

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Linda Booth 00:33

Welcome to the 15th 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 Prophet-President Steve Veazey. One of the joys of serving as a Community of Christ apostle for nearly 23 years was working with Steve. And here's just a few of the reasons why my experience with him has been so positive. Well, he's an inspiring leader, you all know that. He's an authentic, honest man, a great listener and communicator. Steve's a deep thinker, and truly values every person as a child of God, and we're on this Zoom conference and he's looking uncomfortable right now, because I'm focusing on him. So did I mention that he's a humble man? But we all know he's a blessing to the church and all of us who have the pleasure of calling him friend. Usually, Steve, and I have a Coffee Buzz conversation about such timely topics as systemic racism, or about the spiritual journey. Even once in one episode talking about desert times or the dark night of the soul. In this Coffee Buzz episode, I'm going to ask Steve to do some reflecting and remembering. Reflecting on this past year, and sharing meaningful Christmas memories from the past. Welcome friend! Before we launch into reflections and remembering, Steve, can you tell us how you and your family are doing during what seems like a never ending pandemic?

Steve Veazey 02:15

Well, thank you for that question. And thank you for the opportunity to talk again, through the Coffee Buzz podcast. All in all, we're doing very well. We have the typical stresses that people are having during this time. But as a family, we've been applying all of the COVID-19 precautions in our bubble of Cathi and I, our children and their spouses and our, and our grandchildren. So as a result, we've been able to safely have family gatherings for birthdays and holidays. And that's been, that's been very meaningful, especially during this time, and it looks like we'll be able to do that during the upcoming Christmas and New Year's holidays. So that gives us some bright spots in the midst of the continuing pandemic. Cathi and I have participated, along with children and grandchildren, and in numerous, numerous online worship services, and other activities. Like the European Peace Colloquy, and the webinars associated with that, and I've been involved in the beginning of a climate change series of webinars online. And all of those experiences, especially the worship experiences on Sunday mornings, have kept us connected to our church family in, in meaningful ways. And I'd just like to say I really appreciate all the efforts being made by church leaders and members throughout the world who, at their own initiative and using their

knowledge and creativity, are keeping us connected not only locally, but as a worldwide church family through worship and education and sacraments. And so, that's been a real positive in our lives. Probably our greatest challenge has been the need to support our young grandchildren who are attending school through online activities. And I've found myself having to brush up on grammar and math and science lately. So I've been reliving my elementary education.

Linda Booth 05:16

Well, good for you. I just saw a Gallup poll that talked about religious gatherings, Zoom gatherings. And it said for people who weren't able to have those Zoom gatherings or gatherings, that in the United States that their sense of well being had dropped 20% or more, but people who were able to continue to connect with faith communities, that their sense of well being had increased.

Steve Veazey 05:46

Wow.

Linda Booth 05:46

So I join with you in applauding and thanking all the efforts that pastors and mission centers around the world have made in order for people to connect.

Steve Veazey 05:58

Absolutely.

Linda Booth 05:59

Yes. This past week, I had a Zoom conversation with one of your counselors, President Scott Murphy, and he mentioned that because of the COVID-19, he hasn't traveled into the mission fields of the church since last January. And I'm guessing, based on what I experienced as a full time minister, that by this time, Steve might have had 20 to 30 ministry's trips, or assignments. Has this been your experience as well, Steve?

Steve Veazey 06:28

Yeah, I was actually looking back at my calendar recently, just to kind of evaluate how my time was, was being applied to various responsibilities that are part of my role. My travel in terms of in person ministry, ends with the beginning of the church's announcement in March about the suspension of church activities. I was traveling right up to that date and then had to make adjustments. So that's, that's definitely been the case. And it's missed, in terms of the experience with. with people. People, you know, but also the opportunity to meet new people who are coming into association with the church. However, at the same time, through the online gatherings, I think I've had much more contact with a greater number of congregations and mission centers and, and fields and special activities, not requiring travel—but connecting online—than I would have before. So as I was looking back, I saw where, within a relatively short period of time I was

interacting with the French speaking members of the Church in in Europe, I was interacting with people in the United States and Canada. And within a few days, I was interacting with all of our field staff in the Pacific Islands and and Asia. And that, and we had significant conversations. So it's been a larger number of contacts, but we miss the in-person greetings, or in person experiences and opportunity to greet people and, and spend time with them, which the church really thrives on. We thrive on those relationships.

Linda Booth 08:39

We sure do. And just sitting across the table at a campground talking and sharing or taking walks together. You're right. But thank goodness for Zoom and the other platforms that have allowed us to connect. Because of the pandemic, It sure has been an unusual year for everyone. As you reflect on this past year, what have been some of the challenges and highlights for you personally and for the church?

Steve Veazey 09:09

Well, I think in terms of highlights, what I just mentioned, is the opportunity to be connected more broadly through the technology than I would have in the same amount of time. One of the greatest challenges personally, and for the church, has been my and our corporate awareness of the, of the personal pastoral needs of people in difficult situations and really being constrained, being limited in our ability to respond in person as we normally would with compassionate ministerial presence. Because of the COVID restrictions, and then the quarantines that are in place in various areas. But I want to be clear that I also see a great effort, Herculean efforts I call them, to respond to the needs of people as they wrestle with spiritual, physical and emotional challenges. And I'm extremely grateful for all of those members and countless priesthood members who have found ways to provide ministry, pastoral ministry and outreach ministry. But I, the challenge is we remain aware of the number of people who are isolated, and alone. They really don't have support of a family. They're in situations where they may be homebound or are in nursing homes. And the challenge has been to connect our desire to bring ministry with actually having the opportunity to do that. Another challenge for the World Church has been the constraints on the ability of the leading quorums—World Church leaders—to meet together face to face, to process information, to discern direction and to make important decisions. We have managed to do that to some degree through online meetings. But we have also missed the kind of community that everyone yearns for. Just to have the opportunity to be together to catch up to have those more extended conversations and to talk about important matters. So we have noticed an impact in that regard.

Linda Booth 12:19

Yes, yes. And this year is almost over. And now we're in the Advent season of spiritual preparation to celebrate the Christ child's birth. Sunday, I participated in a congregation Advent service focused on love like most people did. It was a lovely Zoom worship. But I missed hearing the voices around me singing the carols that we sang online, where everyone was muted. "O Come All

Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night." And it seems like I'm remembering more memories from the past. Perhaps it's because our family traditions will be different this year because of the health experts who are urging us to stay home or limit the number of family and friends who gather together. So the disruption of Christmas traditions has caused me to think about those past Christmases. And I've been thinking a lot about childhood memories. My brother Gary and sister Jan and I spending the night on Christmas Eve with our grandmother and grandfather Tim. And then the next morning driving to our home, where Mom would have breakfast ready and we'd open presents. How did you spend Christmas as a child growing up in Paris, Tennessee?

Steve Veazey 13:35

Even as you were talking, I was having flashbacks of memories of different aspects of that and they're wonderful memories. And just to review some of them—wonderful experiences at church with my faith family. Those all kind of blend together. But worship experiences around the Christmas season. A lot of candles, I seem to remember the beautiful candles. Visits to both sets of grandparents who fortunately lived not too far away, nearby. And we would go just before or on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day was primarily spent at home with our immediate family. I have a distinct memory of the Tennessee Kentucky District choir coming to the Paris Branch for a Christmas concert. And it stands out to me as a child, I think because it was the first time I heard the song that I can remember, "Go Tell it On the Mountain." And the choir really leaned into it that Sunday, and I was impressed as a child. So that, that has stuck with me ever since. Even the faces of the choir as they were singing. As a young boy, track into the woods with my hand axe and select a usually pretty scraggly cedar tree, to bring home to be our family Christmas tree. One time I broke the top of the tree and I was quite distressed, I got it all the way home and the top was leaning at a right angle. I don't remember what we did. But we, we always decorated the tree I brought home and somehow my folks had a way of making it look wonderful. And I still miss the smell of cedar. That whole experience results in I miss the smell of cedar trees associated with Christmas. But a particularly powerful memory is that every year my dad would, would take my brother and me to participate in a community service club fundraising effort that involved collecting money in, in baskets at the major traffic intersections in Paris, Paris being what Paris is, of course, those weren't interstates or, or anything. But (at) the major intersections—we would collect money. And the money was used to purchase boxes of food to take to what I remember us referring to as the "down and out families" in the community or the needy families in the, in the community. And to complete the experience, my dad would take my brother and I to distribute some of the boxes to the families. And I have a distinct memory of driving up to a dilapidated home barely hanging together and taking a box of food up and setting it on the porch. And, and experiencing children literally barging through the door and grabbing at the box and and even tearing open packages of food and starting to eat right there on the, on the porch. And that, that's had a tremendous impact. And that scene keeps coming back and back. And it really balances out the more consumer oriented consumption aspects of Christmas for me. So I'm always aware of people in need. That's part of who I am to this day.

Linda Booth 18:22

Yes. I'm thankful you had that experience. I had several types of experiences like that growing up. too. Did any of those childhood traditions continue when you and Cathi married?

Steve Veazey 18:35

Well, we've always had a beautiful Christmas tree. That's primarily due to Cathi's effort. And, and although the people shifted over time, because of me becoming a part of Cathi's family, and being some distance away from my family in Tennessee. So different people were involved. But always the experience of spending time with family, and making a point of being together, usually sharing a meal, but being together, continued and continues to this day. I was just talking with one of our grandsons yesterday about about Christmas, and he was wanting to know why we give gifts, which was a wonderful opportunity for me to talk about the Christmas story, and the wise men and then I shifted into my theological mode, and said, "Of course the greatest gift was Jesus Christ that that God gave us and that's a reason we give gifts." And then I said, "Ultimately, we give the gift of our lives to each other." And I realized I had probably exceeded what he was actually expecting in response to his to his answer, but it reaffirmed for both of us the importance of, of being together.

Linda Booth 20:11

Yeah. From second grade through high school, my family and I attended Stone Church which for Coffee Buzz listeners who've been in Independence that's the stone, old Stone Church across the street from the Auditorium in Independence, Missouri. And I have fond memories of sitting together, and whenever anyone would pray, my dad would link hands, we'd all hold hands. You talked about choirs, Stone Church always had an incredible choir and I remember how they sang the Christmas carols during the Advent season. I remember going on with the Zion's League to sing carols to church members. And as an adult, I remember Mark and Karen Kendrick decorating the Olathe congregation in Olathe Kansas during the Advent season. And every Sunday, they added another fantastic element. I don't mean something small. I mean, something amazingly beautiful to the Nativity or to the building. And I also remember candles, Christmas Eve candlelight services where the Holy Spirit just seemed to be tangible. I know you've already mentioned a little bit about worships when you were growing up. Can you remember some of your favorite Advent worship memories in particular?

Steve Veazey 21:35

Well, we always had some kind of children's Christmas program, and having the opportunity to participate in that was meaningful, having various roles to play in that. But I, I hate to admit it, but in growing up in in Paris, we didn't have Advent specific worship services like we do now related to the liturgical calendar. We really didn't know what that was. The liturgical calendar didn't really cause us to have a certain schedule with certain themes. But what I remember is, as we entered December, in the worship services Christmas hymns would begin to appear with increasing

number. And that was a signal we're moving towards Christmas. So I guess the effect was kind of the same. You, you develop expectations for what is coming. And all of that grew in number and focus until just before Christmas. I think I mentioned previously about some of the singing in the District and the congregation, or Branch then. The congregation I grew up in was extremely gifted with good singing and musicians, some who were teachers involved in music education, so we were really blessed. And we had one person who was really a beautiful vocalist. And he sounded a lot like Elvis Presley, which really, really made an impact. And whenever his name appeared in the bulletin, I remember either my mother or grandmother, one of them would say, "Oh, it's going to be a good one today!" referring to the worship. And a little side note, I remember often when he sung, people in the congregation would say, "Well, I sure hope he'll sing at my funeral." That's kind of a southern thing, cuz your funeral is the last chance to make a good impression on everybody else. I remember music, I guess is what I'm saying. Beautiful, beautiful hymns. And that is really what stitches together the whole fabric of my memories of Christmas.

Linda Booth 24:32

Yes, yeah, those those Christmas carols even like last Sunday, when they had a video of "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night" in the place of our congregational singing. When you hear those songs, they bring back just a flood of warmth and love and memories. Those carols do connect us in very powerful ways to the story of Jesus's birth.

Steve Veazey 24:58

Yes, absolutely.

Linda Booth 24:59

Yeah. And the Advent season, it leads us to anticipate the coming year too, and the hopes for what the new year will bring. Of course, I think we're all hoping for worldwide good health and universal COVID vaccinations, and a return to sitting together in church and gathering and getting a good hug from the people that we love. Steve, what are some of your hopes for the church, as you anticipate the new year?

Steve Veazey 25:30

Well, I hope that people will have even more hope, because there's reasons for that hope that they sense and, and see, I hope we won't just return to normal. I hope we will be, we will thoroughly think about and discuss what, what have we learned about the nature of our lives, creation, ministry, church life in the midst of difficult times, and and apply that experience to a broader and more effective array of how we do mission, ministry and outreach around the world. I think we've discovered some new depths of need, as well as some new resources for expressing the love and peace of Christ throughout the world. So I hope we maintain significant online ministries at every aspect of church life. And I especially hope we use that to make us even more connected as a worldwide church family. We, we primarily experience local expressions of the church if we're

involved. But one of the blessings and strengths of Community of Christ is it keeps us connected globally, which I think causes us to be more in harmony with God's understanding of creation, and how God loves the whole world. And that's one of the gifts that Community of Christ offers. I hope we've been spiritually deepened by this difficult and challenging time, in ways that will allow us to even more authentically live the passions of Christ. It's often in times of suffering, or in association with people who are suffering, that we get in touch with the deeper, more essential aspects of the gospel that sustain people, that bring healing and hope into their lives. And I hope that this experience helps us be even more sensitive to the suffering and struggling of people in the world. And that it's revealed to us both the depth of what that is, but also helped us discover as a church even more capacity to offer ministry. And I guess I hope that as a church, we will continue to discover our future as a spiritual movement engaged in Christ inspired community building, especially communities that produce justice, both within the church and in the larger community. And, and I hope that all of this results in that kind of continued transformation in the life of the church. So that would be some of my hopes.

Linda Booth 29:25

Those are wonderful hopes. Yeah, those are, those are hopes that we all should cling to and make real. I know the COVID has changed my view of the world. It has changed my view of my neighborhood and has caused me to develop deep friendships. Family-like friendships with neighbors, who before were just neighbors and not my my close friends.

Steve Veazey 29:58

Absolutely.

Linda Booth 29:58

And so I'm so thankful for the COVID specifically for opening my eyes, and causing me to take the time to really reach out on my driveway, and now in other ways with my neighbors.

Steve Veazey 30:15

Yes.

Linda Booth 30:16

I really like the notion of discovering our future, as it's spiritually inspired to form us as communities of peace and justice makers in the world. Because that certainly is something that needs to occur in our neighborhoods, in our communities and throughout the world. So we have had a hard year. But it's been a year also of great blessing. I know Giving Tuesday was a great blessing to the church, I don't know if you want to mention what happened. And I don't know if you were surprised by the response during COVID.

Steve Veazey 30:57

Well, pleasantly surprised. I always live in this place, and let me provide some background. I think everybody knows about Giving Tuesday, and it's grown in visibility, that after the time right after Thanksgiving, when we tend to spend a lot of money on buying things, Giving Tuesday is the day we turn our generosity towards organizations and causes that make a difference in the world. And we have been building expectation in the church for several years regarding our opportunity on Giving Tuesday. And the thought of contributors who provided \$200,000, a short list of people for matching funds for any contributions up to 200,000, is always an inspiration and blessing. But then the response of the church exceeding that, exceeding our expectations, and even more people participating as contributors than ever before, is encouragement. I'm not totally surprised, because I know our people. And when there are challenges and challenging times, we tend to respond and and I'm always grateful for that. So yes, surprised, in a good way. But also say yeah, that's, that's Community of Christ. And, and we come through.

Linda Booth 32:48

We do, Community of Christ does come through. We may be a relatively small faith movement, but but we're a mighty face movement.

Steve Veazey 32:57

Absolutely. Our vision far exceeds our numbers. But somehow our impact also far exceeds our numbers. And we do come through. We come through difficult times, we come through for people, and we come through in terms of our passionate involvement in, in Christ's mission.

Linda Booth 33:20

Absolutely, yes. Well, I thank you, dear friend, for sharing your reflections on the past. And a little bit about your family memories of past Christmases. And especially, I'm thankful for you sharing your hopes for the future, which appears—if we live that hope to its fullest—will make a difference and transform not only our lives, but our communities and our neighborhoods as well. So Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and your family. And, and thank you Coffee Buzz listeners for joining our conversation. May your journey through this holy season be filled with God's love, joy, hope and peace. And may the good memories of past Christmases bring you joy and renewed hope for the next year. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and your family. And please watch for next month's episode of Coffee Buzz. I'll be having another conversation with Prophet-President Steve Veazey so you won't want to miss it.

Josh Mangelson 34:37

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