

# 1011275-episode-176-cuppa-joe-historic-sites-bus-tour

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Katie Langston, Josh Mangelson, Barbara Walden, Karin Peter, Peter Smith

### **Katie Langston** 00:16

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### **Karin Peter** 00:58

Welcome to Cuppa Joe, where we explore Restoration history from a Community of Christ perspective. Today, we're going to visit a bit about the Community of Christ historic sites bus tours. Now, I will be upfront on this. I have never been on one of these bus trips. And I've often wondered, well, honestly, I've wondered, why would people do that? So, I thought perhaps I should learn a little bit more about them. And so today, we have a couple of guests to help us to do that. Today, Barbara Walden, who is the Executive Director of Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation, and Peter Smith, who is a Board member of the same organization, have joined us. Greetings to you both.

### **Peter Smith** 01:44

It's good to be here.

### **Karin Peter** 01:46

Really happy to have you. So, Barb, you've been a guest on Cuppa Joe previously, and we talked about some radical women of the Restoration. But in case our listeners haven't yet downloaded that episode, could you tell us just a little bit about yourself, and what your role with the historic sites entails? What exactly do you do?

### **Barbara Walden** 02:09

I'd be happy to. And it's great to reunite with you again, for a Cuppa Joe. As you mentioned, my name is Barb Walden, and I serve as the Executive Director for the Historic Sites Foundation. I came to the

Historic Sites Foundation through church history, where for seven years, I served as the Site Director at the Kirtland Temple, which was truly my dream job. I loved every bit of it. But as my husband took a job in Kentucky, and they would allow me to move the Kirtland Temple with me to Kentucky, another opportunity opened up in sharing church history as the Director of the Historic Sites Foundation. And I've been doing that since 2009. I have to say, a highlight of what I do at the Historic Sites Foundation is riding along with Peter Smith, on these bus tours. They always create wonderful memories, and a number of personal relationships, I guess that we travel with.

**Karin Peter** 03:05

Well, Peter, that's kind of a nice handoff to you. And I have to ask you. So, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you ended up on these bus trips and on the Board of the Historic Sites Foundation?

**Peter Smith** 03:20

Well, it's kind of interesting. I've been living in Florida for almost 11 years now with my husband, Mark, and we took it upon ourselves, we were asked to direct the Florida winter reunion at Deer Haven campground. And I can't remember if it was the first year we directed it, or if we had met Barb before, but Barb came as a guest from the Historic Sites Foundation and we hit it off, not only as friends, but I rediscovered a fascination with church history, which was something that had drawn me into the church when I was 18 years old. I think she sensed in me a desire to learn more and, and a passion for leading worship, leading ministry. The first thing that happened was she invited me to come on one of the bus tours and be, I think she called it, the bus pastor, or something like that. And I was thrilled with the invitation. And of course, I said yes. I think that 2013 was my first bus tour. So that passage turned into reality. I'm trying to remember. I do believe that we did two in a row, and it was after the second one that you might have asked me Barb. Barb had submitted my name as a potential Board member on the Historic Sites Foundation. That's how I got here and our relationship as Board members, I'm not even sure how to say it, colleagues, as colleagues together has grown and our friendship has grown, as well. So, it's been a good been a good experience so far.

**Barbara Walden** 04:51

Peter, you, and I shared an experience on the historic sites before we ever knew each other. My last year in Kirtland as the Site Director there, there was a worship service in the lower court of the Temple that was a part of the GALA reunion, or the annual gathering for GALA. And Peter was in attendance there. I was sitting in on the service, and it was one of the most powerful worship services I'd ever experienced at the Kirtland Temple. It wasn't until years later that I got to hear Peter's side of that story, and how it was so impactful for him, as well. So, I think we've even had shared experiences before we knew each other, shared experiences at the historic sites.

**Karin Peter** 05:30

That has deepened with this bus trip relationship. So, you had invited Peter on the bus trip, and that's how his participation started. But how did the bus trips start? I mean, the Historic Sites Foundation does a lot of things. But when did the bus trip idea begin to take shape?

**Barbara Walden** 05:51

Well, I'd like to think that it began with Steely and Verda Bryant, a couple who had a passion for church history, and who also acted as volunteers and storytellers at the historic sites. Their great grandson, Kevin Bryant, who has inherited their gift for storytelling, has done quite a bit of research on Steely and Verda. Bryant, and their tour company. They had a tour company called Reladasa, which, if you spell that out, is Re la da sa, so it plays off of the RLDS name. The Reladasa tours began in the 70s and they ran through the mid-90s. These two would gather church groups and tour them all over the historic sites, sharing stories along the way, but they also branched out to international tours, heading to the Holy Land and throughout Europe. Those two were just on fire when it came to preserving church history. I would like to think that the bus tour tradition really began with Steely and Verda Bryant in the 1970s. So, in many ways, as we head out on the road doing bus tours today, it's a tip of the hat to the Bryants and the Reladasa tours. It was years later in the 90s, that David Ettinger, when he acted as Director for Restoration Trail Foundation, which later became the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation, was leading tours as the Director. Then we stopped for about 10 to 15 years. It was David, as a Board member, who trained me how to be a tour director. Our first tour was in 2011, which was a really great learning experience, because it seems as though anything that could possibly go wrong, by accident, happened on that tour. It was a 10-day tour. I think it rained torrential rains for eight days of those 10 days. We had someone with an allergic reaction that needed to go to the hospital, another one who had a medical team along the way. No matter how well you plan, accidents happen, and really one of the greatest training experiences I've ever had came with David. He handed it off to me in 2012. Peter came along in 2013, to do the "Sing the Sacred Story Tour." And then it's just continued on from there. It seems like each year we've had a new theme and a new audience, and it really breathes life into church history.

**Karin Peter** 08:32

So, Peter, who goes on historic sites bus tours? Now you talked about why you went the first time, you had a connection with Barb through a reunion and it sparked an interest for you. But who do you encounter on these tours?

**Peter Smith** 08:52

Well, the majority of people that I've experienced on the bus tours, for the most part, have been retirees at this point. A lot of them have a passion for church history; however, some of them are newbies to it and are actually, sometimes they're first-time visitors to some of these sites that maybe they've heard about their entire lives and have never experienced them. Also, there are people who join the church later in life and heard stories about these places, heard testimonies about them, but never got to experience them for themselves. It's quite a mixture of reasons I think that people come, but it all stems from a great interest in the story of the church. Most people, I do believe, that we've had on the tours have had that experience of being taught a certain story of the church, and so they go to these places with expectations of what they'll see there. The beauty of it is that Barb is such a wonderful, not only storyteller, but educator and teacher, that she really opens people's eyes and minds and hearts to, to what I want to say what really happened in these places, and it becomes very real. In spite of whatever people's reasons are for coming on these trips, they truly seem to have not only, I would say, mind or head experiences, but they have heart experiences and, and emotional experiences on this trip on this trip, as well.

**Karin Peter** 10:28

So, Peter, you touched on something that's really interesting to me. And so, Barb, I'm going to ask you to expand a little bit on that. If we have been with Community of Christ for even a short period of time, we've heard stories of the history of the church. But if we've grown up in the church, the stories that we heard might be a little different. I think, Peter, you put it very nicely, what really happened might be a little bit different than what we were told happened, or maybe we've romanticized it. And I don't mean in a hearts and flowers kind of way. But in the life of the church, we've idealized the history of the church and sanitized it in some ways, which is one of the reasons we do the Cuppa Joe interviews, because it's really helpful to broaden people's understanding and recognize that even with our flaws and failures, we still are a people that responds to God's call. So how do you decide what the content is going to be on your tour?

**Barbara Walden** 11:33

Well, when it comes to the themes of the tours, or the subject matter, a lot of it depends on what the audience is calling for. As I'm traveling the country doing reunions and retreats and leading classes, you find that there are certain themes that then rise up. And with the church history, it seems there's so much yet to cover that I think we could do tours every year for 100 years, because there's so much of the story that's out there that's being discovered in archives and in family journals. When it comes to the specifics, I think there are certain things that people grow to expect on a church history tour. They're expecting to go to the Kirtland Temple and hear about Kirtland and Nauvoo history. They want to walk the Sacred Grove. It's when you're on these tours, you're devoting so much your time, both Peter and I and our guests to learning church history, that a lot of times because we set aside that time, those 10 days or those two weeks, you can really dissect the history and spend time with people as they're processing how the story that they were raised with, that they heard from their Sunday school teachers and their grandmothers, isn't matching up to the stories that they're finding in the church archives that historians are uncovering. My personal experience was just that. It was devastating when I discovered that the stories that my grandmother read to me from my Inez Smith Davis's *The Story of the Church* wasn't matching up to what Alma Blair was telling me as a young adult intern in Nauvoo, and it was devastating. It takes time to process that. One wonderful gift that Peter brings to the tour is that pastoral care. So as people are struggling, he has a great listening ear, he's able to spend the time with them that they need. As a team, I can bring the church history, and my own experience of struggling with that church history years ago, while Peter can bring in the pastoral care and the comfort that folks need when they're struggling, as so often our faith and our history are intertwined. And I think on the tours, this is where we can break that down in a healthy way that involves a lot of discussion in relationship with other guests. They're not alone.

**Karin Peter** 14:09

I think that part of what I hear you talking about Barb is a kind of transformational experience that people go through, where history is a set of facts that maybe they've incorporated into how they understand their own relationship with the church and their own faith. But going through and learning that some of that might be different than what they expected can be a little ground shaking. And so there needs to be that sensitivity to people, and where they are, and what's happening, not just in the story of the church, but I would assume that there's some transformation that takes place just from being in community for the 10 to 14 days, on a bus tour and in relationship together for that amount of

time. Peter, your tour was 2013, your first one, so you've done this for some time. How have these trips shaped your discipleship in this experience of community together?

**Peter Smith 15:10**

Well, I would say, first of all, we quite often call these bus trips a reunion on wheels. And it definitely feels like that by the by the middle of it, or even at the end, you feel like you've spent a week at reunion and hate to say goodbye. We also joke sometimes that what happens on the bus stays on the bus. I've had some fun experiences that continue to make us laugh as we look back. For me, starting in 2013, which was the year the US had its National Conference. I went on that bus trip a little hesitant, worried about my, I guess, preordained thoughts of what people who might enjoy church history where they might be on the spectrum of how they felt about where the church was at today. I was really hesitant about that part more than anything. My mom had a health emergency while we were on the bus trip. Somewhere in the middle, I shared my story about who I was, that Mark was my partner, noy my husband, and I shared very openly about my life. And in the midst of that I shared about my mom, they had found a growth and we didn't know if it was cancer or not. And the bus just embraced me. In that moment, they embraced my mother, they embraced me for who I was, and it was really a transformative moment for me to realize these people, two thirds of whom were strangers when we first got on the bus, had suddenly opened their hearts to me after I had told them that I was gay and that didn't change anything. In fact, it endeared me to them more because I was being honest with them. So as the years have gone on, I've been able to become more and more authentically myself on these trips. I enter into them confident now that that part of my life is just going to be part of how this goes. And without fail, I've been on five bus trips, six if you include going to England, I believe that on every one of them, I've grown to love the church more, to love my fellow church members more. I've grown to love church history more and how it still speaks to us today. I look forward to it, not for what I can give, but mostly for what I receive out on the trip.

**Karin Peter 17:51**

So, Peter, I have dear colleagues and friends who went on that 2013 bus trip with you and shared their own transformational experience out of that. Thanks for sharing that. So, Barb, when you think about it, and you're planning these, what's your greatest hope each time you get a theme, you get the registrations, you're planning to get ready to go? Do you think in those terms, or are you just crossing your fingers that nobody has appendicitis on the way? What happens?

**Barbara Walden 18:30**

That is a thought that does occur to you. There's the administrative part of you that wants to make sure we arrive at our destinations on time, and there's no issues at the hotels, and the bus doesn't break down on us. You know, there's always those concerns. But in the end, my goal is to turn everyone on that tour into church history fans, to make church history enthusiasts out of them. And for them to be able to naturally see the lessons in our shared story. That's really the end goal.

**Karin Peter 18:57**

So, the story element of this really is critical, right? It's our shared faith story. And you referenced the Bryants and their contribution to starting this. When you spoke of them, you said they were really storytellers and that they shared that tradition with their children. So, let's shift a little bit into storytelling

mode. What I'm interested in hearing from each of you are, what's your favorite part of the trip? What's your favorite stop, your favorite hotel, your favorite place to eat? Whatever it may be, what's your very favorite part of the trip? Peter, would you like to start?

**Peter Smith** 19:40

Well, how do you pick? How do you choose? I would say two things. I would say the Kirtland Temple of course. I look forward to that. Every opportunity I can be there is a good experience. And I've had the pleasure and the blessing of being able to provide ministry leading communion services every time we've had a bus trip. There's something transformational when receiving Communion in the Kirtland Temple. And of course, singing the "Spirit of God Like Fire is Burning" in that space. Also, for me, going to the Sacred Grove in Palmyra, which is a Mormon site. They are the ones that run that site. Still, it is a transformational experience to walk through those woods. Of course, we don't know exactly where anything happened and how it happened. It is a woods or a forest, whatever you want to call it, it is a place where there are benches, places to stop. The beauty of traveling in the fall is, of course, in the forest the leaves are changing color and it just takes my breath away every time we've been there. We usually have a devotion before we enter the Sacred Grove and I've encouraged people to, to go there with the heart of a seeker, go there with the heart of someone who is looking for answers to questions, as we think about Joseph Smith, Jr. entering that grove with questions of his own, that it's a place where we can all go to find answers. It's truly a place of pilgrimage. And so, it means a lot to me. As far as food goes in Nauvoo, is it the Hotel Nauvoo Barb that I love so much? They have a wonderful buffet there and home cooked food. It's the best, best food of the whole trip and when we didn't get to go on the last trip, unable to have the buffet there, it was entirely disappointing.

**Karin Peter** 21:42

I have been to the Hotel Nauvoo for that buffet. I would agree with you. So, Barb, what about you? What are your favorites from the trips?

**Barbara Walden** 21:53

I really cannot answer that question, especially listening to Peter's answers. He's absolutely right. I mean, there's nothing like a communion service in the Kirtland Temple. There's nothing like a sunset on the Mississippi River and Nauvoo or sharing in a hymn festival in the upper room of the Red Brick Store that shares the story of Emma Smith. Nothing like walking through the Sacred Grove in the fall and seeing that glorious fall foliage. The church history sites are certainly a favorite, but then there's visiting with congregations. We go to five or six congregations throughout these tours, who host us in a delicious dinner. But then after dinner, there's usually a program where they share the story of their unique congregation. So, you're learning about people and you're learning about the diversity of Community of Christ and it's fascinating. And then each tour always includes sites that aren't directly connected to Community of Christ history, but there is a connection. I think about going to the Shaker historic sites and learning about the Shaker connection and Jesse Gause to the early church history and getting people out there to learn a Shaker dance and actually doing the Shaker dance in a Shaker meeting house. I think about that one tour that we did, well two tours called "For Everyone Born" where we looked at women in church history. We went to the Women's Rights Museum in Seneca Falls. It was the birthplace of the women's rights movement here in the United States and connecting that to church history or learning about African Americans in church history. The evening music program at a

plantation there in Williamsburg hosted us for a program where we sang and we danced there at the plantation. And to do that with the interpreters there, who were so talented, in that evening, along with our tour guests who'd we've been with for about a week at that point, was a very special experience. And then that was followed by a visit to the Underground Railroad Museum. So, it's moments like that, in between the destinations where we learn about the diverse history of Community of Christ as we're heading to a museum that's going to focus on the larger context of that heritage is really a highlight. So, I can't answer the question because there's so many awesome things we get to do. Each tour, I think this is my favorite tour, and then the next one comes along, and I think no, this is my favorite tour. It's the love of church history that keeps you going on the road.

**Karin Peter** 24:30

Well, I love the fact that you connect it to the greater context of American history and what was going on since this was frontier America when we start exploring our history, and it does help us understand more broadly, who we are, and who we were, and how we developed into the faith community of which were part now. So, we got kind of our favorites out of you both. So now I just want a couple easy questions. So first off, what's the most common thing people ask you? (Barb, where's the restroom?)

**Peter Smith** 25:07

When are we stopping at the next restroom?

**Karin Peter** 25:12

Let me rephrase the question. What's the common thing about church history that people ask?

**Barbara Walden** 25:18

The one question we can count on every year is the polygamy question. And it usually pops up in a class that we lead on the way to Nauvoo, where we're talking about the origins of the Nauvoo community and the nitty gritty of the theology and lifestyle practices happening in Nauvoo. Typically, that polygamy question will come up. And then there's always detailed questions that folks asked during the classes, when they want to get a deeper look or perspective in church history. What I find fascinating is often the best questions that everybody on the tour is wondering about, but they're afraid to ask are the questions where someone will pull you aside, say, at the Sacred Grove and say, "I understand there were multiple accounts of the First Vision. What can you tell me about that?" Or that again, the polygamy question. In Nauvoo usually someone will pull me aside and say, "I've been hearing this, what do you think is the honest history on this subject?" You can usually count on that every year. And it's good. We want to create an environment where people can ask those tough questions.

**Karin Peter** 26:27

So, what's the weirdest thing you've been asked? Like, the most off-the-wall? Where'd that come from kind of question?

**Barbara Walden** 26:37

I was once asked, not on a bus tour, but on a tour of the Kirtland Temple if there was ever a ninja in the Kirtland Temple. I've never been asked that before. (Karin: Okay). So, you never know what questions

you're gonna get, you can never fully prepare. What do you think, Peter? What are some of the strangest questions you've been asked?

**Peter Smith** 26:58

You know, I'm not coming up with questions like that. And I think part of it is because my role on the bus trip is different than Barb's. I'm quite pointed at the beginning that she's the history expert and I can hardly remember my own name most days and so people don't ask me a lot of history questions. If they do, I direct them toward Barb. Sorry, Barb. Yeah, so I don't get a lot of questions like that. My time is more spent interacting with people and talking about where they're at now and getting to know them, sharing about their life, sharing about my life. I am someone who loves to laugh. So of course, we'll have a lot of laughter. It's a different experience for me from the role that I play on the bus.

**Karin Peter** 27:57

And it's the kind of teamwork that the two of you do together. Through the conversation we've answered some of my very specific questions, like how long are the bus tours? Ten days to two weeks. It sounds like it's fall, right? Is that when they take place? And so, how does one go about it if they are interested in this? How do they go about finding out when the next tour is and if it's something that they would enjoy? How would they find that information?

**Barbara Walden** 28:34

Well, we always have information on our website about the newest, latest tour that's coming up. By contacting Peter and I, they certainly hear information about the bus tours. As I travel to different reunions and retreats, I always have fliers and reservation forms with me. They can also call the office for Community of Christ to Historic Sites Foundation and Wendy Eaton, who I believe you've had on a Project Zion Podcast before. She's there to send out reservation forms and to sign people up. Our upcoming tour is a Holy Land tour, and the World Conference will be promoting it, giving people reservation forms, and answering questions about the itinerary. It's going to be, probably, the longest tour we've ever done and reaching outside of the United States. It'll be a good adventure.

**Karin Peter** 29:24

It sounds exciting. If there are listeners who have gotten the impression that they need to wait till they're retired to take a tour, would this be a family vacation? Would a historic tour work if you had older kids who were part of Community of Christ, or is this something that you need to wait until you are retired to take?

**Barbara Walden** 29:51

We don't have any age requirements on this tour. We don't ID people as they're getting on the bus. I think it can certainly be suited for a family. We've had a teenager before on the tour. And that all went well. We've had young adults on the tour.

**Karin Peter** 30:07

So, you've had teenagers on the tour. You have people in their 80s on the tour. What if somebody had an idea for a tour? What if somebody had a whole group of young adults who wanted to do a tour? Is there a place for people to share their ideas or inquiries about that?



**Barbara Walden** 30:25

Yes, we are very open to people's ideas, and exploring possible topics and brainstorming on church history tours. In fact, our last tour in 2018 was born in a grassroots movement of people who are interested in community, Robert Cook and Andrew Bolton, our utopian community enthusiasts, on both historic communities as well as contemporary communities. They met with me and proposed the idea of a tour that was focused on communities. They knew about four or five contemporary communities where people were living all-things-in-common, in variations. We combined that with historic communities like the Shakers and the Harmonists and made a tour out of it. It was awesome. That was an idea that I wouldn't have thought of on my own. It was great to have both Andrew and Robert on the tour and helping me with the itinerary. The same is true with our 2017 tour that went to England and Wales. It was Peter Judd and Andrew Bolton who had a great idea, and they knew the history, they knew the places and they knew the people in the congregation. They were a huge help when it came to identifying an itinerary and destinations. So yes, we are very open to ideas that people have for specialty themed tours. Absolutely.

**Karin Peter** 31:56

That's terrific. I have a number of specialty themed tours in my brain right now. I'll be sharing those at a later date. I'm excited that you did this best trip to England, we're going to be interviewing here on the Cuppa Joe of Project Zion, we're going to interview Peter Judd about the history of the church in England and Wales. This is wonderful. Peter, I'm going to ask if you were to issue an invitation to our listeners, who maybe in the past hadn't thought about taking a historic sites bus tour, or even visiting the historic sites, what would you want to share with them?

**Peter Smith** 32:43

That's a good question. First of all, I could promise people they're going to have an amazing experience whether their level of interest in church history is minimal or it's something that they're passionate about. The trip itself is unbelievably such a vacation of time together with others, like I mentioned earlier about us calling it a reunion on wheels. It truly is a time of getting to know people today, not only hearing stories of people in the past, but getting to know people today. We get to experience transformative worship experiences as we're sitting in the pews and standing in the places where church giants went before us. It's just an incredible experience to be in those places and not only hear about the past, but to have new experiences, to actually be continuing the church story today in these sacred spaces. And not only that, but you can almost look at it as an all-inclusive trip. It's something where most of the meals are covered in the trip. We only pay for a few meals on our own. We are hand delivered by our bus driver to our hotel every night. I've had the luck or had the joy of helping to unload people's luggage at night and by the end of the trip, I know whose suitcases are whose and I'm able to basically hand them to them and say here's your suitcase. There's a whole great level of community building and getting to know one another. Like we mentioned, there's tons of laughter. We always do a lot of singing on the bus. People who enjoy music will have a good time. We watch videos, sometimes they're history related. We've watched "The Music Man," We've watched musicals on the bus, because it connected with where we were going or where we were driving through. There's all sorts of entertainment happening. We traveled to Niagara Falls. We went to Washington, DC and had a whole day to walk around the National Mall on our own. Wherever the trip is headed, we have not only history

related, but present-day related activities that are open to everyone. It's a great opportunity to call it vacation, and not just a history trip.

**Karin Peter** 35:29

Well, you make it very inviting, and I must say, between the singing, the worship, and the food and, and all that that entails, I'm hoping some of our listeners will make the decision to investigate going on a church history tour. I want to thank both of you, Barb Walden, Peter Smith, for sharing with us today about the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation bus trips. And for our listeners, if you'd like to know more about the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation, you can find Peter and Barb at [HistoricSitesFoundation.org](https://HistoricSitesFoundation.org). Or if you're more familiar with the Community of Christ website, you can go on there, click on Connect and then field ministries, service teams and affiliates. You will find them under that menu, as well. Any last thoughts before we sign off today? Barb, anything that you'd like to share before we close.

**Barbara Walden** 36:35

Well, the thought of appreciation. Thank you for inviting Peter and I to join you this afternoon to talk about the church history tours. It's really a highlight of what we do. It's an enjoyable benefit of Peter being on the Board and myself serving as a Site Director, or as an Executive Director here at Foundation. We warmly invite anyone to join us, whether it's on the Holy Land tour this fall, or next year's tour, for which we're still looking for themes. If anybody has any good ideas, please send them our way. Most importantly, thank you, Karin, and thank you to our friends from Cuppa Joe and Project Zion Podcast for sharing some time with us today.

**Karin Peter** 37:17

Thank you to both of you. This has been Cuppa Joe. I'm Karin Peter. Pack your suitcase and get on board for a historic sites bus tour. Thanks so much for listening.

**Josh Mangelson** 37:43

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