

Fair Trade | Andrew Webber

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SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Andrew Webber

Robin Linkhart 00:29

Hello and welcome to Fair Trade a Project Zion Podcast series where courageous people share the candid stories of their faith journeys, and what brought them to Community of Christ. I'm your host, Robin Linkhart, and today I'm here with Andrew Webber. Andrew grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Today, he's a member of Community of Christ. His home congregation is Rapid City, Iowa. He was confirmed a member in 2013, and today, Andrew will share the story of his faith journey. Welcome, Andrew, thank you so much for being with us today on Project Zion Podcast.

Andrew Webber 01:16

Oh, it's an honor to be here. And I'm happy to share my little bit of testimony with everyone. Thank you.

Robin Linkhart 01:23

Well, thank you again. And let's just stop at this time and take a few minutes so our listeners can get to know you. So please introduce yourself.

Andrew Webber 01:34

Well, as Robin mentioned, my name is Andrew Weber. I am a member of the Cedar Rapids congregation of Community of Christ. I've been a member for almost a little over 10 years, I think it's been about 12 years since I've been a member. Outside of that, I've been married to my beautiful wife for almost 18 years. So this year will finally, our marriage will reach adulthood. I have four children, Christopher, David, Emily and Finn, Chris is 16. David is 13. Emily is eight and Finn is my youngest. He's five. And yes, I'm done having children. So you know, definitely a lot of fun ages in there. Outside of you know, my family, I work in IT. I've been working for a digital marketing firm here in Cedar Rapids for the last 17 years. And it's a lot of boring stuff as you'd imagine dealing with systems and analyzing things. But actually, it's been a really good career. And I've been very blessed to have it. I think I'm one of the few geriatric millennials that had been with the same job for you know, for over 10 years. And so the fact that I've been there, 17 years is pretty, an amazing testament, I guess, to me, and I guess them that that kept me around that entire time. Outside of that, you know, what I'm into right now is obviously church is a big responsibility in my life, and we'll touch a little bit upon that later. You know, I'm going to school right now to earn my master's degree in business. That's my alma mater, Grand View University, which is located in Des Moines. And you know, outside of school, church, and family—I love baseball, love basketball, regular guy. So that's a little bit about me in a nutshell.

Robin Linkhart 03:14

I love this part of the interview, because people that I've known forever and people that I've known a little while, and gotten to get to know you a lot better in the last year, I always learn new things about them. And this is just fascinating. I love it. I love it. Okay, so we're going to start your story at the beginning. Tell us about faith and God and church during your growing up years. And we're just gonna start with where were you born and just take it from there, Andrew?

Andrew Webber 03:45

Well, I'm definitely an Iowa boy. I've always lived here within the state of Iowa. I actually was born out in Des Moines, which is two hours west of here and the largest city here in the state. And that's where I grew up. You know, up until the time I graduated college, actually, I grew up in a single parent household, my parents end up getting divorced sometime about I was two or three at the time. I have two older sisters and you know, growing up in a single family household that can be very challenging, especially in our case where my mother, you know, was had, was disabled and was receiving SSDI checks. My father was not really in the picture as far as supporting the family. So that was a very challenging situation. I remember as a kid we'd have to, we would have to move a lot. Just because you know, when you're have section eight vouchers, like a lot of times that they can, you know, end up coming due. Food sometimes was a bit of a struggle. Like you know, a lot of families that are kind of living on the edge, you know, but the one thing that was kind of a constant in my life that is my mother, I was so blessed to have her in my life. She was very steady and she was a woman who definitely believed in her faith and her faith background was a member of The Church. Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And so I grew up in the church, you know, I was baptized when I was eight, became a deacon when I was 12, and so forth, and so on. And, you know, that's really where my formative years and the foundation of who I learned who Jesus was, who I learned who God was, was really within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you know, I was blessed to be in a ward too, where I would say that a lot of the men, you know, really took on that father figure role for me, you know, I think, you know, not having a father that was fully in the picture, you know, I was in need, I guess I, you know, kind of some father figures and they a lot of times really took up that role as I was growing up. So, I would say, you know, growing up, faith was a huge part of my life. And, you know, out here in Iowa, there's not a lot of other Latter-day Saints, I think, the entire time that I was in school, there was only one other kid that, you know, was LDS, but everyone knew I was LDS. And it's kind of one of those things like, it becomes so much your identity, right? It's not just that, oh, I'm a Christian. No, I'm a Latter-day Saint, or I'm a Mormon. And so I think a lot of people they knew growing up that, you know, with that faith that I had certain standards, they knew it just simply just also to that, you know, on Sundays, you know, we kept the Sabbath day holy. So we weren't able to go out and do a lot of things, you know, and things like that. So that's kind of the basic foundation of where, you know, my faith journey begins, you know, as it's within that church. As I got older, I started thinking more and more about becoming a missionary, and wanting to serve a mission. You know, like, we think a lot of songs, we were LDS, y'all hopefully call me on a mission, things like that. But something radically changed in my life about ages 16, my biological father had died. And while I mentioned that he wasn't much of a support in our lives, you know, he still was a major part of my life. And that really shook me up because he died relatively young. And it really kind of rattled me there, and it made me think, you know, I...any decision I make going forward, I really need to fully believe in it, I really need to fully embrace it. Life is short, we only got a finite amount of time here on this earth. And that really changed a lot of my thinking and a lot of

perspectives for me. And so as high school was coming to a close, I was really dealing with a challenge or like, do I go on a mission? Do I go off to college? Do I do something else in life?

Robin Linkhart 07:34

Wow. So you really have had a lot of different experiences in your life from a very young age with your mom becoming a single parent and but you know, even you talked about a lot of challenges, being food insecure, and housing changing a lot. But golly, your mom just sounds like an amazing woman and such a rock for your family and then losing your dad at a young age. And here, you've brought us to this cliffhanger question, Andrew. So what did you decide about your mission?

Andrew Webber 08:11

Well, in high school, I was a big history fan. History. I loved history so much that I decided that I would actually get a degree in history. So that's what I ended up doing when I went eventually went off to college and everything. And so I started looking really, honestly, within the church's history, the LDS Church's history, looking into what is it they believe? How has he evolved over time? Things of that nature, right? And kind of come to the conclusion? Do I really believe this? Do I really want to spend two years of my life giving it to this faith? And I, this may be surprising, but I just could not bring myself to answer that question. It's not that I would say no, I just, two years is a long time. And it's a long time to go away from my family. And it's also a long time to commit on something that let's say culturally, you're kind of pushed into, but you may not actually have a testimony of it. And he I really wrestled with that whole idea, too. I had talked with a few missionaries, the returned missionaries that were part of my ward that said, Yeah, I didn't really believe going, you know, until I went on my mission. And I had this, you know, basically transformational moment. And I'm a firm believer now, you know, and so I wrestled with that whole idea of like, well, maybe that will happen to me. Fortunately, I did have a little bit of wildcard. I was 17 when I graduated high school, and 17 year olds don't go on a mission. So a lot of times, they'll just kind of wait a while until they reach the age to go on a mission. But I decided you know what, maybe part of figuring out if this is something I want to do is let's go to college first. Let's just go right off the bat. Worst case scenario if I decided to leave college midway and go on a mission great. You know, it's always an opportunity for me to serve there if I wanted to. But I started college at 17. And, you know, again, I just kept having these nagging questions. You know, what do I really believe? Has God really actually spoken to me specifically? Or is this something that basically I parroted from my parents or parroted from people around me or some social pressures from around, you know, my community? And ultimately, I just really kind of just was stuck, I just really did not have a good answer. And I decided, you know, what, I'm gonna continue this college thing, because there's nothing wrong with getting a degree. And I decided just to push forward with that. But as many people know, sometimes, you know, being LDS, that's a complete identity. And I have to admit, I was a little ashamed. You know, I felt ashamed that I didn't go on a mission. And I stopped going to church all together for a while there for at least a couple years. And then something changed where my wife, I ended up meeting my wife while I was in college, and she ended up meeting with some missionaries, and she got baptized. And it was right before we got married, I should say. And so then I felt a lot of pressure like, oh, well, I guess maybe I should give this church thing a try again, and be part of the faith and continue forward with it. Even though I have these nagging questions. I think a lot of people forget that in the mid 2000s, the LDS church was very much into banning LGBTQ marriages and things like that, you know, gay marriage was a hot issue in the mid 2000s. And that's, honestly, some of the

struggles that I had with my faith is that all of a sudden, I felt that we were a church that was more focused on the gospel to all of a sudden a church that was political and political in a way that I was not comfortable with. To be honest with you, I've met a lot of people that were gay, you know, when I was in high school and throughout college and to view them lesser, and to deny them the same rights that I enjoy, just didn't feel right to me. It felt wrong. And but you know, I kind of put that aside, because my wife ended up joining this church. And I was like, you know, I'll just support her, at least through it. And of course, it's something I'm familiar with, it's what I was comfortable with. It's definitely part of my background. And that worked for a while. But eventually, those questions still kept nagging. And Prop Eight was a big factor, I guess, really, that kind of pushed me a little bit into the direction I ended up going into of leaving the church. And even in Iowa, it's nowhere near California last I checked, you know, they were definitely pushing a lot of us to help out to call people to stand for a traditional marriage out in California. And I was like, wow, this is really getting into the political realm. And especially on an issue that I feel the exact opposite about, you know, I was probably we were probably one of the few families within our congregation that were Democrats. Those Mormons, they understand a lot of them were Republicans. So we were one of the few that were probably on the other end of the spectrum, and it just became very uncomfortable. And so my wife felt the same way. And we've just ended up deciding, you know, what, this isn't for us right now. Maybe we'll revisit this in the future. Maybe the church will change and we can come back. But to be honest with you, that's not how it worked out. It worked out a completely different way than I was not expecting. So.

Robin Linkhart 13:39

Okay, so wow, this is, this is such a great story. I did not know that your wife was a convert to the LDS church. So that's interesting. Did you all end up getting married? sealed in the temple?

Andrew Webber 13:52

No, no, no, we ended up not it's not because basically, when she became a member, it was we were already engaged. And so we were very close to getting married anyway. So I think if I recall, at the time, the policy was something like you had to be like, at least a year or something. Like I don't remember what the policy was exactly. But that was an issue at the time. It was I was inactive there for a good period of time. So I'd only had recently gone back when she ended up choosing to be baptized.

Robin Linkhart 14:23

Uh huh. So then, you were all graduated from college around the time you got married, you're starting to work. You're active in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and there's all this stuff going down with Prop Eight out in California. You know, a lot of people in the queer community, I'm imagining you had good friends that were gay or a member of the queer community.

Andrew Webber 14:49

Oh absolutely.<yeah> And one of the, you know, things that just really hurt my heart a lot is that you know, I went to an open house on one of the newly built wards out here in Cedar Rapids, when I first moved to this community from Des Moines, and you know, I brought a friend who, who was gay with us, you know, because he was just like, ah, you know, I'd be curious to see it, too. It's a big building, you know, you know, Iowa's got a lot of small buildings. So if it's something big, you gotta go see it. So,

you know, I took him with it, and we walked through it. And I just remember, you know, as we're going through this, you know, the bishop at the time really wanted to talk about traditional marriage. And here, my friend was, and I felt horrible about it, you know, because I certainly didn't think...and I warned him, you know, that's definitely how the faith felt. But I definitely didn't think it was going to come up as we're walking through an open house things so open to the public. So it was, yeah, it just it just really kind of damper things that you know, of me ever going back at that point, you know, I couldn't see a pathway for it.

Robin Linkhart 15:47

So things are really unraveling, in a big way. At that point, how did you find Community of Christ and what did that look like?

Andrew Webber 15:55

Well, it's a very interesting story. So backing up a little bit, when I left the LDS church, I ended up having a kid about six months, seven months after that, right. So my life has now becoming really busy new kid, new city, graduate college, and my wife, you know, of course, not working during that time, too, you know, so my thinking and things was all geared towards my family, family, family. And I just really didn't have time for faith at all, you know, because I, I briefly, for a brief moment, I did think about, oh, well, maybe there's another faith out there, right beyond the LDS church that I can embrace. But things are just so busy in my life, I just really didn't see a need for it. And, you know, I just needed to take care of what I needed to. So I went a few years there without any sort of faith at all. And it wasn't that was a non-believer. I never was like an atheist or anything like that. I just, I just didn't have time for it. And I knew that, you know, I just wasn't comfortable going back. But what changed was, oddly enough, my sister, one of my older sisters ended up going back to the LDS church, and she just was so happy. I mean, she was just so happy to have some sort of, you know, faith in her life. And I think even outside of the faith, part of it, it was the community aspect of it. And, oddly enough, I was extremely jealous of it, because I was kind of somewhat isolated at that time. I really just had just my family. That's all I had, I really didn't have a lot of friends within this new city that I lived in, I didn't have any sort of communal, you know, ties within the community itself. So I was really kind of jealous of her. And I was like, you know, maybe I should get this faith thing to try again. And, you know, I tried for like, a couple of weeks you going back, but it just, again, didn't really click for me, it was like, you know, what, I had talked about possibly looking at another faith, I was like, this time, I should really go full force ahead and figure out what that faith would be, what would be interesting, you know, where would be an interesting place to take my family? I am one of the people that I you know, I definitely think that the story of Joseph Smith does have some resonance with me, you know, the idea that God can have this, he could have this moment as a 12 year old boy, this vision, and you know, it changes the world. I mean, that meant something to me. It does even today, you know, and I thought that that's a very sacred story. And the one thing I did like, from my previous faith was the idea that God still speaks today, God can still have revelation for us in the modern day. Funny thing is, though, I didn't see the evidence of that, but I liked that concept. So obviously, I looked deeper into the faith. And I had heard about the RLDS church growing up. I just didn't really know a lot about it, you know, there wasn't I didn't know anyone personally, that was part of it. And you know, from an, you know, outside of the church, you know, we were kind of told of, like, They've got women in the priesthood and they, they don't believe in the Book of Mormon, and they're, you know, they're you can't distinguish them from any other

Christian church. I was like, you know what, that's what they say, but maybe I need to actually go find this out. So I ended up shooting an email to the church at the time world church, and I got an answer right away. They sent me to a website. This is like back in 2011, 2012. Uh Latter-day Seekers and like a lot of stuff that I read on there was like, hmm, this is exactly the type of stuff that I'm interested. But I don't want to show up at a congregation cold, right? I need to know a little bit more. I want to talk to somebody. So I asked for them to send me a missionary and they sent me Larry McGuire to my house. And if anyone knows who Larry McGuire is, he is a really tall guy. He's a big guy. He does not look like a typical seventy or apostle or anything that I had in mind, especially when I was told that he was a church, you know, works for world church. I was expecting somebody you know really kind of you know, tightly, you know, fine clothes and everything. And they sent me, Larry. But Larry was great. I mean, Larry spent time with us for a couple hours just answering your questions and basically answered everything I would want to feel comfortable with going to church for the first time, going to the congregation here in Cedar Rapids. And so that was a big challenge for us to like, let's give it a try. We haven't gone to any church over the last, you know, four or five years, this will be kind of exciting to see what happens. And, you know, I'll be honest, I wasn't super impressed at first. There wasn't anything that was like, oh, you know, what, what a moment here, you know, it took time, actually. And nobody was—I think what it was, is that, you know, I, maybe I was looking for that aha moment. But I just didn't have it quite yet at first, so, but I kept going, the people were nice. You know, they were interested in as far as obviously, you know, being LDS is kind of like a fun thing. You know, it's a good icebreaker for people, people like, oh, that's kind of exotic, especially with the Community of Christ. So it was fun, you know, kind of playing that card a little bit. But for the first, maybe six months or so, it just was, "Okay, we're gonna do this, we're gonna give this a real try." And slowly over time, though, they begin to know me, I began to know them. They had kids about same age as my kids. And slowly our relationship started building. And slowly, my trust in them started building as well, I took down some of those walls that maybe I was a little a little afraid to share with them. You know, at the same time, I had finally had something in my life that was like, "Oh, this feels right, this feels new. And this feels like something is for me." And I couldn't imagine how, you know, back in 2012, that eventually, I'd be where I'm at today, within the church, you know, doing what I'm trying to do out here in the community today. And it's just, it still kind of amazes me just how quick it all came together. I had times, I'll admit, it was frustrating. You know, that's one of the things that we find with, you know, from going from, let's say, the LDS faith to community crisis, things do run a little slower, I feel like on this end, there is, you know, really a collective movement to listening for the call listening for the right times, to jump in the right time to come to action, where I think a lot of us who grew up in the previous faith, it's, you know, very top down, and you do it right away, you get fast and you get baptized right away, you do this, and boom, you know, everything just happens quickly, you know, so it is, it was hard at first, you know, learning the pace within my new faith. But, you know, I really can honestly tell you that it has transformed my life. Given, it it's made me feel something I never felt before. Now, of course, I told you, I know who Jesus was, but I've never felt on fire for him until I joined this faith. I never felt like I really wanted to go out there, and just literally share the gospel message. And I think Community of Christ has a wonderful message to share, not only within Cedar Rapids, not only in Iowa, but throughout this country, and throughout the world, I think that we are a hidden gem. And I think we are something that I think a lot of people, they're looking for it, they don't know it yet, but they are looking for us. And I hope that we can be as welcoming and affirming and open to all people, you know, wherever they are in life. And I hope that

they end up coming to check us out, you know, in seeking us because I know for sure, just from my own personal story, it will transform you. I mean, it will, it will put you into a different spot in life. So.

Robin Linkhart 23:50

So, um, did your wife end up joining the church too?

Andrew Webber 23:54

No. So that's an interesting thing. So that that is one big difference, you know, within even something I learned when I was first joined the church is that I think within the LDS church, particularly if you're a man, I think there's very much like a distinction whether you're a member or a member with priesthood, right, everyone's got to have priesthood. You know, that was a big change for me to understand that. Actually, you don't need priesthood to do ministry, you don't need it at all. Actually, there's a lot of things that people could do without priests, and that's one things that was, I think, different from my wife too, was the things that she would want to do. She doesn't mean membership. And she wasn't comfortable at the time of saying, you know, hey, I want to actually become a member. She wasn't very interested in voting. The things that she does do in the community, like when we go out there to the homeless shelter and feed, you know, the folks out there. There are items that we do like with Vacation Bible School within our congregation. My wife can do that without a membership, you know, and so even though she goes with me every Sunday and she's active and two of my oldest kids are actually members, you know. It's something that she just doesn't feel like she needed to put on paper, and that hasn't been an issue at all, actually. And I think that people should know that, that if you come into our community, you don't necessarily have to be a member to have impact. In fact, there's a lot of people within my congregation, I think, maybe six or seven of them that are in some sort of leadership role within our congregation who are not members. You know, there's various reasons why they're not members, but they're not members. And I don't think they have any interest in that.

Robin Linkhart 25:29

Yeah, I think. And I think the pressure to join the church is something that has softened over the years. My dad was not a member, when my mom and dad got married, and he didn't end up joining the church until I was a senior in high school. But I mean, I think there was some pressure on him to join I know, especially from my grandmother, my mom's mom who would periodically you know, bring it up. "Well, John, when are you gonna..., you know, kind of put a little pressure on him. But he did all kinds of things. He was on the building committee, he even taught the kids class when I was in high school, he taught the high school class, he was just super involved. And now, I think there's almost nothing that a friend of the church can't do. Gosh, I mean, it's basically it boils down to things that you have to have ordained priesthood to do, like officiate sacraments, but a friend of the church can do all kinds of things in the life of the Church, which I think is wonderful, because it's—when you were talking about, you know, a sense of call, a sense of call to join is, is part of that. And I think that happens in people's own time. And some people remain a friend of the church until the day they die. And it's perfectly fine to do that. So here you are, you've joined Community of Christ, who shares a root in the restoration movement or rich heritage and history in the restoration movement, but has taken a very different path as we lived our journey, especially with continuing revelation, that's a very active thing in Community of Christ. But very distinctly different from the path that you grew up in. So what were some of the

challenges for you as you lived into this? You've talked to a few of those challenges. Were there any other things that at the time were difficult?

Andrew Webber 27:32

Yeah, I mean, I, it's some of these things may seem so silly from somebody who, let's say, was not LDS when I say some of these things. But, you know, honestly, some of it really came down to minor tiny things, that were a little uncomfortable for me at first. Very much, I did not like the idea of calling myself a Christian. You know, I mentioned I left the LDS church, because, you know, I felt that they were very, you know, let's say, you know, bigoted towards LGBTQ folks. But I guess I viewed them still somewhat different than what in my mind what a Christian was. In my mind, Christians were like, kind of like your, you know, televangelists folks that you see on television or certain politicians. You know, the idea of adopting the term Christian was very, at first was a bit of a challenge for me. But you know, we sing a song called like, "One in the Spirit," right? And they will know that we are Christians by our love. And like, I think once I fully understood that, that you'll know that they're Christians, by their love, that I fully embrace that term today. So that was some something that's so minor, that I'm sure that some people will listen to be like, "Oh, that's so silly." But, you know, it was a bit of a challenge, at first to adopt even that term. And, of course, the cross, you know, understanding my concept of what the cross was, you know, growing up in my previous faiths and what the cross means, to me today is radically different. And so I would say a lot of the stuff that I struggled with at first was more symbolic things, minor, tiny things. The other things such as you know, the way the church is structured, honestly, I fully embrace those. I mean, that's the one thing I do love about this faith so much, is that whether you're a member, priesthood member, or you're a friend of the church, you have a voice in this church, you have direction as trust this church is you. It's not just some folks out in Utah, what the churches are, I guess, in our case, Missouri, but, you know, that's really the thing that has been that fully embraced. The idea again, of continual revelation, those are the things that I just No issues embracing. I love it.

Robin Linkhart 29:45

It's really interesting for you to talk about the term Christian and using cross because, you know, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has been on a really long journey and part of that beginning probably in the mid 60s, maybe even beginning in the early 60s, was our own coming to Jesus time of really kind of working through some things and deconstructing a little bit of, and which included some of the distinctives of being a Restoration Movement. So the term "Christian"—we called ourselves Saints, we were Reorganized Latter Day Saints. An the cross, you know, you wouldn't see a cross. And even actually, I wouldn't even wear a cross around my neck. We didn't like candles, you know, in church or have all and response readings, anything that looked like it would be Protestant or Catholic, you know, wasn't included. And as we really embraced the rich heritage of the greater Christian tradition, because we come out of that tradition, and then identifying those parts of our sacred story. And Josephs experience in the grove and how that carried through into our story, embracing those things that fundamentally on our journey felt very important as distinctives for us. So it's interesting to hear you talk about that, because we had done a lot of deconstruction, and building back by the time you met, you met us? Was there anything that you had to give up or let go of from your Mormon faith that was particularly difficult for you?

Andrew Webber 31:39

Um, I think I mentioned maybe, or at least alluded to it at first, and that was the concept of priesthood. Right? I mean, because, you know, especially at that, when, you know, I suddenly realized that this is something I really want to be part of, it's something I, you know, I really want to embrace. You know, there was kind of a sad moment for me to realize that, like, oh, yeah, my boys who were not eight, at that time, there's a good chance, I'm not going to be baptizing them. And that was a little sad, you know, kind of the come up, come to come to terms with that a little bit. You know, also, you know, kind of being told, you know, hey, you know, you can do all these things in priesthood, but, you know, there's certain things you can't and that was difficult for me, because, you know, as I was an elder within the, my previous faith, so not being able, I guess, to fully I guess, carry out the ordinances, the Gospel, I guess, that was a little bit challenging for me, you know, but at the same time, I also say that it really changed my perspective on priesthood altogether, actually, being, I guess, I suppose, at first, maybe being frustrated with it, that I kind of do certain things it made me realize that priesthood is, is so much more than hitting an age, or even like a knowledge thing. It's actually it's gifts and talents. I mean, that's the thing that I've, I never really thought about, you know, if you know, even LDS folks can do this, you know, you pull out your Doctrine and Covenants. And you read what it says the office of a deacon is, the office of a teacher is, the office of priest, so forth. Now, those are unique gifts that not everyone's equipped to. So the idea that we kind of go run through the mill, like I'm a deacon teacher, priest, elder actually doesn't make sense. And, you know, knowing that and going through that may be frustration of not being able to carry out that has made me actually have more appreciation for those that are called and potentially called.

Robin Linkhart 33:39

Yeah, I've, I'm interested to hear about more, a little bit more about your journey, because it is a really big deal. I mean, coming from the Mormon faith, males are, I mean, it's, it's a sense of deep responsibility. It's part of your family structure it's part of the theological cosmology. I mean, it's all tied together and to come to Community of Christ, and be given the choice, you know, we will accept your baptism. And you could be confirmed on on your baptism in your previous faith. You could choose to be baptized and confirmed. And a lot of seekers are like, okay, you'll accept my baptism, but what about my priesthood and it can feel really challenging in that regard, too. And just, it's a whole different culture like you said, I really appreciate the way you framed that.

Andrew Webber 34:37

I'm glad you actually mentioned that Robin because actually, I did not choose to get re-baptized I actually chose to just be confirmed and partly was because you know, my baptism that I experience eight years old, I felt was something I shared with my stepdad who became my stepdad later in life, and you know, God. So like, I didn't feel a need to redo that, you know, But I admit that it was a little odd for me to kind of like, well, you're accepting my baptism, but you will not accept my ministry. I worked through it. And I think that honestly, I'm so much blessed for it today. And it's changed my perspective on priesthood altogether from what I originally had.

Robin Linkhart 35:18

Yeah. And I think I really appreciate it. appreciate hearing the challenge of that. And then the way you stepped through that, because it was a little over three years, I think, after your baptism until you were

ordained. So tell us about. I mean, there's a lot going on in your faith life as you're journeying with Community of Christ and becoming a member. And just stepping through all of this living into a culture that feels very familiar in some ways, but very different in other ways. I'm sure you had some leadership roles during that three years. So tell us about that time and then receiving your call to ordination?

Andrew Webber 36:01

Sure, yeah. So within my congregation, we're fairly decent sized congregation, there's about on a regular Sunday active about 40 to 50, which in Community of Christ terms is a pretty, pretty decent size, actually, especially out here in the Midwest. You know, so I had the opportunity to join a lot of different like committees. So like, I was on the Finance Committee for years, for actually, I think, yeah, up until recently, I was on the finance committee, as you know, a chair on there. Other committees within our congregation, you know, the buildings committee, I've been recorder for the congregation as well. So, you know, I had those, you know, I guess we'll say, positions where those positions actually don't require priesthood. And that's what that's so unique about that going going back to that. I, there's some people on several committees within our congregation that are not members. So I think that's something actually I love that because it gives us a totally different perspective on things, you know, and kind of makes us look a little bit beyond ourselves. But as you mentioned, you I went there three years without being ordained. And I realized that like a lot of stuff that I wanted to do, which was essentially share the message, I could do. So I did do sermons when I wasn't, I wasn't a priesthood member. And I think for some that was a little different for them. The I know, many of them were kind of a little surprised, because, you know, they're used to the way things have been structured within our community locally. And it was like, oh, well, priesthood members are the ones that, you know, go out there and preach. I, you know, they gave me the opportunity. And that's the one thing that I can tell you that I was so blessed to be part of this congregation. I mean, they just really embraced me. And, you know, and I, I just can't begin to tell you how thankful I am and where, where I would be without them.

Robin Linkhart 37:54

So did you have a sense of call in your soul before your pastor approached you to call you to priesthood? Did you have a sense that was kind of bubbling up? What was that like for you?

Andrew Webber 38:09

Yeah, so I had an evangelist blessing, maybe a little after I became a member, actually. And I thought, oh, boy, after that it was gonna get called, like, anytime soon, but actually, it took another couple years before it. And I felt that, you know, as my kids were getting older, I was like, oh, you know, I wonder, you know, they're starting to let me do a little bit more this and more that, I wonder if they're gonna let me as they're getting older, they're gonna call me to priesthood at some point. And I kind of sensed that I did have a call, I really thought that I would maybe be called to a priest. You know, because I didn't really necessarily see myself as you know, I think there is a little bit of a difference between a priest and elder, I just really didn't see myself on that level, by any means. So I thought, you know, they'll probably eventually call me to be a priest. And I had a few meetings with some folks who were, I don't know, if they were testing the waters with me kind of talking about, you know, where do I go? Do I still feel passionate about this? What do I want to keep doing? But, you know, just kind of out of the blue was kind of like, oh, you know, we've called you to, to be an elder, you know, Oh, great. Well, we got to do that when we got to get ordained. And, you know, I didn't realize oh, actually got to prepare for that.

Actually take classes for it, you know, because I thought, Oh, well, we're just gonna get our pick of pick a Sunday, I'm gonna get our date, you know, because nobody had been ordained during the time that I had joined the church and from when I got ordained, so I was kind of thinking, Oh, this will be great. We're going to do this next week. But even that took a little bit of time, you know, to prepare for that fully prepare for the calling, I guess accept the call. And then you know, also be able to prepare myself for ordination.

Robin Linkhart 39:50

Yeah, so you had to take three classes for your first ordination. How did your family feel about you being called to serve as an elder?

Andrew Webber 40:00

Um, I think for my wife, it was probably a little scary, mainly because she probably figures, "Oh this, he's gonna be doing a lot more than what he's actually doing." And but honestly, I think a lot of the things that I was doing, just as a member are things I was doing this, you know, that I would do later on as an as an elder. And, you know, the only thing that really got added was that, you know, I was able to lay hands on people, you know, I was able to actually carry out those ordinances, all those other things and preaching or going out, like, you know, visiting people. I was doing them anyway.

Robin Linkhart 40:36

Yeah, right. Okay, so you were ordained in 2016. And, and I happen to know that something really exciting has happened in your life in the last year or two? That's changed things up a little bit. So tell us about that.

Andrew Webber 40:55

Yeah, so this, I think was this past year, I went back to school to get my master's degree. And as I'm going through these classes, we're talking a lot about leadership, talk a lot about organization. And, you know, pastor who has been the pastor in Cedar Rapids congregation had been there for ten years. And she was really wanting for somebody to end up taking on that role, besides her. Ten years, a long time for that position. And she, you know, I think, kind of put it out there, to the congregations that she would love for somebody to replace her. I did not think that was gonna be me. I did not necessarily say, oh, you know, I should be the person to replace her. Not at all, actually, I actually had a couple other people I thought would be great replacements for her. In fact, I was actually one of her counselors. So I definitely didn't see myself necessarily in that role. But as time kind of moved on, and we were getting closer and closer to our business meeting, you know, we're maybe three or four months out, I suddenly felt something that like, you know, what, there's never going to be a perfect time in your life, where everything's gonna fall into place, you know, to serve. And I think that these people would benefit by having somebody different, you know, at the helm, somebody who has been, you know, a different perspective. You know, in my congregation, I'm actually one of the younger priesthood members. So, I think that that was also a motivating factor. And I decided, you know, what, I would enter in some counseling with a few folks within my congregation to decide, is this the right thing for the for our group? And also, is this the right thing for me? And so I reached out to one of our evangelists, I reached out the several folks that you know, within our church, and I just began to counsel with them over the last three months, or over those three months, and just say, you know, what, what would it look like, if I were to

be pastor, and I kind of come to the conclusion that you know, what, this is something I want to stand for, this is something we'll see if I can end up being you know, voted on to be passed, or, which is kind of was interesting too. Fun, you know, because that's the thing, it's like, people may not realize that but in our faith, we vote on that position, it's not a given that you're gonna be you're gonna be passed, or you got to actually stand up for a vote. And I was touched with a lot of people that confirmed that they felt that that was the right call, and right position for me to be in. And as of January first of this year, I have been pastor of the Cedar Rapids congregation. And I have been, it's been so exciting to see some of the things that we have done over the last few months, the things that we have gotten involved with. I've really taken to heart the idea that we need to look beyond our walls as what the Doctrine and Covenants tells us do. Be part of the community. And so we ended up joining the inter religious council here in Linn County, which is something that we used to be part of long, long ago. But you know, I decided, you know what, it's time for us to have a presence back on that committee. Ended up joining Cedar Rapids PRIDE for their inter- religious service. So I serve on a council with them as well as part of their religious activities. And that's been one thing that's been a bit challenging is to get our congregation from not just a welcoming congregation, but to an open and affirming congregation. There is a big difference between those two terms, you know, being welcoming and being affirming. So I've worked on that over the last few years, are over the last few months. And, you know, some other committees that I've been joining with throughout the city. We've been working with the Cedar Rapids Christian Ecumenical Center, where we've actually raised a bunch of money for some homeless folks and some of their services that they're doing. And so that's one things that I've been wanting to push us to, because that's what our congregation has been telling us the last two or three years is that they want to be part of this community. They want us to get out there and do mission work. And so that is really where I feel like I've been Much of my focus has been over the last six months. And it's been, it's been fantastic. You know, a lot of congregations, you know, let's be honest, did suffer through the pandemic. But I don't know why but we really weren't, we really did not suffer through the, through the pandemic. We kind of came out of that in the same position we were before. And so I think that, that God's spared us through all that. Spared our people literally and spared our congregation that, you know, it's time for us to put our faith in that and go out there and be part of the world and be part of the community, you know. And so that's been the exciting stuff that I've been working on over the last few months, and that I hope to continue to work on as long as they'll have me.

Robin Linkhart 45:45

Yeah, I think it's awesome. I know, I'm Denise White, my field support minister and I, I'm the apostle field apostle, supporting your mission center. So we went on a mission trip to Cedar Valley Nauvoo Mission Center a little over a year ago, and Cedar Rapids is one of the congregations, we stopped to visit. And I was really struck by the deep connection that you have with one another, and how you really that connection as a community really weathered the COVID pandemic quite well. And as you say, when you could open the doors again and come back, in in person, there didn't seem to be much of a dip. And your group was very interested in being connected with the community that there were, there are some longtime connections with the congregation and the community kind of sprinkled around. But boy, they were really ripe for what you brought to your leadership role as pastor I think because Denise and I saw a lot of that, wanting to understand how we can be connected outside the walls of the building in new and exciting ways. So I was, so it's just been a thrill and joy to support you in your new role as you walk, walk into the future. And speaking of walking into the future, as you walk with, you

know, church members and friends of the church and new seekers, what do you Andrew see people looking for in their church faith experience? I mean, certainly you had a sense of something you were looking for in yours. What's connecting for them and meaningful ways, as they choose to journey with us as friends or members? And I guess, in a sense, what are the big life questions that you're hearing from people today?

Andrew Webber 47:40

Yeah, so, you know, I think for a lot of folks, is that what they really are looking for what they say, are two different things. You know, and I'll explain how, you know, when I first started coming to church, you know, changing the faith, you know, a lot of my questions were about doctrine, right? So if you listen to me, you might assume that I was very much wanting to look for answers, right? I was looking for some sort of authority, I guess, you know, to live my life by but really, at the heart of it, I was looking for community, I was looking for friendship, I was looking for, you know, love, acceptance. I was looking for people that wanted to build a vibrant community, within our congregation. That's really what I wanted. And I think that that is actually what most people are looking for out here in the world today. Let's be honest, I think a lot of people have been hurt by their faiths, regardless whether they were whatever faith they were part of previous. They've had some sort of negative interaction with a church that in many ways have, you know, led to a loss of community. Yeah, and I think, you know, particularly and this is for us locally, here within Cedar Rapids, I would say, you know, our state has really turned a different way. And in particular, we saw a lot of this through elections with the school boards, where they tried to ban certain books or put restrictions on certain children within our community, I have a lot of teachers within the congregation that I serve, a lot of youth. And, you know, we talk about being a church that upholds the worth of all people. So that means that we actually need to show that. We need to actually be actively involved in affirming the worth of all people. And so that is something that I feel that people are looking for that. I mean, there's so much negative out here in the world, you know, and I think they're definitely looking for some sort of community and belonging that does, you know, runs against hate.

Robin Linkhart 49:48

Yeah, I love that. So, I mean, we are looking into the future as a denomination as a world wide Global Community of Christ. We've had challenges and struggles. And I mean, it just feels like we're, we're standing on the precipice of what is yet to be in a world where the future is unknown to everyone. There's been so much change in our lifetimes, and lots of hard stuff going on. Big challenges in the world that we're facing. What are your hopes Andrew, for Community of Christ as you look to the future?

Andrew Webber 50:26

Well, I hope that Community of Christ sticks to the idea of building Zion. And what desire is peace here on Earth, it is it is essentially building the kingdom of God, here in the now in the present. And what do the people of Zion look like? It's not just members of Community of Christ. It's our friends at United Church of Christ. It's our Methodist friends, it's our Presbyterian friends, it's our Lutheran friends. It's our friends who are not even part of the Christian faith. It is our Muslim friends. It's our LGBTQ friends. That's what Zion is. And that's what I hope Community of Christ hears. And that's what I hope Community of Christ continues to strive for is building Zion. I hope that our communities, within our

current real within our denomination, continue to build those bridges and look beyond the wall. You know, we are unique, I don't want to say that we are not, in fact, I love our uniqueness. I love our history. I love our faith. But Zion is not just going to be us, it is going to literally be, you know, the entire community, entire world. And so I hope that we always keep that vision, you know, foremost in our mind, you know, and that's why I really hope for Community of Christ.

Robin Linkhart 51:41

So Andrew, as we prepare to step out into the future, what do you need Community of Christ to hear you say today?

Andrew Webber 51:54

Don't be afraid to actually step out there be part of the world to make change happen. You know, and there was that whole saying, Well, you know, "many are waiting to hear the redeeming words". That's what we offer, we offer hope, we offer the light of Zion. And that's something that not a lot of faiths offer. We're unique, I really, truly believe that we're a hidden gem. And I don't think we're just a gem that's just for folks that let's say, have come from a Restoration or a Latter Day Saints background. I think we're a gem that's available for everyone, a gift that everyone can share. In fact, a majority of my congregation have no affiliation with the Latter-day Saint movement, you know. So I think that's just testament that that's what we are to not be afraid to actually stand up, be bold. If we say we're for Peace Church, that we need to actually show people that we believe in peace. If we say that we welcome all people, then that means all people.

Robin Linkhart 52:55

Embody and live the peace of Jesus Christ. I love it. Preach it, brother! Andrew, is there anything? I haven't asked you today that you would like to share with our listeners?

Andrew Webber 53:12

Yeah, I would say that if you are a seeker, you know, and you're gonna run through some challenges within your journey, I will, I told you all the great things, all the fantastic things that really lit me on fire. But I'll be honest with you, there's been many negative things. There's been times where I felt like, you know, at this, this is a mistake. I got really heavily into maybe some Facebook online groups with some folks and gotten some back and forth arguments. And, you know, I realized now some of that stuff was very petty, but you don't know it, of course, in the moment, right. And remember that this is a church where you can control the destiny. Maybe there's something you don't like, maybe there's something you don't agree with, maybe there's a policy, or maybe there's even something within our, you know, doctrine that, you know, it's just not setting comfort. Don't run away. You know, these things can change. And that's the thing that I love, about our faith. We are faith, that believes in Continuing Revelation, Common Consent. So what I would encourage folks that are listening here is to push through the journey. Know that you are in charge and you're in control of your faith journey, and I hope that you can find faith or you can find peace and comfort with us. Because that's what I've found within our faith.

Robin Linkhart 54:35

Thank you so much for being with us today, Andrew, for just being willing to be vulnerable and share from the depths of your soul and to tell about the ups and the downs of your journey. It has been a true joy and honor for me, Andrew, to spend time with you and to hear your story. Thank you so much for being with us.

Andrew Webber 54:58

Thank you.

Robin Linkhart 55:00

And of course, a very special thanks to you all of our listeners. If you would like to hear more from courageous people willing to share the candid stories of their faith journey, and what brought them to Community of Christ, check out our Fair Trade series on ProjectZionPodcast.org. You can find that on the series drop down menu on the top bar of our website, or you can click on the link listed in today's show notes, which will take you to all of our Fair Trade episodes. This is your host Robin Linkhart. And you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care, bye bye.