

# Episode-198 | Fair Trade: Michael Wright

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, Christ, community, home, Mormon, family, God, congregation

## SPEAKERS

Josh Mangelson, Michael Wright, Brittany Mangelson

### **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, and welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Brittany Mangelson. And we will be having an episode today with our *Fair Trade* series. So, *Fair Trade* is all about faith transitions; stories of new converts who have found Community of Christ. And today I've got on Michael Wright, who I am very excited to have on, because I think his story is going to be unique. Every story is unique. But I think that there are some layers of uniqueness to Michael's story that we have not had on the podcast before. So Michael, thank you so much for joining us today.

### **Michael Wright** 01:14

Absolutely. Happy to be here.

### **Brittany Mangelson** 01:17

So, I guess, really quick, just give us an elevator version introduction of yourself. Who are you? Where do you live? That kind of thing?

### **Michael Wright** 01:27

Okay, well, as you said, my name is Michael Wright, and I live in Rome in Italy. I've been in Italy for about 18 years. My work brought me to Italy many years ago. I work for a university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that's called Duquesne University, which is also my undergraduate alma mater. In fact, as soon as I graduated from undergrad, I came to work for the university to open a branch campus of the university for study abroad. We host students here in Italy. So as a daring and excited 25 year old, I thought I would come and do this for the university. I figured I'd come for a year or two. And I thought maybe I would just perfect my Italian and make some good friends. I was really eager to get back to Spain, where I had spent some time as a as a young person. And as life would have it, here I am, all these years later, still here today. I grew up mostly in Nebraska and Oklahoma, in the United States. But we moved a lot for my dad's work. I come from a good-sized family. And I came from the LDS tradition, and that's what brought me to Community of Christ, which we'll explore a little bit about today with my story.

**Brittany Mangelson 02:54**

Awesome, thank you. I'm really glad to hear that introduction, because that's obviously a huge part of your life, and your identity, and who you are. And I was not really certain why you were living in Rome, or what you did. And I know you travel a lot. So that's really good to have that background. So you said that you grew up LDS. I just want to hear a little bit about that. What was faith, religion, church? Well, what did that all look like when you were growing up? How important was God or spirituality when you were a kid?

**Michael Wright 03:29**

Well, very important. I come from a very, very active Latter-Day Saint family. And there's a lot of layers to that as well. My parents, who raised me, my mom and my stepdad - I'm going to call him my stepdad in this interview, to divide between my biological father and my stepfather, even though my stepdad is my dad, he raised me, but just for clarification in the interview - they're both converts to the church. My mom was a convert to Mormonism when she was in her graduate studies at Northwestern University, many years ago. She was very much attracted to the idea of eternal families, after her very dear grandfather had passed, and it was something that brought her very close to the Latter-Day Saint tradition. And my stepfather, he converted with his family when he was in high school. My family is a multicultural family as well, because my stepfather is Cherokee, is Native American. My grandparents lived their whole, entire lives in Oklahoma. We're speakers of Cherokee, we're very proud of their heritage. Often there are many stories about the Trail of Tears in the family, and these historical ideas and thoughts came forward in our family quite a bit. Even though I don't have any Native American blood running through my veins, my family did and does as well. So that was a distinctive in my family as well. And that came together with the geography of where my family is from, but also some of the things that were attractive to the restoration as well for my family. We were a very active family. I feel like we kind of grew up in not the same kind of Zion that you talk about, Brittany, in Utah, but I always felt like we grew up in Zion, maybe the way that we think about it in restoration scripture, that people were really taking care of each other and really loved each other. And we loved the restoration. I came from a pretty economically depressed family, as most of the people in the wards that I grew up. I never grew up in a place that had a lot of money. And so there was this real unity in our wards, of people taking care of one another, babysitting, feeding one another. There was this really beautiful, lovely feeling both in Nebraska and Oklahoma, where I grew up. We were always involved. So everything revolved around Sunday, and our callings, and Wednesday night activities, young men's, young women's, Boy Scouts, all of those kinds of things. My mom was the Relief Society president for quite some time, and my dad was the Scoutmaster. So everything in our family revolved around the church. And we were active in seminary, we read our scriptures together as a family every morning, family home evening was more comical than educational, because it always ended up in some kind of fight, when my mom was always in tears, but it was fun times. And those are some of the best stories we still talk about, like at Christmas time around the table. It's like those family home evening moments, too. And in seminary, early morning seminary was a big part of life, and getting us there, and our neighbors, who are also LDS, trading off and on and going to do that. And so yeah, I would say that everything that we did evolved around the church. And I always felt like a real missionary. I was always trying to give people a Book of Mormon at school, I was always inventing musical firesides at church, so I could have an excuse to invite people to church, and maybe even to sing with me or play with me, just so that

they'd have to come to my church, and I could tell them about it. And when people would say nasty things about Mormons, I was always there to defend the church as well. It was just really part of my DNA. And I always felt called, in a way, in this relationship with - at that time, I would refer to it as Heavenly Father, as God. But this close closeness that I felt, and that I was really called to help people feel close to God. I remember in my patriarchal blessing, one of the things that always stuck out to me was that it said that people would feel close to God with my presence. And I always took that as a real challenge. And something real that I wanted. I wanted people to feel love when they came into contact with me. And that was really, really important to me, still is today. But I think that the church really helped me with a lot of those things in my youth and my growing up.

**Brittany Mangelson 08:43**

It sounds like you really were all in that. You lived it. You breathed it, you love it. All the things. So as a child, did you feel like you had extra worth, because you were Mormon? The way that you're describing your enthusiasm with the church is how I felt about it. But I lived in Utah, so I almost felt like I fit in. But being outside of Utah and having that same amount of enthusiasm, I mean, were you part of that rising generation, like did you have that vigor and vim behind you? I'm using such Mormon words right now!

**Michael Wright 09:30**

Yeah, it was definitely that! It was that missionary zeal. It brought so much happiness to my family and the people that I was around, and I loved that. And I wanted that for other people, too. I don't know if I felt more worth, but I did feel like I had something very special. And I think that's the reason why I wanted to share it so much with people. I mean, I did believe it was the true church, but I don't think that's the reason I was out there. I mean, I didn't go out tracting as a young kid or anything, but I was constantly thinking about this. Because I wanted other people to feel the same happiness that I felt. And yeah, I think that's what it was. I always just wanted people to be happy.

**Brittany Mangelson 10:23**

Yeah, that's helpful and relatable. So as you were growing up, was there ever a point that it stopped working for you? Or I mean, was it a slow or gradual thing? Because spoiler alert, you are now with Community of Christ. So let's get into maybe as you grew up, became a young adult, started to figure yourself and your life and your relationship with God out? When did you start questioning the things that you were kind of handed at birth?

**Michael Wright 10:58**

You know, that's a hard question, Brittany, because I think that has to be pretty recently. I think there were things when I started to understand that there was something very different about me, and the message. And that had to do with my sexuality. I started to really understand that I was gay when I was about 12 years old. It would be years before I would ever utter that word, because I was very scared of it. But I didn't even really question then. I thought it was my fault. I thought there was something very weak about me, or there was something that this challenge was out there for me to overcome. Maybe for some reason - this is very Mormon - but maybe I had been so valiant in the preexistence that I had this giant challenge that I was going to have to overcome. And I was up for it. I didn't understand it. But it would be an excruciating ride for me. And it's not until just maybe a couple of years ago that I started to really understand what was going on. I always was trying to figure out, I always believed, and I loved

the message of the gospel. And I was reading my scriptures. And let me tell you, fasting and praying, fasting testimony, sacrament meeting, once every month, it was full of me pleading with God to take the gay away from me, literally. It was the only thing that I was concerned about. Because I knew that it had to do with my salvation. I had to overcome this challenge, this problem, that was there. And so it would take a long, long time and a lot of negotiating with God, but the negotiating with God, now I understand what was going on, but that negotiating with God, it wasn't very successful, obviously, with the outcome that I was looking for, and thought that God wanted for me. And so it would start to break my relationship with God up. And I started to feel like I really couldn't trust. And this really brings me to my mission. So I served a mission for two years in Barcelona in Spain. I had always wanted to go on a mission. I had saved my money as a young kid. I had sung the primary song, "I hope they call me on a mission," with such - I keep using the word zeal, but that's the word - like, that was me. I was going to be Elder Wright! And I was going to go somewhere in the world. And I was going to bring truth and bring happiness to people. And it's really interesting, because the place I wanted to go was to Spain. And when I opened my call, it was to Barcelona. It was exactly the place that I had been pleading that I could go, just because I really loved my Spanish class and had this thing for Spain. But as I was preparing to go on a mission, my prayers and my fasting continued to be even more fervent that this be taken away. And I finally got to the point where I thought, okay, well, what I'm going to do is I'm going to just talk to God a little bit about what I'm willing to do if he's willing to do his part. So I said, listen, I understand that we haven't gotten to where I want to be. I'm still having these feelings. I still know that I really, really am attracted to men, but maybe the mission is where this is all supposed to bring me, and I'm supposed to serve faithfully, and then maybe this will be taken away. Maybe this is the great challenge. So I pleaded and I said to Heavenly Father, listen, I will be the best missionary you have ever had, I'll work tirelessly, I will keep every rule, I will do whatever you want. And please, please, please, just please, please, please help me to be normal. And just help me to be who you want me to be. And I served! I served a really, really great mission, it changed my life. I had more love for human beings, I learned a culture and language. And I just did it all with the eye of being healed. And I came to the end of my two years on my mission. I remember sitting in the mission president's home for a final dinner, where they kind of give the obligatory "it's time to go home and get married" talk. And I felt sick to my stomach. And I thought, well, maybe the magic here happens when I get off the plane at home. I was grasping any hope. And thinking, I can't doubt. If I doubt, then I'm not being faithful. And so I returned home. And I returned home the same Michael that I had always been. And I went back to college, I went back to my sophomore year, and thought, well, I'll just keep working on it. But it started to get really dark for me. I didn't want to go to church anymore. I didn't want to pray anymore. I really, really felt abandoned. And I felt like I really upheld my part of the deal, and was still looking for that part of the deal that I thought was going to come. It got really bad. I remember one time I called my mom in the middle of the night from college, and just could not stop crying. I was just hysterical. And my mom kept saying, what's wrong, sweetie, what's wrong, and I couldn't say it. I couldn't say it at all. But I really, really thought that my life was in jeopardy. I thought that maybe it was best that I had never been born. I was really having those kinds of feelings. And my mom said, I'll come to you, if you need me. Please just tell me what's going on. I would just tell her to stay on the phone with me, and just be with until I went to sleep. After some of those really dark moments, those kind of dark moments of the soul, I decided I needed to really get some help. So I started to go to the university counseling center, which really brought me from those black, black, dark moments. But I started to not feel like I could go to church. I was in a singles ward. We were talking all the time about people getting married, celestial

marriage. Our church leaders were trying to hook us up on dates. Young women in my word were very interested in me all the time, I was dating people, women at church and also at school, trying to work on this. And when it really wasn't going where it was supposed to go, I decided I just had to distance myself. I was always very busy. I had multiple jobs. I was in different music ensembles at school and stuff. I would use those as excuses why I couldn't be at church. And it was kind of liberating and a little bit feeling freeing, even though I felt guilty about it a lot. So yeah, my university years were coming to an end, I was still very, very much trying to work on this personally. And I accepted this job in Italy. I was very excited about moving back to Europe, and coming back and having my career being here where I could start anew and fresh. And that's kind of what would happen. About two weeks before I moved to Italy, there was a guy in my choir at school that I was kind of very interested in. And I just decided, there's just about two or three weeks before I move to another country. Maybe I'll just see what this is like. Maybe I just try to go out with somebody, and that was a real definitive moment for me. Because this person was a very kind person, loving person, and knew what I was going through, and literally held my hand, and was the sweetest person help me through those couple of weeks before I went. And it was an amazing moment. I realized that for the first time what these feelings of attraction and what love might feel like. Also, holding somebody's hand and kissing somebody and not feeling utter dread for the first time were wonderful and kind of miraculous for me. So, about two or three weeks later, I moved to Italy, and from there, I would start a whole new life for myself.

**Brittany Mangelson 21:02**

It sounds like - and I don't want to put words in your mouth - but when I have been faced with those moments of wanting to do something that at one point I would have considered wrong, or thinking something that I would have considered wrong, but then you actually do it, and your world doesn't explode, and lightning doesn't strike, and you actually feel good about yourself, you feel close to God, you feel close to whatever construct of a higher power you are feeling with at the time. I mean, was that your experience, too? Were you expecting to kind of have everything crumble? Maybe in that instant?

**Michael Wright 21:43**

Yeah, I guess. I mean, I just had to figure something out. I wasn't happy! And I just told you in the early part of the interview, that the thing that really made me happy was helping other people to be happy. And here I was in a part of my life where I was just definitely not happy. And here was something that was bringing some kind of joy to me. But the thing that I'd have to say, Brittany, is that I felt a lot of shame. I couldn't think that it was because this was God given, or that this was set in my way. It was more in those kinds of ways that we picture Adam leaving the garden. I couldn't look at God, and I couldn't talk to him. This was something that was helping me, and it was joyous to me. But I felt a lot of shame, I have to say.

**Brittany Mangelson 22:44**

And in a lot of ways, that makes sense, because of the way that you were raised. I mean, what I just said, the idea that the lightning is going to strike or that you will be punished, or it will make you unhappy, that really puts a distance between yourself and God, or at least it did. It has for me. So yeah, I think that shame is part of the process, unfortunately. And I want to underscore the 'unfortunately.'

**Michael Wright 23:12**

Exactly. And it's an important part of, I think, my journey too, because many years later, when I will start to try to have this relationship with God, all of this will be part of that learning process for me. It's something that was necessary. I guess I just have to say that I really learned a lot from it, as well.

**Brittany Mangelson 23:41**

Yeah, it's important. So you move to Italy. And then what?

**Michael Wright 23:50**

Well, so I moved to Italy, and I got here. And I knew that there would be some cultural adjustment issues or whatnot. Moving to a place I had never really been to before. I had been to Rome one time before. And I was a Spanish speaker. And I had taken Italian for multiple years in university, but I had never really been in a place where I could use it. So there were a lot of adjustment issues here. So what did I do at first? Well, I ran back to the place that made me feel the most comfortable. I went back to church. So I found the LDS branch that was closest to my home here in Rome, and went there, looking for friendship and also looking for the ability to practice my Italian, and to be able to start to feel home and comfortable again. And that worked for a little bit of time. It was really necessary and important for me. But as I started to adjust, all of those issues were still working in me. But also all of the problems of church were starting to flood back, because in my new language, I was starting to understand again all of the same things that had been bothersome to me before, and I wasn't feeling good about myself. And at the same time, I started to date another guy, an Italian guy, who would be a dear friend for a long time. And so once again, I started to back off and not be available for church anymore. And so I would spend 15 years here in Rome, separated, really, I think separated in a lot of ways, from God, which I thought that he had separated himself. And please forgive me using the male pronoun here. It's just, it has come out naturally here for me right now. But I would later really realize that it was me who had put up that wall. So you know, I lived a very wonderful life here, traveling, building up my career and whatnot. But 15 years would go by without having any kind of serious relationship with God. An important part of this story is that, in those early years of living in Italy, I would meet a guy. His name is Antonio. And he would become one of my best friends here in Rome. And for the last seven years, Antonio has been my partner. And on July 7 of this year, Antonio and I will be married here in Rome.

**Brittany Mangelson 26:33**

Congratulations!

**Michael Wright 26:36**

So Antonio, will be a big part of the rest of this story for me, too, moving forward. So maybe we could fast forward a little bit to the part that's going to start to bring me to where I am today. Is that okay?

**Brittany Mangelson 26:53**

Yeah, of course!

**Michael Wright 26:56**

Okay. So like I said, about 15 years past, and I had these moments, these tragedies that would happen with my students, or even with my family, and I would be on my knees. And I would pray, and never for

myself, but only for other people in these extreme moments. But that was about all that was happening with me and God during these years. So in early 2017, I remember it was a rare occasion where I was home alone, and just was loving having a moment just watching TV and being on the couch, and just kind of hanging out by myself. And I started to have these feelings that I recognized very strongly as being the Spirit. And at first it hit me so hard that I thought maybe somebody else was in the house. It was very strange. It was during the day, so I wasn't frightened or anything like that, but I turned the TV down to see if I could hear anything, like maybe somebody was at the door downstairs, or something like that. And there was nothing there. But I had this feeling. And I was kind of like, what is that? And maybe a week or two later, I would be having that same kind of experience at home by myself. And I started to have that feeling again. And I really recognized it as the Spirit. And I was pushing very, very hard. I was like, what do you want? What do you want from me, you know, like, I didn't think we had this anymore! And this was going to start to be pretty consistent with me. It was not in any kind of audible voice. But there was something that was calling me. And it was making me very, very uncomfortable. I was at home in the States in Pittsburgh for work on a business trip, and I met up with one of my very dear friends from college, one of my best friends. And she's actually the person that's going to marry me and Antonio in our ceremony here in Rome. And she had always kind of prided herself in college as being an atheist. She would always fight people that were talking about God. And she was always one of these people that was very insistent that God did not exist. And then she would meet her husband later on, who was Jewish, and she would convert to Judaism, and there she would end up finding what she would believe was God. And I was talking to her about what was going on in my life and all of these kinds of things. And she said to me really frankly, Michael, can I be just frank with you? Can I just blurt this out? I hope I won't offend you, you know that I love you more than anything? And I said, Yeah. And she said to me, Well, could it be like, okay, the God that you believe in is perfect, right? And I said, Well, I think so. And she said, Okay, that's what it seems. I've known you for so many years, nearly 20 years. And that's what I think of when I think of you talking about God. So she just said to me, could it be that God is offended by what you ask of him? And I said, Okay, go on. And she said, you know, you've asked all these years to be not gay, and to be cured. And she said, if this God is perfect, and that means he creates perfect things. And she said, Michael, you're not broken. She said, you're one of the most beautiful people in my life. And you are beautiful to many, many people. And it's hard for me to hear you talk about yourself in a demeaning way, and that God has made you broken, or has created you imperfectly. And she said, I just want to put it out there, maybe God's offended by what you ask. And maybe you should rephrase the question and just ask what you're supposed to do, and that you recognize his voice. I thought a lot about that. And it would lead to a prayer by my bedside by myself, where I told God that I was here and had always been here. And I said, I love Antonio more than anything in my life, and that he's staying. And so with all of this, just tell me what I'm supposed to do, and I'll do it! And I've always been here and I want to be here. But I'm really uncomfortable. And so, time would pass and things would start to move faster in my relationship. I was recognizing that things were happening around me that were on purpose, and that they were signs to me. And I know that sounds really strange, but I have to say that the finding of Community of Christ was a bit of a miracle for me, because I didn't know about Community of Christ. I definitely didn't know the new name for the church. And there are no Community of Christ congregation or people in Italy. I am the only member of the church right now that's Italian. I had gotten a call from work, I was supposed to go on this business trip. And I was looking up tickets to go to London for this thing that I was supposed to do. And I just put in Google 'London flights.' I can't remember what else was in there,

but then I hit ENTER. But up pops an article. You know, Google fights will be like two or three down, which never happens! And an article will pop up that says "Dissatisfied liberal Mormons find refuge in Community of Christ." It was a Guardian article from the United Kingdom. And I was like, what? Now I do believe that Google keeps tabs on stuff. But I was like, who's Community of Christ? And am I a liberal Mormon? I didn't even really know what that meant! I just saw this article. And I thought, what does all this mean? So I clicked into it. And I would learn really quickly that Community of Christ was the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who, of course, I knew of. It was talking about moving forward. Now, this was an old article at the time. So I didn't know that there had been things at World Conference that would affirm LGBTQ people. It just said that the church was working on it. It talked about priesthood for women, and all these things. And I thought, wow, I have to look this up. And so instantaneously, I go on this frenzy of searching for the Reorganized Church - Community of Christ, and finding out who they were and what they were about. And what's kind of funny is that I had these moments with the Reorganized Church before. In my youth, I grew up in the plains, like Nebraska and Oklahoma. And I had had some of these moments where I was having flashbacks about the RLDS church coming up in different moments in my life. My mom had this - I don't have any idea and still don't understand it, and I had this conversation with her and she doesn't even know where it is - but I remember there being a Community of Christ or RLDS *Doctrine and Covenants* on our shelf, a very old one, when I was growing up. And my mom would say things like, I think that God will have mercy on Emma, I think the world of her, she had to put up with so much. I remember my mom saying things like that. It would jog my mind. I remember in a seminary class, we went to Independence in 1993. And the Temple either was just dedicated or just about ready to be dedicated. And looking at it and thinking, I was standing safely on the visitor center side of the of the LDS church with my seminary class, but thinking, Who are these apostates, what is this Temple? What is that? Who are these people, you know, standing very safely on the ground of the LDS Visitor Center. And then a very, very important piece of what I would call my testimony at the time, of going to youth conference in Nauvoo as a young high schooler, and going to the RLDS side. And this is a really interesting story. I'll come back exactly to where I was, but I was telling Apostle Richard James about this, that I had gone off to Nauvoo, and I went to the RLDS side, and had these two missionaries that were taking me around. And they were both from Germany. And I thought to myself in my very young, immature, not understanding things like, why are they members of the RLDS church? And why are people from Germany here? And one of the things that's super interesting is that Richard says, I know exactly who that person was that was your tour guide. And I said, No, how's that possible? He was like, is that like, 1992? And I said, yeah, he was like, That's Eva Erickson, from Berlin. And so I met Eva at World Conference. And she was just set apart as part of the [Standing] High Council. And we figured out that she was a Graceland student and in fact, that summer had been there. So she had been that missionary that I remembered. And we had that connection again, which was really interesting. So I had these moments and these glimpses into it that I remember were interesting and curious to me, but never had given it a second thought. So here I was, and I was super excited to start to learn about Community of Christ, and learning about women in the priesthood, and reading apostles names that were females. And this was all so new and bizarre to me. And it really was! I use that word because I was just processing all this thought. And maybe I need to check these people out. So I was back in Pittsburgh again, in the States on - I remember - it was Saturday, July the 29th of 2017. I was driving home from work. This very clear thought ran through me, to go to Community of Christ in the morning. And I thought, well, I don't even know if Community of Christ is here! And the thought came through my mind again, Go home and look it up! So I went back to



my house, and I went in to look up a congregation, and I saw that there was one that was two miles away from the house where I was, the Beachview congregation in Pittsburgh. And so the next day, I would go to church there. I was highly welcomed by this beautiful breakfast activity that everybody does in the morning. I saw a coffee maker there, that blew my mind. And I was like, okay, what's this all about? Then I was blown away when they welcomed everybody to come up to the sanctuary with their cup of coffee for worship. And I was like, This is so strange. But people were so nice and kind to me. And there were words that were common vocabulary that was there. And I remember that a female elder of the church was preaching that day, and that it was the most beautiful sermon I had heard. And she had used the *Doctrine and Covenants*. She had used scripture from the *Book of Mormon* and also from the Bible. So I felt completely at home, all three of these. I would later find out that using the Book of Mormon in church was not the case usually, but I was so glad that she had done this in her sermon, because it had made me feel so welcome. So I would continue. I would come back to Italy. There's no church here, I would just kind of be reading, listening off and on, and this kind of stuff. But then I decided that I needed to come out to my family, because I really wanted to ask Antonio to marry me. So I was trying to come up with the nerve to do this. And I was trying to figure out the best way to do this with my family. So this would be later the next year, in February of 2018. I would plan a trip to Houston to go and tell my brother and my sister that lived there. And I was so nervous. And I had already told my one brother, who had cornered me a couple of years before and said, I want to know, Are you gay? And I want you to know, if you tell me 'yes,' it changes nothing about our relationship, it will actually just make us closer. And so I had had that moment with my one brother, but he was no longer a member of the church, and was in a very different life than the rest of my family in a lot of ways. So I felt comfortable. And he said, you know, until you want to tell other people, it's safe with me. But I love you. So I had already had this affirming moment with my one brother. And so here I was with my very active brother and sister, and thought, well, I just have to do this. So I did. I took them out to lunch. And I told them there was something really important I needed to tell them. And I told them that I was gay. And I also told them that I had the intention to ask Antonio to marry me. And they just were in tears. And I didn't know how to read it at first. I was a little frightened, I actually was a lot frightened! And they just hugged me and told me that they loved me, and that nothing would ever change that between our relationship and that they just wanted me to be happy. And that was really, really moving for me, to have them. And they told me that they were really relieved, that they had thought this was the case for a long time. But they didn't want to ask me because they didn't want to offend me. But they were really, really hoping at some time that I would feel that I could have that conversation with them. On that same trip, I decided that I had already had that first test with Community of Christ in Pittsburgh. And I told my brother and sister that I was going to go to Community of Christ the next day, because I wanted to have another experience. And I had decided that now I'm going to be in the south of the United States. And I'm going to go to a congregation. And I'm going to tell the pastor that I'm gay, and I'm going to marry my boyfriend. And I'm going to look in that person's eyes and see the split-second reaction and find out if all this stuff that I'm reading about Community of Christ is really true. So here I go off in the car, to this Houston congregation, with the idea that I will have this moment. Whether it's painful or joyful, it doesn't matter. It's going to be something that that tells me who these people really are. So I arrive, I'm in the parking lot. I'm a little frightened to go in. And a woman knocks on my window and says, Hey, who are you? And I said, my name is Michael. And I've come to worship here with you today. And she said, Well come on in. Her name is Carol, and she was an older lady who has become a good friend of mine. And she kind of held my arm and brought me in. She had the sweetest Texas accent, and just made me feel

so comfortable. She introduced me to the pastor there. Her name is Dorothy Hibbard. And I thought, okay, here we go. So I go all through church that day, participating in the service, and talking to people, and just having the most wonderful time. But I pulled her aside and said, Can I talk to you after church today? And she said, Yeah. So she pulled me into the sanctuary afterwards and said, what can I do for you? And I told her, I said, Listen, I'm investigating. (That was the word I was using at the time, seeking now, in Community of Christ.) And I wanted to tell you something today. And she said, Okay, and I said, I came out to my brother and my sister yesterday. I grew up in the LDS church, and I have an active, loving Mormon family, but I need to go to a place where I'll be accepted and loved. And I'm going to marry my boyfriend, Antonio. And I need to know that this is a place that will gather us up, and a place where we can feel God's love, and a place where I can serve other people and be happy and bring happiness to other people. Look, I just need to delve if this is the place for me. And she grabbed me, and she held me, and she cried. And she said, Boy, when are you guys going to move to Houston? And I said, Well we are not. And she was like, Well, you could come to our congregation, we would love to have you, it would be so good for us. And I said, Well, that's really good. And she said, Let me tell you an anecdote. And she told me about her life in the church and her calling to priesthood. And it had a lot to do with the same kind of things that I went through in my life. And she told me this just beautiful, amazing story about her call all through her life, yet priesthood was never available to her - until it was - and that she had had these feelings of maybe leaving or going other places. She had family that were in different places in Community of Christ then she was at different times. It was the most amazing story. And she just told me, We love you and your wanted. So she just said, you're going to go home to Italy tomorrow. Can I put you in touch with people? And I said, Yes, please do. And so I left my family, feeling a little bit more whole, a little bit more healed. I went to this place to have this stare off with a pastor, thinking that I was going to be turned away. But I was embraced so lovingly. So the very next day, I get an email from Larry McGuire, who is a Seventy in Arizona, saying, I heard from Pastor Dorothy Hibbard, and she said that you might want to get in touch with people. And I've copied Apostle Richard James on this email. And so I said, Yeah, I would love to have any information I can. And things started to move very, very, very quickly for me. On February 27th of 2018, I had my first zoom chat with Apostle Richard James, who is just the most loving and dear man from Wales. You know, Brittany, how it is to think about an apostle in the LDS church. So I was so frightened to have this conversation, I thought that my worthiness was going to be brought into question again, which made me very nervous, and brought up a lot of have different feelings. And yet here was this man with this lovely accent, this lovely demeanor, who was just telling me that I was loved. And we prayed together, and we read scripture together. And he wanted to know about Antonio. I had never had people like this ever interested in this part of my life, nor did I ever have the courage to talk about it freely. And here was one of the Quorum of the Twelve, who only wanted to know these things, and communicate love to me. And Richard and I have created a beautiful bond and friendship over the last year+ as well. And it all started with this very Spirit-filled moment for me.

I'm just keeping talking Brittany.

**Brittany Mangelson** 48:25

No, this is great.

**Michael Wright** 48:27

Okay, if you have any questions, just chime in anytime. I hope this is all okay.

**Brittany Mangelson 48:32**

I just have a huge smile on my face. And I'm just nodding over and over again.

**Michael Wright 48:38**

So less than one month later, I would go off with Antonio to Thailand, where I had decided I would ask him to marry me, feeling a little more whole, with part of my family knowing about Antonio and my intension, and to hear an apostle. And I know we think about apostles differently in Community of Christ, but as you know, Brittany - you work with an Apostle all the time too - that there is something very special about these men and women and Community of Christ. They bring their voice and their love and the Spirit. And they are these beautiful missionary people, welcoming in a way. So in some ways, I don't feel any differently about the Twelve than I did before. But I feel like they're approachable. And they can be people that I can relate to, and are friends to us as well. So I feel this way about Richard. I go off to Thailand, I ask Antonio to marry me. He tells me yes and embraces me, and I'm so happy and so excited. I come back on the Sunday after going to Thailand and asking Antonio to marry me, I join Community Circle for the first time. I told you before that here in Italy, there are no congregations. So I get hooked up with this European online group. You've had lots of these people interviewed before on Project Zion. But this becomes my little community. I think it's so bizarre to do this online. I don't know if I was being snobby or what, but I thought, oh my gosh, how can we do this online. And from the very beginning, I was hooked. These were my people! And I longed for the day that I could hug them and actually be in the same room as them. But yet I was having this beautiful worship experience from people from all the different corners of Europe that were in the same kind of boat as I was. They would be nourishing to me. Just two months later, in May, I would go to New York City to meet my sister, Erin, who would be the last person I would come out to. My sister Erin is the person I get to see the least of my family because of where she lives, in Missouri. And yet my work and job never brings me to that part of Missouri. So I decided I really needed to do something cool with my sister. And she's a beautiful, talented musician. So I decided, I told her, why don't you meet me in New York City? Why don't we do a couple of days of theater, and just hang out and just have a really great time together. And she was like, Oh, I could really use a parenting escape! So I'll leave the kids with my husband, Tom. And I'll come and be with you. So we had these three beautiful days of exploring New York together and going to theater every night, and talking about music and the things that we really love. But Erin was bringing up all kinds of questions to me. And I hadn't even come out to her yet. Not about that, but about issues that she was having in her own ward that were really kind of driving her crazy. And all these Community of Christ answers were coming from my mouth, and my sister was just eating this all up. And I thought, okay, this is very interesting. I don't really know what to think or what to do. So on our last night together, I took her to dinner, and I came out to her, and I told her the same thing that I had told my other brothers and sisters. And my sister was very quiet. And she just told me that she loved me and once again, embraced me and said that she couldn't be happier for what was going on in my life. But she was a little quiet as well. So the next morning, as we were having breakfast, and she was planning to go back home that day, and I was going to fly back to Rome that evening, she asked me to tell her more about Community of Christ, because I had also told her that I was seeking. And so we had this whole morning together that we were talking. And she also said to me, you know, I knew this day would come that you would tell me that you are gay. But I always thought that I would be frightened for your salvation. And I'm not. And that's what makes me be very quiet. Because I always

thought, well, I'll always love you and love him. But I was really afraid for what that would mean for you, and what it would mean for you being with me after this life too. But she said, the only thing that I can say is that the Spirit continues to confirm that you told me what you were supposed to tell me. And it's okay. And she said, so I'm kind of thrown through a loop here. And plus, you keep telling me all the answers I've been searching for, for a long time, to my doubts and my frustrations. I had brought the *Community of Christ Sings* hymnal with me, which I didn't think I would do because it's heavy and I was going on a transatlantic trip. But I thought, I got to put this in my bag. And we sat and sang through songs and looked at the lyrics and the text. And my sister says, well, I'll be in touch. I think that I have to go to Community of Christ to see what this is about. So this trip with my sister turned into something that was way more than what I had expected it to be, and very different than the way that I had expected it to be as well. And my sister Erin has been seeking in Community of Christ ever since. That's a story for her to tell some time. But we've been on this journey together, and it's been a beautiful, wonderful journey for us to be on. In June of 2018, Richard James and Larry McGuire would come to Rome for the very first time to visit me. It would be a meaningful experience. I was trying to figure out what to do with them in Rome. They were going to come for three days. I was like, what are we going to talk about for three days? I don't even know these people. I'm super nervous and scared that they're coming. And I thought, well, we'll just go see important things in Rome that have to do with apostles. And that will be what we'll do. So we went to go to St. Peter's and I took them to see the place where Peter's remains are. We went to the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican Museums together. I took them to St. Paul's, where Paul's remains rest as well. And these opened up all kinds of different discussions for us. They met Antonio, who is a person that would mostly say that he doesn't believe in God, and is scared of religion and faith, but yet has been very supportive of my journey. [He] was very nervous to meet these people, yet left with these beautiful friendships and feelings for these people. So I just really love that. But the culminating event for their arrival here was not St. Peter's or going to St. Paul's, or being in the Vatican Museums with them. But it was in the hotel room that they stayed in very close to my house, where they gave me the Lord's Supper. I was always scared of the sacrament in my LDS days, because I always felt so unworthy. I was always really, really frightened of anything that had to do with priesthood. Because I thought I wasn't worthy. And I thought that when I partook of it, that I was really kind of eating into my own damnation. And they invited me there, and served the Lord's Supper to me, in a hotel room. It was the most beautiful experience that I think that I've ever had in my life. Richard gave me a blessing. I asked him to give me a blessing. He gave me the words, the exact words that I would end up using to come out to my parents. They were exactly what I was supposed to say to my parents. And Larry, who has a beautiful baritone voice, sang "For Everyone Born." We sang it together. It was one of the most sacred moments of my life, that day with them. I would have some other experiences that were really powerful to me at the Kirtland Temple on another trip to Pittsburgh, in July of 2018. I didn't tell you before, I forgot, but I have a lot of pioneer heritage on my biological side. One of my grandfathers is Brigham Young, and my other grandfather is Truman O. Angell, who finished the Kirtland Temple, and who build the Salt Lake Temple. These are both men that came into the Salt Lake Valley in the very first group of pioneers. And they're both grandfathers of mine. To sit in that place and to dwell on my seeking, and to be in a place that my grandfather put together was powerful for me. And I would have wonderful other experiences. I went to the Temple in Independence, just before I went to go to my parents and to come out to them, and met was Jane Gardner, who had a profound experience and had a profound impact on my experience, and also on my story, going forward and moving to tell my parents about my coming out. And that same summer in August, I would

go to Dallas, and be with my parents and tell them. And I was frightened to death to tell my parents. I just knew that it would cause my mom a lot of pain. Like a lot of Mormon moms, they think about their eternal families and those bonds in that link. And I know my mom loves me very, very much. And I was afraid of really hurting her. And I used those words from that blessing that I received and set it up with prayer. And my parents both just embraced me and told me that they loved me and wanted me to be happy. And that they were so sorry they didn't realize that I was in so much pain for so long. And that they asked forgiveness. And once again, I had another experience that I was just blown away, and was so happy that that response was that way. I came home to Rome and I told Antonio about it. And Antonio said, Well, if it was so good with all of your family, why didn't you do this 10 years ago? And I told him, Well, you know, maybe it would have been that way 10 years ago, but I really feel like the Spirit has led me on my path, and that this was the moment, this was the time to have that conversation with my parents. I decided that I was going to join Community of Christ. I had been talking to Richard for a long time and told him that I would really like to go to World Conference. And I would like to be baptized before that. So I made another trip to Dallas just to go tell my parents I was going to join Community of Christ. And once again, I was met with embraces, and told that they wanted me to be full of joy. That was the most important thing. And as my mom was in tears and hugging me, she just asked me, could you just do me a favor? The next time you come, could you not have a secret? I said, Yeah, it's all out mom, it's all out. And she was laughing and crying at the same time. She was like, I love you. I hope you know, I love you. And I will support you, in you joining Community of Christ, and your life in love with Antonio. So on March 25th of this year, I was baptized and confirmed by Richard James. He came to Rome, and we met in an apartment that I rented that had a Jacuzzi tub large enough for me to be able to get in the water all the way. And I had some colleagues from work that came, and a huge community online that came together on that very special day for me. And I was baptized, just about a week before I would travel to World Conference, which was an amazing experience for me as well. So I guess I end with just saying that here I am. I'm a member of Community of Christ, I have found joy. I told you that I'm being married on July 7 here in Rome to Antonio, but on July 11, Larry McGuire is going to come to Houston and do a Community of Christ ceremony for my LDS family and me and Antonio as well. I thought that was a really important thing. I told my family that I didn't want to be the apostate uncle or son. It was really important for me that we were all on a journey together, that they could ask me any questions they wanted to and that I hoped they wouldn't be praying behind my back that I would come back, that they would pray for me to be happy. And that I would do the same for them. And that when I came home, we could have scripture study together like we always did as a family. It didn't need to change. I just made them all promise, and they all said, Oh yeah, absolutely. This is absolutely okay. So I just have to say that there were years and years of difficulty and extreme problems, but I trusted the Spirit when it came to me, even though it was frightening and difficult. But it brought me to the place where I am today. And I'm grateful for it. And one of the things I'm so grateful for in Community of Christ is the recognition of journey. Are there things that are still difficult for me to understand in Community of Christ? Absolutely! Are there things that I miss from the LDS tradition? Yep, absolutely. Will I always consider myself to be Mormon in my heritage and tradition? Yeah, I will. And will I go forward as a person proclaiming Zion and the peaceable kingdom of God, as we call it in Community of Christ? Absolutely, absolutely I will. And that's what makes me so happy about this new tradition that I found, that is encompassing of who I am and what I want for the world. And this is just a joyous, joyous place to be.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:03:54

Well, Michael, it's not every Project Zion interview that I do that I just put my computer on mute and sob like baby. This one did it for me, though.

**Michael Wright** 1:04:11

But I just hope that it will be helpful to people that are listening, because Project Zion was helpful, very helpful, in a place where there were no congregations for me to connect with the church and with voices that were like mine. And I didn't say that in my story, but that's absolutely true. I can't thank enough every single person that's been on. I've listened to every episode of Project Zion, sometimes twice. So I thank you, I thank the team, and I thank those that have been vulnerable to come on here. And I'm super honored to add my voice, and I pray that it will help somebody else in their journey as well, no matter where it ends up leading them.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:04:54

Yeah, well thank you. You know, I talk to a lot of Latter-day Seekers. (And I'll try to get it together here, I'm obviously still crying.) I talk to a lot of Latter-day Seekers, and most of them have some sort of community. All of them have some sort of physical community, being here in Utah. Community of Christ people are not people you run into everyday necessarily, but they're within a 15-minute drive. I have a large ex-Mormon community here. And I feel pretty supported. And so as you were telling your story, I just kept thinking, he is alone in Italy, going through all of this, and what courage and strength! I mean, you want to talk about pioneer heritage, you've got it, man! I mean, I really admire your courage, because I don't know if I could have done what you have done without the physical support of the people around me. So the fact that you're doing this in Italy as a total trailblazer, I stand in awe of that. And that is one thing that was fueling my tears as I was hearing you speak.

**Michael Wright** 1:06:23

Well, you know, in World Conference, when we all have been talking, and admonished to think about church in a different way, I am a person that loves to sit in the pew and sing my hymns and hold people's hands and have potluck. And I mean, these are things that I daydream about, but I'm a product of new church, and what it can do for people. And I love my online community. And when so many of them were at World Conference, when I saw them, we embraced and just shed tears. We have been together through so much. But yet, we had never had any physical contact before. And I just have to say that I add my testimony to people needing that new mission that the church is looking at, and looking how to do it in the world. I'm a product of it.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:07:15

Yeah, it's true when we start the debate of how meaningful can relationships be when they're through a screen, I get a little bit defensive about it as well, because I have seen how online ministries and having something like zoom has really changed lives. Whether Community of Christ is a stop on the journey, or whether it becomes a permanent home, the possibilities are endless. And I really appreciate you bringing that up. Because you're right, you are a product of this new envisioning, this reimagining of what church can be. And thankfully, I think we're just getting started with the conversation, which is really, really exciting.

**Michael Wright** 1:08:03

Absolutely, absolutely. And I told everybody, I want the Italian flag up at next World Conference. And we will work to be able to have some kind of community here someday. It would just be such a blessing for Italy.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:08:15

Yeah, that's true. We need to add the Italian flag. I didn't think of that. But you're absolutely right. That's pretty awesome. Well, Michael, again, I just want to thank you for sharing so vulnerably, and I have been itching to get this interview. Because not only have I wanted to get to know you a little bit better. But I have just had a strong sense that your story would be helpful to those seeking, to members of Community of Christ, and everybody in between. And I really, really thank you for just sharing so deeply and just from your heart. It's been really meaningful for me personally. So is there anything else that you would like to leave us with?

**Michael Wright** 1:09:02

Well, yeah, one last thing if I could. For my baptism, I thought about how do I talk about my story? We've been talking for quite some time now. And we didn't have that luxury at the baptism. I didn't want people to fall asleep or fall off their chairs. So I was praying about how to really tell my story in a way that could be effective and could touch people. And so I decided to do it in a verse. So to end today, I wondered if I could share with you my poem that I wrote for my baptism.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:09:40

Yeah, absolutely. Please do.

**Michael Wright** 1:09:43

It's called "Restoration":

Time, a lot of it has past away,  
My watch seems broken, although the seconds tick astray.  
I left the Promised Land for a land of Martyrs and Saints,  
Icons of You, that couldn't possibly be 'true`?  
A Latter-Day Saint so confused, not looking back cause it causes too much pain,  
I go in search of understanding in the world so I might be able to understand the Way,  
Can I finally say it out loud? I'm gay...  
But I'm not evil or defected, am I? I don't feel that way.  
And through these strong feelings  
I push and shove,  
Why don't I get the chance to love?  
I'll prove I'm not broken by serving and loving in the moonlight,  
dreading the dawn of the next day.  
Back on the Continent where I served you so well, felt closer to You during those years in Spain,  
Yet as I came with a full heart and in need of an embrace,  
I felt shame,  
Once again I can't be like you, separated from my family and friends,

Seeking Celestial Glory, just ending up in the low light of a world far away.  
Those midnight prayers, the wrestling on my knees grew fewer and fewer apart,  
Until the heartbreak turned to depression and darkness, communication faded away.  
Then one day, after many years, I started to hear Your voice, like the soft warm sun on my face,  
Where eyes cannot adjust, but the warmth thaws a long winter's stay.  
I open my eyes, expecting to be blind – only to see that it must have been a dream.  
Then, I start to see You in others:  
In the one I love MORE than any other.  
In my dear friends, who whisper to me, "The Creator created you perfectly".  
And in my family who says, "We love you eternally."  
Prophetic voices coming from those that have always been there,  
It's as if my ears are tuned and their hearts feed mine, which has been on its last beat.  
I realized that my tongue had been bound by fear.  
Like a faint noise, I recognize the Spirit that used to be so strong in me,  
And with knees weak once again,  
I fall at my bedside and pray to thee,  
"I'm here if you want me. I don't know how to do what I think you've always asked of me."  
With familiar words, ones Restored,  
I find a path has been set for me,  
That God has always loved me,  
It was my shame and fear that obscured me.  
A vision comes to me,  
So, there You've been all along, standing right there above me!  
I should have looked there, but with my head down I couldn't see.  
Trying to teach me of my inestimable worth,  
Yet cultural misunderstandings,  
kept me from the truth and light that I was craving.  
Peace?, that's what you want for me! From me?  
So, I'll search it so You will heal me.  
How does that work?  
Oh, yes, I must grant peace and set others free.  
Grace, a new friend I've found along the way, she's generous and kind,  
Her gift I don't completely understand,  
With sacred oil, she lays her hands upon my head,  
And speaks, how sweet the sound,  
"This is a gift from the One who came here,  
Who is here,  
Who is helping you see clear,  
He sends that gift to you and me."  
So, today, I will wash away those sins,  
The ones of doubting who I am,  
Not trusting the great I Am.  
The sin of shame, fear and angst, that damned me from healing others.  
A disciple I will become - again,



A path of serving and learning through this journey of life,  
I pray that I will recognize those like me,  
Those who wallow in strife,  
In need of a prophetic voice,  
No longer timid or scared,  
Who offers a healing hand,  
A warm embrace,  
And through me they might recognize that Still Small Voice that whispers,  
“Come follow me.”

**Josh Mangelson** 1:14:34

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.