is just, like, spilling from your mouth right now. Um, and this idea that you just want everyone to have a spiritual home that is accepting of them, that is loving of them, that allows them to meet the God that they know and love. And I just really appreciate your open mindedness. And, again, I just hear so much grace just streaming through everything that you've shared today. So, uh, yeah, Ken, thank you so much for sharing your story. I know that it will help a lot of people, uh, not only be reminded of what Community of Christ has to offer, um, but any seekers that are listening, um, who might be, you know, still struggling with, uh, whether or not they want to pursue a different path. And I think that as long, I think that through your story, it's been made clear that as long as you follow your intuition, follow the Spirit, uh, whatever label you want to put on it, that you'll be okay and that you'll find a community that will love and accept you and will celebrate you, uh, for who you are. So, again, Ken, thanks so much. Um, it's been a joy to talk to you today.

Ken Bowen 53:59

I've greatly enjoyed it. Thank you, Brittany.

Josh Mangelson 54:09

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