

Fair Trade | Cristian Ramirez

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, LDS church, community, seekers, congregation, missionaries, faith, Christ, excommunicated

SPEAKERS

Cristian Ramirez, Brittany Mangelson

Brittany Mangelson 00:30

Hello, and welcome to Fair Trade a series in the Project Zion Podcast where courageous people share their candid stories of their faith journey and what brought them to Community of Christ. I'm your host, Brittany Mangelson. And I'm here today with Cristian Ramirez. Now, we just recently had his wife Heidi Ramirez on, on a Fairtrade episode. And, so, I'm really excited to have Cristian on today. So, Cristian, welcome. And why don't you quickly introduce yourself?

Cristian Ramirez 00:58

Uh, hi, Brittany. Uh, thank you for inviting me to this podcast. So, I'm, I'm very excited to be here. So, I'm Cristian Ramirez and, as you mentioned, my wife joined Community of Christ, July of 2022. And, you know, that's how I got introduced to the Community of Christ. But a little bit about myself. I live in Orlando, Florida, and I am originally from the Dominican Republic, but, but I have spent most of my, well, more than half of my life in the US. I got to this country at the age of 22, back in 1995. You can do the math there and you'll know how old I am. And for, for about 30 years of my life, I was a member of the L, the LDS church. And then about two to three years ago, I, I kind of left that church. So, that's a little bit about myself. We have three kids. The youngest is about to go to college. And that's it.

Brittany Mangelson 02:11

Awesome. Well, I'm really excited for this conversation. Uh, we recently spent a little bit of time at World Conference together and spent, I spent most of our time together laughing. So, Cristian is a hoot and very funny. And this should be a great conversation. So, uh, let's just dive right on in. So, how was church for you growing up? Did you grow up religious? When you lived in the Dominican Republic, were you active in any sort of congregation or spiritual life? What did God look like for you? Just start talking about your early, early years.

Cristian Ramirez 02:49

For sure. So, I grew up in a home where we were Catholic, but not really active. So, that, that was a tradition that my, that I, uh, received from my parents, and that my parents received for, from their parents, but we were not really active in the Catholic Church, with church. We would go to church maybe on or, you know, certain events, may, maybe, um, for mass, you know, New Year's mass or something, or maybe somebody in the family, you know, passed away, so you went to mass because they, they will do a mass to remember that person. Very little church attendance as I grew up. But at

home, we were expected to not really join other churches. So, as soon as we, uh, showed interest in, in, in other churches, like, I don't know, evangelical churches or, or even the LDS church actually, that I had, before I joined, I had two encounters with missionaries. My parents were, were, were not very happy that, that, you know, that I was talking to the LDS missionaries. So, not a lot of religion until I joined, uh, the LDS church at the age of 14. And, uh, I did read here and there the New Testament that, they would, it is common to get into the area, at least, a lot of churches would give you like the New Testament only for free. A pocket version of it. I don't see a lot in the US. I know I in World Conference, I saw one in, uh, the offices of the Apostles. But I would read the New Testament when I grew up, but I didn't really pray or, or anything like that. God, God, God was, was mostly a mystery for me, you know, growing up.

Brittany Mangelson 04:42

So, I'm interested to hear more about your conversion to the LDS church. Can you share that story? Particularly, like, what, what drew you to the LDS church? What did you enjoy about it at the beginning? Just share that conversion story.

Cristian Ramirez 05:00

Yeah, for sure. So, we first received missionaries in our home. I think it was probably 1985 when I was maybe 12 years old. And it was, it was these two sister missionaries. And, of course, you know, they knock on doors and everything like that. And we let them in. And they basically wanted to talk to the whole family. But my mom and dad were not interested (. . .) It was me and my sister who was, who would sit with them and listen to, to what they had to say. So, they talked about the Book of Mormon and that was, you know, something that I had never heard of, and they invited us to activities that they will do. So, I think one of the things that drew me to that church was the, that they will do a lot of activities for young people. And I, my sister knew someone and I knew someone also, a classmate that, that was LDS. So, that was interesting there. And also, to be honest with you, I also wanted to learn English. And most of the missionaries were Americans at that time, you know, (. . .) in the DR. So, I thought it was cool that I got, you know, I will get a chance to practice my, my English or learn English, if I, you know, if I let the missionaries preach and so on. They would offer English classes, too. That was kind of like an incentive to, to kind of like hook people into listening to discussions. So, a lot of people are interested, interested in the DR about learning English because the main, you know, industry there is tourism and a lot of Americans go there and people from other places. So, so it's important to learn English, but so the second time they came, so that one time my mom told us no, you cannot join that church or, you know, you, you're not gonna' do it. So, it was funny because in '85 after the missionaries came, the two sister missionaries, we told them that we couldn't (. . .) we were not going to join the church, you know, because obviously, they press for baptism. They want you to, they wanted to set a date and all that. So, we told them we couldn't do it. You know, our parents don't want us to join. Right after we told them that and we said, We love you, but you, you know, don't come back, you know, because we're gonna' get in trouble at home. My mom made us go in, in, into catechism after that instance with the Mormon missionaries. So, we were forced to go to catechism and I did not like it, but I had to go to catechism and, and then we actually joined the Catholic Church officially. Like, we baptized, did the baptism and the first communion. That's it. That was that. But I don't think, even after I went through the baptism and the first communion, I didn't really go to church after that. So, I just did it and my sister did it because my mom made us do it. They, they just forced us to do it after she

got nervous with the Mormon missionaries. So, then, a few years later, two years, three years later, I met, I became friends with another boy at, at school that his family was, you know, LDS and, and very involved in the LDS church. In fact, his father was the first branch president in that, in my hometown, for the LDS church. So, we became friends. He invited me to church and that's when I joined, like, two, two years later, but I did not tell my mom. So, I baptized in the LDS church in secret. I just went to my baptism. Did not invite anybody. Just did it secretly. And then I told my mom after I did, Hey, by the way, I joined the LDS church. That did not go down very well with my mom or my dad. So, for a few years, they did not like the church very much. But then they saw that, Hey, you know, at least, at least he's not getting in trouble and, and so on. So, that was kind of my journey. The second time around, of course, they, you know, the missionaries wanted me to pray to, to ask God if the Book of Mormon was true. And I did that and I don't think I got an answer, but I didn't feel bad about it. I, you know, I made some friends in the church, so I ended up joining the church. So, that, that's pretty much how, how it went down.

Brittany Mangelson 09:29

So, Cristian, you mentioned that it didn't, you know, when you joined the LDS church that it didn't go super great. Can you share a little bit more about that? Um, how did those conversations go?

Cristian Ramirez 09:40

Yeah, so, I think my parents were, they had fear, right, because the, you know, Mormons in the DR are not really seen as Christians. And also, you're gonna', you're gonna' find this kind of funny, a lot of people in the DR, back in those days and even today, they think that Mormon missionaries are basically CIA spies. So, you know, that there is a plot. That they're there because the US government sends them to spy on the Dominican, uh, the people. To understand that, you really have to understand a lot of history, right, because, you know, we, the US is always the big nation, powerful nation, right? And it has a colonialist past as well, right, like, in Cuba, Puerto Rico and other places. And then, you, over the, the 20th century that, that, you know, the US sent troops to different countries, you know, like, including the DR a couple of times. In other places in South America, you know, fighting communists, in the name of that fighting communism, and so on. So, there's a lot of distrust sometimes. It's not like they, the Dominican people don't love the American people. They do. But they distrust the American government oftentimes. So, in my family, they were not, you know, I think they had that distrust, especially my dad, he, my dad totally thought that they were spies, the missionaries, you know. And also, he thought, my dad particularly, that I was going to, that my stories, like, you know, my story, my homework, you know, all the things I do on my homework assignments for school were going to suffer because of my involvement at school. And, so, that was one of the main tensions between my dad and I, that he always thought that you had to focus on school. You can't focus on that church. And pretty much that was it. The times that I would spend because, as you know, the LDS church requires a lot of time, right? So, there are a lot of meetings, a lot of things you do. So, it was an ongoing source of tension, you know, the time that I would spend at church. Thank goodness, I, you know, I don't think my performance at school suffered at all, but, but I had that pressure all the time that my dad felt like I did, you know, he didn't want me to be involved and so on. But then little by little, they realized that I wasn't really getting in trouble. The main thing was the time they invest, the time investment, the, you know, seminary, getting up early. They didn't understand that stuff. Like, why do you have to get up so early to go to that, you know? So, I think at, at some point, or, to some degree, I think my dad particularly

thought that I was being brainwashed and indoctrinated, I think. I don't know that he articulated it that way, but, but I think he felt that that, you know, that was the case.

Brittany Mangelson 12:39

Thank you for sharing all of that. I think it's import, it's an important part of your story because so often when we talk about faith transitions, we talk about that tension when you leave Mormonism or whatever church, you know, you, you are coming from. However, joining the LDS church initially can also cause friction. And for those of us, you know, who were, like, I was born LDS, I know your wife was as well, we haven't experienced that tension on that side of it. So, so you, you know, joining the restoration movement had that, at least some sort of breakdown in maybe trust, communication, understanding with your family. Um, so, yeah, thank you, thank you for sharing.

Cristian Ramirez 13:22

If I may, I, I would like to add one more thing. There, there is persecution, too. Because when you join a church like the LDS church that's, that's quite different than the other Cristian denominations, you, people (. .) they mock you, honestly, like, they make fun of you. They do all these things, right? So, I had to endure all that. So, like, I re, I remember the first time that I wore a, a tie to go to church. That's not something that boys do in the DR, wear a tie. That's, you know, I remember that I, you walk (. .) in my hometown, you walk from, you know, point A to point B. There was a car in my house, but, but a lot of people don't have a car, right? So, you have to walk a lot. And I remember that I had to basically go, we lived at the end of the street, so I had to really walk through the whole street to go to church and, boy, that was hard the first day I wore that tie because my friends were making fun of me. And it's not pleasant. You know, I was just a 14-year-old boy, right, with the tie and people, What are you doing wearing that tie? (. .) you're a spy. Or, you know, things like that and, and then it gets easier, you know, but there's a, a, a little bit of that right, Oh, you don't drink or, you know, there's some persecution, yes. Not, not physical aggression where people in, you're not very popular if you are, if you, if you join a church like the LDS church. Maybe things have changed now, but when I joined in the '80's it was, it wasn't fun to be Mormon.

Brittany Mangelson 15:12

Sorry to hear that. So, I guess just keep telling your stories. So, um, I'm curious to know, when you moved to the States, how you met Heidi, what the timeline of all of that was and then how your religious life, uh, continued. So, just keep sharing your story.

Cristian Ramirez 15:32

For sure. So, you know, I continue to go back to the, you know, the time investment in the LDS church, because it's heavy. It's a lot, right? So, as I grew up from, as I continue to get, you know, going, to go from adolescence to, to adulthood and everything like that, there were so many things I did in the church, because it was so small in the DR. So, so everybody had a job, a calling to do. And it was busy, right? You know, I was, I helped on a, with a lot of different things; teaching or, or doing the financial side of things like, you know, being a financial clerk very young to, (. .) not that many people. The congregations were so small, so I did so many things. And then, of course, at some point, you are expected to, to go serve a mission. That's what you're supposed to do when you, when you get to the correct age. So, I decided I was gonna' go. That was another point of a lot of tension in my house,

especially with my dad because he wanted me, I was, I went to, to college for a year. And then I stopped that to go serve a mission. And then my dad wasn't very happy with that. And my mom was unhappy because she never understood why I cannot see you or, or, or why can you not call home. And those were the days where you couldn't call, only Christmas, during Christmas, and Mother's, Mother's Day I think. So, so I decided to go against their wishes. I did it. And I got assigned to go to the, to serve mission in the DR, but, but the northern part of the country because I'm from the southern part of the country. Anyway, so, before I served my mission, I was about 18, 19, I met Heidi, my wife, because she was a missionary there in the Dominican Republic. And, actually, she was actually friends with my sisters more than me, obviously, because I was a boy and they're not supposed to be talking to boys too much. In all the rules that LDS missionaries have to abide on your way and so on. So, I got to meet her when she was serving there in my hometown. And that, that was a key moment, right? Because we met and then when I went on my mission, she wrote to me a few times. And I always teach her that, and I say that, Hey, you cannot like me when you are a missionary. And she denies that. But I think, I think she liked me, Brittany, I'm pretty sure.

Brittany Mangelson 18:03

Oh, for sure, for sure.

Cristian Ramirez 18:08

And then I like to say that she brought me in her suitcase to the US, you know. And, so, I went on my mission, served my mission. She wrote me a couple of times. And in one of the letters I think I told her, Hey, don't forget to send me your wedding invitation. Because I thought those are, I thought that was very cool. You get to meet people, they get married, send you the invitation. So, so, it was a nice thing, right, getting those in the mail. Then I, when I got done with my mission, I started going to college again and I moved to the Santo Domingo, which is the capital of the Dominican Republic. And Heidi came back with her mom on vacation a few months after I was done with my mission. And that's how we connected again. I was very surprised that she wasn't married. Here again, we go back to the LDS, the different LDS pressure, right? You're supposed to serve your mission, you're supposed to get married and right away. So, I felt all those pressures, you know, because when I got done with my mission, the next thing is you have to get married really quick and really soon and all of that, right? So, she came to the DR and it had been maybe two to three years. Maybe three years since she was, she had been done with her mission. So, in my head when I saw her I was kind of like surprised that she's still single, you know, in my head, right? So, we went to dinner and everything like that and then when her mom was there with her in that trip and when her mom realized that I wasn't like a threat or anything like that then she let me take Heidi on a date or, you know, just the two of us. The reason being is that it really is an issue of safety for lady missionaries in the Dominican Republic because guys will, will say things to them and there's not a lot that I know of, a lot of, like, you know, physical assault or anything like that, but they get, they hear things, a lot of things when they're riding their bikes in the DR. And not nice things. And I'm not gonna' go into that in this podcast, but not every Dominican man will say, but you know, really naughty things. But a lot do. And, you know, so, and Heidi's mom knew that. So, that's why she came with Heidi to the DR. She wouldn't let her go alone to the DR. And anyway, so then we started talking and, you know, dating and all of those things. And, and we ended up getting married in 1995. It was a long distance, you know, kind of relationship for a while there, for, you know, about nine months, I want to say. So, if you think about it, it was a very quick. Now, when I look back, I think it was

quick, like, we didn't really know each other that well. And then in a period of nine months, and we got married, so we did that, right? So, then I came to the United States. And we lived with Heidi's parents for about a year, nine months, that amounts I forget, in the San Francisco Bay Area in, in Danville close to Walnut Creek. The East Bay is what they call it. So, then, you know, we got married in the Oakland Temple and I just started, you know, going to school again. You know, I had been going to school for close to two years in the DR, but none of that stuff counted. So, I had to start college again when I came to the US. That's how I got to the US. And we were very poor for a long time. She was because she was a teacher, and she was the, the, basically the breadwinner until for a long time until I, you know, was able to get done with my education. And then after, you know, I got done with my associate's degree, I went to a community college in the Bay Area. Then I went to a, a Catholic school to finish, finish up my education at St. Mary's College. They, you know, they have a program where you go once a week for like a year and a half. And then you wrap up the, the last two years of, you know, of your education so that you can then get a bachelor's degree. So, that's what I did. I would work during the day and then go to school once, once a week at night and no, no breaks. You just go to school for about a year and a half. This, you know, is for working adults, a program for working adults. And then, then after I got done with that, we moved to Sacramento. And, you know, we, we had our first kid, Tino, who is getting married next week. So, that's kind of like how I got, end, ended up in the US. And now, I'll just say one more thing (. . .). But there are a lot of Dominicans in this country, but not where I was. Very New York City, Boston, you know, the eastern seaboard, that, that side of the country. And I ended up in, in the West, right in California. So, it was, I know this is about religion, but it was the culture shock was, was huge for me when I came to this country. I know the language enough to go to college and not have to take English classes. But it was, it, it, it took me a while to get used to living in America. Maybe a, a good two years, I would say.

Brittany Mangelson 23:39

Yeah, well, I actually was going to ask about that because I know that within Mormonism there's this idea that the church is the same everywhere you go. And, so, when you leave your home country and you're part of a religion that claims that it's the same everywhere you go, I was wondering if that helped at all, in your transition to living in the States? Was that like constant? Or was that community? What kind of helped settle some of that cultural shock? Or did, did that impact it at all?

Cristian Ramirez 24:10

Great question. I, you know, looking back, there was, I, I guess, some sort, to some degree there, you know, I found a community, but to be honest with you, I felt more comfortable with Americans that were not Mormons than with Americans that were Mormons to be honest with you. So, with some exceptions, right? I think we attended our congregation in, in Sacramento for about four years where I felt really comfortable, but, but that wasn't the case. In other congregations that we attended, English speaking congregations, because, of course, the LDS church other, you know, Spanish speaking congregations and so on, so oftentimes it was very uncomfortable. I really felt foreign and I was made to also feel foreign, you know. I was even called a Laman, Lamanite. (Yeah.) That kind of stuff in jest, I think, I don't think the guy meant it in a bad way, but I didn't like it, you know. (No.) So, the, the political situation, too, right? I never, when I got to this country, I didn't know much about the politics, but then I started forming my own opinions. And I felt like, you have to be a, be a certain mold in the, in the LDS church. You have to be conservative, means you have to be a Republican, and so on, and I did not

align with some of that stuff. And I did not align with some of the things that were said in the Elders Quorum because, to be honest with you, a lot, a lot of the things I felt were, some of the things that were discussed were from the perspective of someone who was very Republican and male, you know? There's these (. . .). And so it was really hard to, to, to be in the Elders Quorum, uh, uh, oftentimes. And it, and it's not like I respect all the, you know, other perspectives, but it's like you're expected to toe the line, you know, and I just never did. So, so it was very uncomfortable for me to, to, to do that, to, to be part of that group. So, so going back to your question, I don't think I found the community that I felt I was gonna' find. And then, of course, there's cultural stuff, nothing to do with politics, you know. Like, in the DR, people are really warm and friendly and then, then here in the US, you know, we tend to be maybe more reserved, and so on. So, so, so, yeah, it wasn't an easy transition. And I really, my friendships were probably found outside of the church, at college, for example. When I went to college or at work I felt that people, people were more approachable and friendly than at church, to be honest with you.

Brittany Mangelson 27:18

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I, I think that it's a really important perspective, um, that, like, gets out there because this idea that, you know, if you convert to this one true way of thinking, then that means that it's going to impact your politics, it's going to impact your worldview, and then you'll, you know, conform to the groupthink, if you will. And if, if you're coming in from it with an international perspective and you're getting to know the landscape of American culture and then you recognize, like, Oh, here in the States within Mormonism, that means that you must adhere to this, this, this is this. And even in joking, you know, take something like the Book of Mormon and the Lamanite community and have that put on you even, even in joking, like, there's a lot of cultural layers there that are very political and racial, and, you know, racially charged just straight up racist, and encountering that in the quote unquote, one true church where people are supposed to be, you know, Cristian, like, that's, that's tricky. That's, that's really tricky.

Cristian Ramirez 28:30

I felt that, and I cannot prove this, right? I don't have evidence. I can just tell you what I think, but I felt in, in certain cases when I had positions of leadership in the LDS church that the some guys, I'm talking about men particularly, they, it did not sit well with them. Like, if I'm, if I'm asking a guy because I was in the, in the Elders Quorum multiple times as a leader, right? I would, I would go in and, you know, ask him about, you know, the what do they call those interviews you do, the personal interviews and so on, where you ask him about where if they're visiting their families and all that some, some, some guys were not very pleased. I felt that I was asking them those questions, right? That they forgot to report to the brown guy. I felt that sometimes. I don't know. Maybe it was my, my impression. I cannot prove it to you, but, but it felt like they didn't like being told what to do or, you know, by a brown guy, you know? Oftentimes if they ask you to introduce yourself when you go to a new congregation, some people will be shocked when I say that I work in technology be, because they felt like maybe I worked in construction or something. All these stereotypes of Hispanic people. Or, You cannot be in technology, right, because you're Hispanic. You, you need to be in the ho, hotel industry or, or you're a landscaper, or you're in construction and so on. So, I've run into that kind of stuff all the time. Not, not very comfortable, you know, very uncomfortable, to be honest with you. And then the political stuff. Oh, my gosh, you know, like, all the jokes about it, you know. We'll let you in. We'll, you know, that's okay. We'll

let, you're a Democrat. We'll, we'll have to put up with you. The, the, the constant comments about politics. And, and actually, I got into a few arguments, arguments to be honest with you here and there, you know, where I just, you know, couldn't take it anymore. But there was one time, I have to say this, it's not representative of my experience in that church. You know, I, I, people asked me, have, did somebody ever said anything overtly racist to you? And the only time it happened was inside of Temple. (No!) Yeah. Where this guy, we were working in, my wife and I were volunteers. And he asked me, in Spanish, in, in Spanish, if I was a wetback.

Brittany Mangelson 31:07

What does that even mean?

Cristian Ramirez 31:09

It just is a derogatory word that you use for Mexican people because they, you know, there's the Rio Grande (Oh, my gosh.) and, so, they, some people swim to cross the border. So, that's the derogatory thing, right? So, he asked me inside of the Temple in Spanish, right? And he thought he was funny. (Wow.) So, I confronted the guy and we had, and I said, You, you need to be more respectful. You don't know me. You don't know anything about me. And you shouldn't use that term and all those different things. And, so, this guy thought, thought it was funny to say that, you know, and there was somebody from his group, because they were part of a group of kids that went, I mean, he wasn't a kid, but he was with a group of kids that were doing, baptisms, and so on. The leader of, I don't know if it was a Bishop or who it was, he came to apologize to me. But in the Temple of all places, right, you run in, in, into this kind of thing. So, I don't think, I tried to forget that incident, but it, it was just awful, you know?

Brittany Mangelson 32:17

Yeah. Well, and again, I could probably rant about this for far too long, but let alone like the plight of the refugee, the plight of the downtrodden, the plight of those who are the most vulnerable, as Christians, one would think that you would be compassionate towards that, not turn it into a derogatory slur that in, you know, supposed God's house, like the Lord's house, you're gonna' turn that and weaponize that, against someone. Like that, that is a horrifying, absolutely horrifying story. And I'm really, really sorry that that happened.

Cristian Ramirez 32:53

Yeah, thank you. It's, it's, you know, I moved on and everything like that, but I was pretty upset. And so was Heidi, too. And so were, to be, be honest with you, giving credit to the, the whole party, the person that spoke to me was just, he couldn't say sorry enough times, you know. He, they were so embarrassed, right, that this guy said that and that he thought he was cool to say that and he was funny to say that and, and so on. But, yeah, the racial situation was very uncomfortable. I, I hear, heard other comments, you know, in meetings and things and, you know, so, it was just such a source of discomfort for me the whole time I was in that church. Things that would be said, right? I remember in Orlando, somebody says something about, about this group of kids and he had to specify that the kids out there were Hispanic, right? And we were in Elders Quorum and there was a guy that's not Hispanic and he got up and he got so upset at the comment that he called on the guy and said, like, Why do you have to say that they were Hispanic? If it would have been a group of white kids or black or whatever, brown,

yellow, you know, why, why do you have to say that? You don't have to say that. Just say the story with, I mean, this guy. So, I was, still there were things like that, that I saw that were good to see because, and I was gon, I was gonna' say something, but this guy stood up and said it for me, right? Well, you know, things like that, stereotypes about, you know, the whole stigma about welfare, right? You know, I heard leaders, you know, they think that only Hispanic people get welfare and black people, not white people. And you have to set them straight and say, Hey, stop that, you know. Anyway, it was just, it, it was just uncomfortable, you know?

Brittany Mangelson 34:47

Yeah, constant tension it sounds like.

Cristian Ramirez 34:50

Oh, constantly. Yeah. If you went, if you attended a English speaking congregation, that's the stuff that you have to deal with, all the time stereo, stereotypes, people questioning your authority. Sometimes you're in leadership roles, you know. I felt that, that is because I was brown. I don't know that, that's how I felt. Or people expecting you to fit them all, right, politically speaking or, or think like everybody thinks, you know. Just a lot of tension in, in the body (. . .). So, I was here '95. In the 20 plus years that I attended the church in the US, the LDS church.

Brittany Mangelson 35:36

Yeah. And I'm assuming that once you started doubting the truth claims of the LDS church, I mean, all of your very lived experience with racism within the church was probably, I mean, I'm sure that it like came to light even more and, um, you know, recognizing that there are in the LDS church, there's real cultural and even doctrinal that, you know, the LDS church tries to ignore, but justifications for that racism. Um, you know, past leaders have said horrendous things. And that culture, like, tha, tho, that, those points of doctrine then turn into culture when you talk about the Book of Mormon, when you talk about, you know, the curse of Cain, etc., etc. So, now, I guess we'll, let's move into your, your faith transition. What were the things outside of the obvious racism that you experienced, um, that made you start questioning and made you really examine your experience and faith within Mormonism?

Cristian Ramirez 36:41

Yeah, so I can talk about a few of those, a handful. So, I think the thing that bothered me the most about, you know, the LDS church, being a member of it, the last ten years I was a member, or even I was, I was, I think, I started having difficulty with some of the doctrine actually in, in 1999, starting in 1999. I'll start with that, right, with the position of the church towards the LGBTQ+ community, right, because in 1999, I was living in California. And we were, as we were told that we needed to contribute money and time to, for, I, I forget the number of the initiative, there was an initiative on the ballot for gay marriage, to ban it or, or to not allow it, I, I forget what it was, right. So, so, we were told that we need to contribute financially. We have to go and campaign for that. And I had a lot of trouble with that. I did not like that at all, right? I didn't understand why the church wanted to get into that. You know, I felt like it was, the ones that the, these communities that, that was once persecuted the, the, the Mormons, right, now we're persecuting another community, right? The LGBTQ+ community. I felt that maybe, you know, you could disagree with gay marriage with, without trying to, you know, fight it so hard like they were in those days. So, I did not like that, right, the stance of the church towards, towards the LGBTQ+

community. I didn't like it at all. That was one thing that didn't sit well with me. The other thing that really bothered me so much is how they dissent, how the church, the LDS church handles dissent. If, especially for scholars, if you're an academic, and you write a book that is not favorable to the LDS church, then you got excommunicated, basically. I mean, obviously, they, they will talk to you or, you know, send you to a disciplinary council or whatever they do, right? But at the end, oftentimes, if you hold your ground, you get excommunicated just because you disagree with something or you wrote a book that threatened the establishment, you know? So, that did not sit well with me at all. And when I would bring it up at home, it would bring contention in the home because my wife was very orthodox and I was always my, my dislike of these, or not my dislike. It was more than that. That was just, it was just, I just hated it, right? That that's how they would manage, that they were so intolerant, right, with, with people exercising free speech, to be honest with you, like, saying what they thought. So, that, that was very, very, you know, something that I started having a lot of trouble with for the last, oh, I don't know, 15 years that I belonged to the church, but I will not talk about it too much because if I did it at home, then Heidi will get mad that I, you know, I couldn't. So, I just kept, kept it inside. So, the other thing that really bothered me, and, and that I'm talking about 15 years ago, is the wealth of the church. And I know today we know that, you know, the SEC thing happened. And that, you know, the church will have to pay a fine, but I'm talking about 15, 20, you know, 20 years ago, I knew that the church was very, very wealthy. And I just, I didn't understand back then how wealthy it was. Now, I do it today, right? But it just bothered me so much. I just never could reconcile the fact that a church can have that much money. Why? I just never understood that, right? And then in the local communities, or in the local congregations, you did not have enough money to fund certain activities or to go in and help people that were in need. It was very controlled the way it did that. However, the church was, am, you know, kind of accumulating all this wealth. I just, I just never understood that. Or why the churches, for example, the members have to go clean them because they, they don't want to pay for somebody to clean the church. Even with all the wealth. No, you're expected to go clean the church and then the members go in and do a half-assed job of cleaning the church as church thinks, because we don't want to, you know, I mean, we don't want to pay for someone to go do that job. All those different things. It was, it was just, I just never understood it, right? So, the money thing, the LGBTQ+ (. . .), the dissent, how they handle dissent in that church, and then of course, the participation of women, right, limited participation of women. And you go, I don't know today, because I've been disconnected for, like, three years now. But, you go to a General Conference and there's like two women that speak and then the rest are men in general, that, that are the speakers of, of, of that. So. And then the history. I just felt that they, you know, it was all, like, I felt like the church was just trying to hide the true history, right, and not let people know what really happened, right? And I have a good friend of mine that, you know, served with me, when we were, we were missionaries together. And he left the church because of that, because of the history, you know, because he, he felt that the church was trying to hide things and, and also the church doesn't, the LDS church doesn't apologize for anything. They don't apologize for anything. So, I had trouble with that as well. Anyway, those were my grievances, more or less. I, I have to say one more. The discipline of the church, how they discipline people. Never agreed with that. I always felt that, I felt it was draconian or it is because they still do the same thing. And, a lot of the issues with that I had with how they dish out discipline that church. If you make mistakes or, you know, outside of the academics, right, I told you about the academics, if you say things, actually I'm talking about outside of that, you don't follow certain rules then they crush you there. You're just literally crushed. And I just, and then they wonder why people don't come back, right? You know, my, my, my

father-in-law was a bishop, BYU and so on. You know, he disagreed also which is how it, it is done, right, so, so then you're, me, I have spoken to him about that and we both were saying, Okay, they have the statistics on how people, how many people get counted discipline, how many come back. It's little, it's very little, very few people that come back. You wonder why, you know? So, had a lot of issues with that, with how they administer discipline. So, I think those were the points, Brittany, that where I started like really disconnecting, having this, you know, faith crisis, if you will, where I would go to church physically, but my Spirit and my mind were not there. I am, there, I want one last thing also. I also felt that the worship meetings of the LDS church, I really, like, don't mean to offend anybody who will listen to this podcast, but very empty. Like, I just, I just did not feel anything. (Yeah.) I, I, really devoid of the gospel, that they, you know, they go, they, you know, how people, a lot of people in the LDS church say how they love the gospel. But when you go to the sacra, sacrament meeting, I just, I just wonder where is the spiritual food here, you know, very mechanical. You talk about a lot of things that have nothing to do with Christ in sacrament meeting. So, so, you know, it's really, I don't know how I did it for so long. I know I did it for so long to keep the peace at home, you know? That's why I did it, but I, I was so disconnected for so long. And I, my body was there in the church, but my Spirit and my mind were checked out like years ago, you know?

Brittany Mangelson 45:33

Yeah, this is absolutely relatable. And it really is tragic in a way. I, as you were talking, and, you know, you mentioned that they don't do apologies, which is absolutely true. And, yet, they're so strict on dissent and discipline and shutting out any sort of voice that doesn't conform, and people that just make genuine mistakes, right? So, in the LDS church, there's a very real atonement theology that you, you know, have to repent and have the basically repentance buy in from your leadership. And, so, you're expected to apologize. You're expected to, you know, not take the sacrament or communion as essentially a punishment, although they probably, they wouldn't use that word. But, you know, there's, there's all this, there's all these ways that you're supposed to perform and yet the actual institution does not, they don't follow those same rules at all. And so

Cristian Ramirez 46:36

It really is humiliation, the way I see it. (Yeah.) I'm not talking about justifying somebody's mistake, but the people are humiliated because it's supposed to be confidential. And it is not. Because you cannot pray, you cannot participate in callings or anything else. So, obviously, everybody knows that you've been (. . .) discipline, right, because you're not participating. And then a lot of, I wouldn't say everybody, but every leader does that. But quite a few leaders, they, they cannot, cannot keep whatever the issue was contained. They, they will say what it was, right? So, you know, people's personal lives are out there in everybody's mouth because it's supposed to be confidential and it is not and the whole construct of the disciplinary Council, or, it's ridiculous. You're supposed to have half of the, the High Council for, supporting you and the other using you. And so to me, I just felt like the whole thing was based on humiliation and not really wanting somebody to, to change their lives, you know, for the better. That is not what the program is, right? It's, it's, it's all about humiliating somebody, and I know people, right, that went through that. And, and the best thing you do is, is, is just not show that you're defiant or anything like that because that, they can really make it difficult for you if you want to stay in that church. (Um hmm.) If they feel you're defiant, you know, then they make you wait, you know, to whatever it is, if it's that you got excommunicated and then they make you wait longer. Or if you're

disfellowshipped, they make you, I mean, it's, it's, it's draconian, I'm telling you. I just, I had a big problem with it.

Brittany Mangelson 48:27

Yeah, I remember I, I never went through any sort of formal discipline. But I do remember when my husband and I were in the, you know, pits of our faith crisis, our neighbor who I think he was the Elders Quorum president or he was in the Elders Quorum presidency or something. But he was a good friend of ours. And he came over one night and basically just said, you know, I just want you to know that the whole Ward Council basically had a meeting about you guys. And, you know, of like, what are we going to do about the Mangelsons. And it was not pretty. And he kind of came to our defense a little bit, but he was just like, you know, just so you know, this is happening, these conversations are happening. They're, you know, really concerned about your faith and your membership in the church, and yada, yada, yada. So, it kind of tipped us off, knowing how strict our leadership was in that ward that we knew that if we officially joined Community of Christ, like, they've already talked about, you know, excommunicating us or doing something if we joined, right? So, as soon as we joined Community of Christ, we resigned from the LDS church and later found out that yeah, those rumors, if you will, were true and that there was, you know, going to be a disciplinary council for us to be excommunicated. And it's like, Gosh, after it, like, there was no even conversation with us, right? But it was already being planned. So,

Cristian Ramirez 50:01

So, it's crazy because I don't care saying it, it, it really gives me freedom. But I participated in, in that program, I say program, I don't know now that I'm out of the church, in that process, from different perspectives, right? Right, from different perspectives, to be honest with you. And, and as a leader, and, and then on the other side of the equation, right? And it, it's, it's crazy. As a leader, I, I'll have to say, also, it's very uncomfortable for people to be the ones that are handing down the discipline. It's not only taking it, so, it's, the whole thing it's, it's just, it's crazy. So, a lot, one more thing. With Heidi, I, I, not anymore because, you know, she's not really involved with the LDS church anymore. But I had this fear that they were going to excommunicate her, you know, because she kept posting things in Facebook after, after she stopped going to church. And I, I felt that that was okay if they did, I wouldn't care. Okay, do it, whatever, but I don't know how she was going to take that. And I don't know if it was going to, like, really Crush her or whatever. I had this fear for about a year that they're coming to crush her, you know, because she would say, she was very vocal, she is still very vocal. But now, I think she's in a different space, right, where she feels that her faith journey it's in, you know, just just have to do that, right, just have to go to Facebook and say things and so on. And I think part of it was kind of like venting (. . .) in, in, in Facebook, yeah, but, you know, the bishop and the other leaders of the world were there seeing those things so I'm like, Oh, boy. Not that I was afraid that, I don't know if you understand what I'm saying. I, I didn't care what they thought, but I don't know how she would have taken, how Heidi would have taken to be excommunicated or something or, or invited to a council over the things she was saying on Facebook, you know, so it's just crazy.

Brittany Mangelson 52:08

Yeah, no, I totally get what you're saying because not only is it embarrassing, but it's, you know, them having control over your whole lived Mormon experience, right? So, like, for them to decide that she's

no longer worthy to even have her name on the records, if that's something that is still important to her for whatever reason, you know, and maybe, like, having that taken away from her would be devastating to her family or whatever. Like, it causes, there's potential to cause so much more conflict that you don't have control over. Someone else has control over you, you know, spiritual autonomy or however you want to phrase it. And that's, that's not cool. That's not cool at all. So, I'm wondering now, because I know we already, we did talk to Heidi about her faith transition story, but when, in this timeline, do you guys kind of mesh and start to actually talk about faith stuff? Because that's relatable as well. You know, my husband, Josh was definitely on his faith journey. And I was like, But we're Mormon. And it was really threatening to me, you know, but then we got on the same page. So, what did that look like for the two of you to realize, like, Okay, maybe we're both doubting. Maybe we can both explore this journey together?

Cristian Ramirez 53:30

Yeah, that's a great question. So, I think, you know, I mentioned all the different disagreements I had with the church, you know, the, the wealth, the LGBTQ+ stances, the discipline that the, you know, that this, the disciplinary program, they have, you know, all those different things, but in Utah, we lived in Utah from 2017 to 19, and it had nothing to do with the church. The reason we were there is because of Heidi's job. She used to work for JetBlue, got transferred to Salt Lake City. And I work remotely, so, I can work anywhere in the continental US, right? So, we moved there because of a job. And in those three years we were there, one of our kids, the middle one, Mateo, we have two boys. Dino is the oldest, Mateo is the middle boy, the middle one, and then Sarah, the youngest. He came out as, as, as gay. And we, you know, I kind of suspected for a long time, since he was little, that he was gay. But, you know, I was just waiting for him to tell us, right? And I think he was a little bit afraid of telling us because he wasn't 100% sure if we were going to accept him. He felt he, we would, but he wasn't sure. So, he did it by text. And he said, We, I got to tell you guys something. And we say, Yes, tell us. And he did it on his birthday. Also, he was 14 I want to say. And he says, I like boys. That's how he came out. He said, I thought it was good. I liked boys. And then I, and then I said to him, And we love you. So, nothing wrong and nothing's going to change. And that's how it goes, right? So, he was crying when he wrote the text, he was just so scared. But then he was so relieved, right, that, So what? When he came out, So what? We love you, right? We support you. Nothing changes. But at that time, 2018, I want to say, we were still trying to go to church and make it work. Well, me, I was checked out, to be honest with you, on 2017. I went to church because I wanted him to go to church. And, you know, I felt like, I just got to church, right? But Heidi was, now I know this is about me, not her, but she's still trying to make it work. Well, he was just, it's just very hard to make it work, because we don't know, right? And, so, my son, he got some, in our (. . .) years, we were there towards the second year, he got to the point where he was suicidal, he has suicidal idea, ideation. And we have to take him to the University of Utah, the hospital there where they have a mental health. (. . .) He had to go there because he, he kept saying he was going to, you know, kill himself and all those things. So, he was there for about four days and he, some of the things were (. . .) because of what happened at school, because he was told he was gonna' go to hell and all those different things right after General Conference, you know, some kids, you know, Oh, you're going to go to hell and all that, because he was openly gay, right? People knew that he was gay and he wasn't shy to say, I'm gay. You know, I felt like, I connect. You know, I, I, I felt like I had the freedom to talk more about my disagreements with the church, right, that saw an opening there because, of course, Heidi even started to having a lot of doubts about the church and our

last two to three months in Utah, we did not even go to church, right? And we moved back home to Orlando and we again attempted to go back to a local congregation and put our, it was different than before, right? We would go to church, we were almost on the brink of being out, but we're still going through the motions. And Heidi still was trying to make it work. And she felt like she can be a, an agent of change from within. And I kept telling her, I don't think that's going to work. You know, she would go to church and cry at church and at home when she got done with church. And it was just so hard. And, so, we started having, you know, really honest conversations about, you know, our involvement in church and, and, and image, you know, I just told her, I don't know how we can sustain this. You know, you're, it was impacting her health, physical health, mental health, you know, all those different things. You know, the pandemic basically was, was a good thing for us be, because, in, in the sense that it gave, gave us the space to really disconnect. Now that there were no, you know, physical meetings that we were expected to go to, it was just timely, right? I think we would have left the church anyways, but I think it would have taken longer, but with the pandemic, it was, like, Okay, this is the chance. And that's when we really disconnected, right? We went to a few meetings here and there after the pandemic, but my last meeting that I attended was October, 2012. Yeah. 2000, the year 2000, October, the year 2000. And I went to church, and it was not a worship service. It was a leadership meeting, and I never done that before. But in the middle of the meeting, I got up and I said a few things and left in the middle of the meeting, because I was so upset. And it was a first for me. We were in this meeting and there was a guy the, one of the counselors to the Bishop, that was saying that, that if people did not show up at church, that's what they were trying to get people back to church at the end of the year 2000 with masks, and so on if they could, he was saying that if people don't come it's because they don't have enough faith. And that's when I just had it. I went off on that guy. I didn't, of course, I didn't curse at him or anything like that, but I really just told him just stop right there. You just shut up. Stop right there. You don't, like I'm, in fact, it's probably worse how I'm telling you now. And I said, You don't have the right to say that. Who are, who do you think you are to say that? And then, you know, he kept talking over me and I was talking over him back and it was just loud in this meeting. And everybody was like this, like, they couldn't believe that I was having the Bishop, the other people in that meeting. We went at each other's throats in there. And I won the match because I was louder than him. In the sense that was really loud. And I say, Be quiet. I'm gonna' talk. Listen to, don't say anything. I say, Who, who are you? Right? I have a wife that has long COVID at home and you're saying that she doesn't come because she doesn't have faith? How dare you say that? You know, to one, and at that point, the number was 200,000 had died because there were no, no vaccine. Now the number is, I don't know, a million, whatever, right? How can you minimize that man? Are you crazy? Like 200 people, 200,000 people have died and you are talking about faith here? You rea, I think I even went personal, to be honest with you, which was awful. But I think the last thing I said, You're ridiculous. And then I got up and left. And that was my last meeting at the LDS church. And then, of course, we patched it up, me and the guy. He apologized. I apologized for (. . .) because I think I call, I told you're ridiculous, you know? And he's a neighbor of mine and he's a good man. Honestly, he's a good man. But what he said in that meeting, it was unbearable--to me. We patched it up with, since gone to lunch a few times. (. . .) I don't have any groceries. But it was just a moment that I just felt like, I'm not gonna' sit down quietly, and I'm gonna' just go with a bang. And that was(. . .) with a bang. I got calls from so many people that day that they felt terrible, right, about the whole thing that he said that. And that was my last interaction, right? So, I told Heidi, I ain't going back to that church, right? And, so, she was fine with that. And then I resigned. When I say resign, I don't know, what I mean is I stopped, like I told, I had a calling and said,

I'm not going back. Just release me. And, you know, I'm not going back and everything like that. That was January of 2001. And then that was it. Then after that, I was just trying to convince Heidi to not be a change maker because she thought that she can do it. And I, like, you know, and I was just trying to tell her you can't (. . .) conversations, and also with my oldest son, who is a, a devout member of the church, you know, I have to tell him, Look, I had a long conversation with him at once, and I said, Look, you got to support your mom. I went with her leaving the church, this is not good for her. And my son was on board. So, I thank him for understanding that and supporting, you know, his mo, mom. He even, he, he even attended her baptism, virtually and everything like that. But, yeah, those were, I think we kind of long answer to your question. But I think we kind of were able to have honest conversations. And, and I was able to finally speak my mind with Heidi when my son, you know, came out of the closet. That was the opening there.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:57

Yeah, and I think that, you know, in 2020, and 2021, when church had shut down and churches all over the place, were trying to figure this out, and the political tension was so high. And I think that it helped people maybe take a step back and look at what the benefit of religious community was in their lives. So, for you, you have this kid who is fundamentally not accepted in the Mormon church and has, has experienced that to the point of wanting to self harm themselves, and seeing that in very real time of, you know, the religious indoctrination and things like that with your wife trying to be a change from within while she has long COVID. I mean, I, you know, meeting her I remember one of the first things that she was posting about was all of her issues having COVID, you know, and she had had COVID months and months before, but she was still dealing with, with the impact of it. So, for, it just seems like it was the perfect storm, right? So, you've got this frustration because of how the church has, how the LDS church has treated your kid and how it's tormenting your wife because she wants to be, you know, the change and she wants to make it better. And yet she has no power, like you had said earlier, um, to actually make change, and then to have faith be weaponized in the midst of the pandemic. And I, I do appreciate, you know, that you said that your neighbor was a good guy and, um, because those situations, you know, can be awkward, especially when you are neighbors. But I think that that situation also speaks to the larger culture and your neighbor, the, you know, the guy you were talking to, he was just probably feeling some of that same angst and, (Yes.) you know, couldn't control the culture himself and (Yes.) kind of speaking the party line, if you will, not (Oh, yeah.) really recognizing how it hurt people.

Cristian Ramirez 1:05:58

And he really expressed that to me and I, I appreciated that and, and he is, I mean, he really is a nice man. But, yeah, he said what he said and, but he expressed that to me later. He, he, he told me, What I said was so, so unthoughtful, I mean, I was just careless, you know, stuff I said there and everything, I try to be more careful in what I said, you know. When we left the church then Heidi discovered, you know, Community of Christ. And I think that's documented in one of your podcasts. First, she started attending the, Beyond the Walls, the online congregation and, and I would listen on the side and then few things and I, and I just could not believe that that church, CoC, had a, a common beginning with the LDS church. I just, I mean, for the longest time, I could not reconcile that, right? I just couldn't see how these two organizations have the same root, you know. So, I started listening to John Hamer (. . .) did I get the name, right? Yes, and then Leandro, and so on. And then one day, she wanted to go to the

congregation here. And I went in Orlando. And I went mostly out of curiosity because I'm very curious. It was an anthropological experience, or, or attempt for me, not really religious. I just wanted to go see what this church is all about. And then I was pleasantly surprised at so many things when I went there for, for the first time. I don't know where to begin. Guys wearing shorts at church. All their men ser, serving the sacrament, a meeting that was really relaxed and not driven by protocol. Like, so methodical like the LDS sacrament meeting is just everything is calculated. And, you know, and there's a huge emphasis on, on reverence. So much, right, on reverence and here, you, you can feel a great Spirit, you feel great. I mean, and you hear about the gospel, but you don't have that pressure on, on you have to be reverent and all those things, so it is less structured. And, of course, all the women running the show, right, in this congregation that we went to. But the thing that caught my eye the, the, the most was the joys and concerns. I told Heidi I just thought that that was just spectacular, that you go through the, and I still do today, that you go to a congregation and that part of the service is devoted to listening from people that are sitting there about their everyday lives, right? So, that was just unbelievable to me, right, that people, you know, would go in and say all these happy things that are happening then not so happy things that are happening, too, you know? And I love that it was one hour. I'm not gonna' lie to you. Like the, the, the one, well actually there's two meanings. I know that there is two things, right? You, and I have been to other worship services and I don't see the, the approach to it has to be a certain time because that's the other thing you know, sacrament meeting in the LDS church doesn't end early. You have to fill the hour if somehow speakers are done then the Bishop comes up or whatever to talk about to fill the hour. I don't, I don't, so I didn't see that in this, in the Community of Christ in, in congregation here in Orlando. And the other thing, too, no one is trying to, you know, proselyte. (. . .) you know, you, you can go there and, and you don't have that pressure to the point that, I told Heidi this recently, I said, I'm not a member of C of C, but I told her, like, I was LDS for so long, like 30 years, and, of course, I invited people to church, but I think I did it because it, the, the pressure you have to do missionary work is so strong, right? And sometimes, honestly, I didn't invite them because I didn't feel comfortable having them there. Like, I didn't want something to happen to, you know, something uncomfortable happening to them. Honestly, that's why I didn't invite people to go to church sometimes. And I will refrain on the missionary work and take a chill pill on that because I felt like some of my friends would not feel comfortable there, right? And it is a compliment to C of C that I told Heidi the other day, I can invite anybody I know, anybody I know, to C of C and I can extend that invitation just fine and feel okay and having them come and, you know, and sit there and listen to stuff. So, so, that's how much I love this church, you know? Anyways.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:18

Well, I would say that you are a great missionary for Community of Christ. And you are very enthusiastic, um, in all of the interactions that I've had with you and the way that you're able to articulate who we are. You've got us figured out, which is, which is pretty good. And I, I do, I just relate so much to everything that you've said, you know. This idea that, like, how in the world did these two denominations have a common start, right? I've done a pretty thorough deep dive into the history and, like, logically I could tell, I can tell that story of how we got to where we are today. But every once in a while, I'm like, Really? How did this happen?

Cristian Ramirez 1:12:04

It's crazy. Like, I, I was telling my daughter, Sarah, who is not, she's, I don't want to say anti-religion, right? But maybe that, maybe she is anti-religion, right, after what happened to her brother, especially because what happened to her brother. (Yeah.) And the pressures that we received, or that Heidi mostly received from her, her parents, Sarah's grandparents, that I was telling her, the other day I said, Sarah, The C of C church is nothing like the LDS church. Like, because we've invited her, her to go with us and she refuses. And it's okay. We're not gonna' force her or anything like that. But I just told her that you have no idea, Sarah. It's, like, completely different. And then when we, and then finally though that she listened after we came back from World Conference, she was asking questions, and she's like, can you drink? And I can tell now that she's more okay, maybe I'll go one day. Because I told her about World Conference and how what we did there and, you know, how the service was and everything. And, so, I cannot say enough to her and Mateo, my gay son. I also tell them, I say, You have no idea what this church is like. You guys are going to be blown away if you went to a service, because what I think they're expecting to see some Mormonism in C of C because of the common rules. And I said, Oh, my goodness. That is nothing like that. I, I just told them. And I continue to be, you know, just pleasantly surprised by, by the, by the church to the point that Heidi told me, I had no idea. When I went to World Conference, I guess I was talking to three apostles, three apostles, and I had no idea. And I had zero idea. Like I forget the name of this gentleman. He's a historian also. And I'm an Apostle (Lach? Lach Mackay?) Okay. (Yeah.) I had a full on conversation with him for like 15 minutes from when we have the seekers pizza party. And I had no idea. Neither he made any attempt to tell me I was a leader in that church. So, Heidi said, Who do you talk to? I was just talking to this guy there. I didn't really talk to many people because then we have to go to the Peace Award. And then she's like, He's an Apostle. I went, What? And I like it that way. I really do. I had no idea. And then we go and Charlie Carter, his wife, just released is the word. She got released from, that she had stepped down. It was a tour of the Apostle offices and I was talking to this other guy and I had no idea either that he was an Apostle because we just had a, a conversation about Orlando and he's English or Welsh. I can't, I forget, from the UK. (Yeah.) It doesn't matter. I was, What? Anyway, so, it speaks volumes to, that kind of thing, to me. And, and, of course, I'm objective and I tell Heidi, It is a small church, after all, compared to the LDS church. So, I put, you know, I try to put it, I tried to think of it objectively, right? If the LDS church was small, maybe you can talk to these people, but I doubt that it will be the same interaction. I really do. What I see here is more like these people that have these big jobs, you can't even tell. And, to me, that is a great thing, right? We went to a, a queer service, worship service, Harmony, you know, the organization Harmony that put it together, or I don't know if they were (Uh huh.) a Harmony there. And also there, I was surprised that two Apostles were the ones that were administering the, uh, the, uh, sacrament, right? I had no idea. I'm like, Who are those people, Heidi, you know, so it's just so awesome to see that. I have to tell you from, I'm an outsider, or I, not an outsider, I feel like I am part of the community even though I'm not an, an official member. But it is so awesome to see that, Brittany. I cannot, I don't even have words to express how awesome that is.

Brittany Mangelson 1:16:19

Yeah, it, that, your stories remind me. World Conference 2019, I had an old Mormon neighbor that was just in town, in Independence going to diff, various church history sites. And she contacted me 'cause she knew I was in Independence. And she wanted to come see the Temple. And I'm like, Oh, yeah, I can come show you the Temple. And we met in the foyer. And this was like the first or second day of World Conference so, like, tons of people are going crazy. So, we're, we met in the foyer and Barb

Carter came walking down the stairs. And, you know, I hadn't seen her in a couple years. We hug. It was great. And then I introduced her to my neighbor. And she did not introduce herself as an Apostle, but she's like, Oh, can I show you around. And, so, we, you know, Barb took us a little bit. And she was, you know, giving her a little bit of a tour. And, I mean, it was brief, because Barb had somewhere to be and, but she stopped and, you know, gave us a little tour. And then after Barb left, I said that was an Apostle, and my neighbor was like, What?! (Blown away, right?) She was totally blown away, and, but she was really appreciative that a woman was an Apostle and that she would stop and give a little tour and also not lead with her authority. And, you know, just wanted to keep things relaxed. And this is Brittany's neighbor and this is her friend, Barb, and it was just totally relaxed and chill, and, you know, a really good experience for all of us. So, the culture is definitely different in Community of Christ.

Cristian Ramirez 1:17:51

Yes, it is, it's, just the other thing I was gonna' say, I spent a lot of time feeling, you know, so imperfect in the, the Mormon church be, because of the, you know, all the expectations, right? We, the certain person, right, you're supposed to be and I find that the gospel as preached in sitting C of C, it's, it's, it just allows for more grace. And for me, I'm just a human being, right? I just make mistakes. I've made mistakes. I make them today. I will make them tomorrow. To really, really talk about the gospel, right, I, I will say that, you know, I, I just love the, the, the way that the people at C of C you see Christ and see grace and all those different things because, you know, God knows I need grace in my life, you know, and, and I think it was, for me, it, it was just hard sometimes because I, I don't even know how to articulate the thought, but you, you almost have to be these perfect person in hell yes churches. It's, it's just really hard to, to measure up to that. And even though you think and I even though I thought that again play with my mind, it did I, you know, because I will talk to myself sometimes say, Okay. Well, this is how I say things. And this is how the church sees things. But, but it really plays into your head and I, I don't have, you know, I don't have only been words to explain this, but I think part of my deconstruction, I've heard that word quite a lot, part of the unpacking that I have had to do is that, like, to kind of give me some grace, you know, after being measured, you know, by the standards of the, all these standards. You know what I mean? Like, this idea, by this i, idea of you, you're supposed to be, it's, it's just kind of liberating, to be honest with you, to know that God loves everybody, and that, and that there's enough grace there to, to cover your imperfections.

Brittany Mangelson 1:20:18

I love it. I absolutely relate to that when I realize, like, Oh, I don't have to be perfect. I don't even have to be striving for perfection, right? Like, I can just be me and just show up as me and learn how I interact with the world when I'm not trying to just, like, be self, I, I don't, I don't even, I, I know what you're saying and I don't even know how to, like, articulate the importance of it when you are LDS and you're constantly being told that you're not enough, that you're not living up, that you could do more, that you need to conform more, everything from your politics, to your culture, to your, you know, beliefs, just everything. The way you interpret history. All the things that you've said, when, when that is the message and that's what you hear at church, all the reasons why you're not enough. I mean, it creates a really unhealthy dysfunctional view of yourself and of community and of God. So, I totally get what you're saying of just, like, you don't have to just constantly be beating yourself up, and you can just come as you are and be. And there's not that pressure. There's not that, you know, you don't have to be perfect.

Cristian Ramirez 1:21:38

Yeah, it really, if you think about it, and I just thought about it now. It's the equivalent of the practice that people who do it, maybe today, some people still do it, where they would lash, you know, kind of punish, do corporal punishment on their backs with (Yeah.) a, with a belt and so on. And it's, it's, you know, I'm not saying that that's what they do, let me set the record straight. But, but it, it is kind of similar except you're not physically inflicting pain on yourself, you know, on your back and you're not bleeding and so on. But maybe your soul is bleeding, you know, be, be, because you, you just cannot, you don't get to, to this idea that you're supposed to be. That this idea we're supposed to be and then you're down here and the idea is up here, it really causes suffering and, and maybe even despair, to be honest with you, on the stress and all those different things. So, I'm glad that I'm not there in that, you know, in that space, that I feel like I am free to not, you know, I kind of transcended that space and left that space. And I feel like grace is enough to cover me and, you know, and my imperfections.

Brittany Mangelson 1:22:59

Amen! That is the sermon. That is the message. So, I guess, you know, my, my final question would just be, what would you tell other seekers? I think it's really interesting hearing you share the things that you've told to your kids, right? Because even though they're not necessarily seekers, they're people who aren't, like, familiar with Community of Christ, right? So, what kinds of things would you tell people who are on a faith journey transition, (Yes.) um, who might be looking to Community of Christ?

Cristian Ramirez 1:23:34

Yes, for sure. So, the first thing I will say is, it really, you, you have to understand that it takes time to finally, you know, find that journey of find yourself and find where you're supposed to go. And it's, it's a, it's a process. And, and because it takes time, you have to be patient with it. And mine took forever. So, if I compare Heidi and I, the reason why when I stopped going physically to the LDS church, I was pretty much, like, done with the faith transition, but very close. It's because for years, I went there, but I internally, I had all these disagreements with the church for years and years and years. And, so, it takes time, right, because if I was a member for 25 years or 30 years, I cannot unpack all of that stuff in a month or two or three months or four months or five months. It just takes time to process all these different things. But, so that's the first thing, right, to be patient. The other thing is to be open minded, right? I think if you are a seeker, you are (. . .) to see out to the C of C church and you are looking for parallels or things that are similar to the LDS church, and that, that's the wrong approach. That is the wrong approach because you're gonna' find very little is the same. But I think sometimes we want to look for familiar things. In comfort, we find comfort, in familiar things. So, be open minded. I will say, Be open minded because the differences are so large. And to the point that for some people, depending on where, where they are in their, in their faith journey, they might be even overwhelming. You know, the differences. To me, they were not because, I repeat, I had my internal faith journey while physically going to church. And that's something I would like to highlight here. There's two things. You go physically to church, but where is your mind and your Spirit, is it there? And mine wasn't for ten years. I checked out. I went to church, my body was there, but not my mind, my Spirit. So, when you go to, to, depending on where you are in your, in your journey, just, I would say be open minded and, and, and just listen there, right? When you go to (. . .) and ask a lot of questions. And you're gonna' find a lot of beauty, I think, in C of C. As I mentioned before, I'm not even a member and I see so much beauty in

this organization. And you, it's important, I think, to, to, to make connections also. And I have to say that the people here in this congregation that we go to, and also the Utah congregation, which I kind of like to feel like I'm part of the Utah congregation even though I don't go there, but I feel very comfortable when I go there. They make it easy for you to feel comfortable, right? So, that's, that's very nice. If you're LDS, don't expect a program for everything. You go to the LDS church and the (. . .). I went to World Conference, I was expecting programs (. . .). So, now what are we gonna' do? Now what are we gonna' do? It's not like that. And I've been learning that little by little. Even when I went to that seekers party, I thought there was going to be a program, that somebody was going to speak. And, so, I was pleasantly surprised that it's more, as you guys say, about community, right, making friendships and all those things. So, that's gonna' be a big shock to seekers that a lot of the things that Community of Christ does is not really, there's not a program behind it or, you know, this structure thing that you have to follow. It's really relaxed and so on. So, making connections is important. We went to lunch a few times with some of the folks in the congregation. They invited us. Actually went to lunch with some of the people in the Utah congregation after the service with Carla and, and Tyler and other folks. So, those were the best meetings for me because sometimes it wasn't even about religion. It was talking about other stuff. Just really funny things actually. Carla is very funny.

Brittany Mangelson 1:28:04

She is funny and I did not get to see the two of you together. And that was probably a good time because the two of you are both very funny people.

Cristian Ramirez 1:28:13

It was a (. . .) with Carla and Tyler was there and Michelle was there. Anyway, so, those are the things I say. Be open minded. Be open minded. Ask questions. Listen. Give it some time. Don't get overwhelmed by the differences because there's so many differences and it's, it's, it's just amazing, right? And, so, that's what I would say.

Brittany Mangelson 1:28:33

I love it. Very, very good advice. And I definitely, I was just actually talking to another seeker earlier today who was kind of in that program mind of, you know, like, Well, what do you do about this? And what about this? And what do we teach this? And I was like, Okay, there, we're, we're definitely not as structured as what you're used to. So, there's not this, like, correlated plan that, you know, you have to walk through and, yeah. That is a big cultural shift for people because they're always just expecting to be, you know, there, there's a purpose that brings you further into Mormonism. (Yeah.) Everything. Where Community of Christ is just, like, We want to just be with people. And it's (Yes.) It's, yeah.

Cristian Ramirez 1:29:18

I'm going to throw something, I thought, thought about something I would like to add. So, you know, I travel a lot for work, used to at least. Now I travel more for leisure and when the pilot says, You get in the plane, you know, you're about to takeoff. And I can do a pilot im, impersonation, but I won't. Because they all say the same stuff. But when they say, Sit back, relax, relax and enjoy the flight, that is what I encourage other seekers to do. Sit back, relax and enjoy the flight. You're not a flight attendant and you're not a pilot. You just sit and watch the movie unfold and enjoy the moment. That's what I would say.

Brittany Mangelson 1:30:05

Hmm. What a good analogy. I haven't heard anyone say that before, uh, in all my years doing these interviews and working in seeker ministry. So, brilliant though. That's, that's a really good

Cristian Ramirez 1:30:17

It is. Enjoy the worship. Listen to the messages. Nobody, no one is going to ask you to go and visit 20 people after the service is over, which is not a bad thing. I'm not saying it's a bad thing to visit people. But you just got there to enjoy the word. That's what it's all about, right? And I felt like I didn't get that before. And I get that, as you'll see. I'm enjoying the word, gospel, right? And, so, yeah. So, I thought about that analogy. That's what it is, really.

Brittany Mangelson 1:30:51

Yeah, absolutely. Ah, Cristian, this has been a really fun conversation. And I actually do end these usually just by asking if there's anything else that you didn't get to say, any final thoughts that you have that you weren't able to get out during the interview?

Cristian Ramirez 1:31:10

Not really. I think we covered a lot of ground and this, this podcast is going to be long. So, maybe, I don't know, I see that as another thing, too. If you, if you would have been in a different, if we were under a program, you would have said, Okay, we got two minutes. But another example of C of C, right? The thing went until it ran out, right? We did cover where we needed to go and that's the end of the podcast. So, another example of, of not having that structure that to me, sometimes, it, it's just not that great to have a structure in spiritual matters. You, you need to let things run the way they need to run, right? Just flow, right, the flow. So, I don't have anything else to add. Thank you for having me here, Brittany. And it's been great talking to you.

Brittany Mangelson 1:31:59

Absolutely. Thank you so much. And I will just say really quick, I don't think these interviews ever get too long because we're just trying to provide a platform for people to tell their stories because other people identify with your story, right? So, folks are going to hear your story and see themselves in your journey and hear your experience. And I really feel strongly with these faith transition interviews that, you know, more is better because we've all been through something similar. And maybe our reasons for leaving the church of our birth are different, or the church we, you know, spent, like you, decades in, but what has brought us to Community of Christ, there's those similar threads. And, so, again, it's all about creating community and even if that's, you know, a community of podcast listeners. So, I'm grateful for your vulnerability and your openness and just how you've been able to articulate your story and all the complexities of joining the LDS church, leaving the LDS church and then associating yourself with Community of Christ. So, thank you so much. And I will also just say as the pastor of the Salt Lake Congregation, I totally think that you are a part of us. So, anytime, anytime you want to come or Zoom or whatever, you're absolutely welcome. So,

Cristian Ramirez 1:33:20

Thank you very much. Thank you, Brittany.