

Open Topics | President Emeritus Wallace B Smith

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Wallace B Smith, Brittany Mangelson, Josh Mangelson

Josh Mangelson 00:16

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts the restoration offers for today's world. We aim to feature a variety of guests with roots in the restoration tradition from Community of Christ and our friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The music has been provided by Ben Harrington, you can find his music at Mormon guitar.com.

Brittany Mangelson 01:08

Hello, everyone, welcome to an episode of the Project Zion Podcast. I'm Brittany Mangelson. And we are coming to you from Independence, Missouri. And today I have my husband and co-host Josh on. And we are delighted to bring you an interview with President Emeritus Wallace B. Smith. So thanks for coming, Wallace.

Wallace B Smith 01:30

Glad to be here.

Brittany Mangelson 01:31

So for those of you that don't know, Wallace was the President and Prophet of the church, who was the president at a very transitional time of the church and made some very significant changes and advancements to get the church where we are today. But we're gonna back up a little bit and maybe start at his childhood. He was the son of President W. Wallace Smith. So I'd like to ask you a little bit about that. What was it like growing up in the home with your dad being the President of the church?

Wallace B Smith 02:08

Well, I had a happy childhood. Dad was not President of the church when I was a small child. He had a wholesale hardware territory, he sold wholesale hardware in northwest Missouri. We lived in St. Joseph, Missouri. And it was a pretty typical childhood growing up in the 1930s. It was time of, of austerity, certainly, we were not poor. But we, we didn't have a lot of extra things as I was growing up. It wasn't until we moved out to Portland, Oregon, at the beginning of World War II, that dad began to be more active in, in the church. And we began to talk about what his role might be, after he finished

working in the shipyards. During World War II, he had been pastor of the Portland, Oregon, First Church Branch. And at that time, my uncle, Israel Smith was President of the church. And he had been he had been aging, and was certainly thinking about continuing leadership in the church. And I think began talking to my dad about that. So my early years and growing up years, were not particularly focused on future roles in the church. When I was in high school, as I began to think about careers, I had always thought about medicine as a career. And so when I began to talk about that with my parents, they encouraged me to pursue that because they realized that that was certainly my first love. And they did not say, Oh, well, you better take religion courses or better get prepared to be a leader in the church, because at that point, that did not seem too likely. Of course, from time to time, as I was growing up, people would sometimes say to me, Well, you know, you're Smith and there might be a time when you would be called upon to assume leadership at the church. But that wasn't a common theme. In my growing up years, I was focused on being a doctor and took Latin took courses that I thought would prepare me for a medical career. And that was certainly what I aimed for. And what I achieved, of course, I went to medical school became a doctor and, and was very, very happy pursuing a career in medicine.

Josh Mangelson 05:38

So did you work as a doctor in Portland, Oregon?

Wallace B Smith 05:41

No. I graduated from the University of Kansas School of Medicine. And I graduated in 1954, during the Korean War. And at that time, all medical doctors had to serve two years in the military, it was called the doctor draft law. And so I had been deferred for medical school. When I finished medical school and my internship, I was eligible to be drafted into the military. So I enlisted or I joined the Navy to keep from being drafted into the army, because I think I would have preferred the Navy. So I went in to the Navy Medical Corps in September of 1955 as part of the, as I say, Doctor Draft Law, and completed about two and a half, two years and eight months of active duty. As a medical doctor, I took a course in aviation medicine, and became a flight surgeon during the time I was in, in the Navy, when I reported aboard in Pensacola, Florida, and they were sending a lot of the general medical officers to Guam with the fleet Marines, and I didn't want to go to Guam. So I volunteered for aviation medicine. And that's how I became a flight surgeon. But following that, I went back into residency a year in internal medicine and three years in ophthalmology, and then finally took up a practice of Ophthalmology in Independence in 1962. That's kind of my medical career. I practiced medicine until 1976. During that time, as I lived in Independence, I was active in the church, of course, I was an elder in the church and shortly became ordained as a high priest in the church, and was quite active in in stake roles during the time that I was in practice, was in the Stake Presidency for a time, and assistant pastor of several other congregations and independence. And during that time, I felt myself being drawn a little more strongly into active participation and various roles in the church, I served on the Standing High Council, and sensed in a way that I was maybe getting groomed, you might say, for a larger role and leadership of the church. But it wasn't really until the fall of 1975 that my dad approached me and indicated to me that he had a strong light, that I should be preparing myself for full time leadership in the church. Well, of course, that represented quite a crossroads for me, because I was very happy as I say, practicing medicine. I felt like that was really my calling. But at the same time, I recognized my heritage, the obvious call that I had as as part of that heritage to respond to the leadings of the Spirit. I told dad that

certainly was not a complete surprise. That I had sensed a calling in my own life, a shifting of emphasis perhaps, and as I prayed about it, and spent time reflecting on my future life, I realized that, indeed, God was calling me to accept a different path for my life. And at that point, began the rather major transition that would be required to give up my practice care for my patients and be sure that they were cared for by other competent physicians. And at that point, affirm to dad that I would accept a call as what he called at that point, President Designate, because,

Josh Mangelson 10:35

Right, so you took two years to prepare for the actual call.

Wallace B Smith 10:41

Yes, I, I had, of course, as a priesthood member had studied the scriptures and, and felt like I understood church history and some general theological background. But at the same time, I realized that I was not prepared for a general ministerial role. And so that two year period was very important to me to prepare for ministerial leadership. And fortunately, that opportunity was provided me. And I was able to enroll in several theological courses at one of the seminaries in the Kansas City area. And, to course, a New Testament, of course, or Old Testament, in church history, general church history, Christian church history,

Josh Mangelson 11:46

This would have been what to improve,

Wallace B Smith 11:48

This would have been from 1976 to 1978. It was during that time that several of the professors at St. Paul, literally kind of opened up the top my head and poured in a whole Master's in Religion course for me in about an 18 month period, for which I was very grateful. They were very generous. Very helpful to me, as I prepared for a leadership ministerial role.

Josh Mangelson 12:26

Well, thank you very much. I want to backtrack just a little bit and just ask you first, was it typical for the next President, once they knew they were receiving a call to have taken time to prepare for it? Or was that something that you just specifically felt out of personally for you? And then also, I just want to talk about your dad's Presidency of it.

Wallace B Smith 12:51

Okay. Well, there was some variation in the preparation for leadership. In the past, Presidents of the church, Joseph III, of course, had 54 years as President of the church. And during that time, kind of set a course for the way the church would go. His son, Frederick, served as his secretary and served in the Presidency of the church for a number of years. So he was certainly well prepared to assume leadership when Brother Joseph died in 1914. Then his brother Israel, had been serving, both in the Presiding Bishopric of the church and in the Presidency, as a full-time minister for some time, so when Uncle Fred died, Uncle Israel was in a position to assume leadership without too much of a leadership gap or without a need for a lot of training because he had already been an active participant in leadership in the church.

Josh Mangelson 14:16

Now, what was different when Israel to your dad,

Wallace B Smith 14:21

Dad, of course, was not as fully involved in the life of the Church, as I indicated early on, and Uncle Israel recognized that and felt that that he needed to prepare dad to some extent, and that's when dad was called to be an Apostle and served for I think it was about three years as an apostle and then went into the Presidency of the church, in 1941, I think it was I'd have to check the date to be sure. But went into the Presidency the Church had served until 1958, when Uncle Israel was killed in an auto accident, and had assumed the Presidency of the Church. So he had a period of about eight years, also in the presidency to to become acquainted with the leadership role.

Josh Mangelson 15:25

Right, and that really shook up the church to find out that Israel passed away.

Brittany Mangelson 15:32

Suddenly,

Wallace B Smith 15:32

Yes, it was, it was a shock. Certainly aunt and uncle, his role was very much loved by the membership of the church and, and had provided a good healing kind of ministry, for the church, following a fairly turbulent years of Uncle Fred's presidency. But yeah, it was a shock. Fortunately, he had left some written instructions for the church, providing for a succession and leadership if he were to die. And that was the basis upon which dad accepted the call, and assumed leadership of the church.

Brittany Mangelson 16:21

So one episode that we did with Andrew Bolton and Barb Walden was about the story of your dad at St. Paul, and dealing and working with a bunch of theologians. And kind of this what they coined New Mormon History was coming out. Things like multiple versions of the First Vision and in kind of this story that everyone thought they knew so well, and maybe it was a little bit trickier than what we thought. And there was a moment where people turned to your father and said, Well, what do we do if what the teachings of Jesus contradict the teachings of Joseph, who do we follow Joseph for Jesus? And your dad said, well, we'd have to go with Jesus. And I guess there was a kind of a silent relief over the people in the room, and they knew that the direction that the church was going to go, would be the right choice, which I think is a pretty radical moment, I would say, in RLDS history, and one that was, you know, maybe built up over time, and continues to be explored. But how, how was your perception in that whole transition of maybe the story that you grew up hearing, as a little boy, you know, was maybe different in reality of what happened and seeing your dad kind of be one of the, you know, poignant figures in the church's history to start leading the church through that journey.

Wallace B Smith 17:55

I was not really, in the midst of that discussion in 1960s. When all of this began to, to occur, the meetings with the St. Paul seminarians and the shift in emphasis from our history being our theology, to

a Christian understanding of theology, becoming the guiding emphasis for the, for the leadership of the church, I, I was not really, in on those discussions, I was aware of some of them, but in a busy medical practice it, it was not on the forefront of my thinking, as it was with those who were involved in those discussions, the Joint Council and particularly Apostles and Presidency and Bishopric. So I must say, it came as a bit of a surprise to me, as I began to be phased in to that understanding, to learn that what I understood was, was the emphasis of the church, and the history of the church was being explored and examined, and perhaps even altered so much as, as modified to accommodate some understandings of Christian theology as a whole. So as I say, that was a surprise to me, and it took me some time to adapt and kind of to get on board, you might say, with what had been going on in the Joint Council. And in the awareness of some other members of the church. It certainly was, was not an easy transition for the church. As a whole, as you're probably aware, at this point, there were some major battles, for instance, in the development of the church school curriculum, as we tried to reflect more teachings of Jesus, and the intersection model between where people meet the gospel in the midst of their everyday lives, as kind of separate and apart, over in a separate compartment where your religion exists, sort of, apart from the rest of your life. And this, this was difficult for many people in the church to accept, because for so many years, the church was the gospel. When persons preached, they preached a development of the church, from Joseph Smith forward, and what that meant in the development of their life, having accepted the restoration gospel, and that was not abandoned. But it certainly received a new direction during that 1960s period. And it, it took a lot of adjustment. And some people, of course, never made the adjustment. A were just not able to accept some of the new emphases that began to be talked about in the church.

Brittany Mangelson 22:06

Yeah, well, because it sounds like the entire identity of the church switched, because we've heard it said before that the church was the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints with the tagline, not the Mormons. But, but growing out of that and turning it into a more positive identity. And I guess, especially when the church was sending missionaries to non-Christian nations, and really having to face that reality of okay, this little story about a farm boy doesn't necessarily resonate.

Wallace B Smith 22:38

Yeah, they are not interested in that aspect of the gospel of people who've never heard of Jesus Christ, were not as receptive to a specific interpretation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so much as they were just learning about Jesus, Himself, you know, at the, at the Christian gospel, we had to start there, before we could introduce the specifics of our denomination and its beliefs. And that certainly altered our missionary story. At least it seemed to the Joint Council in the 1960s, that that was necessary to do. Now, some churches. The Mormon Church, for example, did not see that as a barrier, they went right ahead and told the story of the church, as they knew it, and believed it, and had started with the first vision and it started with Joseph and his interpretation of Scripture, and, and they, along with some other Christian churches took the position. This is our story. This is what we're preaching, if that is meaningful to you, come with us. If it isn't, then we'll go elsewhere. You know, it's so it was an informed decision to adapt the gospel to be meaningful to non-Christian populations. And that was one approach out of several that could have been taken. But its the road that our church took.

Brittany Mangelson 24:35

And I'm assuming that you're supportive of that? Do you think it was the best approach? Oh, yes. Yeah. I do too. I know I'm not to speak for all Latter-day Seekers. But I think a fair amount of us who have found a home in Community of Christ can really admire and appreciate the journey that the church took and I kind of always say that the overall journey that the church has taken kind of parallels our personal journeys. And so it's it's been really beneficial to find a home that or people can relate to us. And we've all gone through this deconstructing of what the restoration is and what it means and why does it still have value?

Josh Mangelson 25:19

Right? So if they do find value in restoration theology, a lot of seekers are be more appreciative of non literal approaches or more nuanced approaches. So I just want to talk a little bit about your own personal beliefs through this time, what are your beliefs have been growing up in RLDS church? And how would that have shifted? When you went through St. Paul's seminary. You said that it was like taking the top off and filling your head full of stuff? And how would have that changed the emphasis for you leading up into becoming the President/Prophet of the church?

Wallace B Smith 26:01

Yeah, well, I guess I would say that I had, along with many other members of the church, a fairly simple faith, a fairly literal faith. And that was, I guess, uninformed, you might say. And so to learn that, that the gospels were not literally written down by the apostles, whose names were affixed, to the Gospels was a new information to me. And so I had to work through that. Realize that the Christian gospel is a mélange of many different ideas and thoughts, pasted together, you might say, to form the New Testament, emphasized a certain way to, to combat a Gnosticism. You know, all of those details of the development of Christian faith, were new to me, and fascinating. But kind of flew in the face, you might say, have a literal understanding of the gospel, even the gospel as Joseph Smith understood it. So that was, as I say, both liberating and at the same time, but a little bit disturbing. Until I was able to work through that, and come out the other side with something, an understanding of the gospel that had made sense to me. And I realized that it, it always did make sense to me to, to have a, an expanded understanding of Scripture, for instance, and to understand that the Christian faith evolved over a long period of time and with many starts and stops and reverses. So as I work through that, I came to a feeling of, of satisfaction of making sense, and felt good about where I came out, you might say, in my working through my personal theology,

Brittany Mangelson 28:39

so what year did you become Prophet/President?

Wallace B Smith 28:43

1978 1978? Okay.

Brittany Mangelson 28:46

So when you became Prophet/President of the church, did you have an idea of the direction that you are going to help lead the church in I'm specifically thinking of the Temple, this beautiful building that we're sitting in as well as ordaining women? So essentially, 156? I'd like to know, maybe the

background of that for you on a personal level? And what led up to those things and those discussions that you're having to produce documents?

Wallace B Smith 29:21

Well, when I became President, I talked with my counselors and some other members of the 12 and said, you know, with a new Presidency, we kind of need a new direction. We need an emphasis for this period of time. So let's kind of have a theme. We talked about a theme and realized that church had gone through a period of transition and upgrading of its theology. And so we said, Let's I'm not sure just who came up with the phrase, but let's, let's have an emphasis of the faith to grow. And we felt that that had two dimensions to it. Both the vertical dimension and the faith to grow spiritually, as well as the faith to grow numerically, in light of new understandings and new emphases that we felt were an outgrowth of the, of the studies of the 1960s. So we launched the Faith to Grow theme in the in the World Conference of 1980. And throughout the church, we asked people to consider the four C's of our new emphasis, which would be based on the ministry of Christ. And we kind of went from there. And for the whole decade of the 80s, we look forward to building around that theme of the Faith to Grow. And that went fine for the first few years of people, I'd say embraced that theme and the leadership of the church and missionaries spoke of, of the four C's of calling and conveying, and I can't remember all the four C's calling me while it's been a long time ago now, since we will use that the, but they embraced it. But also during that time, other things were happening in society as a whole. And the church, of course, was not apart from society, but part of society. And as you are well aware, the era of feminism was beginning to emerge. And women in the church were beginning to talk about the aspects of feminism, and how that affected their role as members of the Church. Discussions were being had about was it appropriate for women to speak from the pulpit? What roles were appropriate for women within the work of the church? Did it just involve potluck suppers? And, and teaching Sunday school class? Or were there other possibilities for leadership roles? And if so, in what context? There were certainly women in the forefront of that discussion, one of them being Marge Troeh along with some others. And so from well, from the 1970s, on, these were prominent discussions in among church members and church leaders.

Josh Mangelson 33:17

So when you say that it wasn't apart from society, it was the early 1980s, that the ERA, the Equal Rights Amendment, was being right presented to be passed, which never did

Wallace B Smith 33:27

Never did pass, but that was, what was a major theme in society at that time, and certainly reflected in the thinking of, of some of the women in the church, I must say, it wasn't all women of the church. Many who believe very strictly that a woman's role was secondary, should never be aspiring to lead leadership or certainly not to priesthood. But there was a significant movement within the church within our church, RLDS church at that time, to expand the roles of women. And, in fact, the First Presidency, published a paper called "The role of Women," and in that we spoke of the appropriateness of women speaking from the pulpit, for instance, of doing workshops, teaching adult classes, things that now seem rather ridiculous to think about, because it's such a part of our understanding and our practice now, but at that time, it was very much the concern of many people in the church. Come. So I think our paper on the role of women, was released in the 1982 World Conference. And there was also a

resolution passed at the conference for the first president is to study further study the role of women up to and including priesthood, in the church. And so certainly the subject was out there and it was being discussed. And there was a great deal of thought given to it. Coming up to the 1984 conference, we, the First Presidency, were seeking to be responsive to that resolution to call for a study to be made by the First Presidency. And as part of that study, we actually did a widespread poll throughout the church, both of priesthood members, and of non-priesthood members, general membership of the church. And it was interesting, as that poll began to be analyzed and brought into focus, it appeared that there was about a 60/40 split against priesthood membership for women, as opposed to for priesthood membership for women: 60 against, 40 for. Approving .so that was an interesting insight for us to have at that point regarding how the membership felt, generally speaking, but I also was doing a great deal of, of studying in my own mind about this question. And over a period of time, several months leading up to the conference in 1984, I of course, studied, prayed, prepared to bring what I felt would be inspired instruction to the church. And more and more became impressed upon me that it was time for women to have access to priesthood membership in the church, I particularly did not want the impression of the church to be that we were responding to opinion polls for our leadership positions in the church. So the fact that a poll was released in January of 1984, showing that there was actually a majority in opposition to what I was coming more and more to believe was, was the direction the church should go, was an additional burden for me. But at the same time, I felt that I needed to proceed in that direction. I was aware of all of the background and history of priesthood in the church, the feeling that many had of honoring the sacredness of priesthood, but the eternal nature of priesthood and the fact that the long history and tradition of the church was a male priesthood. But I also felt that it was compatible with our belief in the equality of all creation, that women ought to be able to have access to the same privileges and responsibilities as men as it relates to leadership roles in the church. So with that background, and with that growing impression of the Spirit on my part, I felt called to present section 156 to the church. And this involves, of course, not only the sections on priesthood membership, but also start to be made toward preparing for building the temple. As you as you know, this was a watershed moment for the church. Many people rejoiced. Many people despaired because they felt this was not in conformance with previous scripture, with previous understandings traditions, and it led to serious schism in the church, as you are no doubt aware, schism, which has persisted. And that's to my

Josh Mangelson 40:10

To this day we just drove past the building, we're like, Oh, that's where that church is, right across the street.

Wallace B Smith 40:19

But there's you know there's to this day there's those feelings and to my regret that had to occur but at the same time I think it did have to occur for our church to move forward and be the church that I felt it was called to be in today's world. So

Josh Mangelson 40:43

Did you have any inkling anticipation for what was going to happen? As far as...

Wallace B Smith 40:50

I guess I did not realize the depth to which some people would be forced to, to follow. My hope was that it was something that would take a lot of adjustment, and many people would be uncomfortable, but that over time, the majority of people would come to accept it. And I think, surprised me to certain extent, the degree to which many people refused to accept that direction for the church and in fact, withdrew their support. And in many cases, their membership from the church was to my lasting regret. But still, I felt that was what we were called to do and be,

Brittany Mangelson 41:55

Well, it's hard when these are family members, these are members of your congregation. These are people you've known for decades, if not your whole life. (Yes). And suddenly, there's that big,

Wallace B Smith 42:06

You can't talk about something that is a major part of your life.

Brittany Mangelson 42:11

Well in it, you mean, so you have daughters and a wife, who I'm assuming have benefited from, you know, priesthood ministry, women in the priesthood. And yeah, it becomes a part of you. And yet it's something that you love dearly.

Wallace B Smith 42:29

In fact, there were those among the dissidents who said, Oh, well, he's just doing that so that his daughters can be in line for leadership in the church. And of course, that was the farthest.

Josh Mangelson 42:45

That's one of the LDS tropes that I heard growing up. That's the only reason why you did it. You could ordain your and if that were the case with the president is what they said it was like, but that didn't happen.

Wallace B Smith 42:57

It didn't happen. And my wife is a priesthood member, and one of my daughters is, but the other two are not. And that's fine. And we went on from there. Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 43:16

So how was your wife in all of this? Was she? I mean, were you having conversations with her and getting some of her feedback, or was the idea ...

Wallace B Smith 43:28

She always made a point not to insert herself in my struggles and contemplations, because she felt that that was not her place, to try and influence me. She was very supportive, after the fact, and happy. But I'd made a point of not being involved in discussions or really, you know, doing the shoulder shrugs, and eye winks leanings that you might anticipate on my due, because she is very sensitive to just such impressions on the part of other people, fearing that she might be an influence. So she bent over backwards really to try not to be an influence.

Josh Mangelson 44:31

So this might be too personal. And you can tell me that that's the case. But I do want to ask you about the revelatory process. So which sections of the Doctrine and Covenants did you present? Other than 156? And then including section 156? How would you say that the revelatory process worked for you, and how would you try not to inject your own personal agenda with that process?

Wallace B Smith 45:00

Well, right off the top, you realize that that's impossible not to inject yourself into the process. You're a person after all, and whatever comes from divinity is filtered through a person. And so there's, there's always going to be a human element. It was certainly a learning process for me. My first experience in 1978, you know, I, about January is when I began to really think seriously about what was I going to present to the conferences as my first message to the church?

Josh Mangelson 45:49

So was there an expectation to present Words the Council at every conference?

Wallace B Smith 45:55

I would say, yes, there would be an expectation, it was not always the case. But certainly the majority of the time, there was a message brought to the church, it's time a conference simply because that's the time when the delegates were assembled to consider a document. And, and so it was just simply convenient. But yes, I'd say there would be an expectation among many of the church membership. And so on that basis, I was certainly concerned as a new leader, to want to sort of set a tone, speak to, to the people, give them some indication of my leadership style, and, and my leadership position, started to say along about January, I began to think, okay, no, how does this work? And I began to try to withdraw myself at times and get quiet, pray, study, contemplate, and wait. And nothing happened. I was not sure what I was waiting for. But I certainly did not feel inspired beyond just what normal thought processes might provide. And this continued, and we got closer to conference, and I got more desperate and, and began to think, oh, maybe there's just nothing there, maybe I'm on my own. But at the same time, that process of thinking about the needs of the church, thinking about, and examining where the church was in relation to where we felt the church needed to be, or where we wanted to, to go. My own thought processes began to coalesce into certain ideas. And those ideas became more fixed in my mind. And finally, I got to the point where I was able to say, Okay, Lord, this is where I am, you're going to have to help me at this point. Is this, is this truly, where I should be going? Can you help me at this point? What else do I need to do? What is the process at this point? And it goes this at that point that you have to interpret your feelings, but the feeling becomes stronger and stronger that? Yes, this is, this is what needs to be. For me, there was never any dream, there was never any voice of affirmation. It was just simply a stronger and stronger feeling within myself, that this is, this is where we needed to be. And this is where I needed to go. And unless I hear very strongly to the contrary, this is where I'm going. And that that has was pretty much the revelatory process for me. It's very difficult to describe. And in fact, most of the prophets of the church have not haven't tried to describe it with any with any detail because it's, it's not amenable to description, or to, to explanation, so much as it is just simply a sense of part of your being that was a learning process for me, and one that never got any easier.

Brittany Mangelson 50:07

What's a lot of pressure?

Wallace B Smith 50:09

Yeah, a lot, a lot of pressure. Great blessing, but at the same time, quite a burden. Because we might just talk for a minute about the prophetic role. It's a real dichotomy in a way, because the prophetic role is, is in essence, taking the people from where they are to where they ought to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit. And this sometimes takes you in directions that you know, that people don't want to go, that will lead to problems for the church, lead to financial difficulties. And then we'll make people, many people unhappy. Well, that conflicts with your priestly role. And you want, you want to be a good leader, you want to be well liked, you want to be someone who's thought well of, and you want to be able to represent the Spirit to the people in a way that it will be meaningful and acceptable to them. But at the same time, here's this prophetic push, saying, never mind all that. Here's where you need to go. And that's, that's the burden. It's the burden of any leadership, of course, from the lowliest pastor in the smallest branch, all the way up to the leadership of the church. That's the burden of prophetic leadership, but it's there, and has to be listened to, and has to be considered. And, you know, that's something that every leader has to face.

Brittany Mangelson 52:03

So with that, how, how does a leader keep from letting I guess that power go to their head? Or how do they keep themselves in check?

Wallace B Smith 52:14

That's the other burden of leadership. And it's, it's a constant. It's a constant tendency or temptation. It's almost unbearable temptation at times. But that's what I've always said, is an important check and balance for our church is that it is not an infallible leadership, the World Conference, has the final say, about any prophetic instruction. And as people have asked me sometimes, what would you do? If the World Conference said, No, we're not going to accept this? Well, you do what you had to do, you would ask them to consider it, take time with it, continue to pray about it. But if it was the will of the people, let it not be accepted belief of our churches, that would be the final, final word. So it's, it's such a delicate balance between that the role of leadership and the role of the common consent of the people. And it's something that's hard for some people to understand or to think about, but it's there. And it's important. check and balance, in my opinion.

Josh Mangelson 53:45

Thank you. One of the things about the restoration is we're a temple building people. So one of the things that Joseph Smith did in every area that he moved to it seemed like was build a new temple. So when he was in Kirtland, they built the Kirtland Temple, and then they go on also a Nauvoo, up until section 156. Kirtland was the Temple that was owned from within the RLDS church. Was there an expectation that you would build another temple? And then when that did come forth, was there any setbacks because of the strife between ordaining women? Was there any financial setbacks to building the temple? And did that hinder any of the excitement to build another temple?

Wallace B Smith 54:33

That was interesting? Of course, there was. There's always been an expectation on the part of people in the RLDS church that there would be a temple on Independence. They weren't quite sure what was supposed to happen in that temple and they weren't quite sure the purpose of it, but they knew that Joseph had indicated that, that there should be at least One temple, maybe many temples, I don't know if we've ever seen the plot of 24 temples that he laid out. But one way or another, there was a feeling among the people in the RLD Church, that there should be a temple and independence. So that was not a difficult proposition for many people in the church to, to accept and get behind and support. On the other hand, there were some people, particularly what you might call the liberal element in the church, who were afraid that simply giving in to the idea of a temple and Independence was a backward step, a step more toward the old gospel, as opposed to the new approach the church was taking in its theology and gospel message. So that, interestingly enough, I was not aware of until after we had built the temple when some people were bold enough to tell me that this was a concern among some of my liberal friends in the church. But it was, oddly enough in this in this in spite of the schism that occurred after 1984, when we got down to raising funds for the Temple. That was, I won't say it was simple, but it was much less difficult than you might imagine, in a small church, to raise \$50 million, so that you could build a temple with cash, and have \$50 million left over for an endowment that says there were a lot of people in the church who were very supportive of building a temple, as I say, they weren't quite sure what what ought to take place in the Temple aren't one sure what the purpose of it was, but they wanted a temple in independence. And so it was gratifying to see the response of the people. And to see the support that was forthcoming when we did get to the point where we want to just start building,

Brittany Mangelson 57:31

I've heard that some of the thought of when a temple was built is that when Christ would come back, he would come to the Temple. And so maybe that's where, when you were talking about the liberal side of the church was thinking maybe it was a step back and the forward-thinking theology. And you also said that there was kind of some confusion of what would happen in the Temple. And I know that from people that we interact with, there's a lot of curiosity about what does happen in the Community of Christ Temple. So if you could describe it, I guess, how did the purpose of the temple develop? And how involved were you in that process? And then just explain what happens here?

Wallace B Smith 58:13

Well, I was certainly very much involved in the process, I had to write the paper that describe the purpose of the Temple. But from almost the beginning, we all said, this is going to be an open temple. It's not for secret purposes. This is a temple that will inspire people, it's a temple to come to, but more importantly, it's a temple to go out from is to go out in mission from having been inspired by the beauty, by the Spirit that is present in the Temple, you go out from the Temple in mission to the world. So that was our emphasis from the beginning. We felt that it was important to have a theme that would be descriptive of, of the Spirit's presence in the Temple. And so that's why we said it was dedicated to the pursuit of peace. Because Christ Spirit is a Spirit of peace, of Spirit of love. And that's what we wanted our temple to, to be symbolic of. So, the pursuit of peace, really emulating Jesus' ministry He was for teaching, for inspiration for ministry, for inspiration for mission. These were the things that Jesus preached, and these were the things that we wanted to model and symbolize in our temple. So this was the process we went through as we began to put together the purpose of our temple. So that that was kind of the process we went through process of choosing the design was also interesting be, at least I

felt it was interesting because we did not want just a Greek temple, we didn't want to just an office building, we didn't want something that was just even Western, because we, we were an international church, and we wanted the temple to be in some way recognizable by all cultures and all people. So as we thought about that, and talked about it, our and began to have discussions with our architect, very early on, he began to talk about a spiral design. And we, of course, had never even considered a spiral design, but we began to, to think about it began to talk about what things a spiral symbolizes, you know, and, and it became more and more evident to us that this might be very well, a good symbol for us, and something that would be recognizable, something that occurs in nature, something that all cultures might be able to relate to, rather than a Western steel and concrete glass edifice. So that was really the basis on which we went forward with a spiral design. And, as it turned out, it was a difficult design, both to, to build and to, to work with acoustically and, and even visually, because a round surface is much more reflective, and you'd get dead spots and live spots off of a round surface. And so we had to be very careful in designing for the acoustics in the sanctuary. And also, because the elevation changed, as you proceed up a spiral, we had to decide how we were going to deal with that. And that led to the evolution of the worshiper's path, and also to the continuing evolution out, going out from the sanctuary into another level, and out the doors into the World Plaza. Again, symbolizing going forth into the world, leaving the Temple in mission. So those were all things that had went into our process as we, as we went, went through the design of the Temple.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:10

So by what time was it dedicated?

Wallace B Smith 1:03:13

it was dedicated in 1994. It was actually finished in the summer of 1992. But we didn't want to hold the dedication until the next World Conference so that more people would be here and be available to participate in the dedication service. So that's why we waited until 1994.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:35

So how long was your presidency? It was from 1978 until...

Wallace B Smith 1:03:39

1996.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:42

And that the end of your presidency is also something that you're known for, I guess,

Josh Mangelson 1:03:48

Very different from every other Prophet/President.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:51

So, it had been tradition to keep the president, the line of Presidency, in the Smith family.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:58

But not only that, but until death.

Brittany Mangelson 1:04:01

Yes, yes. Yes until death. So yes, talk about that.

Wallace B Smith 1:04:06

Okay. The service until death, of course, was abrogated in dad's transition in leadership because he resigned, he didn't die in office. Okay. He turned it over to me. And he became President Emeritus. So that precedent was already established with your dad. But the transition out of the Smith family was certainly new with me. And I just felt like it was timely to begin thinking about that process. Again, it involves struggles of the Spirit, because I wanted to be responsive to the divine mind. But at the same time, wanted to open up the possibility of leadership to other abled people, other qualified people, besides members of the Smith family, so I just, I'd been of course, thinking about that for a number of years, but did finally respond to leadings of the Spirit in opening up the ministry of leadership to other persons other than members of the Smith family, in my call of leadership to President McMurray. So, yes, that was another breach of precedent that I was responsible for.

Brittany Mangelson 1:05:57

Are you satisfied with that? Do you think that that was a Oh, absolutely.

Wallace B Smith 1:06:03

Not that there weren't other members of the Smith family? Who could very well, I've assumed leadership. But I just felt it was important to, as I say, open up the leadership of the church, to other able people.

Josh Mangelson 1:06:24

Right, which almost never happens within organizations like once it gets going a certain way, it's very hard to relinquish a certain power or dynasty. (Yeah) As people would say. So what was going through your mind? Was there something that made you uncomfortable with it and dynasty within the Smith family line?

Wallace B Smith 1:06:48

I wouldn't say uncomfortable. I would say that there were, I felt, perhaps times when there might have been other possibilities for leadership in the church. But at the same time, I'm not being critical of past leadership of the church, I felt, I feel that all those who served, including members of the Smith family, were very able and, and brought good leadership to the church. But as I say, I just felt that we were unnecessarily limiting ourselves by confining it to one family.

Josh Mangelson 1:07:36

I mean, you could the same could be said with priesthood in the ordination of women. Yeah. You're only choosing from 50%. Yes, a talented pool. And you might as well include,

Wallace B Smith 1:07:47

Again, that as is limiting ourselves in an unnecessary way.

Brittany Mangelson 1:07:53

Well, there's nothing barring members of the Smith family of some incoming president of the church again, male or female, really, right. So it's fascinating. So I guess, really quick, we won't be too much longer. But wrapping up, post presidency, another big change that has happened with the church, that people were curious about your take on the name change to Community of Christ. Taking on again, as I mentioned, kind of earlier, maybe a more positive identity instead of the tagline, not the Mormons. What were what were your reflections on that are your thoughts? Looking back on that moment of time?

Wallace B Smith 1:08:36

while I was very supportive of the effort to come up with a new name? I don't know. I think I may have been more sensitive than many people to that long name. The fact that from our beginnings, we were an opposition church. We were opposed to something we were opposed to the Mormon church and their interpretation of the restoration gospel. We were saying, we're not the Mormons. That was our that was our message for all those years. We were the one true church, just as the Mormons believe they were the one true church. Can't be two one true churches. But that had always been a bit of a sticking point for me, personally. I grew up in the church was proud of my heritage in the church was not embarrassed by my church. But I at the same time, I felt that we could do better. At the same time, we had come to a point where we were no longer at war with the Mormon church. We'd gotten past those days. We'd gone our way, they had gone their way. We were cordial in our relationships with one another. And it just seemed as though it was time to stop defining ourselves as to what we were not what we were opposed to. Because that time was really kind of passed. So as we began to think, what are what are our core beliefs, we went back to what we believed was our most important core belief, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And what better way to symbolize that core belief and to identify ourselves as the Community of Christ. At the same time, we wanted to preserve the idea of community of the designing vision, because that is basic to who we are, and what we are. So we felt Community of Christ was the perfect blend. And that was kind of how we arrived at that name. And I think that, that it has proven to be inspirational to us, it proven to be a good symbol for us, going forward from time of have the name change.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:30

fairly. So another story that I heard moving forward and years is the National Conference of The Church just held, discussing the issue of LGBT ordination and marriage in America. And we were just talking to Michelle McGrath yesterday. And she said that you were invited to pray at that service, and that there was a lot of angst with the community, and no one really knew what direction it was going to take. But she has heard and I've heard this from several people that when you prayed at that service, there seemed to be just a calm Spirit, I guess, hearing your voice and knowing that you had taken the church through very, very difficult times before that, that was kind of it was a witness to people. And they knew in that moment that whatever was going to happen, it was going to be okay. So I don't know if you were aware of that reaction to your prayer. But I guess my question with that would be what is your relationship with the church now? And do you still feel like you have some sort of, I don't know what, yeah, influence or, you know, Spirit about you that you're able to bring together some understanding and camaraderie, maybe when hard questions arise?

Wallace B Smith 1:13:02

Well, I suppose there is that element. And perhaps even more than I'm aware of, I've tried very hard in my role as President Emeritus not to be an influence, you can only have one captain of the ship, you can only have one profit. And so I made it very clear, both to Grant McMurray and to Steve Veazey, that they would never see me, shaking my head, they never see me, given a nudge or raising an eyebrow. That was not my role. And I would reject that role, if someone tried to thrust it upon me. So that has been my, my very clear understanding with the leaders of the church. And at the same time, as you say, they're bound to be whatever people read into my participation and whatever way I participate, either support or opposition, depending on what I'm doing. And I, I can't help that any more than anyone else can. But I, I am very purposefully making an effort not to influence. My prayer at that service was for unity and understanding and mutual support. And I tried to be neutral in my language. But simply my being there was a message, of course, and that's unavoidable. The only way I would avoid that message was not to not show up, not to be there. And that would have been a message. (Yeah. Right.) So it's inevitable that there are those circumstances. But at the same time, I try my best not to be an overt influence, if I can avoid it.

Josh Mangelson 1:15:27

That makes a lot of sense. So just to wrap up, I want to ask a two-fold question of if you could go back, would you do anything differently during your time as Prophet/President of the church? And then to date, you've had 20 years as President Emeritus, have you, we just mentioned one thing, have you been satisfied with where the church is going? And, what vision do you see? What are your hopes for the church going forward?

Wallace B Smith 1:15:59

Well, as to what I might do differently, I suppose everyone has second thoughts, and look back on their life decisions, perhaps, in ways that are informed by consequences. But I must say that I have felt that I did my best, and was as responsible to the leadings of the Spirit, as I knew how to be, and I don't know of anything that I would do differently, might do it in a different way. Looking back with hindsight, I might do some things a different way. But I guess I would say that, for the most part, I feel that I did the best I could, and that, that I would probably do the same thing again, as far as I had this insights to do, what I did, as far as as far as the direction the church is, is taking, I'm certainly supportive of President Veazey and and all the leadership of the church, I think they are wrestling with questions and, and burdens that, that every denomination is, is wrestling with, right now. Some, perhaps doing better with it than others some doing differently than we are. But I, I go back to, to the concept on core belief of the worth of all persons. And I just don't see how we can come out anyplace else than where we are going and still adhere to that basic principle, that all people are of worth in the sight of God, and therefore have equal claim on God's Spirit, and God's love, and God's mercy and grace. I don't know where you can be anywhere else, and still be in the Christian belief system. So, you know, I think it's it's tough sledding ahead for all organized religion, we see that already. And I think that will continue because of the secularization of society in general, the dumbing down of society in some ways. I, I regret, to see that. But I think it's a part of, of the future. We need to continue to try to provide leadership, whatever leadership we can we, we need to reach out those people who are like minded, who see our values and, and support our values, we, we would hope that there would be more and more of those people. But honestly, I think we have to face the fact that there are all there going to be struggles for organized

religion in general. And we need to gird ourselves for those struggles, and do the best we can in the face of a very secular society.

Brittany Mangelson 1:19:31

So one thing that I didn't get to ask, but I forgot really quick. We talked about the restoration. And I think a lot of us thought maybe that it was Christ's original church being restored now. How would you say the word restoration has evolved? Or what meaning do you find in restoration? What's the purpose for you with that word now?

Wallace B Smith 1:19:56

Well, I think humankind is always is in a state of rebellion against the good, against God, and the idea of love, and mercy. And I think we're always in need of a restoration to God's presence, we tend so much to put ourselves at the center of our concerns the center of our universe, we rebel against God being the center, we want to put ourselves at the center. I think the whole idea of restoration is to restore God, to the center of our lives in the center of our concerns, the center of our church. And that fits right in with our history, and Joseph's concerns of putting God once more at the center of a rebellious society, we're still fighting that same rebellion against God, we need restoration every day, we need to turn once more to the purposes of God. And I think that's what restoration is all about.

Josh Mangelson 1:21:10

Thank you. Thank you very much for joining us. It's been a real pleasure to sit down with you and speak with you.

Brittany Mangelson 1:21:20

Yeah, thanks. This was well it's been a pleasure. This was kind of a dream of mine to get to do and I didn't necessarily think it was going to happen. So it happened. Thank you. Thank you,

Wallace B Smith 1:21:31

I appreciate your you're doing this. It's a it's a big job and and you're to be commended for making the effort to get points of view and let people be exposed to them. Yeah,

Josh Mangelson 1:21:47

thanks again. Project Zion is sponsored by the Latter-day Seekers team from Community of Christ. The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking, and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter-day Seekers, team, or of Community of Christ.