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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.

Linda Booth 00:33

Welcome to the 16th episode of Coffee Buzz, a podcast conversation with a member of Community of Christ, First Presidency. My name is Linda Booth. I'm a retired apostle having served nearly 23 years in the Council of 12 apostles. Last month, I spoke with Prophet President Steve Veazey. Typically, I would speak next with one of Steve's counselors, President Scott Murphy and then President Stassi Cramm. However, today, I'm interviewing President Veazey, again, at his request, because he wants to talk about the year ahead, and also about some of the timely topics that are impacting nations, the world, and the church. Welcome, Steve. As 2021 unfolds, what issues weigh most heavily on your heart? And what brings you hope?

Steve Veazey 01:35

I would like to say hello to to all the listeners and express appreciation for joining us through this podcast. As I think about that question, I, I guess I would respond by saying there are many issues that weigh heavily on my heart. That's the nature of the world we live in. As a personal practice, I review world news every morning from from various sources, to make sure my awareness is is global in scope and concern. And so I could talk about various issues. But I think the one that weighs heaviest, is of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. And I'm concerned greatly about the increasing health and economic impacts of COVID-19 throughout the world. I'm very hopeful about the vaccines. I'm troubled, that they will not be easily or readily available to many nations and regions throughout the world, including places where numerous church members live. So for me, that's a basic human justice issue that weighs heavily on me, and I hope is concerning to the church. Hope, I gain hope, in any number of ways. One source of hope for me is that group of church members, I call them the committed core, who are incredibly dedicated, supportive, visionary, and generous. And they inspire me daily, and are a constant source of hope. And, of course, the Holy Spirit, which bears witness of the eternal purposes of God, being fulfilled regardless of current circumstances, is always a source of fundamental and abiding hope. That, that's the hope that is at the heart and soul the gospel.

Linda Booth 04:05

It sure is, Steve, the hope is what keeps us going through all of these challenges. And speaking of current challenges, what is the relationship between the church and politics?

Steve Veazey 04:19

Well, that is a complex and weighty topic for sure. So let's start with this. Our call is to discern and embody the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ, and then faithfully express it through the church's life throughout the world. So we start with Jesus. Jesus was born into poverty and oppression under Roman rule with these legalistic religious authorities in cahoots with the Imperial officials. That Alliance caused suffering for many, and and was contrary to the just reign of God of which Jesus taught and spoke. So scripture describes Jesus as being engaged in—not not isolated from—the social, political and religious issues and powers of his day. And Jesus offered an alternative way of living, that challenged certain religious and political systems that crushed people, while favoring other people. That, that's at the heart of who Jesus was. And so we take our cue from that I think. Christ inspired mission includes abolishing poverty, for example, ending needless suffering, and pursuing justice and peace on and for the earth. That gives us a focus. Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b states, "Courageously challenge cultural, political and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursuit peace." So I think it's important to remember that the peace we're referring to, in this passage, and others, is not an imposed facade of peace, or one that simply seeks the status quo, just keep everything as it is. It is God's peace or Shalom, using a biblical word, which is justice well being and wholeness realized for all people in the entire creation. So with all of that background, and I realize it was extensive. I think often when concern is expressed about church involvement in politics, the main issue is people's perception of partisan politics, or showing clear preference for a specific political party or a particular candidate. And, and some just equate the notion of politics with undesired conflict in the church. And they would really prefer the church avoid anything that might cause some to feel uncomfortable, or offended, or upset in some way. The challenge for us is that in this highly politicized environment of our time, people assume that partisan politics drive almost every church perspective and position. That's the way they perceive it. And once issues are defined through the lens of oppositional partisan politics, it's hard for some to see them any other way. That's just how they view the issue. Well, the church attempts to rise above that and develop its public positions from careful prayerful, prayerful consideration of the Six Lenses for Discovering God's Will: scripture, tradition, knowledge and reason, personal and community experience, Continuing Revelation, and Common Consent. The church refers to our Enduring Principles, basic beliefs, World Conference Resolutions, and other official statements as we constantly seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the church's, prophetic witness and engagement in the world.

Linda Booth 09:35

Thank you, Steve, for helping us understand that.

Steve Veazey 09:38

That's a long answer to a complicated question.

Linda Booth 09:41

It is complex. Maybe this one will, well maybe it won't be easy for the next question. Last year and continuing into 2021. There have been numerous protests in some nations, backed by various groups.

Some of these events spawned rioting, violence, destruction of property and looting. What is your perspective on these events?

Steve Veazey 10:12

Well, I think it's important to say, in the midst of all that's going on, regardless of the issue, Community of Christ has not and does not support or condone violence or looting or destruction of property of any kind. We recognize that peaceful protest is a form of protected free speech in some, but not all nations. And we have to keep that in mind as we think globally as a church. It's a way of drawing attention to issues and advocating for change. Some church members participate in protests, as matters of personal conscience and agency. But the church emphasizes that such activity should be non violent. And, and I think it's interesting to note that World Conference Resolution 1319, approved at the 2019 World Conference calls the church into a serious discussion about the meaning of non violence in our daily lives, and also in group efforts to achieve, to achieve desired, hopefully positive, change in society.

Linda Booth 11:50

Yeah, Steve, you...all of us know about the January 6 attack on the US Capitol and Congress which shocked and disturbed people nationally, and internationally. You joined some denominational leaders who signed an open letter from the National Council of Churches in the USA that stated the time had come for President Trump to resign or be removed from office. Why did you sign the letter?

Steve Veazey 12:23

Well, being members of the National Council of Churches, which we are and which was authorized by World Conference Resolution 1276, means that Community of Christ is a governing board member of the National Council of Churches. That's part of what membership means. On the Friday following the US Capitol attack, governing board members were contacted with an invitation for presiding officers—they go by many titles—of member communions, which means churches to sign an open letter with their respective titles to stand united as Christian leaders in response to those events. So the letter was a joint response of NCC member church leaders to a matter of what we considered and I considered great moral significance and urgently needed accountability. The magnitude of the issue, and imminent risk of incitement of more violence, for me rose far beyond partisan politics, and shouldn't be diminished in any way by the short time remaining for the current administration to be in power. To put in a little different perspective, the letter is a type of non violent action called speaking truth to power that is rooted in a long scriptural tradition of prophetic witness. When functioning in that way, I don't speak for all members of the church nor do I represent myself to others is doing so. However, I do hope church members will be prompted by such actions to explore deeply the grave moral implications and the far reaching consequences of occurrences, occurrences like the attack on Congress, and the true source of motivations leading up to such events. And consider what responses are appropriate for them to make as followers of Jesus Christ, the peaceful One.

Linda Booth 15:21

Speaking of non violence deep, how is the development of a church position on non violence going?

Steve Veazey 15:31

Well, it's it's going well, given again, the complexity of the issue. Non violence has many dimensions and definitions and related questions. But as an update through the Peace and Justice Team, which is a World Church Team, all the other World Church Teams have been asked to provide perspectives on non violence from their areas of expertise or focus, like theology or human rights, spirituality, Earth stewardship, diversity, and and ecumenical and interfaith ministries. And I've been really impressed and enriched by the quality and the depth of the reports that are that are being offered. The content of those reports, is being used to develop study material, such as the 2021 reunion resources, and other types of resources for World Conference that will be part of a consent building process as we engage in the next World Conference. A synthesis of the reports and the offering of delegate perspectives will become part of our consent building around this topic. You know, in many ways, responding to this resolution on non violence is simply an inherent part of the process of ongoing disciple formation as we work together to become the community God created us to be. At the end of the 2019 World Conference, I asked the church, are we moving towards Jesus, the peaceful One? And I left that as a question for us to ponder. The question was related to the approval of WCR 1319. But it's also more foundational than that, in terms of our formation as a faith community. It's saying we must begin our conversations about justice and peace with a faithful understanding of who Jesus the peaceful One, really was, and and is. So to help the church explore this topic, we are using it as a guiding question throughout the church. And we've developed multimedia resources related to it that explore non violence in connection to that, that question. Also, there's a non violent section on the Herald House website. Under a category we now have called a member created resources that has material developed from around the world. So I would say we're making progress.

Linda Booth 18:48

You are making progress, and that's a wonderful resource. Speaking of resources, the Worship Helps are so wonderful. I'm thinking of them as we plan for another Zoom sermon on Sunday.

Steve Veazey 19:01

Yes.

Linda Booth 19:02

Yeah. And some view the church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as too cautious, overreactive, or even lacking in faith in God. Why has the church responded as it has, where we're now meeting on Zoom almost entirely.

Steve Veazey 19:21

Yeah. Well, I think we all are aware that this has been a difficult, stressful and even confusing time for everyone. So church leaders stated at the outset of the pandemic, based on the information that we had, that decisions about church life and gathering were being made with the most current public health information in mind. We also stressed that protecting the most vulnerable is a priority for us, as a principle stated in Doctrine Covenants 164:6. That principle protecting the most vulnerable as a priority concern, coupled with other Enduring Principles like Worth of All Persons, Christ-like love of neighbor, Responsible Choices should all be evident in our responses at the congregational level, the mission center level, the world church level. Protecting the most vulnerable has become, and continues to be, a key priority. Vulnerable such as older folks or health compromised folks. But that leads to a bit more cautious approach than what may occur in the larger society where people are emphasizing, "Well, my individual freedom and right to behave or not behave in certain ways." The issue of having faith or not having enough faith is one that we should really be careful about. It's a well established belief and understanding that we shouldn't tempt or test God by putting ourselves in obviously risky situations to try to prove our faith or that our faith is somehow greater than somebody else's faith. Those kind of actions may harm us or cause others to bring harm to themselves and make unwise choices. So, making Responsible Choices is an Enduring Principle that urges us to consider carefully how our actions may not only impact us as individuals but may impact others. I think the church has responded vigorously and creatively to ministry needs of people during the pandemic. By increasing online experiences that are providing ways of connecting of communicating, caring, and growing in spiritual community. We've provided guidelines for the sacraments which many people yearn for, to be available online, or virtually when in person contact is not possible or wise. We continue to monitor global and local conditions and have provided a set of guidelines for more local decisions to be made in apostolic fields and mission centers and congregations as part of the decision making process toward resuming in person gatherings. And, I guess I would say we all all look forward to a future when the pandemic no longer negatively impacts so many aspects of our lives.

Linda Booth 23:34

Absolutely. And because we can't meet in person or we don't have in person church gatherings—they're not possible or wise and many places—how's the church doing financially during this pandemic?

Steve Veazey 23:50

Well, initially, I want to affirm that our church members' commitment and vision are obvious in their ongoing generous support. It's evident in their local and worldwide mission tithes. And I want to say thank you to everyone responding in that way. The worldwide mission ties goal for 2020 was a range from 12 million to 12.9 million in US dollars. Last late last year, the Presiding Bishopric reported that there was a good chance the church would have contributed close to 12 million when all 2020 contributions were recorded. Now I'm informed as of today that we're very close to meeting that goal. As an update, there are still contributions being recorded. But we are very close to that goal. And that's, that's wonderful. We've also been monitoring local mission tithes, and giving locally was less in 2020.

However, local mission tithes, tithes have received almost \$13.4 million, which is about \$3.4 million more than worldwide, worldwide mission tithes. And we're also aware that camp grounds, especially are being stretched and stressed, as the need to limit gatherings impacts revenue that they had they had counted on. While supporting mission tithes is essential, as I've said before, equally essential is annual progress on the Bridge of Hope retirement responsibility goal. So we always have these two aspects. So to help people understand: investing certain amounts contributed annually, so that they begin to generate earnings is critical to the whole plan to reach our goal of \$120 million US by December 31 2023. So, as of our last report, on June 30 2020, we had raised 76 million US dollars, leaving \$44 million still needed. So those are important figures to keep in mind. And I'd also like to say as noted, just a few moments ago, mission centers and congregations are being impacted by reduced income due to the pandemic, in addition to the world church. And that includes income needed for locally funded staff and camp ground operations. So how this pressure and stress will impact jurisdictional bridge of hope contributions is a growing concern for church leaders. And as we've announced many times before, regarding our intent, efforts continue to identify church assets, not critical to mission that can be sold to ensure we will meet our goal on schedule, while trying to minimize the impact to mission. And the whole point is if we don't achieve our goal on time, meeting church pension and post retirement obligations—which is what the Bridge of Hope emphasis is all about—will become more expensive in the future.

Linda Booth 28:28

Thanks.

Steve Veazey 28:28

That's, that's a lot again.

Linda Booth 28:30

Yeah, that is a lot. But thanks for that update. And of course, people can go online and look under the financial section. And there's always reports from the bishopric there, as well.

Steve Veazey 28:42

Yes.

Linda Booth 28:43

Yeah. At the 2019 World Conference, the High Priest's Quorum approved a letter of concern to the First Presidency, about the climate crisis, and the dire consequences of not responding soon enough to this global problem. What perspective do you have to offer?

Steve Veazey 29:07

Another very large issue for our whole global community. So as highlighted in the High Priest Quorum's letter of concern, which was approved at the last World Conference, I really urge people to read the

reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, as it's called. That panel is a United Nations agency that's responsible for assessing climate research from around the world and to provide a realistic view of the probable environmental impacts and impacts on health and, and impacts on our economies, and to make recommendations on how to lessen those impacts. And, to say the least, I guess, those reports are eye opening. And I encourage people to be informed. In addition to educational efforts by the Earth Stewardship Committee, one of the World Church Teams, church members in Canada and the United States have formed a North American Climate Justice Team that's being sponsored by the Greater Pacific Northwest Mission Center. And the team is coordinating a series of webinars on climate change due to global warming, and information about that can be found on their website, which is CofChristclimate justice—all one word—CofChristclimatejustice.org and you'll find the information there about the webinars and webinars that have been recorded for people to view later. I think from a faith perspective, we recognize that back in 1972, through Doctrine and Covenants Section 157, there was sounded a message of obvious environmental concern. I'll quote just briefly from Doctrine Covenants 157. "These are portentous times, the land is being desecrated by the thoughtless waste of vital resources. You must obey my commandments and be in the forefront of those who would mediate this destruction while there is yet day." In addition to that, in 2007, the World Conference approved the following counsel to be included in the Doctrine and Covenants as the Spirit's counsel to us. "The earth lovingly created as an environment for life to flourish, shutters in distress because Creation's natural and living systems are becoming exhausted from carrying the burden of human greed and conflict. Humankind must awaken from its illusion of independence and unrestrained consumption without lasting consequence." That's pretty clear and it's pretty ominous. Each year, there are worsening global warming impacts through the rising number and severity of wildfires, storms, droughts, diseases, ocean acidification, air pollution, species extinctions. We can take actions, as described in the IPCC reports to mediate this needless destruction while there's yet day. I think we must accelerate the pace of taking those actions, or we've really abdicated our calling as stewards of God's good creation.

Linda Booth 33:48

Yes, yes. We've talked about this before in some of the podcasts we've done together, and I've even asked, for example, President Murphy about the World Church Leadership Council. They've been involved in a group discernment process, and would you like to end our podcast by sharing how that's going?

Steve Veazey 34:11

Sure. It's going well. We've learned a lot about group discernment as we continue to explore our working discernment question, which is "God, where does your Holy Spirit lead us next as we embody the soul of Community of Christ?" I think that's a question worthy of any church group's attention and consideration. Last September, we focused on listening deeply to people throughout the church, who were invited to respond to the discernment question and that that provided a lot of hopeful, helpful hopeful insight into the the yearnings of our church members across generations and socio economic levels and ethnicities around the world. Last December, we began to identify what we're hearing as

insights and concepts, or emphases to guide our way into the future. So the individual voices are, are merging into the guiding statements, lights to guide our way. The discernment process is continuing by testing and refining our perceptions, which is also an important part of discernment. And we're doing that right now. The World Church Leadership Council is engaged in that stage of the discernment process right now. I think this process has really shaped and equipped us as a community of international servant leaders in our respective roles called to support the church as a people, a prophetic people, called to "...discern the Divine will for your own time and in the places where you serve." That's a quote from Doctrine Covenants 162:2c. During the discernment process, we've definitely sensed the affirming presence of the Holy Spirit instilling hope and vision for the church's future in these demanding times. The Holy Spirit is urging us to trust what's what's being born. Though we may not understand it all in the in the present moment. Trusting what is being born. That's the way of prophetic faith and vision. That's our ongoing journey.

Linda Booth 37:20

Thank you, Steve. For your faithful responses to the questions you were asked for your leadership and your willingness to stand in the breach for justice and peace for all of God's children. Being an International Church, we're blessed by the diversity of thoughts, perspectives and experiences. However, our diversity can sometimes cause division and separation. And I pray that during this challenging time, we unite in our diversity rather than divide. That we rejoice in our diversity rather than despair, and that we listen to and respect each other, so that the Blessings of Community can truly bless the world. And thank you Coffee Buzz listeners for joining our conversation. May you each experience God's presence and grace during these challenging times. Please watch for next month's episode of Coffee Buzz. I'll be having a conversation with one of Steve's counselors, President Scott Murphy.

Josh Mangelson 38:38

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