

Loren Webb interviewing Michael J. Kruse
Interview on November 18, 2021
Participants: Loren Webb, Jesse Stocking, Michael J. Kruse

Webb: Welcome to this interview, this interfaith interview, conducted by myself, Loren Webb, and Jesse Stocking to my right. We are going to be interviewing Michael J. Kruse, a spiritual leader with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Southern Utah today. This is our second in a series on interfaith leaders in Washington County. Please list your name, and then mention the day, month, and year of the recording session and the place of the session.

Kruse: Sure. My name is Michael J. Kruse. This is November 18, 2021. I was born in Ozark, Missouri. Oh, this is the Dixie State University. I was born in Ozark, Missouri, June 14, 1950.

Webb: Tell us about your parents and any brothers or sisters.

Kruse: Sure. My parents are Robert H. Kruse, Sr. My mom is Adeline Bertha Kruse, and I have five siblings. The oldest was Robert. He's deceased. Then Peter, he's deceased. Joan is my sister, and Rick or Richard, and then myself.

Webb: Tell us about any highlights of your growing up in Ozark, Missouri.

Kruse: Well, I moved after I was a year old to Phoenix, Arizona, and I attended two different Catholic grammar schools. I was an altar boy at one of the schools. I was selected most outstanding cross-country runner in my high school in Phoenix and received an unsolicited track scholarship to Pomona University in Claremont, California.

Webb: So some of those experiences that you had there, how did those shape your character for your future life?

Kruse: Well, probably the most important thing, Loren, I learned, is that you have to work hard to be successful in life.

Webb: So you say you went to, where was that again, in southern California?

Kruse: No, I did not go there. I did get a scholarship to Pomona University, but I attended Arizona State University in Tempe.

Webb: And what was your major or minor at that time?

Kruse: My major was environmental science. My minor was sociology and botany.

Webb: Did you go to any divinity school?

Kruse: I did not. I did take classes in religion and sociology of religion in philosophy.

Webb: In your social life, whom did you marry, and where and when did you get married?

Kruse: Okay. I married Beth Rogers in Phoenix in 1998. I have a son, Dylan. He's now 22 years old. He lives in Seattle. I married Kathleen Bailey in St. George, Utah, here, in 2013.

Webb: Occupation-wise, what were some of the full-time jobs or vocations that you did before becoming a spiritual leader at the Unitarian Universalist Church?

Kruse: I was a hydrologist for the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality in Phoenix and also agricultural scientist for the Department of Agriculture, also the State of Arizona. I also worked for the Department of Water Resources in Arizona. And I've been teaching chess to school children for twenty years.

Webb: Oh, cool. Okay. So when did you become a spiritual leader of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Southwest Utah?

Kruse: Well, we have no paid ministers here. I joined the fellowship in 2013. Our first location was in Kayenta at the Room for Thought. We outgrew that facility and then we moved to our new location which is at the Room of the Square which is next to Croshaw's Pie Shop. Everybody pretty much knows where that is.

Webb: Why did you come here?

Kruse: Why did we come to St. George?

Webb: St. George.

Kruse: My family lives in Phoenix. We, my wife and I, moved from Hilton Head, South Carolina. Her family, her brother, lives in Colorado Springs. Her sister lives here in St. George. And I've always liked the West better than the East, or Southeast. Not a lot of canyons or mountains in South Carolina.

Webb: That's right. How many members of your church were there when you first arrived, and how many members in the church are there today?

Kruse: We had about fifty when I joined. We have around a hundred now. There's official members, and then there's people that just come often and don't officially join, but they may contribute, so it's kind of hard to pin down exact numbers.

Webb: Is there any reason why those numbers have increased over the years?

Kruse: Well, I think we've had some really good programs. I think we've had some excellent speakers. I think we are reaching out to the community. Those are some pretty good reasons.

Webb: Can you describe the building and the specific street address?

Kruse: The building, let's see, do I have the location? It's around 900 square feet. Oh, I do have the location here: 175 West 900 South.

Webb: So do you have any other multi-purpose, like any kind of assembly hall, classrooms, kitchen, special use rooms, anything like that?

Kruse: Well, this is a bridge center. We just rent it on Sunday. They play bridge there during the week. There is a kitchen there in a little upstairs area where we may be able to do some religious education if and when we get some children, or more children.

Webb: So what are your duties as one of the spiritual leaders of your fellowship church? Is this a part-time or a full-time position?

Kruse: It's part-time. I've served on the board of directors with the program development committee and other committees. I've conducted a lot of services, read my poems. (I'm a poet.) I've led congregations in songs, meditations, readings, and prayers. I do planning, outreach, and I'm on the caring committee, and of course I'm the inter-faith representative with the St. George Interfaith Council.

Webb: Right.

Kruse: Which is why we're here, I think.

Webb: Great, yes. So if it's part-time, which it is, is there another job that you hold in the community?

Kruse: Well, I'm currently teaching chess after school to children.

Webb: And you get paid for that?

Kruse: I get paid for that.

Webb: That's awesome.

Kruse: How do you beat that?

Webb: I mean how do you beat something that you really love? That's great.

Kruse: Right. I played the world chess champion once.

Webb: Wow.

Kruse: He played 15 of us at the same time, and he won all the games. But I lasted 32 moves, which I think is not bad.

Webb: That's amazing. What are some of the physical boundaries of your church?

Kruse: Physical boundaries?

Webb: Like in the Catholic church and in the LDS church they have wards or diocese?

Kruse: Oh, I see what you're saying. No, they're just independent churches or fellowships, and we pretty much exercise our own form of democracy right there. We don't have to check in with upper echelons or districts. There is a district here. And then the headquarters is in Boston, Massachusetts.

Webb: In Boston, Massachusetts. Are there any other Unitarian Universalist Fellowships in southwestern Utah?

Kruse: No. None south of, I think, maybe around the Provo area, there's two or three up in northern Utah.

Webb: Do you have a regular amount of visitors from outside St. George that come to attend your services?

Kruse: I wouldn't call them regular—I'd call them irregular. We have people that come from northern Utah, from the Midwest, California.

Webb: How do they find out about you, by the way? Just through the internet?

Kruse: Yeah. We have an internet website, and you can Google, of course, Unitarian churches with Google.

Webb: So are other people, are people of other faiths welcome to your congregation?

Kruse: Absolutely. We welcome everyone.

Webb: What is it like ministering in a community that's dominated by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Kruse: Well, you know, clearly the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is politically and culturally dominant here. However, through the St. George Interfaith Council that's been very, a wonderful bridge for harmony and progress, and it's just been fantastic for me and for our fellowship.

Webb: When did you become a member of the Washington County Interfaith Council?

Kruse: About 2015.

Webb: 2015. And what is your role on the Interfaith Council?

Kruse: I have had a number of different activities, active in the Crop Walk where we raise money for hunger locally, nationally, and internationally. I've conducted prayers over the city, opening and closing prayers at the Interfaith Council meetings. I've done readings and poems at City and County Council meetings. I've recited my poems at the Veterans' Center in Ivins. And I started an anti-racism task force through the Interfaith Council, which I call ART (Anti-Racism Task Force) where we've brought in numerous minority speakers to the Interfaith Council meetings. And the ART also created a prayer or statement that has been read at many faith gatherings. Would you like me to read that?

Webb: Yes, your statement, sure, go ahead.

Kruse: This was approved by the Anti-Racism Task Force around 2015, mid-2015. The ART members are The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the U U Fellowship of Southwest Utah, Grace Episcopal Church, St. George Catholic Church, and the Shepherd of the Hills Presbyterian Church. And it goes like this: "We acknowledge the sin of racial prejudice and discrimination in our community which affects all of us. We plead for forgiveness and apologize to and sympathize with those who suffer from this wrong. We call upon all people to join in accepting responsibility to transform ourselves and the community by ending racial prejudice while moving toward reconciliation within every part of society."

Webb: Which of these experiences that you've had on the Inter-faith Council stand out for you?

Kruse: Well, I think ART is, the Anti-Racism Task Force, has been very valuable and important. But I also enjoy the prayers over the city and meeting the County and City officials with those prayers, opening their meetings. And they really appreciate that. They've often commented that it's the best part of their meetings.

Webb: So can you tell us how the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Southwest Utah, how did that come about in Washington County, and who were the principal leaders over the years?

Kruse: It was founded in '09.

Webb: In 2009?

Kruse: In 2009 by Warren Wright, Joyce and Ron Spinelli. We've had presidents Joyce Spinelli, Chris Bork, and Ann Foster is our current president.

Webb: How did that come about? Why did they decide this was something that was needed here in St. George or Washington County?

Kruse: They were looking for a liberal or progressive church here, gathering, so that people would have a place to go here in the St. George, Cedar City, area.

Webb: When you look back over your life, what lessons have you learned and what advice would you like to share to others?

Kruse: Well, I have a few poems I wrote. One is called *Laugh a Little . . . Love a Lot*.

If you wanna know what life's about
Laugh a little, learn a little . . . love a lot!

Sometimes it's crazy . . . sometimes it's not
So laugh a little, learn a little . . . love a lot!

Always be grateful for what you got
Then laugh a little, learn a little . . . love a lot!

Smell flowers, dance, sing and shout
Laugh a little, learn a little . . . love a lot!

'Cause heaven's all around us—there's no doubt
So laugh a little, learn a little and love a lot!

Webb: Very good.

Kruse: Thanks.

Webb: Jesse, are there some questions that you would like to ask?

Stocking: I think that pretty well covers it. I might comment that it's interesting to me that this branch of your church originated in 2009, and I know that's when the St. George Interfaith Council discussions began about developing that group.

Kruse: Oh, good. I did not know that.

Stocking: So you guys are about the same age.

Kruse: Yes.

Stocking: The St. George Interfaith Council.

Kruse: I did want to share some of the principles, our seven principles of the Unitarian denomination, the Unitarian Universalist denomination. We have the inherent worth and dignity of all. We believe in the responsible search for truth and for meaning. We

respect the interdependent web of all existence. Reduce, reuse, recycle—you may have heard of that little term. So those are some of the principles that we have.

Stocking: And I do have a question I thought of. I wanted to ask if you would touch on what it's like to be a church or a spiritual group that welcomes and consists of any type of religion when it comes to religion and people's understanding of God and these spiritual matters. You would think there would be very strong convictions that could easily be oppositional and not in unity. And so I just wonder what is it like in your church group? How are those issues addressed, because it sounds to me like people are welcome to hold their individually deeply held beliefs.

Kruse: Absolutely.

Stocking: Without compromising them.

Kruse: Right.

Stocking: And so to me, in my experience with the St. George Interfaith Council, it would just be a larger group of people doing the same thing we do in the St. George Interfaith Council, on a larger scale, in a way.

Kruse: It's a good question. I think the people who come to our fellowship, or come to any Unitarian Universalist church anywhere in the country or in the world, for that matter, have an open mind. They're searching, they're looking. They have their own spiritual or religious background, spiritual or religious feelings, philosophy, but they're looking, they're open, and they're interested. So our search for truth can be anywhere. It can be found in any of the sacred books; it can be found by any illumed or enlightened person, and we think that's where we can find inspiration.

Webb: Is there anything else that you feel important that we haven't asked you about?

Kruse: Well, let me share with you another poem or two, if that's okay.

Webb: Sure.

Kruse: I wrote a poem called *Transitions*.

Got no time for booze or beer
Got no time for guilt or fear.
Thankful for blessings from above
I have a God of peace and love.

I'm not afraid of dying
But I am afraid of pain.
I am not afraid of hell
But I am of losing my brain.

I'm not afraid of judgment day
Because I've led a good life.
Lucky to have folks who care
Family, friends, and my wife.

Webb: Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us.

Kruse: My pleasure.

Webb: Michael, and Jesse, also. We have now just, and thank you, also, for joining us as well for this Interfaith Council interview. We hope to do more of these types of interviews in the future. Thank you again.