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Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

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Welcome to the ninth episode of Coffee Buzz, a podcast conversation with a member of Community of Christ First Presidency. My name is Linda Booth, Coffee Buzz host. I've been retired about a year now after having served as a member of the Council of 12 apostles for nearly 22 years, and the last six years serving as president of that Council. And those are leadership roles that my guest Prophet President Steve Veazey has also served in. Welcome Steve, How many years did you serve in the Council of 12 Apostles? And how many years as the President of that Council?

Steve Veazey 1:14

Well, thank you for the opportunity to share in this mode of view in the podcast. Let's see I entered the Council of 12 in 1992. So I was in the Council 12 for 13 years. And the last three of those years I served as President of the Council of 12. Before I was called into the Presidency.

Linda Booth 1:45

Yes, and the Council of 12 was tasked with discerning who would lead the church after the resignation is President McMurray and I remember very well Steve, that experience of discernment as the counsel, and the day that we all share our testimony of your call. So that is a precious time in the life of the church. So thank you. Steve and I have chosen a topic which is very timely now. And the topic for this Coffee Buzz podcast is critically important for disciples of Jesus Christ and members and friends of Community of Christ. And that topic is systemic racism. And as everyone knows, the video of George Floyd's death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, triggered protests across the United States and around the world, and brought renewed attention to the ongoing concerns about systemic racism in the criminal justice system. But it has also exposed the long standing racial inequalities in many aspects of life, schools and laws, social system Governments, communities and even in religious institutions. As a result, everyday people are waking up to the reality and the truth of the reality of what millions of African Americans experience in their lives as they read and listen to the stories of black men, women and children. Steve How has this pivotal news event and listening to our black sisters and brothers impacted you.

Steve Veazey 3:31

Well, I think initially, we need to acknowledge that not only have we been witnesses to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, but that has been compounded by the killing of Rashard Brooks in Atlanta, and other incidences which have probably not gained as much attention on the national News, but are just as real and impactful as the Floyd killing. But the Floyd killing certainly created a series of emotional reactions in me when I first saw the video heard the

commentary and continued to watch feelings of shock that quickly gave way to anger and frustration. And as I remained in those feelings in solidarity with others who are expressing what I think we could best describe as an outrage at this particular time in history after all these years, we're still faced with these overt actions of racism. I also renewed my own reasons which has pretty well been a lifelong concern to try to live as a person of racial reconciliation and justice making and also to work through whatever institutions organizations I can be a part of to dismantle racism. It's a long, hard road that requires persistence, and determination. So I experienced all of that, and continue to experience that even in the present moment.

Linda Booth 5:40

Yes, Steve, I think most of us are, if not all of us, who saw that video, and then began to listen to the stories and read in the newspaper of, of the systematic and justice that has typically our black sisters and brothers have experienced much of their lives. I find myself feeling very sad, and at times so angry that I'm really surprised at the depth of that anger. A few days ago, I received a text from Jimmy Munson. He's one of the pastors in a multi racial congregation in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And he wrote yesterday at 9am to have our cell group leaders Derek age 23, who just served 51 months in the military and Rodney, age 20 and a student at University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. We're playing ball with their nephews, ages six and eight at Chester Frost Park. They were taking care of their nephews because the boy's mother was working a double shift at the hospital. Derek chose to take his nephews over to a policeman to say thank you for his service, hoping to show his nephews that not all police are bad. And the policeman gave a cold response. So the guys went back to playing ball when Derek and Rodney got hit. handcuff for suspicion of shoplifting. Well, Derek and Rodney were held in a holding cell. Children Family Services took their nephews at 1pm. Yesterday, Derek and Ronnie got released because it was discovered that the shoplifters were two teenagers, one white and the other Hispanic, and one hour ago and \$650. Later, thanks to an attorney who was working on Sunday, the nephews got released to their mom. Dave, I actually cried when I read this story. I thought about the words you shared with the church in March 2007, which became section 163. I'm going to paraphrase it a little, God, the eternal creator weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated because of their unnecessary suffering. such conditions are not God's will open your ears to hear the pleadings of mothers and fathers and All nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children, do not turn away from them for in their welfare besides your welfare. Steve, please share your thoughts about this scripture in the context of systemic racism.

Steve Veazey 8:21

Yeah, again, I want to acknowledge similar if not the same reaction that you had to the message. I also received the message from brother Munson and read it several times, just to make sure that I was allowing the full implications and pain of the situation to enter my being and embrace it. And for the church listeners and friends of the church, we're talking about members and leaders in community of Christ receiving and their families receiving this kind of treatment, not just occasionally. But as I've talked to our folks in Chattanooga and other places, it's it's a daily occurrence. It's what they have to endure. And it's a tremendous burden. The Doctrine and Covenants section that you referenced, I think we need to understand it

clearly applies to racism and other causes of unnecessary totally unnecessary human suffering in the world. That quiches are snuffs out the Spirit of life and hope in individuals young and old. And very clearly, that section states that it's not in any way, God's will or created order or anything that is an expression somehow, of divine perspective of evil and human lives. So I think that we must be adamant and act accordingly, with an understanding that racism is in conflict with it's contrary to the nature of God, to the reign of God on earth, and the church as an agent of establishing the reign of God on earth. What many of us will refer to as the cause of Zion must not accommodate or be complicit in racism. And even if that requires some very painful work, in terms of our own history, and our own attitudes, and very importantly, we must work with others to to challenge and dismantle racism, in order to be aligned with God's will and vision for creation. I think it's as simple as that. And if and if we wouldn't act accordingly, to that understanding, we would find ways to positively impact the coming of the reign of God on earth.

Linda Booth 11:53

Yeah, I often find quotes that I write down and I write them down on slips of paper. They're kind of stacked up in different places. And I remembered a quote by James Baldwin. He's a Black author and an activist and I went through my stacks to find it. He said, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced. And that really strikes me because it's easy for us with that are white in particular, to kind of ignore or turn away from or not think about what are Black sisters and brothers and other people of colors face? So how do we as Christians authentically face systemic racism and maybe even unwillingly and and without our knowledge are contributing to it as well?

Steve Veazey 12:53

Yeah, and that's where the tough work has to occur. Because first e must stop, deny the reality and extent of the problem of racism in our own lives and in our societies, especially when we are people of privilege or in power positions as dominant cultures, then I think our response must be at least threefold. One, we must work to transform ourselves and accept and deal honestly with our own racial biases and discriminatory behavior. We can't offer excuses. We have to see it and deal with it and that will only occur through education about racism and the experience of people who bear the burden and wounds of racism. And along with that deep spiritual formation in our own lives and souls that expands our own capacity to experience and share the love of Christ. And it's the intellectual understanding coupled with personal transformation that enables us to, to deal with the attitudes and behaviors that we have inherited from our cultures or we have absorbed i think is a better word for it. our culture's especially as Anglo or white people in a white dominated culture. I think Secondly, we must transform our congregations, to be communities that welcome and celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity and understand that that's how it should be in the body of Christ, and that we are deficient without that kind of diversity in our church fellowship. And then, third, I think we must support and and join with other people, organizations and movements we have we have to combine our efforts and our resources with other people, organizations and movements that are working to uncover confront and dismantle racism in our institutions in society. I guess I would add to my answer that several of the most powerfully transformative experiences I've

had, in terms of understanding the importance of recognizing one's racism, and then working to transform oneself, one's family, one's congregation, one society have have occurred. When I have intentionally built relationships with those who are the targets of racism, and gotten to a point of trust and honest sharing that they have, I've had the opportunity to listen to them as they share on honestly about their experience, and to allow that pain and their burdens to break my heart. And then I think I'm ready to be a strong and effective advocate. When I've gone through that kind of personal growth and understanding and transformation,

Linda Booth 17:28

Yes, we really don't like to acknowledge or face that systemic racism is deeply woven into our cultures are even in our lives. Right, taken another violent, senseless death of a black man and others to force us again to look into the face of this evil. And we don't like to talk about evil or sin. I once read that slavery is America's Original Sin. And that sin has been prevalent in the United States since 12 million years. Africans of all ages were sold into a life of forced labor. Even the Bible was used to rationalize treating humans as slaves. And even before the slave ships arrived, racism killed and marginalized the Native Americans who were here before the Europeans arrived. Because systemic racism has been going on for centuries. And, you know, we think we make advances, we in the United States elected a black president for two terms. And so it's easy sometimes to just feel helpless, especially in this COVID-19 environment where the pandemics challenges weigh on our shoulders. This is such a difficult time. So you've mentioned already, but maybe you could go into it more deeply. So what can we personally and our faith communities do to move beyond this feeling of helplessness, that this problem is just too big for us to address.

Unknown Speaker 19:06

Yeah, I think that's really an important question because people feel that their effort or support is not nearly enough to make a sustainable change. And that's one of the reasons I emphasize the multi dimensional approach that includes ongoing personal transformation in relation to one's own understanding of racism, as well as accepting the pain and feeling the pain of those who are the objects of it, and also getting engaged in the support of, of movements that are proactively addressing these issues and there are a number of have excellent organizations do that with people doing that with people from multiple faith in faiths and faith traditions. And so I find that my feeling of helplessness is overcome when I combine my efforts with others, and then we're able to see progress in terms of legislation or changes in policy or are putting fight supremacy groups out of business through legal means. And I can share in that progress by combining my efforts with others, I think it was Desmond Tutu, the South African Bishop, who was who was such a prophetic advocate against apartheid, who said in essence when the elephant is standing on the mountain tale. The mouse does not appreciate your neutrality. And so I think what that means is we have to choose a side and this struggle, no one can be neutral because it's that important. It's essential to the gospel. It's not okay to remain on the sidelines. And my personal perspective is the side we must choose in this struggle, as in many struggles, as followers of Jesus Christ is the side of those who are being crushed, in this case, being crushed by racist behaviors. And, and we, we simply need to not be neutral, to get involved, get off the sidelines and do what we can.

Linda Booth 21:56

Yeah. Yeah, I remember about 15 years ago, when a Black teenager was baptized in a southern Community of Christ congregation in the United States, he was the first Black person to ever enter the baptismal font. And someone sent me a photo to commemorate that first. But when I preached in that congregation several years later, I looked out into a sea of white faces with not one Black face and attendance. As I've traveled to congregations in the Western world, not just United States and not just in southern United States, I rarely see Black sisters and brothers in our congregations, even though I see Black faces in their communities. That's even my experience in Independence, Missouri, where Community of Christ has its international headquarters. This reality is always troubled me because our congregations often don't reflect the beautiful diversity of their communities. So I have several questions for has this been your experience? And if so, what does it mean? Is it a discipleship issue? Is it a cultural issue? Is it something else?

Steve Veazey 23:14

Yeah, you pointed out something that it's very important for us to understand and see in terms of Community of Christ. So in response to your question, yes, it has been my experience in the Western world, predominantly Anglo English speaking church, and we have struggled to effectively include members of minority races and ethnicities and cultures. We have had some success. And we have a few predominantly African American congregations in the US. And that has occurred through persistent effort over time to be the best of who we are. I think our biggest challenge is in the Western world. And I want to keep drawing that distinction. Because I've served in Africa and visited other places like, like Haiti, and India, where as a white person, I have been the minority. And that's, that's a good experience that that everyone should have is to understand what that that feels like. But I think our greatest problem in the Western world is that we try to be nice and welcoming, but deep down our attitude and behavior say to people who represent racial, minorities, people of color, people of other cultures, we tend to expect them to fit in to assimilate into our way of life, our way of doing church our way of understanding the gospel. And as a result, individuals who have been attracted to the church because of our message our enduring principles, experiences with the fellowship, find that over time. They are marginalized in our congregations. Sometimes as as I've talked to, for example, African American members who have joined the church, they they share with me stories of behavior where they felt discriminated against, and even inappropriate humor. Jokes where people were trying to be funny because of maybe their own discomfort, I don't know. But they were very hurtful to those who were the receivers of inappropriate humor based on ethnic differences, things as simple as that make a huge difference. their capacities were diminished in terms of becoming leaders in the church. So I think it's this idea of, you have to fit in, whether it's conscious or unconscious, do church like us, that continues to be a barrier to the kind of diversity that we would see See, like to see in the life of the church. So again, the diversity in the church has to be a conscious effort. And it has to be daily decisions and and understanding of cultural differences and awareness of what it's like to be a participant in a dominant group that is of a different culture, or language. It's It's my hope, that we'll continue

to do the hard work of becoming more diverse as Community of Christ, in places where white English speaking culture has been dominant for so many years. We have a ways to go.

Linda Booth 28:01

We do. And and, and as you've said it, it goes goes to authentic fellowship and authentic relationships. And sometimes in congregations we are pretty superficial. We're so busy rushing from this to that. And while we have relationships with folks in our congregation, they're not really deep. We don't know their stories, we don't hear their testimonies. And the same would be true as we make friends with those whose skin color is different than our own, to take the time and invest in those relationships, so that we can hear their voices and we can feel their pain and we can then be that voice because we understand

Steve Veazey 28:51

Or at least we understand to the best of our ability to understand but we have to keep we have to keep listening And and authentic listening occurs in the context of a relationship that's genuine. So I, I agree fully with what you're saying. We our interactions tend to remain at a surface level through once a week or once every other week. Greetings to people and maybe some casual conversation. We have to understand the realities of their lives in order to be able to offer opportunities, appropriate opportunities for relevant ministry. It's, it's all about understanding

Linda Booth 29:47

It is. And one of the blessings of the pandemic has been for my family for my husband, Doug and myself, to really get to know our neighbors on a deeper level. One of them is a family that lives up on the corner who are African American, who I've talked to, you know, when you drive past you roll down the window and say hi, how are you? And when I walked the dogs I talked to Anthony, the young adult male that's living with his mom, but with Coronavirus, we've actually sat in our driveway in lawn chairs Anthony and myself and had these amazing conversations about his family and about his hopes and his desires. And interestingly enough in this struggle with COVID, I have been a better friend and neighbor as a result of having those opportunities.

Steve Veazey 30:47

That's wonderful. I think Cathy and I've shared some similar experiences. We're living in a neighborhood we chose because as we were looking for our next home, down sizing, we saw diversity cultural diversity in a neighborhood. And that was part of our decision making. That's that's where we wanted to live so that we'd have those opportunities to, to build relationships that could become pathways of racial reconciliation.

Linda Booth 31:30

Yes. I just learned yesterday at the house next door sold really fast within one day. And I just found out our new neighbors are an African American couple who recently retired and I texted out to the folks in our cul de sac and we're going to have a block party for him and we're gonna bring our lawn chairs and celebrate the fact that they are now our neighbors. Wonderful. It is I'm very excited about that.

Steve Veazey 31:59

And then community building. Yes. In the spirit of the vision of, of Zion. That's it.

Linda Booth 32:08

And I confess without the pandemic. I don't know if this any of this would have occurred, but it sure made me aware of what I've been missing in relationships with my neighbors. Wow.

Steve Veazey 32:21

Yeah.

Linda Booth 32:22

So I've been listening to and reading a lot of stories. So I go online, I listen, I've been listening to podcasts, from African American men and women who live on the margins of society because of their skin color. And I've read in the paper stories of teenagers who are called by the N word and local high school or my grandson graduated. And I also talked with a female, a neighbor who is afraid when her she awaits her teenage sons returned from work late at night, because he's been stopped so many times by the police because he's black. I want to support the voices of those who have been traditionally presented or even silenced throughout our society, and Steve we as Community of Christ, we are a justice and peace faith movement. And you've shared lots of ways in which we can unite our voices to support our sisters and brothers and address us in justice. Is there any other questions or things that you'd like to add that we haven't addressed yet?

Steve Veazey 33:35

Well, I think I would reiterate, in order to emphasize that that racism remains a major problem. It's sinful, and it's contrary to the values and vision of the gospel as we understand it, proclaim it tried to live it. And we must do more. Whatever our efforts have been to this point, I think we have to double them because Because I really believe that we're at a turning point, there is a convergence, an intersection of, of feeling and knowledge and desire for transformation. That is becoming a tipping point in terms of some major change if we can see it through and not let up on our efforts, and as a prophetic people, who are called to discern such times when there's opportunity for creation to turn more in the direction of God's will, we can't miss this opportunity to align our efforts, our voices, our resources, to address the problem along with others. I think that's what I would emphasize. I do believe there is the convergence of experience of pain of images of movement of younger generation saying we don't want to live in a world like this. And all of that could bring us is bringing us to a very important tipping point. And we need to be on the right side of history in this issue. And so I hope that's where we individually and as a church will find ourselves.

Linda Booth 35:51

I agree we're reached the witness of Jesus Christ and to do that demands that we as a faith community boldly lead the way toward building adjust society, thereby freeing the nation from its activity that sinful, systematic structural, cultural, and legacy of slavery and and i think you're

right there is. I am I'm sorry for our brother's death and the death of those African American who have been killed, but there has been, it's forcing us to pay attention to what you've said, See that God's wants us to be doing anyway.

Steve Veazey 36:39

Exactly. Yeah.

Linda Booth 36:41

Yeah. So I thank you, Steve, for talking about this difficult issue that impacts our cultures and our communities and our congregations and justice we, for our sisters and brothers, those who are discriminated against, it's reassuring to me to believe that God leads to the God is in our midst urging us to accept the Blessings of Community and you Unity in Diversity and go where those Enduring Principles will lead us if we'll just courageously risk and embody the living Christ.

Steve Veazey 37:17

Absolutely.

Linda Booth 37:19

So I thank you for challenging us to action. inaction is unacceptable. Right? Exactly. We must stand up and speak out and we must reach out our hands and Christian fellowship to our sisters and brothers. Thank you for your compassionate leadership. And thanks to all of you who have listened to this episode of Coffee Buzz, I hope that our conversation has disrupted, disturbed and challenged you. I also hope that you'll have similar conversations with your friends, and your family and your congregations. Please watch for next time. month's episode of Coffee buzz, a conversation with Scott Murphy, a counselor to Prophet President Steve Veazey.

Josh Mangelson 38:19

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