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Project Zion Podcast

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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 14th episode of Coffee Buzz, a podcast conversation with a member of the Community of Christ First Presidency. My name is Linda Booth and today I'm talking with one of Prophet President Steve Veazey's counselors and Presiding Bishop, Stassi Cramm. We're going to be talking about something dear to my heart after serving nearly 23 years as an Apostle, and Director of Communications for Community of Christ. We're going to be connecting the dots of multiple communication messages. For example, Mission Initiatives, Metamorphosis, Generosity Cycle, Guiding Questions, etc. So how are these messages connected and why are they important? Welcome, friend! Thanks for taking the time to visit with me. I know you've been working hard on the World Church Finance Board December reports, and preparing for World Church Leadership team meetings. So how's all that going?

Stassi Cramm 01:37

Hey, Linda, it is so good to be back with you on Coffee Buzz with all your listeners. Everything's going really well. On Monday of this past week, which was, I don't know, like the seventh or eighth of November, we released all the financial reports in three languages to the Finance Board, as you would remember from your days on the Council, for years, the board did not receive material before the board meeting. All the reports were provided the day of the meeting, and in English only, and the board had to act on them that day. Several years ago, the board went trilingual. So we were really excited about having a more diverse board. So now we have to do all of our reports in English, French and Spanish. Also, based on feedback from the board, we now release reports about a month (prior) so that the board has adequate time to review the material and come to the meeting more informed to ask questions and provide oversight. It is a labor intensive process. But we are so grateful for the work the board accomplishes on behalf of the church. And you asked about World Church Leadership Council. We've been meeting via zoom a couple of days each month during these very unprecedented times of the pandemic. It's always good to worship and spend time in discernment together. And we got to do that on Wednesday and Thursday of this week.

Linda Booth 03:06

Oh, those are good reports. And I wish I could see those wonderful people that are a part of the World Church Leadership Council because they are so dedicated, and so committed to Christ's mission in the places in which they serve. And I know Stassi that recently your husband, Steve, retired. How's that going for him and for you?

Stassi Cramm 03:28

Yeah, I think it has been more nerve wracking for me than it has been for him. But he's officially been retired for one week. And he seems to be smiling an awful lot. He's actually going to start doing

engineering consulting work. But he's not going to do that until the start of the new year. And so even though he's getting a lot of requests and phone calls, he keeps saying, "Not yet, not yet, not yet." So he seems to be settling into this idea really well. I keep teasing him and telling him that I'm far too young to be married to someone who's retired, so he better get back to work.

Linda Booth 04:08

It is an adjustment. And of course it was adjustment for my husband, Doug, when I retired because I was always gone traveling and he had already taken really early retirement. So it was adjustment, more of adjustment for him than it was for me. I am so thankful that you've joined both me and the listeners today because we are going to be talking about communication messages. And I'm also so thankful that Community of Christ is a dynamic faith movement. And God keeps pressing us forward into the future, through inspired counsel and communication messages from world church leaders that we read or we see or we hear through all the church's communication tools such as the Herald magazine and the church's website and Twitter and Instagram and on and on. And sometimes multiple communication messages can stack up. And they may even cause confusion. When I recently voted in the USA election on November 3, a poll worker who is also an active church member, he pulled me aside to express some confusion. And perhaps even some frustration. He said he really liked it when the church talked about the Mission Initiatives, but lately all he's been hearing about from his mission center leadership is about the Generosity Cycle, and selling church buildings. He also mentioned a lot of communication recently has been about online worship and sharing sacraments online. And he thought those messages meant that leaders were telling him that online was the future of the church, that eventually everything would be experienced online. Now, the pandemic has added complexity to the church's communication messages. And before we talk about multiple communication messages that people may be hearing or reading, I want to personally acknowledge the excellent job done by the communication team to get First Presidency and leaders messages out to the church members throughout the world in three languages English, French, and Spanish. And I also recognize that over the years, it's not uncommon for people to ask, what's the priority in the midst of many communication messages. So Stassi, my dear friend, I'm depending upon you to connect the dots of recent communication messages, and to help us understand how these messages are related, interconnected, and lead us in Christ's mission and point to the Mission Initiatives. So let's start with the question of the poll worker, are the Mission Initiatives and Enduring Principles still an important part of our message? And why aren't we hearing as much about these?

Stassi Cramm 07:11

Yeah, so first of all, Linda I want to add to your voice of gratitude about the communications team. We are so blessed and I just think they do an amazing job, especially given how small they are and the fact that they do it in three languages is just so great for the church. And it is a complicated job as you well know from firsthand experience. So the identity, mission, message and beliefs of the church, as presented in the Sharing in Community of Christ booklet, remain critically important. Who we are and what we should do always align with these ideas. In particular, the Enduring Principles have been called the church's DNA, or the church's essence, or soul. In other words, these nine principles, uphold the essence of who we are to be as a community. When we're making decisions in the First Presidency or even in the Leadership Council, we always pause to consider whether our decision aligns with our best understanding of the Enduring Principles. Of course, there's always room for various perspectives,

but all of us should be using these principles as guides, to who we both are, and are still becoming. Similarly, we've been challenged to claim Christ's mission as our mission. And we understand Christ's mission as it was shared in Luke 4, and from that scripture came our five Mission Initiatives. These mission initiatives help us go deeper in living our mission to "Proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace." The good news is that I think the church is starting to really embrace our identity, mission, message and beliefs. I think some of our questioning of who we are, has started to be set aside in these more recent days, and that we're now starting to really look at and figuring out how we faithfully live Christ's mission. I think we're talking about the Enduring Principles and about Mission Initiatives all the time, but we're just using different words to describe them. Every time we talk about the blessing of community, the worth of another or the sacredness of creation as example. We're talking Enduring Principles. And every time we reach out to our neighbor, pray for the sick, donate to a worthy cause or debate how to create a better world we are exploring mission.

Linda Booth 09:50

I believe you're right Stassi, because even though we don't by rote say each of the five Mission Initiatives, they have gone to the core of who we are and what we're doing as a people. So I really appreciate the fact that you're identifying that we are beginning to live those Mission Initiatives in very tangible and real ways. With everything online now and the new guidelines for sacraments, are in-present gatherings going away like my friend feared?

Stassi Cramm 10:23

So as you've discussed in a couple of podcasts, I think with Steve and Scott, the pandemic has really created a challenging time for the church as well as for the world. When we first had to close congregations and limit physical gatherings, we never imagined that we'd be in this situation for such an extended period of time. I know many are really tired of online worship experiences. But in places where the number of people getting sick and hospitalized with COVID-19 continues to increase, as a church, we have to do our part in keeping people as safe as possible. And we have to trust that God and God's Spirit can transcend however we come together and meet. At the same time, the Presidency knew that there was a growing need for people to experience the sacramental aspect of who we are. We didn't want to force people into unsafe conditions so that the sacraments could be provided. We were grateful we had already developed guidelines for the Lord's Supper, and so providing guidance for the other sacraments was determined, was determined to be a faithful response. Just because we can now provide the sacraments online doesn't mean that in person gatherings are going away. I do think that as we get past the pandemic, we will find ourselves in a space of balancing in person experiences with online opportunities. All the research indicates that people's expectations for worship have changed as a result of the pandemic experience. The way forward will be a balance, and congregations will have to experiment to determine what will meet the needs of their seekers, friends and members the best. And I think that's going to be a combination. Clearly being together is part of who we are. And everyone wants to get back to having those experiences. And yet being able to reach beyond national borders or state borders and be with people that we would not otherwise be with is one of the advantages of online experiences, and I think our congregations are going to be, you know, looking to provide both of those kinds of experiences.

Linda Booth 12:50

I would agree. And I would also like to lift up what you said about how the Holy Spirit really connects us during our separation and isolation because you can feel that sense of spirit when we're together online in worship just as we do when we're in person. So I'm grateful to God, and God's presence as we move through this very difficult time. So as you said, so the Enduring Principles are the expression of who we are, are called to be and the Mission Initiatives are what we are called to do to live Christ's mission. We're also hearing about what leaders are calling the Guiding Question. And that question is, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?" This question from President Veazey's closing 2019 World Conference sermon is being emphasized in the Herald, and in Advent preparation materials and other places as well. So how does this Guiding Question, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?" How does it connect with Christ's mission, the Mission Initiatives or the Enduring Principles?

Stassi Cramm 14:06

Yeah, that's a great question. I think what's really important for all of us to remember is that what is at the heart of everything is Jesus Christ. As you said, the Enduring Principles are the expression of both who we are and who we are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ. And the Mission Initiatives guide us in living Jesus Christ's mission. And then the Guiding Question helps us reflect on how we are doing as disciples of Jesus Christ. Naming Jesus Christ, the peaceful One, upholds the true nature of who the Gospels teach us Jesus was and therefore who we should be as his disciples. As you consider the nine Enduring Principles, it becomes clear that Jesus, the peaceful One first embodied all these principles, and therefore, so must we as his disciples and hands and feet and voice in the world. Similarly, the mission of Jesus, the peaceful One, was focused on inviting people into God's kingdom on earth, and breaking down systems that disadvantaged others. And as Jesus spoke truth to power, he chose nonviolent methods to engage. As we learned from the Gospels, the Jews were expecting a Messiah that would challenge the authorities with power. Jesus' focus on ushering in the reign of God resonated with their expectation, but his message of love and inclusion and his nonviolent methods came as quite a surprise. In some ways, I have to confess I wonder if I or we would recognize Jesus, if he was walking with us today. What expectations have we levied on Jesus? Of course, World Conference Resolution 1319 was passed by the 2019 World Conference and it focuses on nonviolence. And the first resolve states that, "Over the next three years Community of Christ members and leaders discuss the role of non violence plays in the pursuit of peace on and for the earth, and in the life and mission of the church." Resolution. 1319 acknowledges that as a church, we are committed to building Zion, or God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, or bringing in you know, God's reign. But the question before the church is, what means do we use to achieve that kingdom? Where do nonviolent responses fit into the solution? So we're faced with kind of the same question as those early Jews? You know, do we expect to get there through worldly means? Or do we expect to get there through means that would model Jesus the peaceful One? to start our exploration of nonviolence? As you already noted, President Veazey posed our Guiding Question that we're focusing on, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?" This question has become our Guiding Question for now, but it doesn't replace our identity, message, mission and beliefs. This question helps us evaluate in this moment, how we are doing in embracing who we are and what we are called to do. It also challenges us to be faithful to Jesus' example, in choosing how we help fulfill God's vision of shalom. On the surface, the question looks pretty simple. It's a yes or no question. And of course, we are moving towards Jesus, the peaceful One is my initial response. But then it's like, "Wait, are we, am I?" I mean, that's a pretty profound question. And so before I or we can begin to respond, we have to fully explore who Jesus the

peaceful One was, and is. And we have to be honest about letting go of some of our maybe preconceived notions, where we are trying to create Jesus in our image, instead of learning who Jesus really was, and is. This is an ongoing journey of seeking understanding to know Jesus, and like I said, to lay down our preconceived notions. Of course, the Jews had their preconceived notions of who the Messiah was when Jesus returned, and that got in the way of them recognizing Jesus when he walked the earth. So we need to learn from their experience, and try to be more open. So this Guiding Question leads us to a deeper exploration of why and how and where we follow Jesus, the peaceful One. The Presidency has had many conversations about how we help people tie everything together, we understand that there are a lot of words and concepts. But they really do all fit together in creating the picture of faithful discipleship as a community. One of the images that I have is that the Guiding Question is like a magnifying glass, that helps us look more closely at how I need to align my attitude, behavior and actions to better align with Jesus, the peaceful One, as expressed through the identity, mission, message and beliefs of Community of Christ.

Linda Booth 19:57

Excellent. That's very helpful as we think about that Guiding Question. And now I'm going to bring up a word that has frequently been spoken by President Veazey and other leaders, and that's the word, "metamorphosis." What does metamorphosis mean? And how does it connect with the Guiding Question: Are we moving toward Jesus... And how does it connect with Christ's mission or the Mission Initiatives, etc?

Stassi Cramm 20:27

Yeah, it was almost a year ago when President Veazey shared the image of metamorphosis. It occurred at the December 2019, World Church Finance Board. On Sunday morning, he had one of those moments where he felt compelled to address the Board and out of that experience came this imagery of metamorphosis. It was such a significant experience that Scott and I, as well as other leaders, felt strongly that Steve's words needed to be shared with the whole church. And so they became a published article in the Herald. As people hear the idea that we are engaged in metamorphosis, there have been a lot of different reactions. In the case of metamorphosis, I feel like this was and is more a way of us making sense of what is happening around us and to us. Metamorphosis is not a church program, or something that we choose to jump into. It is an analogy to describe the pain and struggle that we are experiencing, and to help us understand that the struggle is worth it, because it is part of our growth. And it is the only way to live into fulfilling God's purposes in the world. To truly find our capacity as Community of Christ, we need to continue to grow and become. There may be many things we disagree about around the church, but I think one thing we can all agree on is that we have not yet become the full embodiment of Zion, or God's reign on Earth. We have work to do, and Doctrine and Covenants section 140, paragraph five, C and D reminds us and here's what it says. "The work of preparation, and the perfection of my saints go forward slowly, and Zion's conditions are no further away, nor any closer than the spiritual condition of my people justifies. But my word shall not fail, neither will my promises for the foundation of the Lord standeth sure." And that's the end of that section. So let me do a quick summary. The Enduring Principles guide us in who we are to be and become, the Mission Initiatives guide us in what we are to do. And the Guiding Question helps us evaluate how we are doing in becoming and responding. And metamorphosis helps us understand the nature of transformation, that helps us move from our current state of being into our perfected state of

being through Christ. I'm also reminded of Doctrine and Covenants section 161, paragraph three d that says, "Understand that the road to transformation travels both inward and outward. The road to transformation is the path of the disciple."

Linda Booth 23:50

Yes, and that's what we're talking about, isn't it. It's discipleship and how that's all interrelated. During the six weeks leading up to Advent, the church has been emphasizing on its website in a variety of places, the Generosity Cycle, which is: Invite, Discover, Respond and Reflect. So what is the Generosity Cycle? And how does it connect with the Mission Initiatives, etc?

Stassi Cramm 24:18

Yeah, all your questions remind me why having a map or some breadcrumbs to follow makes a lot of sense for people. But to answer this particular question, I want to start by quoting from the booklet that you can get from Herald House called "Choosing Generosity." And so if you look on page 12, it states "We believe God's vision is that everyone experiences the Enduring Principles in tangible ways every day. And God invites us to be co-creators in making God's kingdom real by living Christ's mission of invitation, compassion, justice, and peacemaking. Christ's Mission, Our Mission is expressed through the five Mission Initiatives of Community of Christ and stewardship is how we support Christ mission. Not just financial stewardship, but whole life stewardship. Our whole life response in living Christ's mission is how we create God's vision of shalom. Discipleship is the hard and messy work of living Christ's mission. And whole life stewardship is the framework within which we give in support of this mission." So that's what's in the book. So then if we build on that, the Generosity Cycle is then a spiritual practice of invitation, discovery, responding, and reflecting to help us in our whole life stewardship. If the Enduring Principles are the "who," and the Mission Initiatives are the "what" than the whole life stewardship is part of the "how." In 2016. In June, the World Conference passed Resolution 1314 on mission and timing, and that included this resolve, "that the First Presidency and Presiding Bishopric provide resources to support priesthood and leaders in developing disciples who understand faithful tithing as part of the six principles of a disciples generous response." This resolution also called attention to tithing as a spiritual practice, as defined in Doctrine and Covenants section 165 paragraph 2d. So the generosity cycle is a way of upholding the commitment of the church as captured in this resolution. But more importantly, it also helps us in expressing the Mission Initiative, to develop disciples to serve.

Linda Booth 27:01

Whew! You've done an excellent job of connecting, and showing us how each communication message supports our call to make Christ's mission, our mission. Is there a communication message that we've missed that's important?

Stassi Cramm 27:20

Oh, my goodness. Well, we've indirectly talked about both continued revelation through Doctrine and Covenants sections, as well as World Conference Resolutions. And in fact, I referenced a few Doctrine and Covenants sections, and I referenced a few resolutions. Of course, Doctrine and Covenants sections come to us as guidance that the World Conference ultimately has to approve to add it to our books of scripture. And so it's a form of common consent and agreement on how we hear God's

speaking today. In addition to that, resolutions guide leaders and the church by upholding what the World Conference has supported as important for the church's focus. It's probably good that we're talking about resolutions because they're due one year before World Conference. So that means that resolutions to be considered at the 2022 World Conference will need to be submitted by the beginning of June 2021. And that's less than a year from now. So many Mission Centers around the world may be considering resolutions, you know, in their conferences in the coming months. In addition to World Conference Resolutions, and new sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, I also mentioned our Basic Beliefs. But we haven't really spoken specifically about those. So I am excited to announce that we are in the process of posting articles on the church's website that explore each of our Basic Beliefs in greater detail. These are going to be posted in phases and communications will let the church know as they are available. We are also going to sell the compilation of these articles as some form of ebook on the Herald House website. Again, watch for future announcements on when that's available. These are just another dimension of how we express what we believe as disciples. And our Basic Beliefs don't replace anything we've talked about. They add to our understanding. So if the Enduring Principles are our DNA, or our soul as a community, maybe the beliefs are somewhere between our head and our heart. As stated in Community of Christ, the Basic Beliefs of the church are not the last word, but are an open invitation to all to embark on the adventure of discipleship. Well, I feel like I've said a lot of words and we've covered a lot of topics. I do hope that people listening don't feel more overwhelmed. I suspect if we knew everything that is happening in our own bodies to keep us alive, it would seem overwhelming, too. But we are born with some innate abilities such as breathing and crying when we're hungry. And as we grow, we develop more mechanisms for not only surviving but thriving together in the world. In the end, all of the things that we're talking about, all of the communications and messaging in the church, is about responding as faithful disciples together as we seek to embody and live the mission of Jesus, the peaceful One. Perhaps Doctrine and Covenants section 164, paragraph 9b sums it up. So let me read that scripture. "When our willingness to live in sacred community as Christ's new creation exceeds your natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation, you will become who you are called to be. The rise of Zion the beautiful, the peaceful reign of Christ, awaits your wholehearted response to the call to make and steadfastly hold to God's covenant of peace in Jesus Christ." And that's the end of that scripture. So I think just like living and breathing, we have to continue to trust in the Spirit's presence with us. And we have to continue to breathe in that Spirit, and trust it as it guides us as a community and as individual disciples in embracing Jesus, the peaceful One.

Linda Booth 31:54

Amen, dear friend! Thank you so much for connecting the dots, that the Enduring Principles are what guide us, the "who" of who we are to be and become. The Mission Initiatives to give us focus to what we are to do. The Guiding Question to help us evaluate or reflect on how we're doing in becoming, and responding. And the image of metamorphosis to help us understand the nature of transformation, and the Generosity Cycle that's a part of helping us to evaluate how our discipleship is going. That's a lot, but you have given us words and images to help us understand how they all go together. So thank you for sharing your insights with our Coffee Buzz listeners. It's reassuring to know that God is leading us forward into the future, and that leaders are listening to the Holy Spirit and challenging each of us to engage more fully in Christ's mission. And thank you Coffee Buzz listeners for joining our conversation. I hope that the words shared with you have connected those communication dots and helped you on your journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And watch for those exciting articles that will be on the

church's website that explore each of our Basic Beliefs, and also pay attention to when they Herald House releases that ebook form for sale. Please watch listeners for the next month's episode of Coffee Buzz. I'll be having a conversation with Prophet President Steve Veazey. Until then, have a great, great life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Josh Mangelson 33:54

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