

The Mission Matters Most!



“Today, the central question is, how much does the mission of Jesus Christ *really matter* to us?”

THE MISSION MATTERS MOST!

By President Steven M. Veazey
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I previously have shared that when I was committing to paper the words that were to become Doctrine and Covenants 164, I thought I had reached the conclusion with paragraph 8. Having wrestled with complicated theological, sacramental, and ethical issues, I was grateful for the Spirit's guidance. I wanted to rest with God. Much to my surprise, as I began a prayer of thanks, the Spirit surged up like a fountain! I reached for my writing tablet and began to capture the experience in concepts seeking expression.

What resulted is now paragraph 9 of Section 164. It is a message of God's affirmation and hope for the church. The concluding sentence came with undeniable clarity: *"The mission of Jesus Christ is what matters most for the journey ahead!"*

The MISSION of Jesus Christ is what MATTERS MOST for the journey ahead!

But, what is the mission of Jesus Christ?

The challenge in answering this question is the all-too-human tendency to mold Jesus and his mission into our national, cultural, political, and theological agendas, rather than allowing him to deepen and transform our vision!

So, I think the best way to answer the question is to turn to scripture; particularly the passage previously read: Luke 4:18–19.

After a time of wilderness spiritual strengthening, and after his baptism and confirming experience with the Holy Spirit, Jesus went to worship in his hometown synagogue. The congregation was mostly family and old friends; not the easiest place to announce that you are the Messiah.

But when Jesus was invited to read scripture, he did not hesitate. He was poised for this occasion. He was handed a scroll of the writings of Isaiah. He selected words that correspond with Isaiah 61:1–2 and 58:6 in the Bible.

Isaiah 61 poetically describes a servant who would restore God's justice and peace to Israel and the world. Isaiah 61 is rooted in other Isaiah passages, especially in Isaiah 42.

Isaiah 42 speaks of both a servant and a covenant people of God—a faith community—who will open blind eyes, free captives from bondage, bring forth God's compassionate justice, and be called a light to the nations.

Jesus strategically selected a scripture passage to proclaim his mission. By doing so he set the direction for the disciple community that would form around him.

He read: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...”*

Jesus was able to make this claim because he knew the ways of the Spirit. He was grounded in scripture, particularly the prophetic texts. He had spent ample time being shaped by the Spirit through prayer, as well as worshiping and learning with others.

Being spiritually formed is foundational to obtaining a clear and compelling vision of mission. A compelling sense of mission springs from the overflow of deep communion with the Spirit. And such communion occurs when we engage in personal spiritual practices as well as spiritual growth through healthy congregational life.

When the time came, such spiritual communion allowed Jesus to assert that what he was going to do was not his agenda; it was the work of God’s Spirit already in motion. And the Spirit was commissioning him to pursue the mission that *“matters most”* to God.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. —Luke 4:18–19
NRSV

In the Greek text, some scriptural phrases in this passage are even more forceful. For example, the phrase rendered in English *“to let the oppressed go free,”* translates more directly from Greek as *“to send away in freedom those who have been crushed.”*

A translation from the Aramaic text adds: *“to strengthen with forgiveness those who have been bruised.”*

Also, compare the full text of Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18–19. According to Luke, Jesus left out the phrase *“and the day of vengeance of our God.”* Jesus was showing how to responsibly interpret scripture through his intimate knowledge of God's loving heart and intent.

Now, back to the text! The Spirit of God inspired—Dare we say compelled?—Jesus to boldly proclaim the mission that would define his ministry. If Community of Christ is serious about the mission of Jesus then we need to be serious about what he clearly said his mission was!

Throughout my time in ministry, I have found this to be true. No matter what the setting—local or global; urban, suburban, or rural; among the poorest of the poor or the richest of the rich, and in vastly different cultures—Jesus' mission is most faithfully pursued as follows:

“To bring good news to the poor” means evangelism in the fullest sense of the term. It means gospel proclamation in word and action, including invitation and welcoming hospitality!

In today's varied social and economic settings, it means inviting people to Christ to experience the good news of the gospel whether they are poor in substance or poor in spirit. This invitation ALWAYS

includes the understanding that people best experience the gospel through the fellowship, ministries, and sacraments of the faith community.

The idea of introducing people to Christ without engaging them in the faith community distorts the gospel as Jesus lived it! The good news is that the resurrected Christ lives in community that restores persons to right relationships with God, others, themselves, and the Earth.

“To bring good news to the poor” and *“recovery of sight to the blind”* also means caring and healing ministry for the hurt, grief-stricken, and brokenhearted. Isaiah 61 includes the phrase, *“to bind up the brokenhearted.”*

This means compassionate ministry with people who are physically, spiritually, or emotionally hurting, which at one time or another is all of us. It means pastoral care as extending Christ’s love to everybody: church members, friends, and neighbors. And, according to the

gospel definition, “neighbor” is anyone in need, including those who society or religion have taught us to overlook, fear, or avoid.

“To release the captives..., let the oppressed go free,” and *“proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* is clearly about ministries of justice and peacemaking. The phrase *“the year of the Lord’s favor”* is particularly informative. It refers to specified times in the Hebrew calendar when steps were taken to restore balance and harmony to community relationships. The goal was to remedy social and economic injustices to better reflect the will of God. Jesus was saying that time is now and always!

In other words it is not enough just to care for people in their suffering. The mission includes ministries that release people from unfair or crushing conditions that cause suffering. Jesus’ mission is about restoring people to wholeness in healthy community.

So, we must address the root causes of poverty, hunger, discrimination, and conflict. These conditions keep large numbers of people from realizing their potential while others flourish.

This aspect of Jesus' mission is about promoting the peaceable reign of God on Earth as it is in heaven. It is about the cause of Zion—the gospel expressed in real Christ-like communities of inclusion, generosity, equality, and peacefulness.

Community of Christ is called to share the peace of Jesus Christ in all of its aspects. Sharing Christ's peace can begin with any dimension of Christ's mission: invitation, compassionate ministry, or promoting communities of justice and peace. But, to be authentic to the real Jesus our ministries must expand to integrate all of them.

Our mission statement says proclaim Jesus Christ AND promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace. We are called to pursue the whole mission of Jesus Christ, not just the aspects that most interest us.

The first communities of Christ described in the Book of Acts understood this! The church community in that time stood out as an alternative to the life-crushing conditions of its day.

The first followers of Christ boldly invited others to faith in Christ and baptized them after a time of serious discipleship preparation. They intentionally included new disciples in Christ-like communities of love, generosity, and equality. They committed themselves to living Jesus' core teachings daily as presented in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

They did not retreat or seek refuge from the world. They brought the vision and demands of Christ's peace to bear on the segregation, violence, and injustices of the false peace of the Roman Empire. They believed that being rich or poor, male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free didn't matter because baptism made all one in Christ.

The spiritual impulse to restore the mission of the first Christian communities energized the early Restoration movement. For a time

the church in Kirtland, Ohio, would host a great banquet for everyone in the community. The church wanted to demonstrate the inclusive love of the Savior as revealed in the Parable of the Great Dinner recorded in Luke 14:15–24.

Elizabeth Ann Whitney, who lived in Kirtland, wrote in her diary:

According to our Savior's pattern...we determined to make a feast for the poor, such as we knew could not return the same to us; the lame, the halt, the deaf, the blind, the aged, the infirm.

The feast lasted three days, during which time all in the vicinity of Kirtland who would come were invited, and entertained as courteously and generously as if they had been able to extend hospitality instead of receiving it...

—Quoted in Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations, Mark Lyman Staker, page 245

Founding Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. remembered:

The feast was after the order of the Son of God—the lame, the halt, and the blind were invited, according to the instruction of the Savior. We then received bountiful refreshment furnished by the liberality of the Bishop. —Ibid.

I like that phrase, *“the liberality of the Bishop.”* Of course, the “liberality of the Bishop” was made possible by the generosity of the Saints who gave out of their own poverty!

Do you hear the three fundamental mission themes in these accounts? Following the teaching of Jesus, they invited all and received them with warm hospitality, they demonstrated great compassion, and they practiced justice for everyone, which always precedes real peace.

Our call is to reclaim the same vision and passion for the full mission of Jesus Christ today! That is what Doctrine and Covenants 164:9

means when it says, *“The mission of Jesus Christ is what matters most for the journey ahead”!*

My comments do not mean that we have not been involved in mission. We obviously have congregations, ministers, members, and affiliated organizations actively engaged in mission. Thank you for your faithful efforts!

What I want to emphasize today is that we now are going to do the mission of Jesus Christ with greater determination, alignment, wholeness, and effectiveness. And, here is how we are going to do it!

From this point forward, we will focus all ministries, personnel, and resources of the worldwide church on the whole mission of Jesus Christ. We will do this through five mission initiatives.

These five mission initiatives are not new programs that begin and end at certain times. They build upon our mission statement and the foundation of We Share and the Enduring Principles. They are

unceasing emphases that ensure Community of Christ is being faithful now and in the future to the full mission of Jesus Christ. The first three mission initiatives are:

Invite People to Christ—Christ's Mission of Evangelism

Abolish Poverty and End Suffering—Christ's Mission of Compassion

Pursue Peace on Earth—Christ's Mission of Justice and Peace

We can begin to share the peace of Jesus Christ with any of these initiatives, depending on opportunities, needs, and the Spirit's guidance. However, because they are so interrelated, it is important to pursue all of them to be true to Jesus' mission.

Just like Jesus, we need to be rooted and shaped by the Spirit as individuals and in congregational community. The next two mission initiatives create the environment and opportunities through which disciples can grow as they encounter the Spirit of the Living Christ that motivates and empowers them for mission.

Develop Disciples to Serve—Equip Individuals for Christ's Mission

Experience Congregations in Mission—Equip Congregations for Christ's Mission

Through these two mission initiatives, disciples and congregations can find their identity, giftedness, and calling and confidently respond with the affirmation, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us!”* as they launch into mission with Christ.

Let's briefly explore each of these.

Invite People to Christ. We will increase the number of Community of Christ members/disciples and congregations pursuing the whole mission of Jesus Christ. We will do this by baptizing and confirming new members, by opening new congregations designed to reach new groups of people, and by launching the church in new nations.

The continuing mandate for the church is to share the gospel through the world.

Abolish Poverty and End Suffering. We will strengthen and expand ministries to serve the poor and hungry. We also will address the conditions that cause poverty.

We will help those who hurt by bringing compassionate presence in times of need. We will extend Oblation funds to provide immediate aid.

We will feed the hungry through World Hunger grants and help congregations find effective ways of addressing hunger in their communities.

We also will continue to support affiliate organizations dedicated to alleviating poverty and promoting healthy communities.

Pursue Peace on Earth. We will be the feet, hands, and voice of the Prince of Peace by pursuing peace on Earth. We will further develop the Temple, dedicated to the pursuit of peace, as an educational,

spiritual-formation, and networking center to support peacemaking throughout the world.

We will expand our emerging PeacePathways network to maximize the impact of church and affiliate-sponsored peacemaking initiatives.

We also will continue involving children in peacemaking through Young Peacemakers Clubs, Peace Mobiles, and the Children's Peace Pavilion and its satellites.

We want to provide more young-adult peacemaker internships. And, we will continue to engage in ecumenical and interfaith partnerships to be at the forefront of organizations pursuing peace on Earth.

Our fourth mission initiative is **Develop Disciples to Serve**. We will help all ages—from the youngest to the oldest—continuously grow as disciples of Jesus Christ through spiritual practices, community experiences, and educational curriculum for disciple formation.

I am pleased to share that a church member family has committed \$300,000 to accelerate our efforts in this initiative. This generous gift resulted in the sooner-than-expected launch of the Community of Christ “Disciple Formation Guide,” available on the church’s website (www.CofChrist.org/dfg/).

The “Disciple Formation Guide” is an interactive website for accessing ideas, tools, lesson plans, and information, including an introductory video, for planning Christian education for all ages. It contains resources that focus on Community of Christ identity, message, mission, beliefs, and history.

Upon being introduced to the mission initiatives vision, the same family has generously committed an additional \$100,000 per year for five years, for a total of \$500,000 to support the mission of the church.

Develop Disciples to Serve also includes priesthood-faithfulness training and support, plus increased help for pastors and congregational leadership teams.

Our fifth mission initiative is **Experience Congregations in Mission**. Individual preparation and effort is not enough. We especially need congregations that are living expressions of the personality, love, spirit, and mission of Jesus Christ.

What we do as congregations must be much more than routine social activities. Where is the love, spirit, and mission of Christ calling us to focus or redirect congregational activity?

Each congregational activity must be evaluated in terms of its mission alignment and be developed to strengthen mission. But that is not all! To ensure focus and accountability, we'll align the entire World Church budget—all income sources and related expenses—with our five mission initiatives starting with the next fiscal year. What does this mean?

The five mission initiatives now will define everything we do!

All World Ministries Mission Tithes and every other World Church income source will be applied to the five mission initiatives. Each mission initiative will have a tithing income goal. We will grow mission by growing generosity.

Contributors will be able to indicate through the offering envelopes, pre-authorized transfers (PAT), or electronic giving which mission initiatives they prefer to support. You can express your preference to support all of the mission initiatives. Or you can indicate which ones you especially feel called to support.

The church, in turn, will communicate regularly about what is being achieved in each mission initiative, progress toward the tithing goals, and what is yet needed.

Is your passion evangelism, pursuing peace on Earth, or helping congregations engage in mission? Is it abolishing poverty and ending

suffering, or is it helping disciples of all ages deepen their discipleship?

All of the mission initiatives are essential!

Many are aware we have begun experiencing an increase in World Mission Tithes since World Conference. Because of the continuing effects of the 2007–2009 economic recession additional financial recovery is needed before we begin to increase our budget for mission, but we are headed in the right direction!

You may not know that the current generous response is being led by World Church leaders, the World Church Finance Board, the Standing High Council, other World Church teams, and our World Ministries staff. These church leaders were invited to lead the way by increasing their contributions to support the church's mission. Many of our international field staff members in less-affluent settings were among the first to respond!

We also have invited priesthood members to discover their true capacity and to lead the church by contributing or increasing their contributions to World Ministries Mission Tithes, if possible. We are encouraged by the initial response.

Today we also are launching the “Power of Ten” emphasis for the church. This emphasis was designed by young adults who have been meeting with us to envision the church’s future.



The idea is that if people will begin to contribute the equivalent of \$10 a week or \$10 a week more to World Ministries Mission Tithes—roughly the cost of a movie ticket or a fast-food lunch in some nations—the impact on the church’s ability to pursue Christ’s mission would be beyond our greatest imagination!

Young adults, the Presidency has met with close to a thousand of you in 32 Vision Project retreats throughout the world. You asked the

church to be more serious in pursuing and funding mission that makes a real difference in the world. Here it is!

Today, the central question is, how much does the mission of Jesus Christ really matter to us? Words and good intentions are not enough. Are we willing to align our time, energy, and means to show the mission of Christ matters most?

In 1978 the church was admonished through revelation that echoed Luke 4:18–19:

Let my word be preached to the bruised and the brokenhearted as well as those who are enmeshed in sin, longing to repent and follow me. Let the truths of my gospel be proclaimed as widely and as far as the dedication of the Saints, especially through the exercise of their temporal stewardship, will allow. —Doctrine and Covenants 153:9a

Through this counsel, the crucified and resurrected Christ is asking the church to make his mission our highest priority!

As I travel I continue to run into questions about the concepts of generosity and tithing. So, let me be clear. Here is how we respond in my family.

First, we constantly seek to be more aware of how God's generous grace blesses us daily. Then, in thankfulness, we tithe according to our true capacity and desire to support the church's mission so others also can be blessed. This includes Local (congregational) and World Ministries Mission Tithes.

Then we give to other organizations. We understand our giving to church-affiliated organizations, community charities, and other good causes is part of our discipleship, but it is not Local and World Mission Tithes.

Let me also say a brief word about generosity and true capacity.

I was participating in a worship service in an inner-city congregation. We were dedicating a new building made possible by local and church-wide generosity.

During the offering my attention was drawn in deep appreciation to several contributors who were present from other areas. They had given hundreds of thousands of dollars to the project.

Then my attention was turned to a little girl sitting next to me. She was from the impoverished neighborhood where the church was located. She placed an unused postage stamp in the offering plate. As she gave her offering she looked up and smiled at me because of her joy in being able to give what she could to support the mission.

In that moment the Spirit witnessed to me that all offerings should be celebrated. Those with more and those with little had given according to their true capacity. All contributions were valued equally by God because of the thankful spirit in which they were given as response to God's grace, which is God's constant giving.

Generous response from all, according to true capacity now and in the years ahead—through tithing, major gifts, and estate planning—will make mission happen beyond what we now can see. Your support of one, some, or all of the five mission initiatives will bless many lives. And, your life will be filled with greater joy, hope, and peace than you ever have experienced.

What an opportunity for us! In response to God's Spirit we are moving from being a church defined to a great extent by organizational needs to being a church driven by Spirit-led mission.

Today, the voices of those preaching doom for the world and manipulating people through fear are increasing. They are calling people to retreat from the struggles of humanity and the Earth.

In the midst of such times, Community of Christ is called to be fully present in the world to make visible the whole mission of Jesus Christ. Community of Christ is called to move against the tides of fear

as a shining beacon of hope in response to the divine call to establish the peaceful reign of God on Earth.

I am inviting each of you at this pivotal moment in the church's life to put your hearts and souls into mission—the divine mission for which Jesus Christ lived and gave his life!

Christ's mission...Our mission!