



**HEARING GOOD NEWS...BEING
GOOD NEWS!**

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Stephen M. Veazey, president of the church, and
Becky L. Savage, counselor to the president as
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STEPHEN M. VEAZEY

Have you heard the good news?

One year ago we launched five Mission Initiatives to focus the church on the whole mission of Jesus Christ. This was done in response to the counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 164:9 that “**the Mission of Jesus Christ is what matters most for the journey ahead.**”

Since then we have made good progress toward implementing the Mission Initiatives throughout the church. We have heard exciting news from a growing number of congregations that are aligning their priorities with the Mission Initiatives.

Also, tithing contributions to fund the Mission Initiatives are increasing! We especially thank the priesthood who are leading the response. As a result, more and more people are being blessed with vibrant witness of Jesus Christ. Through the church's enthusiastic response the peaceful reign of God—the Zion of our hopes—is gaining ground on Earth!

And that is good news!

Today, I offer some observations as we go into the future:

First, the five Mission Initiatives work best when they work together! They are not options to choose from. Each Mission Initiative enriches the others. They are like different parts of the Body of Christ. One part cannot say to another, “I don't need you!”

All the initiatives must work together or our witness of Christ is distorted and incomplete.

We are called to pursue the whole mission of Jesus Christ!

Second, in some nations the initiative, “Invite People to Christ,” (evangelism) seems to be getting less effort. Perhaps a different way of looking at it would be helpful. This initiative is about the daily opportunities we have to invite people into loving community that generously shares the peace of Jesus Christ. It is not about talking them into anything.

If we extend invitation and hospitality to others, Jesus Christ will reveal himself in the relationships, worship, sacraments, scriptures, and mission at the center of congregational life. Evangelism is relational. It is about sincere invitation and warm hospitality that helps people feel “at home” in congregations.

Two years ago Debbie Hogan felt called to start a compassionate



ministry in New Port Richey, Florida, that would love, invite, and accept all people who yearned for the hope of the gospel. With the support of Southern Field leaders, Debbie began to invite folks she befriended at work, the grocery store, and in her neighborhood to her home for fellowship and scripture study.

So many responded to her invitation to “come as you are—all are welcome” that this diverse group outgrew Debbie’s home and began to meet in a park. When several were baptized and started inviting others, the group outgrew the park pavilion.

Today, thanks to a World Church missionary grant, funded by your tithing contributions and the Florida USA Mission Center, the New Port Richey emerging congregation meets in a rented building.

Because there is not a baptismal font there, on Palm Sunday, April 1, they met on the beach.

Twenty-five people were baptized, and five more joined the church through confirmation. Debbie described how the Holy Spirit is

working with this signal community that lives out Christ's mission as its own.

“We are like a puzzle. God is adding more pieces together, filling in the gaps of who we are called to become as Community of Christ.”

The good news is that God is relentless in loving this world and in inviting the church to love it.

God is at work throughout the planet. Frequently, God's work involves the Spirit's whisper to the church, saying, “Come and help.” In this regard, the Council of Twelve Apostles is testifying the Spirit's invitation is again calling us into new places. The Twelve recently shared that we are ready to plant congregations in at least eight more nations when we have the funding to begin and sustain the church's mission in those areas. This is good news!

The fact is, in many places people are responding to the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ in Community of Christ. Some of these

people are previously baptized Christians. They have become members of Community of Christ through the sacrament of confirmation. This is made possible by Doctrine and Covenants 164, given in 2010 to the church.

Some people have asked, “How is that going? What has been the experience of receiving previously baptized Christians into the church through the sacrament of confirmation?”

Jesus once said we could know a tree by its fruits. In other words, if we see a tree that’s bearing apples, then we’re looking at an apple tree. Well, as we look at the lives of previously baptized Christians who have joined the church through confirmation, we are seeing the fruits of discipleship. They are sharing their witness. They are generously supporting the church’s mission. They are embracing the identity, message, mission, and beliefs of Community of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is blessing us through the gifts, faith, and service of these new members. To you who are new members, let me say this.

Whether you are a previously baptized Christian who has joined the church through confirmation, or whether you are a new member who has been baptized and confirmed by Community of Christ ministers—welcome! We are so thankful you are a part of our worldwide faith family.

We want to affirm that the call to mission necessitates we do the best job possible of preparing congregational leaders for ministry and leadership. We are pleased that a program of special training courses called MEADS Multi-Nation (Ministerial Education and Discipleship Studies) is being held in many places around the world, mostly in non-English-speaking nations. Through these courses, many leaders are receiving training in scripture, leadership, administration, and mission.

We also are pleased to share with you that a generous contribution is making possible new educational and training opportunities in Western, English-speaking nations, as well. In fact, we are only days away from launching an effort called Leading Congregations in

Mission. This project assumes there are ways of “being the church” that can decrease a congregation’s fatigue and increase its spiritual vitality while helping it discover how to be in mission according to its unique congregational gifts.

We’re going to experiment with this approach in about 70 congregations for the next three years. We’ll then collect what we learn and offer this training to many more congregations.

The same generous gift that is making this project possible has funded a new resource called the Pastors and Leaders Field Guide. This field guide, available on the church website (www.CofChrist.org/leaders), is a highly practical resource that provides pastors and congregational leaders with specific, “hands on” help for leading congregational life and mission. Again, it’s called the Pastors and Leaders Field Guide. Check it out!

Becky, I hear there is good news in your areas of responsibility. Please share some with us!

BECKY L. SAVAGE



The good news is so abundant I can share only a few areas. Let me start with young adults.

YOUNG ADULT VISION PROJECT

The church is blessed with a wonderful group of young adults who are visionary, vibrant, gifted, educated, equipped, and dedicated to living Christ's mission. They yearn for meaningful relationships and spiritual enrichment within a loving and inclusive community and fellowship.

For many young adults, mission means ACTION—ACTIVE ministries occurring where people and needs meet. Talk does NOT equal mission, nor does it reflect Christ's model of compassionate ministry to the most vulnerable and the voiceless.

Young adults desire experienced leaders and ministers as mentors to share experiences, to walk beside them as spiritual companions. They need Christ-focused servant supporters who accept them and open the way for creative perspectives and change in congregational life.

To young adults: In those places where you are contributing your leadership and passions for mission, we are grateful for all you are doing to share Christ's peace within the church.

To congregations that have not yet experienced the giftedness of young adults: The good news is there are young adults who may be waiting for an invitation to work collaboratively with you to serve Christ's mission. Invite them to partner with you in action-focused mission and let them lead and grow.

Several important recommendations from the Vision Project will assist church leaders into the future. We are taking three essential next steps. We will:

- Establish a Young Adult Advisory and Ministry Team.
- Initiate a Young Adult Leader-development Program and encourage young adult participation in field-based leadership and Seminary education.
- Create a communication message that shares the outcomes of the Vision Project.

CHRIST'S MISSION IS OUR MISSION – WORLD CONFERENCE STUDY AND REFLECTION

Spiritual preparation is essential for the entire church. Later in his address, President Veazey will ask essential questions related to how the Holy Spirit is moving and speaking in the life of the church.

The good news: In our striving to become a prophetic people we have experienced the powerful impact of God's Holy Spirit. The First Presidency invites the church to unite again in preparation for the 2013 World Conference, where we will focus on the theme, Christ's Mission...Our Mission!

We have just released a new book, [*Christ's Mission Is Our Mission*](#), by Peter A. Judd. The First Presidency asks the church to prayerfully study the text individually and in groups. It is essential that we all approach World Conference spiritually prepared and focused on the mission of Jesus Christ.

COMMUNITY OF CHRIST STATEMENT OF SEXUAL ETHICS, NATIONAL CONFERENCE STUDY AND REFLECTION

The good news is that many of you already are engaged in extensive dialogue and education in preparation for national conferences. Australia and Canada will hold conferences in June 2012.

The USA will have a national conference in April 2013 and the British Isles is planning a conference for October 2013.

We will release additional materials for study, discussion, and spiritual reflection by the end of April. They will include two draft

statements: *Community of Christ Statement of Sexual Ethics* and *Theological Foundations for Sexual Ethics with Reflection Questions*. Watch for these resources on the web at www.CofChrist.org/ethics. The purpose of the material is to encourage open and honest conversation in the church about sexual ethics. In addition to study and discussion, we invite feedback about the statements through the same web address.

Prayer and spiritual openness are essential for discerning God's will, and we thank you for your courage and willingness to remain vulnerable to divine grace and guidance.

COMMUNITY OF CHRIST SINGS

One additional item of good news: We are thrilled to share the name of the new hymnal. [Community of Christ Sings](#) reflects the international personality of the church. We sing our mission and identity with poetry and harmony, in many languages and rhythms.

New songs call us to pursue our mission of justice and peace for all of creation. And, not to worry, many favorites remain.

Congregations may start ordering books in November. We encourage you to attend the October 2013 Peace Colloquy, where the next hymnal will be officially released. To experience the excitement of one of the new hymns, we will now share in singing “To Be Your Presence.”

STEPHEN M. VEAZEY



We just sang the main message today: “To be your presence is our mission here.”

Christ lives in community that is devoted to continuing his mission on Earth!

And, according to scripture, the soul of such community is “oneness” in Christ that transcends human differences.

Are we such community?

The vision that inspired Jesus' was broadly inclusive community that mirrored God's nature. In pursuit of that vision he gathered his first band of diverse followers and adamantly taught them to "love one another." Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 NRSV).

The same vision enthused the first communities of Christ described in the Book of Acts. As a result, a tangible spirit of love, hospitality, and oneness stood out, contrasting with the larger society.

But, even those first disciples struggled to embrace all the possibilities of oneness in Christ. As Jewish Christians, their culture and religion deeply embedded in them distrust and even disgust toward some people. Not surprisingly, it took the Holy Spirit to uproot and move them toward God's broader vision of community in Christ.

Apostle Peter was napping and praying on a rooftop when he had a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of creatures. A heavenly voice said, “Kill and eat!”

Thinking this could be a test of his faithfulness to Hebrew dietary laws, Peter said, somewhat self-righteously, “By no means. I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” He was startled to hear the voice retort, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

God was transforming Peter’s view of how the world is ordered. But, it is hard—extremely hard—to break out of one’s inherited beliefs and biases to accept a broader vision of what God is doing to reconcile all of creation!

The vision prepared Peter for an invitation to come to Cornelius’ house to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why did he need preparation?

Cornelius was a soldier of the occupying Roman forces. He was a Gentile! Gentiles disgusted Peter! He had been taught all his life that Gentiles were dirty and to be avoided at all costs.

Yet, the Holy Spirit was calling Peter to go have fellowship with Gentiles. And, he had the faith to respond to the Spirit's guidance.

It is difficult from our point in time to understand the loathing Peter felt when he crossed the threshold of Cornelius' house. His religious upbringing and scriptural understanding screamed, "No!" But the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the gospel, kept saying, "Yes!"

Thankfully, even though Peter could not fully understand, he had the faith to follow the Spirit's leadings. As the experience drew to a close, Peter confessed:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. —*Acts 10:34–36 NRSV*

Not everyone was happy with his new insight. Some were scandalized. Peter had not followed the rules! He had baptized people who were uncircumcised; people who were unclean!

So what did they do? They convened a “national conference” in Jerusalem to sort it all out. There were vigorous scriptural debates. Points and counterpoints were asserted. Testimonies were shared. And somehow in the midst of it all the Holy Spirit kept shaping the community on which Christianity’s future rested.

Remarkably, when it was all over the church in Jerusalem consented to extending the hand of full fellowship to the Gentiles. They could come to Christ as they were.

If the Holy Spirit had not broken into the status quo, Christianity probably would have remained a small Jewish sect assigned to be a footnote in history.

My witness is that the Holy Spirit is working in Community of Christ today to broaden and deepen our vision of what oneness in Christ means. The Spirit's most recent counsel to the church today states:

It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God. —*Doctrine and Covenants 164:5*

This counsel calls the church to fully embrace the broader vision of love, inclusion, and oneness that was a shining quality of the first communities of Christ.

When early Christians were baptized they committed themselves—sometimes at a great cost—to join a new kind of community. It was a community in which **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”** (Galatians 3:28 NRSV).

The future of the church rides on understanding what the phrase, **“for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”** means.

To me, it means that true baptism in Jesus Christ makes us all equal despite what the world says about our human differences. Through new life in Christ we see each other from Christ’s perspective. And, Christ sees capacity for discipleship and ministry as the same across the whole spectrum of human life.

Oneness in Christ means we simply refuse to label people and assign worth and opportunities for ministry accordingly. To do so is to return to the old world we publically stated we had left behind when we were baptized and confirmed.

Before Jesus was crucified he intently prayed that his disciples in all generations would live in the world as a deeply loving community of oneness:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. —*John 17:20–21 NRSV*

What is the divine purpose in this call to oneness?

The purpose is that we might live with each other as God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit live. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit live in love, mutuality, and unified purpose. It is only through sacred

community, which manifests the eternal community of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, that we are spiritually sanctified, completed, and equipped for life in God's kingdom of peace.

The purpose is also so the "world may believe" in the mission and message of Christ. Think about it! What more effective witness could there be in a world filled with fear and hate between people than communities of "unity in diversity" and oneness forged through the power of the Spirit of Christ?

Is such oneness possible, or just wishful thinking?

Peter's story reminds us how hard it is to let go of what we have been taught about other people except through the power of the Spirit. Our cultures, politics, and family and religious backgrounds deeply embed biases and fears in us.

A song from the musical, *South Pacific*, puts it well:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear...You've got to be carefully taught.

Beginning this June, and over the next several years, the church is entering into national conferences in some fields as provided in Doctrine and Covenants 164.

The questions these conferences will consider have to do with the relationships and possibilities for ordained ministry for our non-heterosexual brothers and sisters in Christ.

These questions cannot be avoided. They are being raised with increasing frequency and intensity by church members and leaders. We are called to a time of serious discussion and discernment about the fundamental nature of our faith community.

Since last World Conference I have been prayerfully engaged, along with many others, in a journey of discernment about the questions before us. I would like to share some perspectives gained so far.

Informed discussion of the issues, including scripture study, will continue to contribute to our understanding and knowledge. However, I am increasingly convinced that the questions before the conferences ultimately will be resolved only through humble listening to the Holy Spirit's witness today.

The basic question is, “What is the Spirit saying and doing today?”

It is interesting to note the unease being expressed about issues coming before national conferences is no different in intensity than the concern expressed by early church leaders over the status of Gentiles in the Christian community.

An important scripture lesson is that the early church, in response to the Holy Spirit, was willing to struggle with questions about the nature of the church community when some strenuously objected to even raising the topics. However, by paying attention to the questions

being raised by the Spirit, the church grew in its understanding of the gospel's power to bring very different groups of people into relationships of oneness in Christ.

My sense of the Spirit's guidance for nations preparing for national conferences is that before specific policy issues are decided we need to give serious attention to some more fundamental questions.

First, no matter what the outcomes of the national conferences, some beloved brothers and sisters in Christ will be disappointed, afraid, and angry. Conference recommendations do not instantly change strong views about the nature of God, humankind, human sexuality, and human relationships.

This prospect weighs very heavily on me. No matter what happens, the initial response of some probably will be to want to separate themselves from the faith community.

So, here is a more fundamental question to prayerfully consider: Regardless of the outcomes of the conferences, how will we continue to live as loving communities of “oneness” in Christ, called to focus on the whole mission of Christ, while some have such strong differences around certain matters?

We all need to feel the weight of this question now.

Second, we need to give serious attention to a reality in the church today. In some nations experienced pastors and church leaders are receiving priesthood calls through what they testify is the Holy Spirit’s witness for people in monogamous, committed, same-sex/gender relationships (legal marriages, civil unions, legal de facto relationships).

The people being brought to the pastors’ awareness are responsible, trusted, gifted, and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ. Their lives evidence the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Let me be clear, these calls are not being approved. This is in compliance with the 2002 World Church Leadership Council statement that there would be no more exceptions in matters related to ordination unless policies were changed through the common consent of the people.

So, here are some more-fundamental questions we need to prayerfully consider:

What does it mean that pastors and church leaders in some nations continue to receive what they testify is the Holy Spirit's witness of these calls?

Is it conceivable that we may be hindering what the Spirit is trying to do to provide for needed ministry in some congregations?

These are very serious questions to pray about and discuss.

Third, in true community that upholds the Worth of All Persons, the majority should not decide the status of a minority (non-heterosexuals) without fully hearing those in the minority who are feeling discrimination. I am talking about the need for ethical discussion and deliberation that do not further wound, alienate, or mute people who already are feeling judged and condemned.

Are we willing, in essence, to go to “Cornelius’ house” and talk, even when some of us are very uncomfortable with the topic?

Are we truly willing to listen to others—especially to those in the minority—before we decide?

In this respect, we should hear again the counsel given in Section 161:3b:

Do not be fearful of one another. Respect each life journey, even in its brokenness and uncertainty, for each person has walked alone at

times. Be ready to listen and slow to criticize, lest judgments be unrighteous and unredemptive.

The most fundamental question for me as we approach national conferences is: What is the Holy Spirit doing today to continue to shape us as true community in Christ? I am referring to the sacred community in which “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28 NRSV).

We need to participate in national conferences with an unusual degree of spiritual preparation and sensitivity. Daily spiritual practices that further open us to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and God’s universal, eternal love are vital as we prepare ourselves in the months ahead.

It is so easy to confuse our individual feelings, thoughts, and egos with genuine guidance from the Holy Spirit. That’s why it is essential that we do our spiritual discernment together. We must all consider our views in relation to the views of others.

Our church's diversity is a gift that helps us better understand God's nature and will. Learning to graciously **talk together** from different perspectives and to **listen together** to the Spirit are essential skills needed for our continued journey as a prophetic people.

In the meantime, our primary focus throughout the worldwide church will be on pursuing and funding the five Mission Initiatives! We must not become distracted from the clear call to passionately live the mission of Jesus Christ...the whole mission of Jesus Christ!

If we resolutely keep our feet on the pathway of living Christ's mission together, the church will make major strides forward in fulfilling God's vision for the future. I can see that future!

I can see the future of Community of Christ with enough clarity to know it is beautiful and full of joy, blessing, and peace for everyone.

It is a future in which we become the visible answer to Jesus' prayer that "they may be one" so the world will have a shining witness of God's coming kingdom, the Zion of our hopes!

The future I can see is one in which we will turn to each other as we immerse ourselves in the reconciling and healing waters of oneness in Christ and say, "Why did it take us so long to get here?"

Until that day the spiritual journey toward true oneness in Christ is our home.

And, in conclusion, let me say that I am sure glad to be "at home" on the journey with **ALL** of you!

