

Cuppa Joe | Theo-History | Review and Vision for the Future

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Karin Peter, Lach Mackay, Tony Chvala-Smith

Karin Peter 00:27

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is Cuppa' Joe where we explore restoration history. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. Our discussion today is the last in a series of conversations about the historical and theological journey of Community of Christ. Maybe I should say last at this point, which is at the close of 2023. Our resident panel members have been Lach Mackay and Tony Chvala-Smith. Lach is an historian, the Director of Community of Christ Historic Sites, and serves on the Council of Twelve Apostles. Tony is a theologian who teaches scripture and theology at Community of Christ Seminary and at Graceland University. Both Lach and Tony are quite familiar to Project Zion listeners. In this series, we've been following the development from the early church through the Reorganization and our continued journey as Community of Christ. And we've looked at important church events in their historical and cultural context, as well as corresponding theological developments and the impact they've had on the church. So, today, we're going to look a little bit at, um, the past, maybe revisit some themes we thought were important, or note some people we might have missed. And then we're going to spend a little bit of time looking towards the future and see if there are some reflections on our journey that will inform that future. So, let's begin who wants to go first? Shall, we start with, with Lach or Tony? Or do we, do we flip a coin? I think Lach, you traditionally begin, do you not?

Lach Mackay 02:13

I don't know how, uh, I would know how not to go first.

02:17

Okay. All right. Let's begin. Lach?

Lach Mackay 02:23

I want to start with section 162:2a. "Listen carefully to your own journey as a people, for it is a sacred journey and it has taught you many things you must know the journey yet to come." It will not surprise our listeners to know that this is one of my favorite passages and I return to it often. And, so, I just want to do kind of an overview of some of the lessons I think we can draw from our past. We spend a lot more time thinking about the earliest years and so I will kind of broaden as I get to the more recent past. And I'm hoping Tony can step in and save the day on some of those as well. Um, some of the

things that I find comforting and troubling. A, a comfort for me, you know, is a young Joseph Smith, uh, struggling with family conflict. The death of Alvin, um, what's gonna happen to Alvin and, and it was really, instead of religion bringing a family together, it was tearing the Smith family apart. So, as I think many of our listeners know, know, Joseph turned to James and went into a grove of trees and prayed. We don't know exactly when. We don't know exactly what, but in his earliest telling, he, he looks back on that, he reflects on that in his 1832 account and says, My soul was filled with love and for many days, I could rejoice with great joy. And the Lord was with me. And in that earliest telling it is, it is Jesus that he sees as one personage, it seems to be Jesus. And so that reminds us that from the first stirrings of what would become the church, Christ was at the center. Now, I think we wandered from that path on occasion later, but, but I take comfort in knowing that that, that is where we were firmly grounded as we started. Uh, Jackson County, Missouri and cultures in conflict, um, 1831 to 33. We're New Englanders. The earlier settlers are from Kentucky and Tennessee. We each thought the other group dressed funny and talked funny and acted funny. We're communitarians. They're rugged individualistic. We're, uh, hoping to convert Native Americans. They are terrified of them. We're generally opposed to slavery. They either owned or, or aspired to enslave people. Um, and we knew we were God's chosen people and they knew we were arrogant. And, so, because of those differences, we were violently driven from Jackson County. As a people, we have been persecuted because of the prejudices of others. And I would argue that that experience leaves us with a moral obligation to be more thoughtful about our own prejudices today. Section 95 of the Doctrine and Covenants from 1833 calls on us to turn the other cheek not once, not twice, but three times, when assaulted. Even then we'll be blessed if we can restrain ourselves. And even then we can only fight back if the Lord commands it. Remember, that's 1833. That reminds us that the cause of peace has called to us from the beginning. Alright, Kirtland 1831 to 38, the Kirtland period, we were, in many cases, a deeply impoverished people. We were described as living in an assemblage of hovels, shanties, and small houses, few of which were fit for human habitation. And Brigham Young said as they built the temple they lived on air and water and a little hominy, a littl corn porridge. Uh, as a people, we have experienced the pangs of hunger. We know what it feels like. And I would argue that that means we need to be more thoughtful about the needs of the hungry in the world today. When finished, Kirtland Temple was one of the largest buildings in northern Ohio. Most meeting houses in that part of the state at the time, if you could pick him up and turn them sideways, would fit inside the temple. So, it's wider than most were long. The building of that magnificent structure by an impoverished people reminds us of the power to be found in community. From Joseph Smith's prayer of dedication for the Kirtland Temple, Out of our poverty we have given of our substance, which also means core, or matter. That's 1836. The sacrificial giving of Temple builders sets an example for us as we're called to meet the pressing financial needs of the church today. A local non-member minister, Truman Koh, said that the Latter-Day Saints women were asked to give up even the necessities of life in order to build Kirtland Temple. When you look at that phrase at the time, it means adequate food, clothing, and shelter. That reminds us that short term personal sacrifice leads to long term community gain. They knew when finished, they would have not just a beautiful place to worship in, but a place to educate their children and their, their leaders. The poverty of the people there often meant a lack of education. Sidney Rigdon is talking about the Far West, Missouri temple that didn't get built in the 1830, 1830s. But he said that they were concerned that there were people being taken advantage of by the more learned. He talks about how they're going to use the temple to, to teach them to read and write so they can take care of themselves. He's talking about adults and children, male and female. So, as a people, we were exploited because of our illiteracy, or lack of

education. So, I believe that as a result, we need to lift up education as a means of empowering the poor. We started in Kirtland the Kirtland Ohio Theological Institution, one of the first five seminaries operating in the state of Ohio. That effort, uh, was an, an attempt anyway to more adequately train our ministers. And the creation of that theological institution should inspire us to enrich ourselves as well as others through open intellectual inquiry. That theological institution included a Hebrew school. They hired Joshua Satus to teach them Hebrew. His family had worship in the Touro Synagogue, now the oldest in the country in Newport, Rhode Island. The Hebrew school reminds us that we have always been called to be a scripturally literate people. Jumping to, to Far West, Missouri, the late 1830s, Governor Boggs' extermination order. He didn't mean leave or we'll kill you. He meant leave or we'll forcibly remove you. But there were people killed on both sides. And that forced exodus was horrendous. Uh, Lucy Mack Smith talks about getting to the, to the Mississippi River at Quincy. It had frozen, but the ice had just broken up, so big chunks of ice coming down the river. You obviously couldn't walk across the ice, but you couldn't take a ferry across. They were stuck. They lay down and cover themselves with blankets. Wa, woke up the next morning, six inches of snow on top of them, and she said it was only with the utmost difficulty that they can fold the frozen blankets. We were welcomed though as religious and political refugees by the citizens of Quincy. Maybe 1,600 of them took in 5,000 Latter-day Saints. So, we know what it's like to be refugees. I believe that means we have a moral obligation to help others in like circumstances. Nauvoo, Illinois, the 1839 to 46 period. We had reached Nauvoo one morning when a family had lost their house to a fire out in the country, church family, and a number of the, the male leaders of the church were standing around outside Joseph Smith's fence talking about how it was tragic and awful and sad. Joseph Smith walked by and listened for a minute, reached into his pocket, pulled out a \$5 gold piece and said, Brethren, I'm \$5 sorry for this family. How sorry, are you? Orthodoxy, right thought, is not good enough, right but orthopraxy, right practice critical as well. That also reminds us that community building, again, not just right thought, but right action. The theological excesses of Nauvoo help us recognize the critical importance of shared leadership and the delicate balance required, in a theocratic democracy, a balance that we occasionally lose in the church. When Joseph Smith III first joined the Reorganization in 1860, the locals here in Nauvoo were not amused. They panicked to some extent. They began passing resolutions township by township, forbidding him from preaching or praying in those places. That's 1860. By 1877, almost 400 Nauvoo residents signed a petition asking us to move our headquarters to Nauvoo. So, in 17 years, You can't preach here. You can't pray here, to, Please establish your headquarters in this place. Joseph III had learned from his father's experiences that community building that focuses inward versus outward is threatening to neighbors. So, he understood the importance of engaging in the communities we live in. Not just in Nauvoo, but in Plano and then Lamoni and even in Independence. Fred M. Smith, uh, in some ways, a cautionary tale. He was passionate about peacemaking in his early years in leadership. That passion was later overcome by tribalism, or nationalism, surrounding World War I and World War II. And I, I saw the same thing happen with 9/11 in our more recent past, um, in a critical cautionary tale there. Among many that could be learned. Israel A. Smith taught us about the more expansive nature of the concept of Zion. Wallace B. Smith steered us back to the path of peacemaking and helped us understand the importance of equipping members with the tools of processing change. From Kirtland to Independence to Far West to Nauvoo to Plano and Lamoni, uh, we are reminded that community building is always what we have been about from the beginning, in the middle, and at the present, building community is simply who we are. I'm going to stop there and listen to what Tony and Karin have to say.

Karin Peter 13:35

Thank you, Lach. I was making notes as, as you were going along thinking, These are not the ideas that most people would pull out from looking at the historical journey. And, so, I appreciate you holding these up for our, um, reflection. So, Tony, do you have your superhero suit? I understand you are to save the day, Lach said. Although I don't think it needs saving. So, let's, let's hear what you have to say from the theological perspective.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:07

So, let me start by saying what Lach just did is an example, a really, really fine example of why one's, in theology, we call them your hermeneutical lens, why your hermeneutical lens matters. And hermeneutics is interpretation, right? And, so, Lach's interpretive lens is, Let's look over our history through the lens of our connection to justice and community building. And when you look through that lens, you see things you wouldn't otherwise see. Right? And, so, uh, the, the discipline of history is not just about, uh, trying to recapture the past as it actually was. That's nearly impossible. But looking at the past through different lenses, what can we learn that we didn't know before? And, so, I really like what Lach just did, uh, because that, that, that justice lens really needs to be lifted more, more completely into the life of the church today. So, um, well, I want to, I'll start by looking back. I, I have, I have some, uh, suggestions for going forward when we get there, Karin, but for right now, we'll, I'm gonna' play off of where Lach went and, and do some looking back. The church began in a context in which a lot of people, not everybody, but a, a fair number of people, wanted to know, How can we recreate, restore the original Christian church. Now, they, they knew what they knew and they didn't know a lot about the history of Christianity. But they, what they knew they knew. And, so, they thought, Oh, oh, when I look around at other churches, what I see is not what I read in the Bible, so on, and so on. How can we, how can we go back to the primitive Christian Church and, you know, get back to the start. Now, by the way, I should note that one of my lenses is that that that's, that's a fallacy called the primitivist fallacy, by which one says, or which one assumes that that which is oldest is truest. I happen to think that's a problematic assumption. It's not always the case of that which is oldest is truest. Sometimes that which is oldest is worst. And, so, something is not true simply because it's old. Right? And also that, that, that fallacy doesn't allow for the possibility of development, evolution, growth, change, and, and ongoing movement which is simply part of the structure of the universe. And, so, one has to be careful with that. But now looking back, uh, I ask the question, Well, what, what might they have meant by restoration? What could they have meant by restoration? And for me, uh, there's this text that comes from 1837 from Far West that church members hear me quote, uh, fairly often. And this is from the Elders' Journal from, a, actually it's 1838, I think. And, so, uh, Joseph writes this, The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ, uh, quote, and I, I put quotation marks on this because he's actually quoting the Apostles' Creed here, that he died, was buried and rose again the third day and ascended into heaven, end quote, and all other things, are only appendages to these. It was a moment of what I would call, like, great theological lucidity. And, so, right there, we have the basis for understanding restoration, not as the reclaiming of an original thing that like a, the, the, the bringing back of some original structure that, by the way, didn't actually exist as it was thought, thought to have existed. Rather, in Christian theology, restoration means always, always realigning with the central revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And that that revelation is not, uh, it's not, uh, optional. It's not, it, it may, it may cause us to struggle, but it's not

optional. That's, that's the central, the central thing about the Christian faith. And, so, right there in 1838, Joseph had, uh, a really powerful insight about what really matters. And, so, one can look at our ongoing history as a veering away from and coming back, veering away, coming back, always trying to come back to the Jesus message. And at the center of the Jesus message is the kingdom of God. Uh, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, that, that's so central to, to our, our vision of, as a church even to this day. And, so, always coming back to that central figure, the central focus, the, as the Letter to the Colossians calls, calls him the icon, the eikon, image of God. That's, that's really key to our journey. And in the 1960s, we jump, jump ahead a little bit here, the 1960s church leaders very courageously said, We, we, we've, we've got to focus on Jesus because the, the, the international possibilities before us, uh, don't really, uh, allow us to talk about how we're different from, from Methodists and Lutherans. We've, we've got to be able to reach out into a wide world and we have to go to the one thing that matters most. And, so, I think that's a, a really important aspect. Now, the justice gene, um, the Nauvoo Expositor, June 7, 1844. I'm going to write a paper on this some day. I'm sorry I haven't yet, but I am going to, so, listeners are, are, are keyed into that. I'm going to write a paper in which I try to argue that that is actually the birth of the Reorganization, June 7, 1844, when some very courageous people, a small handful of them in Nauvoo said, We need a, a reformation of the church. We see what's going on. We see abuse. We see, we see abuse of, what they could see, abuse of, of new female converts. We see, uh, uh, abuse of money. We see abuse of political power. We see abuse of religious power. And this has nothing to do with the gospel. And we've, we've, we've veered off. And, so, the church needs a reformation. Uh, so, that has, that has within it in itself, uh, all the power of, of being the justice movement. We're not going to stand for the abuse of people. And we're not going to, to stand for the abuse of political power. We're not going to stand for the, the abuse, the abuse of wealth. Right? So, um, it's going to take a while, but, uh, when you, when you look ahead at what starts to form in the Reorganization after 1860 and look at some of their basic principles, one has to wonder if some of them remember what they read in 1844. I kind of think maybe they did because there are things, there are things that become central to Reorganization identity that, um, the, the founders of the Nauvoo Expositor were already articulating in 1844. And, so, that, that really, uh, to me, it's not 1860, it's 1844 where, where, where the genius of our, our side of the movement really starts. So, those are a few things. Here's, here's something else. We have inherited from that whole tradition what I call a theology of place. Now, theology of place is tricky because human beings tend to idolize places and turn them into false gods. I understand that. But place is the geographical equivalent to incarnation. Right? Uh, as a Christian, I know that God is love only and completely and solely through the fact that Jesus Christ reveals God as love. Right? And, so, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in first century Palestine, in Galilee, you know, in a, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire a, a, among an oppressed minority that, that has as its equivalent that place matters, too. And, so, this is why Kirtland matters to us. This is why Independence matters to us. This is why Nauvoo matters to some of us. An, but this is also why our campgrounds matter to us. And we are stressed at present because of financial struggles everywhere to know what to do with campgrounds, but honestly, they're connected to our theology of place and they're the best embodiment of it. And, so, in, in my view, it's really important going forward that we try to figure out ways to, to keep as many as we can because that's, that's a marker for us. That's, that, I didn't, I didn't come to know God's love just generally out anywhere. I came to know God's love in, uh, this place at this time with these people in a very concrete way. And, so, uh, we inherited all that from, from our, our ancestors from 1830 on. I think that's, that's really important. The earliest, the, the earliest, uh, community did feel itself called to the world in this,

but as far as they could get was pretty much England and Canada and what became French Polynesia. Right? But that instinct survived and it took a very long time. By 1960, we were in a, we were only in about 10 countries really. But between 1960 and 1980, we near, we nearly what tripled that. Right? And, so, the im, the, the impulse, the impulse to take this message of the reign of God on Earth, Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it and taught it, to other places, um, it was deeply embedded in us from, from the start and that's really important to, to claim. We, we've, we've had, we've had a kind of an, a problem over the years. It, it took a very long time to come to the realization that the image of being the one and only true church was not going to be a very helpful image going forward and that, and that the way it was articulated did not stand up to critical scrutiny. In the 1960s, uh, and I hope listeners will forgive me for jumping all over the, over the, the date map here, but in the 1960s, uh, some very thoughtful and courageous people then said, You know, we've been teaching for a long time we are the restoration of the original New Testament church, etc., etc. Re, really, what does the New Testament say? And, so, they, with, with some new, some new, biblical, scholarly tools, they went back and examine the New Testament and said, Oh, my goodness, there ain't one church there. There's many churches. And it's a moving target, how it develops. There's not an original form that was created. And then it was, and then it was that, sort of supposed to be the, the, uh, eternal ideal that then was destroyed by human beings and then restored magically in 1830. That doesn't, that doesn't fit. Right? That doesn't work. And, so, it took us a very long time. And I think one of the reasons that, that the, the justice lens that has been, could, could have been there and that Lach just articulated really well, that justice lens was hard to pick up on because we were so enchanted by the one true church lens for so long. Now, I, I don't want to look back and say, Well, they should have done this or should have done that. They, they, like I said earlier, they knew what they knew. They, they, they had to work with what they, with what their experience and knowledge allowed them to. Um, it's just that it took a very long time. And it was very painful and very difficult to relinquish the idea that what happened in 1830 was that as if like a stone dropping from heaven, a thing that had been lost for, uh, since, since, since the year 570 AD, according to the old charts, a thing that had been lost for 1260 years now just simply dropped out of heaven fully formed. Uh, that's, that's, that's powerfully untrue. And, so, it's taken a long time to figure out well, if that's not who we are, who are we? Uh, but we have come a, an incredibly long way in saying, Ah, this is, this is who, this is, this is an identity we can claim for today, uh, Community of Christ, a justice making, peace loving, uh, church that is trying to create a, make a difference in a, a, a radically damaged and endangered world. That's who we are. That is deeply connected. You can, that's a red thread you can trace that all the way back through our history. That's been there all along. We just had to learn how to change lenses about 60 years ago. And then it took, it's taken us another 40 years after that really to get our minds around the, the change of those, uh, uh, change of, of lens, lenses. I, I want to jump back for a moment to the justice theme and, uh, uh, uh, a figure that, a figure that a lot of Community of Christ people don't know about that I think is worth knowing about is the man named John L. Lewis. John L. Lewis came from, from, uh, Welsh parentage, uh, connected to Welsh miners. And his family joined the Reorganization and he belonged, as a kid he was, he went to a, a, an RLDS church in Iowa. And how, how did it happen that one of the founders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, CIO, who also was highly involved in the United Mineworkers, who was a union organizer, a powerful, powerful figure in the labor movement in the 1920s and 30s, and so on. How, how is it that he, he came out of the RLDS church? See, this is something a lot of church people don't know that in the early 20th century, there were a lot of, uh, Reorganization people who had very radical socialist politics, were very involved in the labor movement. And if you read some

of, of Fred M. Smith's more theological radio sermons, you'll see that he was not opposed. He was actually a fan of the labor movement in many ways. Um, and, so, the, the concern, the concern for just working conditions, for just wages, for fairness in the workplace, gracious, that, that's, that's, that's part of our tradition and we should claim that as part of our tradition, especially today, in an era when wealth in the world has been sucked into the hands of a small handful of billionaires and working people have, really have to struggle all the time to make ends meet and have limited futures because of poor wages, poor health care, uh, uh, you know, poor health insurance, and companies that see them as expendable. Right? Um, oh, look. The Reorganization at one time had people involved in the labor movement because, well, why? Well, think about Zion. Think about the early communitarian experiments. Think about that heritage in the church and, and how that would play out politically in people's lives. Of course, you would be concerned about the well-being of the whole. Of course, you'd be concerned about the well-being of workers and their wages and so on. So, um, in, in a time today, when, uh, it's some, in some settings, it's somewhat dangerous to say stuff like that, that our ancestors, our Community of Christ ancestors, uh, many of them were involved in the labor movement because of their theology, because of our theology. And, so, that's, that's something that could be claimed and pulled forward in, in a time of, uh, the, the massive, unfair redistribution of wealth in the world.

Karin Peter 29:31

Well, and, and Tony, to go back to, to Lach's, um, thread that he wove historically, we also have thousands and thousands of church members who came to Nauvoo out of the Welsh mining, um, areas in the UK where they were, uh, expendable, where they, they had been, um, impoverished by wealthy mine owners. So, that thread, again, as you talked about, you both talked about, we deviated from that thread and come back to it and deviate and come back.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:04

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Um, these are, these are some things that, you know, come to mind for me as I, as I think about, um, our journey theologically. It's really quite a remarkable journey in lots of ways. The, the, the 20th century theologian, Carl Barth, made this statement, I, I, I love quoting the statement because he says, he says, There, it's, it's going to be more like a paraphrase, but says, There, there is no such thing as a theologiae paranist, a perennial or, you know, a permanent theology. There is only a theologiae viatorum, a the, theology of wayfarers, a theology of journeyers. And our story is a living demonstration of the truth of that. Now, the problem, of course, is that lots of people along the way, uh, some of us sometimes. Right? We, we, we long for one pure, stable, unchanging place. One, one, one place where there's no tectonic plates shifting that will give us certainty and stability. But you know what? Uh, faith is not certainty. Right? It's always, it's always the, the, the trust of journeyers. And, so, that's been our, that's been our story. We, change is built into the very nature of the Christian faith. One of my favorite texts, Lach quoted a favorite text earlier from the Doctrine and Covenants. I'm going to quote one, uh, from Isaiah, from, from the, the, the unknown, unknown prophet, um, uh, who is sometimes called Deutero, or Second Isaiah, who says in chapter 43, Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I, God, I am about to do a new thing. Now this is, this is not a proof text against the discipline of history. I'm just saying. This, this is, this is a, a, a, a prophet speaking to people living in Babyl, the Babylonian exile, who have no sense of a future anymore. They've lost everything. And all they can do is dream about, uh, the glories of a past that will never come back. And it's a powerful prophetic message, uh, where the Lord, through this unnamed Prophet, says, Stop, stop

worshipping the past. I'm going, I'm the god who does new things. I'm going to make a way through the sea. I am going to, now it's interesting, using the old, the image of the exodus from the past, I'm going to make a way from the sea. You can understand that, right, if you're these people in exile, Oh, a new Exodus. And, so, the, the God, the God whom Community of Christ serves is a God who does new things. But the God who does new things, uh, is a god who does new things always in alignment with his revelation in Jesus Christ. Right? So, it's not, uh, an abandonment of the central revelation. It's a, it's a, a lifting up of and an unfolding of, right? The spiral tower of the temple in Independence, um, it's a marvelous symbol of journey. Right? The going around, around, the endless journey around. But architecturally, you can't build that without a midpoint. There has to be a center line. Uh, it's not, it's a journey around something, not aimless wandering. And, so, that takes me back to 1838. The fundamental principles of our religion, Joseph said is, I would say are, but hey, let's not quibble grammatically here, the fundamental principles, Jesus Christ, uh, we would say incarnate, teaching the kingdom of God, crucified, dead, buried, raised, alive, alive in the church, alive in the world, alive through the Spirit. That's, that's the midpoint for us. And, so, that's, that's part of the way into the future. We'll, we'll journey around it. We'll, we'll depart from it. Pull back to it. But that's the, that's the midpoint. And I think that's what it means to be a restoration church, a church that is always struggling and wor, and working at realigning itself to that central revelation of God in, in Christ. So, those are some, some theological reflections on, on the journey. I have some others which we'll, we'll see where we go as we continue the conversation.

Karin Peter 34:23

Okay. So, let's do that. Um, Tony, you mentioned the future, so, I'm gonna' swing back to Lach and say, from your perspective, uh, at this moment in time, Lach, what do you perhaps think out of our story, our wayfaring that informs our future. What are some things that come to mind to you?

Lach Mackay 34:47

Uh, I think, you know, in the early 2000s, so, I'm going to start by looking at the past again, maybe it was 2002, 2004. We pulled a, a group of people together to start talking about re-mythologizing. Um, you know, we had, we had taken the traditional faith story apart which needed to happen. Um, but I was always a little annoyed with, with Alma Blair and Dick Howard and some of those other pioneers because they took it apart, but they didn't put it back together. Now, I recognize that's not their job, that's not their responsibility. But somebody needed to do it. Um, and I thought we should be intentional about it. As we started trying, though, we just immediately fell back into picking it apart. And clearly we weren't ready. I think that process needs to continue, open and honest examination of the past, calling out and repenting for significant errors, but celebrating the positive. I am struggling at the moment because I spent my entire adult life, as I've said many times, in the 19th century, and suddenly, I skipped the 20th and found myself in the 21st, very much involved in the present of the Church which is not something I ever expected to happen and I felt completely unprepared for. And, so, I'm still very much present focused. What I'm incredibly excited about, present and short-term future, are the opportunities to help small congregations in the US with significant resources, there's a surprising number of them, connect to vibrant congregations in other parts of the world without significant resources that are changing the world in the places that they're at. Um, and, so, I'm trying to put a lot of energy into that at the moment. I think that that is going to be critically important for our future. And it's a balance, how do we support the church in, in North America during a time where it is not going to

grow while facilitating that, that growth in the places where it will? That's where most of my energy is going at the moment.

Karin Peter 37:25

I appreciate that. It ties back to the whole original thread of community building and just looking at it in a different way, community sharing of resources. All right, Tony, what do you have to share with us from your thoughts on what will carry forward in our story as we look at the future?

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:44

So, uh, I'm gonna', you know, piggyback on what Lach was saying. I mean, uh, every, everybody's aware that the postmodern world that we're in is a world, at least in the northern hemisphere, that is, uh, very difficult for churches and for Christianity. Some of that difficulty is a self-inflicted wound. Right? In many places, what Christianity means is what fundamentalist say it means. And that includes then, um, you know, anti-science, anti-rationality, anti-women, anti-LGBTQ. Um, it's, uh, it's not, not a picture that moral, reasonable people would be attracted to. So, that's, that's the context in which, uh, there is such a thing as significant church decline, decline of the mainline, decline of everybody pretty much. I mean, for goodness' sake, even the Southern Baptists are in decline. So, that's the context, at least in the northern hemisphere, in which many, many people, many people are trying to live out church. We're, we're, we're, we're having to deal with that question that Landon and Smith asked in 1969. For what purpose assembled? Why do we still do this? Um, that, that question turned out to be a very prophetic question because when they wrote it in 1969, there were lots of really big healthy RLDS congregations who thought they had a, a perennial theology that would never change and never need to because it was, et cetera. And what has happened since? Well, uh, we all know what's happened since. So, this creates a lot of stresses on the church, um, at a time, at a time when we need to have a lot of, a lot more full-time, well paid field ministers on the ground, we have no money for it. Right? And, so, when that's the case, what happens is that local, people locally are less and less exposed to the actual, uh, message and ethos of the church as it is today. And it's, it's a cultural phenomenon and just sort of knee jerked back into the, the local de facto religion which is typically some form of evangelicalism. And thus, thus one can hear in Community of Christ churches sometimes stuff being said that, uh, I'm sure was gotten from the Internet and that nobody checked their sources and it's not Community of Christ theology. Right? But, so, that's, this is the postmodern world we're in and we have to figure out, uh, our way through it. Related to that is if we have a justice gene, how do we do justice? How do we seek justice in environments that are politically polarized? Right? So, I think the, the good news of Jesus immediately and in a non-negotiable way commits the followers of Jesus to being anti-racist. In fact, in the Bible, there's, there's not races. There are types of, there, there are, there are ethna, nations. Right? There's one, one humanity. But, uh, racism is a construct that is created by racists to keep some people down and lift some people up. Well, uh, we're, we get, we get, if we're part of the majority, we get complicit in this and all sorts of ways. But how do we, how do we deal with stuff like that in a gospel way when the, the church community may have people who, who would likely vote for things that one would consider racist? Right? So, we have a lot of work to do on the justice side of it. How do we be a justice church, uh, at the same time we honor unity in diversity of perspectives. I have one line on, on this, but how do we, how do we do that in a way that's credible? And that's kind of a challenge going forward. I think we have resources and tools that can help us with that. But, but there has to be a willingness, of course. Um, going back to what I said earlier about this, this main, this main

line that stretches up the middle of the temple, the central point. That, in my view, we, we've got to, uh, speak again about two things. We, we should talk about the Mormon boundary and the Protestant boundary and what, and the reorganized church was somewhere in the middle of that. Right? So, I think now it's the Mormon boundary and evangelical boundary. Right? On the Mormon boundary side, I think it's really important for us to be able to, to say, Look, we have 14 years of, of shared, shared history and we don't even interpret that the same. So, um, we're not, we're not Mormonism light. We're not Mormonism left. We're not Mormonism, choose your own adventure. In fact, uh, the unofficial name of our church for a long time was we're the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and we ain't Mormons. It was even longer. And, so, I, there's nothing wrong with saying, No. No. We, we are a tradition that came out of that milieu. But we, we vectored in a totally different way. And I think that's very important to be able to say. We, Mormonism can be honored as a great world, one of the great world religions. Let it be what it is, but it ain't us. Right? We happen to have some, some themes and some ideas and some words and language and texts that come out of there. But we, we interpret all this very differently. And, so, it doesn't help us to see ourselves as a branch of Mormonism. It's not true. It's not theologically true to us. So, I think that's important. On the other, on the other side of it, though, it's the evangelical boundary. What kind of radio stations are you listening to? Right? What, when you hear the word Christian, what, what things come to mind when you go searching the Internet for stuff to use in a sermon? What are you picking up? Right? Uh, is it, does it square with Community of Christ's best sense of itself currently. So, I think we, I think we, going forward in order to maintain our identity and our mission and our sense of who we are, these, these boundaries still matter. That doesn't mean you have to be mean to people on the other side of the boundary. No. We can love and care for anybody here, but, uh, being, being true to oneself and true to one's story and where one's story has brought one, that's, that's a virtue that needs to be practiced. Um, then finally, uh, internationalization? Well, Charmaine and I had a conversation about this earlier this morning. And, uh, she was asking what we're doing today and I kind of told her, We're, this is sort of the, the end of the line here and looking back, looking forward and, and she made a really good point about how the, the, we have to be careful, uh, not to assume that the church just looks like white middle class Americans or white working class Americans when, in fact, it's, it's incredibly different from that worldwide, incredibly, incredibly more diverse. And it's, it's thriving in, in some places in the southern hemisphere. It's, it's thriving a lot, actually. And there were a lot of courageous people who helped make that possible in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. And, so, um, uh, it, it would be, it, it's, it's a pipe dream that can never come true. But imagine if you could, imagine if you could gather every active Community of Christ member in a single location for, for an hour. What would it look like? Oh, it wouldn't look like me? Not at all. And I think that's something that's really important for us to get, to, to get the sense of the international cultural breadth and depth of the church. And that that has, that will have, uh, a theological impact on us as we, as we go into the future. That's very im, very important, especially in a, in a. a globalized world that has shrunk, where we now know what's happening in places and it disturbs us deeply. Um, and, and, and we, it's not only the injustices at our own, our own doorstep that we need to work against and, and pray about, but it's those in other lands where other hearts are beating, too. Right? So, so those are some things, um, looking forward. The theological task is an unending task. Uh, theologians sometimes think of it as job security. But, uh, the, there's always, always, always the need to continue reflecting on our faith and to, and to keep reflecting on that fundamental principle, the fundamental principles of our religion are that Joseph once clearly articulated for us a long time ago in Far West.

Karin Peter 46:22

All right. So, we've looked a little bit at the overall perspective of our past. We've talked a little bit about the future. This is our final episode. So, this, this is the last chance, I almost said last call, but that revealed way too much about me, so, I'm going to say last chance for comments. So, Lach, do you have any, uh, concluding thoughts that you'd like to share?

Lach Mackay 46:50

A final reflection. If we would just listen, the journey of Community of Christ is full of powerful lessons that can improve the world in which we live and improve the world that we want to create for our children.

Karin Peter 47:08

Thank you, Lach. Tony?

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:10

I, I second the motion. I think a world with more Community of Christ people in it would be a better world, a safer world, a more humane world, a more compassionate world. And, uh, to, to the New Testament echo to that quote from Isaiah 43 as Jesus, on his last night with the disciples in John's gospel, when he says, I still have a lot of things to tell you. You can't manage them right now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will help you manage them. And, so, in, in, in the Spirit of our tradition, we, we look forward to what is to come, uh, what, what may yet be revealed, and, and what, what new opportunities to serve, uh, the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit may yet, uh, open themselves to us.

Karin Peter 47:57

Thank you, Tony. So, as we bring this series, um, to a close, as I've been making notes on the reflections that you've both shared, I would say that my takeaway from today, um, as well as from our entire series, is that, um, as a Christ-centered, justice oriented community, which are the three words that I hear used, um, so often in our reflections, that our journey is not anywhere concluded as a people even if our series discussing it, for the point, has come to an end. And, so, with that, I want to thank both of you, Lach Mackay, Tony Chvala-Smith, for dedicating time and effort to making this series possible. And I want to thank our listeners for your participation in Project Zion Podcast and listening to Cuppa' Joe, our series on restoration history. So, be sure to catch up on all the topics that Project Zion has at projectzionpodcast.org. I'm Karin Peter along with Lach and Tony. Thanks so much for listening.