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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 19th episode of Coffee Buzz, a monthly podcast conversation with a member of Community of Christ First Presidency. If you haven't checked out Coffee Buzz before, my name is Linda Booth, and I'm the conversation starter for Coffee Buzz. I'm also retired Community of Christ apostle and director of communication. In this Coffee Buzz episode, President-Prophet Steve Veazey and I will be talking about Christ's mission after the pandemic. Welcome, Steve. How are you?

Steve Veazey 01:08

Thank you. Doing well.

Linda Booth 01:10

That's good. Before we get started on that topic, some of Coffee Buzz listeners may or may not have read an announcement from the First Presidency on Community of Christ's website, that the 2022 World Conference has been delayed by one year. Please summarize why the First Presidency made that decision.

Steve Veazey 01:31

Yes, thank you for that opportunity. World, World Conference has been delayed because of projected continuing global impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic. When you think about World Conference, think about people all over the world coming together in one place. And also because of uncertainty regarding the emerging variants of the COVID-19 virus in different parts of the world. We also considered the lack of equitable global access to vaccines right now. So although we in the US may be in a part of the world where vaccine access is, is more and more available, that's not true in other parts of the world. And then added to that was the likelihood that certain international travel restrictions that impact leaving certain nations, entering certain nations, including the U.S. will continue to have a negative impact on people's ability to travel. And, of course, we want World Conference to be a safe, healthy, memorable-for-the-right-reasons experience. And we want World Conference to also be a good experience for the host community here in Independence, Missouri. And, and we want the conference to be as representative as possible of the global church. As a principle that relates to our process of common consent, and also because we'll have some important questions that we'll be discussing and considering so we want the fullest representation as possible.

Linda Booth 03:44

Yes, I'm, I'm thankful for those considerations. As you said, sometimes we forget we're an International church, and there's a lot of countries and people in different places that we need to be very aware of. So what are the dates for the 2023 conference? And will there be any kind of online gatherings in 2022?

Steve Veazey 04:06

After consulting with world church leaders and other field staff and leaders, we selected the dates of April 21st through the 29th of 2023 as the dates for World Conference, and yes, there will be an online worldwide several day event in 2022. That will include elements of worship, celebrating the worldwide cultures of the church, important updates, the sharing of information, discussion of world church direction in relation to major issues and opportunities and preparation for the 2023 World Conference and the issues that will be before the conference,

Linda Booth 05:06

I look forward to those gatherings. That will be, it will be good to be together whether we're in person or not. Zoom will make it possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly impacted Community of Christ congregational, mission center and international gatherings. And COVID has changed how we worship how we meet together. It's also changed how many people live. They go to school and work. COVID is universal. Its impact isn't limited to one nation or place, but has affected all global communities and Community of Christ congregations throughout the world. I know the World Church Leadership Council, and I'm going to remind people who that council, who participate and serve on that Council, which is made up of the First Presidency, the Council of 12, the bishopric and other quorum leaders. I know Steve, you frequently have gathered to discern where God is leading the church and how Christ's mission is being reshaped now and into the future after the pandemic. In past conversations, you've given us updates on those leadership gatherings. Please remind us of the World Church Leadership Council's discernment process--how often you meet, how you meet, how you include leaders from places like Zambia, Wales, Tahiti, and an update on your most recent session.

Steve Veazey 06:34

Sure, thank you for that question and opportunity to update the church. As you reference, and as we've noted before, over the past year, during 2020, the World Church Leadership Council met in a very intentional discernment process over the course of the year. And that process was facilitated by spiritual directors from our own faith community who worked with the council, so that all world church leadership council members could focus on the questions at hand. We met as a group entirely online. And that allows the global participation to continue even though we can't meet in person, as we had previously done. And we met about every four months, during the course of the year. However, between those meetings, we were engaged, again, in online small group discernment activities and also daily individual discernment practices. All of that has to be working together in a discernment process. A primary learning, I think, of the World Church Leadership Council, is that the sermon is actually a posture, a daily posture, an attitude of openness, that, that we have to maintain. That's where we need to

be as world church leaders. Not thinking we have to have all the answers at any one time, but to always be probing our understanding of God's will and guidance. Most recently, as is very important in discernment, we sought confirmation of direction that we had sensed and held tentatively in our previous sessions. Our facilitators have concluded their role. And so the World Church Leadership Council is continuing to explore what we have mutually sensed in terms of what does it really mean and what does it, what, what are the next steps and, and so forth. So, a primary outcome is our learning that true discernment takes time. And it takes refinement, and sometimes true discernment leads to new questions that are perhaps more insightful than the ones you started with, rather than just quick, definitive answers.

Linda Booth 09:34

I'm so thankful that the world church leaders and with your leadership are intentional in discerning (Yes.) the future for, for us. And I'm very thankful that, as I thought about the pandemic's impact, I think there's a dichotomy at play. I know this from my perspective, but in talking with neighbors and family members, they say they're experiencing a similar dichotomy. On the one hand, we've been forced to be physically distant, yet new forms of solidarity have formed around a variety of issues. Our family life rhythms have been disrupted, but our sense of local neighborhoods has increased. And as we've huddled in our homes, it feels like we're alone but together, which is kind of a really strange dichotomy. I believe God is up to something in the midst of this pandemic. Steve, please comment on these observations. And if they resonate with you, what is the implication for Christ's mission after the pandemic?

Steve Veazey 10:42

Well, I think initially, I would say I, I fully agree and resonate with your description of what we've been experiencing, and would also tag on to that spiritual truth and movement is often seen or experienced, in, in paradox, in creative tension. It seems to be a part of the very nature of life itself. So being forced by the pandemic into physical distancing and, and shelter at home quarantines, I think has revealed to us our deep desire and need for authentic community relationships which we may have taken a little bit for, for granted before. And that can be a gift and a blessing to us as we go into the future. I read an article the other day about what people are calling the post pandemic church that noted that we're going to see two trends, in the future. People will continue to move in mass to online communications, education, commerce, shopping, healthcare--that's certainly emerged during the pandemic, the virtual doc visit. And that, that is going to happen and people will find a lot of convenience in that and more access to different aspects of the soc, of society. And this person, this author observed, at the same time, that will result in more people searching, yearning, or, or longing for authentic, meaningful relationships. And this author, called those relationships, thick community, thick community, which I thought was a very interesting term. Now, when I heard that, when I read that, I think our name, Community of Christ, if we understand its meaning and its implications, anticipates a time like this. I think one of the primary implications for our pursuit of Christ's mission is that we need to continue to reimagine our understanding of church. Church is not so much just the place we go on occasion. It is who we are in relationship to others, and to the larger world. It's a daily lifestyle of how we interact with others in the world. And as I've said before, I would re-emphasize, we need to focus on, on nurturing and multiplying

Christ centered, Christ inspired groups of people in a variety of social and economic and cultural, uh, and physical settings, that are focused on developing deep, meaningful relationships that immerse the people involved in the love and Spirit of Christ. I think that's the heart of our calling as Community of Christ, as our name would say. And I would add, these communities, if they are truly Christ centered in Christ inspired, will always be inviting new people, they will be hospitable and inclusive. Or they misrepresent Jesus as I know Jesus is.

Linda Booth 14:58

Yeah. Yes, absolutely. And also, as we all know, digital technology, they've connected us in profound ways during the pandemic, especially in our worship and gathering experiences. And, and, Steve, I think you and I have both heard from folks as we've gone to different places through Zoom to speak in different congregations and mission centers and with different groups, that we keep hearing that they like the idea of leaders preaching in their congregations. And some don't know, really, if they want to go back to how it was before. I don't know how prevalent that is. But talk about how do you and other leaders see the role of technology and Christ's mission, post pandemic advancing Christ's mission?

Steve Veazey 15:48

Sure. Well, I think we, first of all, need to acknowledge that, that digital or online ministries were already emerging in various parts of the church. However, they weren't necessarily being enthusiastically embraced in some parts of the church or even considered at all at this time. The pandemic has accelerated the movement toward online ministries as a means of sharing the gospel, building community, and engaging in mission by, by decades, I think, or by at least a decade. And I think one of the interesting elements of this is that the technology for that kind of sharing has also continued to emerge and, and is rapidly evolving. So we don't know what all tools may be available to us in the first, uh, in the future. But we do know that our primary purpose in our particular era in time is to share the gospel and Christ's mission. And just like the Apostle Paul used the advanced network of Roman roads that had been built, and the maritime shipping routes, to accelerate the spread of the gospel, we should use every tool that's, every means that's available to us to do that. And that's the attitude that I take to online ministries. I think the future holds the following: church groups that develop a healthy balance of in-person and online ministries, some call it the hybrid approach, will flourish more in the future than those who ignore that tool, who ignore online opportunities. I also think that churches, and I'm speaking there of local churches, congregations and groups, but also denominationally, that value and celebrate people who participate only online, by their choice, or because of their circumstances, will flourish more than those who view those persis, participants somehow is secondary, or less than. So, online participation should count as much in every possible way as in-person participation, including in the attendance count because it all counts. I think church groups that plan activities and ministries from the beginning with online options in mind, and online participation in mind, rather than as an afterthought, will flourish more in the future. I know some groups are, they are taking steps forward, but they're basically broadcasting what they have planned for the online participants, (Yes.) but needs to be a change in mindset. Let's plan it with online participants and in the,

in-person, participants in mind. And then for church groups that use online networks to partner with other groups to accomplish our mission initiatives will flourish more in the future. We can use online networks to form strong partnerships to accomplish, accomplish major mission initiatives.

Linda Booth 19:50

Yeah, that's, that's excellent. And that's really prophetic as you think about the future of how congregations can engage in Christ's mission. It's not just one way as we've kind of thought in the past. It actually opens up a whole menu of opportunities to reach people who are searching and looking for a spiritual connection, and a community that will nurture their discipleship.

Steve Veazey 20:17

And that's good. That's not something to be feared or resist.

Linda Booth 20:22

Yes, it, it is God working in our midst to open our minds to the possibilities of what can be. And I'm excited about that. I can tell you are as you speak about it.

Steve Veazey 20:35

Yes.

Linda Booth 20:37

I recently read in a digital newspaper article that there's a proliferation of online searches for the word prayer during the pandemic. And this column has concluded that the pandemic has intensified some people's desire to connect or reconnect with God. Steve, do you believe that the pandemic has encouraged a spiritual openness to a relationship with God? And if so, how will post pandemic provide our members with the opportunity to support those who are seeking a spiritual connection to give their witness and actually invite people to Christ?

Steve Veazey 21:16

Yeah, I, I think it's proven that hard times cause more people to spiritually yearn to seek God for help and hope for the future. I think to understand this phenomena, at this time, we need to recognize that prior to the pandemic there already was a growing number of people who were migrating in their minds and choices away from what they perceived as organized religion, with, with all of its various aspects, to what, what they consider to be spirituality or authentic spirituality without all of the trappings of what they considered to be ineffective institutions that, that had been established. And, and people were doing that because they were searching for authentic relationship with God. And so the pandemic has, in my mind, accelerated the movement of those people who are searching for spirituality. And then on, on top of that, there are those who, because of the pandemic have kind of awoke to their spiritual needs. Some of the author calls it a recognized hole in the soul that one can't fill any other way other than through connecting with the eternal Spirit of light and truth that we refer to, of course, as God. So, with those

two, two trends converging, we know that churches which increased their support and their resources for individual spiritual formation and growth and renewal flourished more during the pandemic than others that just decided to wait out the pandemic with the hope that they could return to normal. Soon, they, they expressed a real felt need in people's lives and so, for me, that implication is clear. For the church going into the future, the need and opportunity is we must increase our emphasis on spiritual formation that connects with people's deep yearning for authentic spiritual relationship to God, others and the creation, which, as we know, really is the same relationship. We, we talk about our relationships to God, to others, to the world around us, but that, that's really all the same spiritual relationship at its base. So spiritual companions and guides, resources, supports for families, spiritual formation activities that people can pursue daily in all the settings of their lives, that's what's going to be very important in the future.

Linda Booth 24:57

You know, as you're talking about that, in the future, that's been occurring in my neighborhood pre-pandemic. We talked about, you know, odds and ends kind of things. And I've discovered in my neighborhood, I've gotten deeper relationships with people that I knew just as acquaintances. And we pray with each other and for each other, and I'll get texts, you know, would you'll pray for my daughter who's taking this and, and there is that that deep appreciation for connection and authentic community. And our neighbors, I think, have that appreciation of many neighbors going out of their way to stop and talk and to help each other and, and talk on a deeper level, and, as I said, to pray for each other. I believe a, a yearning for community positions Community of Christ for a new missional future. For years, we've been talking about community being greater than when we gather on Sunday morning. And we are a faith movement with a mission statement that says to proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love and peace, and the mission statement and our mission initiatives, they send us outside of our church walls. However, during the pandemic, we've been yearning to return to our church sanctuaries. We've been scattered. And now we want to gather in, and our tendency might be to stay in together rather than to go out into a hurting world. Steve, where do you and other leaders believe God is calling members to be and do after the pandemic? And, and what do you believe our post-pandemic congregations will be and look like after the pandemic is ordered to, over to in order to be more fully engaged in Christ's mission or missio Dei, God's mission?

Steve Veazey 27:00

Yeah. And I want to recognize up front as we talk about future implications, we're certainly not denying the yearning that people have to be together and to be together in the sacred places of their lives. Because that enhances their feeling of connection to God and others. But what we're saying is, that should not be the only focus. We're looking forward to coming back together, but is that only for us who have been together for a long time? Or will you, will we be bringing some new people with us, which means stay open to the new relationships that are resulting from the pandemic and that spiritual yearning that we talked about. So again, I would emphasize the disruption of the pandemic gives us a once in a lifetime, maybe once in a century, opportunity to reimagine or re-envision how we can be the most

meaningful, impactful, effective expression of Community of Christ in our time. And that means to reimagine church. What it is, what it does. There will certainly be affirmation of some things that are very important to us that will continue with us into the future. But I hope we'll perceive the church of the future as a movement, a missional movement of doing our part to promote God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. Another online article I read recently about the post-pandemic church, emphasized that hopefully we'll, we'll begin to think of the church more as a verb, something that's happening, rather than a noun, a particular place we go. And the pandemic has revealed to us that people can live deep and rich lives of meaning, discipleship, community, and service apart from church buildings. Now, church buildings may still be a resource for disciple formation and mission. But perhaps the pandemic has revealed to us that there are other ways, if our circumstances call for them, that the church can flourish, without dependence, or without being set primarily in a particular building. And I think that's worth a lot of serious discernment going forward. We need to really focus, in my opinion, on seeing the church as empowering individuals and groups for our mission in the world, not as an end in itself. We get together to worship. Well, that's a means to empower people to have a new vision of creation and how they can contribute to the fulfillment of that vision. We get together for Christian education to study scripture. That's not just an end in itself. It's to equip us, as disciples and witnesses, to go into the world, to faithfully share the gospel with others, and so forth, and so on. And one final implication, this is a hard one, if we are thinking about the church in those terms, we need to look at activities that may be draining our time and our finances and our energy that are not necessarily contributing to the fulfillment of our mission priorities. And we need to discern whether or not we should keep doing some things in order to free up time and resources for priorities.

Linda Booth 32:09

Yes, yes. When you're talking about us being the church of the future, which is a missional movement, I was reminded of Christ putting together a movement of what I like to call searchers, who went out into the world searching for those people who were left behind or untouched or unloved. And that's really what Christ's mission is for us, I think, is that movement you're talking about, that missional movement of searchers going out into their neighborhoods and impacting and becoming friends with those who are, are in need of, of a spiritual connection.

Steve Veazey 32:54

Yes.

Linda Booth 32:55

Yeah. The, the pandemic has also amplified many major global issues like extreme poverty. I, I read an article, Understanding Poverty from the World Bank, that reported that although extreme poverty has been falling the last few decades, 2020 marked the first time when that trend is reversing. And it estimated that those suffering from acute hunger globally could double. And other issues like inequality, you mentioned in distribution of vaccines, food and water insecurity, racism, climate, gender violence. Those are just some of the issues of concern. And all these issues and more call us to compassionate

ministry and justice and peacemaking or to abolish poverty, end suffering and to pursue peace on earth. What are some of the missional opportunities that you and other leaders believe Community of Christ members should focus on after the pandemic?

Steve Veazey 34:03

I think we can emphasize the impact of the pandemic by putting it in very stark terms. So let's, let's just talk about in the United States. The number of children who are hungry has increased by millions. One report I read recently says it increased by 7 million which would be in addition to those who were already suffering with food insecurity. The frequency of hate speech and hateful action and violence against ethnic minorities and those who live in poverty has increased dramatically, according to all of the organizations that track that kind of behavior in society. So the pandemic has brought out the best in some people, the helpers, those who bring ministry, and it's brought out the worst in other elements of our society. It's, it's revealed the darker side of the human condition. So, globally, people suffer from many circumstances that simply are not in harmony with God's vision for creation. We refer to them as poverty, social and ethnic injustices or racial injustice. And in any disease, conflict, regional conflict, global conflict. So, as a church dedicated to pursuing Christ's mission, mission opportunities, and I would say needs, it compels us to respond to these kinds of situations and to focus on reducing poverty and hunger, seeking racial justice and true interracial reconciliation in our communities. For me, because of the pandemic, ensuring vaccine equity in our local communities, that gives attention to those who usually aren't thought of first, as well as globally, and also providing opportunities for people to grow spiritually and encounter the living Christ in authentic communities such as, you know, we've been talking about people experience Christ's love and Spirit. So it seems to me that it's so clear what we should be responding to. The pandemic, if our eyes were not open before, should, should be open now to all of those needs.

Linda Booth 37:32

Yes, absolutely. Oh, thank you so much, Steve. This conversation about Christ's mission has really inspired me and I hope it has all of our Coffee Buzz listeners, and how something fundamentally new is being born which is very exciting. It brings into sharp focus that the church is being gifted with an opportunity to reexamine some of our most basic assumptions about how we participate in Christ's mission. While COVID-19 led to so much suffering, it has also given us the opportunity to glimpse the future of Christ's mission. And so following this global pandemic, I hope all of our congregations don't simply return to business or ministry as usual. And as we look forward to entering our church buildings and being together, we're being prepared to be set out from the safety of our sanctuaries into the broken and painful places where good news is craved the most. So thank you, Steve, for your prophetic leadership. And thanks to the world church leaders who are discerning God's call for the church after the pandemic. May we be poised to become congregations that are true and living expressions of Jesus Christ, woven together by the Holy Spirit and sent into the world as evangelistic witnesses, compassionate ministers, and justice and peacemakers. And thank you Coffee Buzz listeners for joining

our conversation. Please watch for next month's episode of Coffee Buzz. I'll be having a conversation with a member of the First Presidency and Presiding Bishop Stassi Cramm.

Josh Mangelson 39:32

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