

Episode 82 - Spiritual and Missional Practices

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(Music)

Carla: Hello and welcome to the Project Zion podcast. My name is Carla Long, and I am here with a very dear friend, Larry McGuire. We were actually sitting in a pretty warm cabin at Red Cliff Reunion here near Huntsville, Utah. It's about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, which is the hottest part of the day, and, you know what? We should really start getting air-conditioned cabins (laughing), because, not only are we hot, but we're also a little punchy; so this podcast might be a super fun one to listen to. So, Larry, thank you so much for being here.

Larry: Hi, Carla. Thank you very much for having me.

Carla: Ah, it's a pleasure. Larry and I got to know each other, gosh, maybe ten years ago, which makes us feel (garbled) kind of old, in California maybe. And then we were lucky enough to work together in Europe for a couple of years when he was working in England. And, I'm sure he's going to mention more about that. Actually, what a great place to start. Larry, tell us about what you've done, who you are, everything.

Larry: Thanks, Carla. I've been privileged to be able to serve in a variety of capacities for Community of Christ. Currently, my wife Amanda and our kids, Corinne and Elijah, live in Gilbert, Arizona; and I am serving as the Mission Center President there, and also, I have the opportunity to serve as a President of Seventy for the Western USA Field as well as for Europe. And I also have another son, whose name is Corey, who lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Before Phoenix area and the Arizona Mission Center, I was given the privilege of living in England. I lived in Nuneaton, England, and served on the staff there of the British Isles Mission Center in support of Eurasia, where I had the joy of travelling with Joey Williams and Carla Long and it was quite an experience for me to learn a little bit about myself in the midst of a new culture. So, my journey has taken me across the upper Midwest, the Northeast, parts of Europe, a two-week visit to Africa, and now in the Western USA Field.

Carla: You're kind of a "been everywhere, done everything" kinda guy. (Laughter) And a President of Seventy! I'll just say it. What a stud! (laughter)

Larry (laughing): Not so much.

Carla: Ohhh, okay. Well, yeah, that's cool. You've been on a journey for a long time. How long have you been a President of Seventy?

Larry: So I was set apart as a President of Seventy at the World Conference of 2010. That was the World Conference where the Council of Presidents of Seventy was expanded to have ten Presidents of Seventy. And there were seven new people who were brought on to that Council. And so, it's been a joy of learning, but also a struggle of trying to figure out how that role and responsibility is relevant in the culture of the church today.

Carla: So, Larry. I've had the pleasure of working with you, so I know that you have a passion for mission. I know this. I've seen it. I've seen it in the way you deal with people, and talk with people, and are with people. So, what has your journey been about on this conversation about mission?

Larry: So, back about 2005, Carla, I was struggling to try to put into words what I was actually feeling about what God was asking me to do. I had served in a variety of roles; and, but, I also felt there was something else that God was inviting me to be a part of. And I came across a book by Alan Roxburgh called *The Missional Leader*, and it finally put into words what I was thinking and feeling, and it helped give me a way that I could feel I would be more effective in my witness of Jesus Christ.

Larry: Just around that same time, Tammy Lindle and I were invited to go to a Gospel and Culture Network training in Kansas City; and, when we were there, we were introduced to *Dwelling in the Word*. And that literally changed everything about my ministry, that simple practice of which I had not been familiar. I came back and began to share it with Ron Harmon, who was my Field Apostle at the time, and talked to him about this churning that was going on within me, and that I wanted to begin to explore what it would mean like to help shift the conversation in congregational life. And so, we started to have more conversation about what that would look like. We began to use *Dwelling in the Word*. And around that time, then, I came across a book that was written in 1972 by Don Landon and Bob Smith called *For What Purpose Assembled*. I read through that book, and I can remember very clearly recognizing that the questions that Don and Bob were asking in 1972 were the same questions we are asking today. The difference was...they weren't welcomed with their questions; and today we were asking those questions and we were finding people who were interested in being able to do that. And, of course, this was around the time when the word "missional" church came into play, so it was kind of fancy and new and shiny, and so other people wanted to join into that conversation. And Ron Harmon pulled together a group of people from that field and the team to be able to begin to experiment. And what did it look like for us to experiment and learn so that we could help kinda shape that conversation. In many ways, what we did then is what has become *Leading Congregations in Mission*. And so, for me, it was a journey of recognizing that there was something more that I could be involved in, something greater to which I was being called to be able to do.

Larry: Along that same time, later on in 2007, 2008, Ron Harmon had a profound encounter in the passage of Luke 5. Luke 5 is part of the, the passage where they are fishing all night long and they had had it. They had cleaned their nets. They were done. And Jesus said, "Go back out. Cast. But I want you to cast in a different place." And, Ron's testimony that he shared with me and many others was the realization that it wasn't about working harder, it wasn't about working smarter, but it was about casting our nets where God had already provided opportunities. So what that did was it set us free to have the conversation with congregations that it wasn't what they were doing was wrong; they were being faithful to what they had known, but that there was the possibility that God was inviting them to cast for the opportunities rather than just continuing to go along in that same rhythm.

Carla: How awesome! So we have you to thank for *Dwelling in the Word*?

Larry: Tammy Lindle and myself, yes.

Carla: Because I do another podcast series called Holy Grounds, and it's all about spiritual practices, and most people's favorite spiritual practice is a personal practice. And when I asked them about their favorite "everybody" practice, it is almost always *Dwelling in the Word*. And I love *Dwelling in the Word* because we get to learn from everyone, and we realize that people with the seminaries degrees and doctorate degrees are not---well, they are smarter---but, you know, they're not that much smarter than the rest of the group because they have something to offer from their experience with the scripture, and I think that it just so profound.

Larry: So, when we encounter *Dwelling in the Word*, we use the same text for the entire week, which was treasures in clay jars from II Corinthians. And, every time we got together, we met with a different group of people but we dwelt with the same text. And I'll admit, after two days it was annoying; because I had the mindset "well, we've already talked about this. I've heard what other---you know, two other tables have said, but by the end of the week, I began to understand I did not understand the full power of that scripture. And so, by listening in different table groups for that entire week about different questions about the relationship of what God was doing and where God was moving in their lives, I began to understand the power of listening to one another without having the pressure of having it figured out. And so, when we originally started with *Dwelling in the Word* in some of our experiences, we suggested they spend longer than a week with a particular text. And, you know, for some of us, looking at Luke 5, we had our own ideas about it; but when you have an encounter, it changes the perspective and then you want to keep going back and saying, "what else can I learn" and you listen for one another. The other text that really changed me in a---in a way that gave me more focus around mission was when Ron Harmon and our colleague John Billings and I went and spent a few days with Alan Roxburgh in his home in Vancouver, British Columbia. And Alan sat with us, and we wrestled with Luke 10. And Luke 10 is traditionally the one about the calling of the Seventy. And the way in which we wrestled

together about that passage set us on a course that, I believe, has changed my ministry, has changed---now that we have *Leading Congregations in Mission*, and I---and I believe it is changing the shape of the conversation around the church. You know, it says in the beginning of Luke 10, it says, "After these things" and you've got to think "okay, what is he talking about?" Well, Jesus is actually responding directly to Luke 9. And what happens in Luke 9? The calling of the twelve to go cure, cast out demons, you know, those kind of things, they have all power and authority, the transfiguration occurs in Luke 9, the feeding of the crowd occurs in Luke 9, and the casting of this unclean spirit from a boy, the receiving of a child and what it means to do that, and then at the end of Luke 9, three people come to Jesus and they say in a paraphrased way, "so what does it mean to follow this God." And Jesus answers them, "Leave everything and follow me" and the answer they give is "I need to go back and say goodbye to my family" and Jesus said, "that's not necessary. If you put your shoulder to the plow, don't look back." "I need to go bury my father." "Let the dead bury the dead. Don't you worry about it. Sell all your possessions and follow me." The question they're asking, "What does it mean to follow this God." In Luke 10, Jesus begins to say, "this is what it looks like. You go into a town, into a village, don't worry about what's going to be there, and you stay there for a while. You receive their hospitality. You proclaim peace, and if it rests there, it's great. If it doesn't, move on. But you receive the hospitality of the people that are there and don't worry about all this other stuff." Jesus was basically telling us these 70 people who are unnamed, they're not the rock stars, they're not the brand new pastor in the neighborhood. They're just ordinary people. And Jesus says to the 70, "You go there and you be the stranger in their neighborhood." What happened in that experience for me was, I recognized we needed to change the conversation around mission in Community of Christ. So that's part of the journey I've been on. Luke 10 says, "Hospitality is not always about what I can bring, but hospitality means what is it that I can receive from the stranger?" And over and over and over again in the Hebrew text, people say "Well how do we know that God shows up?" and over and over and over again in the Hebrew text and now in Luke 10, they say "You're gonna find hospitality in the stranger." Well, Carla, in most of the places where we have a church building, we're the stranger in the neighborhood. It's their neighborhood; we have no relationship with them. But we open the church doors and say, "Hey, you're welcome." But we don't know one thing about their neighborhood. Jesus didn't say, "Go do a demographic study to figure out what's going on." Jesus didn't say, "I want you to take all these tools that you have and you fix the things that they have there." Jesus basically said, "Go sit at the table. Learn their stories. Learn their rhythm. Be part of their economic reality, and then you will find me because I'm already here." And so, the call to mission for me has been hospitality, living in the neighborhood, and asking the question "God, what are you up to here" in the midst of **me** being the stranger in their neighborhood.

Carla: But that takes sooo much vulnerability. I mean, that takes us saying that we don't have all the answers, we---we don't know how to do this, and we need some help, like, so, the key to that is spiritual practices, right? The key to saying "yes, I'm

vulnerable. Yes, I don't have all the answers" is spiritual practices. And that's what LCM talks about too, right?

Larry: Yes. So, I've recently heard Scott Murphy, a member of the First Presidency, share that spiritual practices ground us in our relationship with God. Missional practices take that relationship and push us out into where we are being called to go. And so, what the journey of *Leading Congregations in Mission* has been about, and, I think, some of the other experiments that---that are happening across the church, especially in the United States---is to take and heal and restore and reinvigorate our relationship with God; but then by asking the question "So God, where are you calling us to go to be engaged in practices that take us out into the midst of the neighborhood," so, and it's not always about having the toolkit, it's about having the relationship. And so by being engaged and listening in what's happening in the neighborhoods, we begin to understand that there's a different rhythm there; and we can listen into that rhythm; and we can find a place that says "Is God asking us to respond to this particular need" so on and so forth. The other piece of this, Carla, is that sometimes people say "I am not an extrovert; I do not want to be put out there in a way that says"---that makes them feel, you know, too afraid or vulnerable. Maybe they find themselves to be an introvert. There's a wonderful resource that I've been studying along with some of my other colleagues called *Quite*. And this book talks about the power of the introvert. And the introvert has a wonderful place in mission in that they don't have, always have the skills and the courage to be able to deal with 30 people; but one-on-one or with two people, they have a fantastic relationship. They go deep and they're able to invest in one another in a way that's meaningful. So it doesn't matter if your personality type is to be an extrovert or introvert. There is a place for that individual in the midst of what it means to---to be welcomed by someone else when you are the stranger, but also to learn how to receive the giftedness that the stranger brings into that conversation.

Carla: Ahhhh, I'd never really understood what it (garbles) introverts ever (laughing), because I am so extroverted; but I do know that when my best friend Tara and I would go to a party, she's an introvert and I'm an extrovert, we would have completely different experiences at the party; because I would be like, flitting around talking to every single person and, like, getting an overall feel of the room, where she would do exactly what you just said. Sit down with one person, really check in, and go deep with them. And that's what she loved to do. And that is the power of the introvert. They---they can draw strength and energy, just by deepening relationships.

Larry: So, a few months back, I was sharing in the Sierra Pacific Mission Center, and Bill McFarland, a colleague of mine in the---in the Western Field, and Zac Harmon-McLaughlin, the Mission Center President, and his wife Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, and after this amazing Priesthood day in sharing and worship with the Modesto and San Francisco congregation, we were going out to lunch because Bill and I had a later flight. And we went to Buffalo Wild Wings, because anybody who knows me, you know to get to my heart, you take a chicken wing there. And the place was packed! The

Oakland Raiders were in town and it was just packed, and it was noisy. And Zac and I were thriving on the energy in this particular room, and we were talking loud and we were very expressive and we were cheering and it was just a fantastic experience! And Bill and Katie sat at the table literally dying. They were on over-stimulation overload; because as introverts, they could not find a quiet, safe space to be. And it clicked to me in that moment as I was sitting at that table just how unsafe it really was for them emotionally to be in that kind of a setting. And how did I then need to step back from the joy of watching football on TV and having wings and talking with Zac who---I feed off of Zac's energy, and---and to really pay attention to Zac and Katie and what it means to lean in to listen to someone. Because so much of the culture in the western world, to lean in has an intimacy with which many are not comfortable; but if we are really going to be actively engaged in receiving the hospitality as a stranger, we have to lean in and listen. And I believe that spiritual practices ask us to lean in to God, and missional practices ask us to lean in to the neighborhood.

Carla: Well, also, there had to be a disruption on your part, right? I mean, you're an extrovert. You---you love this stuff. You get excited. You're---you're---all this adrenalin is flowing through your body, but something---there's another step there, right?---something has to stop you from your natural tendency. And I love that: Be disrupted to lean in, you know, I love that idea. As an extrovert, I totally get it, cause it's really difficult to do.

Larry: And it's important that we take time to pay attention to the other, not just about ourselves, but really---because I have a great relationship with Katie and with Bill, I was able to recognize they were not in a safe place; and as a companion on that journey, I need to be able to lean in and make sure that they feel listened to, and when all this stimulation is done, to not get back in the car and for Zac and I to just start rattling off all the fun we had, but actually to have time for it to be quiet and allow my friends who are introverts some time to breath and allow this---this stuff that's going on inside their soul to settle down so then whatever happens in the conversation, it's safe for them to have that conversation.

Carla: It's an invitation to be a part of it. It's not a pushing way, it's---it's an invitation.

Larry: Yes.

Carla: So, I'm gonna change the course of the conversation just a little bit, even though I really like talking about the Oakland Raiders and Buffalo Wild Wings; I mean, I don't LIKE talking about the Raiders, being from Kansas City, but, you know what I mean. (laughing). I like talking---never mind. All right.

Larry: They were playing the Chiefs that day! (laughing)

Carla: Oh, I bet Zac was very excited! (laughing) So, as a President of Seventy, you probably get this question a lot, and, I am assuming you have a good answer for it. In fact, I'm really looking forward to the answer. So, here it is. Larry, why mission? Why not just be content with what we have?

Larry: Carla, that's a fantastic question. And for all those who hear my response, please understand that it comes from the depth of love that I have for the movement known as Community of Christ, but I do not believe that mission is about fixing the church. Mission is about responding to the invitation that God has been giving to creation from the beginning of time. And that when we follow Christ's mission as we have been called in Community of Christ, it is not about fixing the church; because, in many ways, the church reflects the needs that we had in culture at a particular time. But today, it is about what does it mean in authentic relationships with others in our neighborhoods and in our communities in a way that is relevant and it is life-changing. And to fix the church is a responsibility with which I do not feel called to serve. I love the institution, I love Community of Christ, but this is not about fixing that; because when we say that, that means something was--- was out of control or something was out of alignment. Mission is about being fully aligned with what God is already present and doing. And we need to have the traditions that we have in the life of the church. And, you know, Jesus, when he talked about new wine in old wine skins, he wasn't talking about throwing away the traditions, he was saying if you have new wine, you're gonna need to know a new way to express it and to preserve it and keep it. So, for me, mission is about responding to what God has always been doing; and in that mission, we are given an opportunity to help shape the conversation about what is relevant in people's lives to give them a place where they can feel loved and accepted and allow transformation to take place. That mission is about changing systems that oppress people; mission is about responding when injustice occurs in a way that people are no longer threatened or marginalized. But we also must recognize that the Gospel was never transforming in the middle; it was always transforming on the fringes. And so, what we're being asked to do is we're asked to live on the edge where many people find themselves and give them voice and give them place to where God is moving; and mission is our opportunity, again, to respond to where God is already present and moving. We don't take God there; God is already there. **We** are encountering God.

Carla: So, correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like what you're saying that, is that God's mission for us to be---and one of which is to be in authentic relationship with people---is very different than keeping the institutional church alive. Is that what you're saying?

Larry: So, I believe that as we follow in these experiments, third place ministry where we might go to sit at McDonald's once a week and to engage in conversation with people who are in there, finding out about what kinds of opportunities and needs that are in their lives, or in a coffee shop, or in a bookstore, you know, those kind of things that third-place ministry where we're always present, listening, paying attention. The

practice of walking and praying our neighborhoods, whether it be the facility where we are, in our worship space, or in our neighborhoods where we live. The practice of inviting someone into our home for a meal; the practice of holy curiosity; learning about people without having an agenda. Those kinds of practices are about bringing energy and a focus to what's already happening. And by having that energy and focus, it opens up the conversation and the possibilities for what might be in our communities and in our relationships. There are numerous examples of, of, of congregations that take the risk of being able to say, you know, "we gather here for worship, but we live the mission in the neighborhood, and we're present and we understand what that looks like."

Larry: I---I can remember very clearly being in Springfield, Virginia, one time for a worship experience, and one of the things that happened in the worship experience was after we had received the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the presider had planned that we were going to leave the church building and walk in the neighborhood that surrounded the church and pray in that neighborhood and then come back in for a closing blessing. What a powerful example of taking the ordinary rhythm of our congregational life in the worship experience and receiving of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and then saying, "Now go into the neighborhood and pray for the opportunities there" and I will never forget the image of watching, literally, the congregation stream into the neighborhood; and we prayed together; and then we gathered back in for a blessing that called us to continue that conversation. So that, to me, is the energy and the hope that's around this. So, you know, when we say we're gonna fix what's wrong with the church, we're putting out there a conversation that isn't realistic. This is about being more aligned; it's not about making sure our nets are always cleaned and neatly folded and everything in its place. It is about responding to God that says, "Take those nets that are already clean and cast them into the place where I'm asking you to cast. Don't just go out there and do what you've always done." And so the routine is, go where God is asking you to go with the opportunities; don't just keep your nets safe for the day of "maybe someday."

Carla: You know, I know a lot of small churches that just kill themselves every Sunday putting on a worship service, you know, and they have---and many congregations, and---and that's admirable, you know, they---they work hard at it; but how freeing to say, "You know what? Try something else." Have a sharing in the round in the back of the church over some food. Talk to people. Really get to know the people in your congregation first. You know, try something else. You know, I feel like sometimes people just have like these cassette tapes, and I'm calling them cassette tapes for a purpose 'cause they're pretty old, running through their heads. In fact, just recently, a camp, you know, we had a free day at camp, so we got to leave and we got to go out and do some, and just be out of the camp for a while and see what was around. And an older gentleman did not like that. And he---he told me twice that he thought he came to Reunion to---to get religion. That's what she---that's he said, right? to get religion, and---and I said, "well, what did you do on your free day." And he said, "Well, I went out with my brother and we went to a museum we've always wanted to go to and we

had just a wonderful time being together." And I said "Do you think that was ministry?" He's like, (pause) "No." (laughing) And I said, "Well, I do." So people think that spirituality and religion and church have to be in a building. They can't stop this cassette tape from running in their head. So, in a lot of ways, permission given, folks. Go out. Try something. And try it with intention.

Larry: What a beautiful example of how easy it is to be in relationship with one another in a way that doesn't make us feel like we have to have everything in or---in place and order to make it accomplished. You get together with a group of people and you share, you know, what we are calling joys and concerns. So what's happening in your life? What are some of the things that are really, really necessary for you to talk about? And you share joys and concerns out of a love for knowing the people and having a relationship, not so you know what you're going to fix. Because it's not about fixing people; it's about being in relationship to listen to them and share what is most important in their particular life. What does it look like for a Gospel story to be made real in our midst? What does it look like for me to go into a particular restaurant with a group of people and there's nothing on the menu I like; and yet in the midst of the conversation, I begin to realize there's plenty that I can do and have that is absolutely wonderful; and in the midst of that, I am able to understand the joy of the invitation that they gave for me to come and be present with them in that. And then, also, to be able to ask, you know, the question of, of, what is it, what is it that you see or feel or sense God might be up to? And often times that question is the one that comes long after the relationship has been set. You don't lead with, "Well, what's God doing in your life" if you have no relationship with that person. You lead with "So what's going on in your world?" so that I get to know you better. "What about your family?" and those kinds of things. That, then, puts us on a---on a level place of a relationship that's authentic; and it gives us permission to be able to go much deeper in, in those conversations. I can remember sitting at a coffee shop with a friend, talking about some different priorities of ministry. And as we were talking about those priorities of ministry, I became very aware that people around us were listening. People began to pay attention and figured out that we had something to do with a church. And then that reminded of another experience of having lunch with a congregation in a restaurant down in the southern part of Tucson, Arizona, and the woman who was there who was cleaning the tables kept hovering around behind our table as we were talking about Community of Christ. And I saw her beginning to cry. And, as we were talking, she didn't want to leave; but she had to go clean a table and she came right back. And after everyone had left, and as I was walking out, this woman who was cleaning the tables came up to me and she said, "Do you think that's a church I could belong to?"

Larry: See, the conversation is that in the midst of everything else we have going on around us, there are people who are longing to know that they can be part of the that conversation, too. And by sitting in a neighborhood setting and paying attention and inviting people into that conversation, we give space for them to come and be a part of something that we know is of value to us, but we don't do it in order to try to make

them feel better or to try to fix them. We do it in order that their gifts, their questions, their life journey blesses us as well. So that, literally, as they enter into the stream of the ever-flowing Gospel, our stories are all connected together.

Carla: Well, Larry, that's super messy. It is messy [laughing]. 'cause then you have to, like, get involved with people, and you can't control their lives, and you can't control what they do, and it, then, then you don't know where it's gonna go. And you have to be vulnerable. And it's hard.

Larry: It really is. And, I believe that the disruptive motion and presence of the Holy Spirit is---is doing that in order to waken us up from a sleep, a slumber, a lack of energy or enthusiasm. But I also think that it's okay for it to be messy, because, if we're really honest, there are many, many times in our own life when I've been a---a disciple of Jesus Christ, I have been a hot mess. And in being a hot mess, gosh, you know, what do I do? One of the things, Carla, that has really bonded us together was when I was in crisis, sitting in my living room in Nuneaton, England, and you came and sat with me. And I was a mess. I cried. I didn't---I didn't know what else to say. And, Carla, you didn't say anything. You just sat with me and cried with me. And---and when I asked you a question about something around a---a personal budget, that was the easy part for you, because that's the technical part of you. But the emotional, spiritual part of you was "this is my friend who is broken, and I'm just going to be there." And I know you arranged your schedule to be able to be there with me, when you could have done anything else that would have been really necessary and important. So, Carla, you and I are yoked together in a very messy, messy time of life. And yet, what we found was an appreciation for being present and doing nothing more other than saying, "I'm here" and "I'm sorry." If that's the way in which we get at the authentic part of what it means to live the Gospel, I believe, then, we can have a full assurance that, as the Bible says, "the Kingdom of God has come near" in this place. It wasn't fake; we didn't write down and put it in a manual. It was two friends. It wasn't even colleagues. It was two friends who said, "we're just gonna sit here for a while." I think that transforms people's lives. So is it messy? Yes. Did you try to fix me? No. Did you provide skills for me to be able to manage things? Yes. And in the the end, we laugh and we play and we sing and we know that our story has intersected at a time I needed you.

Carla: Okay, okay, okay, Larry, you've convinced me. (laughing) Being messy is okay.

Larry: I'm a hot mess. (laughing)

Carla: Oh, Larry, I---you're---if you're a hot mess, I think we're all a hot mess. You know? And God definitely works through our hot messiness. If we never went through all kinds of yuckiness, there's no way that we could sit with people when they were going through all kinds of yuckiness. As I like to say, "Perfection is boring. Who want's perfection? Not me." So, let's go back to you being a President of Seventy. That's---

that's quite a title. In Utah, it is a big title, friend, I have to tell ya. So as a President of Seventy, what do you see as the role of the Seventy and mission into the future?

Larry: That's a great question; and the answer is not definitive, but it is unfolding in my mind. I am humbled to serve on the Council of Presidents of Seventy with eight other colleagues who represent the church around the world. And we gather together for conversations about policy; we gather together to pray and discern calls to the Office of Seventy, to pray and discern about potential individuals to serve on the Council of Presidents of Seventy. We share sometimes in conversations with our colleagues in the Council of Twelve. Once in while we're invited as a Council to join in conversations with the World Church Leadership Council.

Carla: I have to interrupt you. What is it like to talk about policy with the Seventy? Is it painful?

Larry: For some of us, it is very painful (laughter). Some of us are not as well versed in some policy, which creates its own set of problems; others of us can be sometimes dismissive, but what we are trying to do is we're trying to be more authentic and in alignment with the World Church policy; however, for some of us, it is a painful conversation. And I'm not always the best one for that conversation, and I'm not always as patient; but John White, who is the senior President of Seventy, understands all of that and he tries to maneuver all those alligators as he possibly can. So it's---it's sometimes difficult, but it's also necessary.

Larry: So, Carla, the---the crux of your question is something that's been weighing on my heart and on my mind for about the last year. There has been a time in the life of the church when the Seventy would---would serve as, you know, really leading the church and establishing it in---in places where we did not have existing church presence and setting everything up and training people how to---to lead and, and establish congregations and so on and so forth. And, and, you know, for decades that's how the church grew, where those who were skilled in kinda reaching out those invitations and setting things up and then would move on. And then we kind of had this transitional, what I'm going to call, where we've had a---a Seventy who were called to be cheerleaders for Jesus. Those who had great energy and could provide, you know, fantastic preaching and teaching that was awe-inspiring and understood all the principles of the Gospel and salvation and all of those things; and they were amazing people that---that drew people in and they---they had this charisma and ability to be able to give people some energy and hope about what it means to become a member of the church. And culture has changed so much and has---it reflects a cynicism and, in some ways in the Western world, I think, a rejection of the cheerleader for Jesus kind of thing. The---here's an example: My wife and I went to Red Robin for a meal, and the table server was high-energy, asking all kinds of questions. And she just got on my nerves; and I said to my wife, "You know, if she says one more positive for me, I'm gonna have to get up and leave 'cause I just can't handle it anymore." And it---it was a

realization at that moment that there's a shift that is taking place even within me, and it's not just about, you know, hey this Jesus is a great guy and you need to come and be a part of Jesus and Community of Christ is a fantastic place to live out your discipleship. But there's something that's calling me to go deeper in the conversation. And I'm---and so what I'm wrestling with is, as the person who is responsible for identifying and recommending calls to the Office of Seventy in the western USA, which is Colorado, Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona, and then in the Eurasia Field, which is Europe, the British Isles, I---I feel a shift beginning to take place in me in that I'm realizing that people who have skills about listening are important in the role of Seventy. People who have an understanding about what it means to be able to pay attention to other people who are oftentimes on the fringe or not the dynamic ones, but that, in---in---also in the midst of the shifting of culture, what does it mean to be a cultural interpreter of what's happening around us. Outreach International does a fantastic job in many nations outside the United States where they use participatory human development specialists, which is a nice phrase for basically saying, "Go in and be present in the neighborhood and listen for what the needs are of the people and work to empower them for the ideas and the energy to come up with the solutions that they have in their own neighborhood. What would it look like for the Seventy who would be engaged in their neighborhoods and in the places where they feel called to go to be present in those neighborhoods to actually listen in to the needs and opportunities that are being present in those neighborhoods. What would it look like for them to be partners in developing the solutions to those situations that are already present in those neighborhoods. And so, this---that takes the skill of listening. It takes the skill of patiently being present. It takes the courage to lean in and to not come away with the answers. It---it means don't go in with a handbook that says, "if you do A, B, and C, then we can have this kind of a project." Because what that does is it no longer empowers them to respond to what God is already present and doing. And so what does it look like for us to be able to help be culture interpreters and recognize that there are some neighborhoods that are more receptive to others, so how do we make that happen where receptivity is present?

Larry: Another element of this is to learn what it means to be change agents. So, we---we sometimes know what it's like to stir things up or to, you know, follow when something is really exciting, we---we push through. But sometimes we have to know what it means to be a change agent, but also how do you manage change? Change is happening every day and it's constantly bombarding us. And many, many of the Seventy with whom I've been working don't know how to manage all the changing dynamics and demographics. People in the western world are---are more suspicious of anything to do with organized religion, because they feel like they're a commodity. But then, when they realize you're actually interested in them and want to have a relationship with them, they don't know what to do with that either because to be invested in a relationship with somebody means, well, you expect something from me, and yet, when we're managing change that's occurring, we understand that the relationship is the most important thing, and the only thing I want out of it is a

relationship with you. And if you want to explore what it means to be part of Community of Christ, there's a path for that, there's a conversation for that. And so, part of the role of Seventy is to help manage that changing dynamic where the church already exists, but then also there's a---a tension to be able to be on the forefront more where we do not yet exist. Also, in the places where we used to have a presence and that's gone, and now there's new opportunities we sense moving in to, what does that look like for us to be able to manage that changing dynamic? So, for me, the calling of the Seventy is about paying attention to what qualities appear to be necessary now within the context of my ministry. That's not the same as it would be in India nor in Africa; and so, to be respectful on the Council of Presidents of Seventy, how do we empower one another to have that new expression of the ministry of Seventy? And that is a conversation that hopefully we can continue to have in---in relationship with our colleagues on the Council of Twelve. So listening, cultural interpreters, and also to be able to know how to manage change in this rapidly changing context. Recently, I've been part of---of calling someone to the Office of Seventy, which the Council upheld, and---and we've celebrated in this person's accepting it. As I shared with them about their call, it was my witness of how they listened to people in a much different culture than their own, how they also were willing to work with the individuals that they had been kind of been in relationship with to come up with what worked best for the expression of the church in their neighborhood. They didn't go in with a preset handbook about what church had to look like. They invested in the relationship of the people who were in that neighborhood, and they gave voice to what would work for them. And it's taking root. So that's about listening and being a cultural interpreter.

Carla: Gosh, I remember when I first heard about the PHDP program, and a story was told to me that has stuck with me, and it's saying, I think, exactly what you are saying. This---a man went in, who was, participatory human development, he was a---expert in it, and he went in to this very, very poor village in Africa. And, you know, he---he just listened. He said, "Okay, folks, um, you know, what---what needs to be helped here and---what's---what's a problem in your village?" And---and lots of people came up to him, and the biggest problem they came up with, this village that had no clean water, hungry people, very few houses, you know, people were sleeping outside, they were like, "you know what is our biggest problem? We have too many dogs." And the guy was like, "Okay, let's see what we can do about that." And he said, "What do you think we should do?" And they found a way to fix the dog problem, and they were so thrilled by that, that they're like, "You know what else we could use? Clean water." And they were ready to tackle something bigger and something---and so, like, they felt listened to, they felt empowered, and things changed for them. And I've always been impacted by that story, because a less wise person would be like, "You're biggest problem is a---is dogs when you have nothing to eat? You are ridiculous and I'm going to tell you right now, you need clean water." And that would have completely disempowered them and nothing would have changed.

Larry: So, I, too have heard that story. And I heard a sociologist from Iowa State University talk about his first assessment as an associologist for the State going to Oceola, Iowa, just north of Lamoni; and, one of the things that they came up with that they have too many barking dogs in their neighborhood. And he makes the point, "What does it look like for us to always respond to the barking dogs and allow everything else to fall by the wayside?" And he said, "Culture will always force us to deal with the barking dogs, but the needs of the people are always emerging." So, what--what happens is that we often times go in with a preconceived idea that says, "I know what you need in order to make your life better," and yet that's contrary to the very essence of what Jesus said in Luke 10: "Don't take all your notebooks with you. Don't take all your pre-prescribed ideas. Don't take all your baggage. Go into the neighborhood. Don't worry about keeping Kosher. Go in as the stranger. Sit at table. Listen. Eat. Be part of their economic situation and, in that table setting, you will find the Shalom of God. The Kingdom will be made real because you present at the table, not because you went in with the notebook of ideas." Now, most of us who have the responsibility of being part of leadership in the church, whether it's as Bible vocational leaders or as paid people through the institution, we have ideas about what things might work and might not work; but this new unfolding massive change that we're in says, "Take time to understand what is actually needed and necessary." And in order to do that, you have to be in relationship. So hospitality is, for me, not just about me taking something into the home, hospitality is for me to receive the giftedness, the insights, and the messiness of someone else; and, as strangers together, we will find out how the Kingdom has already come here.

Carla: Amen, brother. Well, gosh, I feel like that's a good place to wrap it up, unless, Larry, you have any closing thoughts. Do you have anything else you want to say?

Larry: I'm grateful for this opportunity to have this conversation, and I would encourage those who might listen and be intrigued to explore what the concepts might mean for you to take some time to read a book, maybe like *Quiet*, about the role of introverts or a book *Spiritual Friendship after Religion*. Another book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the Neighborhood*. And for those that might feel like it's a bunch of unnecessary conversation, I invite you to take the time to unpack your nets, which have been put away, in order for another day, and to begin to cast them. And to experience new opportunities; but also, do not be surprised when God has already present and saying, "I have been inviting you, inviting you, inviting you. Follow where I'm going."

Carla: Thank you so much, Larry.

(Music)

Narrator: The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter-day Seekers team or of Community of

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