

# Coffee Buzz | Stassi Cramm Update

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, Presiding Bishopric, First Presidency, leaders, world ministry, future, hope, mission,

## SPEAKERS

Stassi Cramm, Carla Long

### **Carla Long** 00:26

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla long. And today I have a very dear friend with me. It's a member the First Presidency, Stassi Cramm. Hi, Stassi.

### **Stassi Cramm** 00:38

Hey, Carla, how you doing? Good. Um, Stassi

### **Carla Long** 00:40

Good. Um, Stassi and I have known each other for a long time. And I've mentioned this before on the podcast, we were roommates for, I don't know, three years or four years. We were roommates for quite a while. (Yeah.) So we got to know each other really well. And I know that Stassi is awesome and wonderful and an incredible roommate, as well as an incredible person. So Stassi, I'm gonna let you introduce yourself to our listeners.

### **Stassi Cramm** 01:05

All right, well, great. Thank you. Well, as Carla said, I'm currently serving as president along with Scott Murphy and the Community of Christ First Presidency. And I'm also a daughter, a wife, mother and aunt, and recently a brand-new grandmother. So my husband, Steve, and I have two homes, we live in both Independence and Boston. I spend time in independence and other places around the world in supporting the mission of the church. But I also work remotely from Boston as much as I can. Because we have a place across the street from our twin grandbabies who are almost 19 months old now. So that's just a little bit about me.

### **Carla Long** 01:50

And being across the street from those Grandbabies, you don't see him very often, of course,

### **Stassi Cramm** 01:55

Yeah, never, never. I tried to not like qualify as a stalker, but it is really fun to like, watch out the window, like when their parents are loading him up in the car and stuff. I don't know. It's just heartwarming. It's like my own little Hallmark movie.

**Carla Long 02:08**

Oh, it's so sweet. So sweet. So Stassi, today, we're gonna be talking about your job and how it's been changing. And there's just been a lot of changes in the last couple of years. So I'm going to ask the big question first, how does it feel serving in one world church leadership role instead of two? Because of course, before the last World Conference, you were the Presiding Bishop of the Church as well as a member of the First Presidency. So how does it feel just going from two positions down to one?

**Stassi Cramm 02:38**

Yeah, that's a really good question. Carla. I think I want to start by saying it was really interesting serving in two roles. So I think to talk about how it feels to serve in one, I need to give a little bit of the back story. When Steve called me to serve as both Presiding Bishop and a Counselor to the President. There were actually some in the church who were a little bit worried that that wasn't a very good model. We did get some feedback from the church that there was concerns about how it created a conflict of interest. But my experience was that the model worked really well, for both the Presiding Bishopric and the First Presidency. It's not a model that you necessarily want to use all the time. But I think that it's a model that we may see, again, at some point in the life of the church, because I think when you need to limit the number of positions in leadership for budgetary reasons, or to make space for other leaders, that it's a great way to streamline leadership and decision making. And I think it really did help us be really nimble during some of the financial challenges that we were facing. One of the things that I remember was Karen Minton was General Counsel at the time, and when I came in in my dual role, we had her come to the First Presidency and talk to us about the role of Presiding Bishop as Trustee in Trust and the role of the Presidency. And I will never forget her saying, "you may wear two hats, but only one hat can you temporarily remove, and that is the role of Presidency. Your role as Presiding Bishop Trustee in Trust of the church's assets is always present, and you must always view challenges and opportunities through this lens, even as you consider the presidential perspective as well." So that really stuck with me. And there were times when Steven Scott and I would be talking and I would be like, I'm gonna step out of this conversation for a minute and I'm gonna let you guys have the presidential conversation because I am going to toe the Presiding Bishop line. And I would need to let myself be fully immersed in that perspective. So that brings us back to your question, how does it feel to serve in only one role? I feel like the members of the Presiding Bishopric did the very best we could navigating some very difficult situations and creating some opportunities for the future. But there's no question that serving in two roles makes you feel like something is always being sacrificed. So in that regard, I feel excited that there are again, three members in the Presiding Bishopric, one, which is, of course, you, and that the new Bishopric can give attention to important financial matters in ways that Steve Graffeo and I did not have the capacity to do. So in that regard, I feel a little bit relieved to be able to focus on ministry and service through the single perspective of the role of President and I feel hopeful, while also tempered with a little bit of uncertainty as I have the capacity to dive more deeply into strategic matters related to the church's mission and future.

**Carla Long 05:59**

Oh, my gosh, Stassi, when we, when the new PB got together, and we were looking at all of the responsibilities that is under the PB, I think there was like nine single spaced pages of all of the responsibilities of the PB. And the whole, I mean, it took us hours and hours to go through it. And I'm

like, how, how is this even possible with just a two person just two people in you have time? Or I don't know, I don't even know how you like split up your time. But how is it even possible with one and a half people to do this? It was, it was an insane amount of work. I was shocked how much work there is in the PB. So hats off to you for doing it. And that quote from Karen is amazing. Like, you can never take off your Presiding Bishop hat.

**Stassi Cramm** 06:44

Yes. Though now I've taken it off. And that actually feels kind of exciting. And so that's, that's good.

**Carla Long** 06:53

I'm so glad. I'm so glad. So you kind of you alluded to this a little bit. I don't know if you want to talk a little bit more about it but what led the leadership in this direction to separate the PB and the First Presidency?

**Stassi Cramm** 07:05

Yeah, no, that's a, I think, a good question and probably, you know, something that people would be interested in. So in 2021 and 2022, as President Veazey was prayerfully considering leadership changes, and he was consulting with Scott and I and so we were both his prayer partners and his discernment partners as we talked about, changes that were coming people that were going to be retiring, what succession might look like. Two factors were the primary reasons from my perspective, at least, that led to the decision to return to a more traditional model of the Presiding Bishopric and First Presidency. So the first one was that it was clear that although we were rapidly moving towards completing the retirement responsibility portion of Bridge of Hope, the financial sustainability of the current levels of ministries and services is in jeopardy. And that's because it's, Carla, you would know well, worldwide mission tithes continue to decline. So the church's ability to sustain the current levels of ministries and services, let alone grow them, which is what we all know we need to be doing is totally dependent on the church developing new generous disciples and additional sources of income to support the annual worldwide ministries budget. So to give this strategic need the time and energy that it required, the Presidency came to the decision that the Presiding bishopric needed to have three full time ministers again. That that would provide more capacity, but also provide some diversity and giftedness, as the new Presiding bishopric looked at how to continue to fund ministry into the future. The second reason or factor that led to the decision to return to a more traditional configuration was related to the selection and preparation of a new Prophet President. We knew at that point that Steve was going to be announcing his retirement in 2025. We also knew that it was in the best interest of the church for the Prophet President designate to have some time to prepare for moving into the new role, including time of attentional preparation and training. And so to support this effort, it was felt that it would be helpful if I could spend more time focused on my responsibilities in the First Presidency without having to also focus on the needs in the Bishopric especially when the needs in the Bishopric were really needing to ramp up on new income sources. And so, so that was kind of the second reason was how do we get more capacity into the Presidency? And I think related to that really was the strategic needs of the church? How did we really bring some focus to some pretty big issues of ministry contexts that are bubbling up around the world? And how we faithfully respond to those?

**Carla Long** 10:22

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Like I said, just those looking at, like, what the PB has to do those nine pages that I just mentioned, it doesn't leave a lot of capacity for the outside, looking outside all of the internal structure that the church even needs. So I, that makes a lot of sense to me. And I totally get it. And now that I've been in the role for, I don't know, five, four or five months. Yeah, there's a lot of things that can distract your time. And we need to make sure we stay focused on what we need to stay focused on.

**Stassi Cramm** 10:52

Yeah, exactly.

**Carla Long** 10:54

Speaking of focus, how is your focus changing and expanding?

**Stassi Cramm** 11:00

Yeah, let me start by acknowledging that it's really interesting when you change jobs within the same organization. So you're still around where you worked previously. You're still around the tasks that were being done by you previously. And you're still supporting those people. Then you add to the situation, the fact that I now work with the Presiding Bishopric as the First Presidency liaison, and it gets even more interesting. For many of us, we had to remember where the demarcation of responsibilities was between the First Presidency and the Presiding Bishopric. Because when I was doing both, I don't think it was always clear which hat I had on when I was making decisions. So everyone has done a great job since World Conference in helping clarify roles and responsibilities again. Of course, Carla, you sit on one side of this relationship. So I hope it feels like it's working well for you, and that I'm not overreaching or holding on to previous responsibilities too much. At the same time, I hope we've provided an orderly transition. And I think we have. So with that transition more or less complete, I am finding myself focusing more on the strategic topics of the church's ministry and future. Anyone that has served in leadership roles with strategic responsibilities would understand that strategic planning and implementation takes time and space. As you noted, Carla operational decisions that you can check off on a daily basis or otherwise short-term things have a way of filling your time when there's a lot of those to get done. Whereas strategic work takes more uninterrupted time to really prayerfully research and discern the way forward. I'm finding that I am needing to adjust my daily expectations and my internal time clock. I'm no longer as pressed to complete daily tasks on a given deadline, where I can get to the end of the day and say, yes, I've checked 10 things off of my lists today. Also, I'm not as pressed with a whole host of operational decisions that occupy my time on a daily basis. So instead, I have both the privilege and the responsibility of pausing and prayerfully contemplating what truly matters most as we support the church's mission around a very diverse world. And of course, I don't do this alone. I do this with my colleagues in the First Presidency. When you add to all of this, President Veazey need to step away from his position until April, that came as a complete, unexpected event. So in some ways, I feel like the Holy Spirit helped prepare the way for Scott and I to be able to keep the mission of the church moving forward even in Steve's absence. If I had still been the Presiding Bishop supporting the church in Steve's absence would have been much, much more difficult. So the letter of counsel that presented my release as Presiding Bishop and Ron's call to Presiding Bishop use similar terminology in both our personal paragraphs and that was, quote, emerging strategic initiatives. Several people have asked me about this wording, especially when we were preparing for World Conference. At the time, I really

wasn't certain and would just smile and say, I can't be specific because they're still emerging. But I can now say that I'm just beginning to get more of a glimmer as to what this might mean. I think Ron and I each have a role to play in helping the church invest in our future, while working our way through what will likely be some very difficult times. Some of these initiatives will be the Presiding Bishopric and others will be led by the First Presidency. But I think all of them will be importing and continuing to help the church respond to our call to be who God needs us to be. So for instance, as you would know, Carla, the Presiding Bishopric, is already exploring how to engage new contributors and younger disciples, as well as create other income sources. And I know you could talk a lot about this, maybe we should do a podcast again, and I'll interview you. But those are, I think, are some of the emerging strategic initiatives that Ron, and you and Wim will be leading. And the First Presidency is working on actions requested by various World Conference resolutions, while also prayerfully considering where God's Spirit is leading us, and how we prepare current and future leaders to faithfully respond to this call. So overall, I think I'm just now beginning to get a feel for what this singular position needs to be.

**Carla Long 16:11**

It's a lot I mean, everyone, I don't know if you get this question. But sometimes people are like, what do you do? And it's really hard to answer because you're like, a lot of weird different things all the time. So that was a good answer to try and like, show people out what it is you do. So I have two questions. And I don't know what order you want to do these next two questions in. I want to hear about what hope you have in the next few years, in the next coming years, as well as what significant challenges we have in the next couple of years. And I don't know how you want to tackle that. If you want to tackle challenges first, then hope, or hope first, and then challenges. So I'm gonna leave that all to you. I'm gonna leave it in your very capable hands.

**Stassi Cramm 16:54**

Oh, my goodness, I want to do both at the same time almost. Well, let's start with hope. Because I think we have to submerge ourselves in hope always. Because for me, I think hope is a choice that we make. It's a really interesting word. It's used in a variety of ways. And some people have heard me talk about my dissertation research when I was getting my PhD. But hope was part of what I studied and the impact that a hopeful leader has on creating hopeful people, and how hopeful people are more successful in accomplishing good in the world. So in the end, from all my studies, I've concluded that hope comes when we are willing to honestly identify where we are, courageously imagine where we are called to be, and diligently work towards creating a pathway into that imagined future. So that's a lot we have to be willing to say where we are, which relates to your question about what are some of the significant factors, you know, that are facing the church right now. But even as we name all of those factors, we have to be willing to allow God's Spirit to stimulate our prophetic imagination, and to have this sense of an alternative possibility. And then we have to have the energy and the perseverance and everything else that's needed to be able to work with the Spirit in creating pathways that lead into that future. So people ask me all the time, if I think Community of Christ has a future, my undeniable belief about that is absolutely Community of Christ has a future. I have hope, because I can see that we are living and serving in a complex time in human history. There's a lot of fear, distrust, uncertainty, division, and gosh, the list just goes on and on. Those same struggles find their way into the life of the church. I think leaders around the church are trying to honestly identify their context of ministry where they live and serve. And this is a very important step. So I don't panic when people are are frustrated

and concerned about what's happening in the church because I get that it looks really turbulent right now. I also think that those same leaders are daring to courageously imagine where the Holy Spirit is leading us into mission. That's going to be different in different parts of the church. And I believe our history teaches us that we have the perseverance and commitment to survive, and ultimately thrive no matter how hard the journey becomes. This is a little like morose, I guess, but sometimes on my worst days, I remind myself that at the end of Jesus's ministry, the human Jesus found himself hanging on a cross, with only two women and a beloved disciple left to view for all of his work on Earth. As he closed his eyes and gave in to, you know, physical death, I have to believe that he wondered, was it all really worth it? And yet, we know that out of that very dark bleak moment, resurrection came and new things bubbled up, new ministries took place new people since the call, and God's Spirit continued to work where people were willing to listen. So I think that Community of Christ has a future. But for us to live into that future, we all have to believe it, and we have to choose to make it so. So at the risk of being maybe too blind. I think that there are three major challenges that we face in the next several years. finances to support annual operations are a problem. And I know Carla, that you could tell your listeners a lot more about that. So I'm not going to, you know, share all those details, because that's not my responsibility anymore. But I do want to help the Presiding Bishopric get the word out that we have to make some significant shifts in how we finance the church. And we have to free up generosity in new people to be able to get where we need to go. The second thing is that in some parts of the world, active participation in the ministries of the church is dwindling. I know where I live and serve congregations are a lot smaller now than they were just 10 years ago. So we're going to have to recreate how we form and shape faith communities. And that's really hard and really scary. It's hard and scary for me, because I was shaped and formed in kind of the traditional congregation that I know and love. But I know the Council of Twelve, and Presidents of Seventy are committed to guiding the church in adopting transformative ways of living mission. So you know, if people will be open, if people will remain hopeful, if people will have the courage to follow the Spirit, we may get really small before we start to grow again, but that spark is not going to go away. And, it's gonna continue to burn if we keep it alive. In other parts of the world, participants in the church are increasing faster than leaders can make sure that our ministries continue to reflect Community of Christ identity, mission, message and beliefs. And so in those parts of the world, it's all about how do we temper growth at a rate that we can sustain, and where we can make sure that what we are growing truly reflects what Community of Christ is called to be. And again, I know that Council of Twelve, and Presidents of Seventy are leading the way and I have faith in their leadership. The third challenge that I see what might be the most important, or at least might be foundational in solving the other two is that the gap between what we know or believe and what we do or live on a daily basis seems like it's big and may be growing. We have spent more than a decade remembering who we are and who we are called to be. We are well equipped for the adventure that God is leading us into, but we have to be willing to change and transform and adapt to stop doing things that no longer strengthen or support the mission of the church. Giving up the known and familiar is really hard, but the future is dependent on our willingness to act on closing the gap between what we believe and how we act. In this regard, I'm speaking to myself as much as I am to your listeners. But we really have to start to put into practice that identity that we have come to understand that Community of Christ is called to be.

**Carla Long** 24:41

Thank you, Stassi, for saying those, I it it's a little bit scary to hear those because I find myself nodding along but I believe you're right when we name something that the fear is lessened. I'm not gonna say the fear goes away but the fear is lessons like okay, well I can ... I know how to do some of those things, I can help out with those things. But when we don't actually speak those things out loud, it's just like, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. So it, thank you for speaking those out loud. I don't know if the listeners agree with your assessment or not. But I agree with your assessment. I think those the challenges that you discussed make a lot of sense to me.

**Stassi Cramm 25:21**

Well, and if your listeners have other ideas, I would love to hear from them. So you can always email me at FP@cofchrist.org, and I would love to hear your thoughts about what the challenges are before us.

**Carla Long 25:32**

Oh, that's awesome. Thank you for saying that, too. So I only have just a few more questions. I promise. That's it. So for you what is emerging in the midst of the uncertainty that's facing the church right now? What's starting to bubble to the surface?

**Stassi Cramm 25:50**

Yeah, so of course, the big thing for me and the church right now is this time of discernment, as we support the Council of Twelve in discerning the one who is called to serve as Prophet President. This is a critical next step for the church that will provide a new chapter in our faith story. The next leader will not have all the answers, but together, we can journey through the uncertainty that is not within our control. So like everyone else, I'm you know, I'm trying to support the Twelve in prayer. I know yesterday, which was the 29th of October, the church was asked to prayer and fast on behalf of the Council of Twelve. But for those that didn't participate, really any day that you can pause and just send positive energy and prayers into, you know, up to God, holding the Council at Twelve would be I think, greatly appreciated, because obviously, having that new leader named will help eliminate at least one piece of uncertainty that the church is experiencing right now. And just like local leaders, world church leaders are working on a variety of other projects designed to help provide stability and strength to the church's mission, as we kind of hunker down to go the distance in what might be some very difficult years. Those projects range from the development of various resources, like the new reunion resources will be coming out next spring. And we've got a World Conference that is now less than two years away, which is kind of mind boggling, since we only have a two-year span from our last World Conference. So we're already starting to get ready for that. We are working on topics related to non-violence, the climate emergency, just all sorts of things that are going on. And, those projects again, won't solve all of our problems, but they give us common topics to focus on as we develop as disciples. And they give us ways to like you say Carla to figure out okay, where does my giftedness where it is my sense of call fit into the larger church call and what can me and my friends do or what can me and my congregation do to take what the church is talking about and put it into action in our local context? You know, at the world church, we can provide information, we can provide guidance, we can cast vision, but really that vision takes hold locally, when people are passionate about something and then go put their passion into action.

**Carla Long 28:52**

Absolutely, absolutely. So I'm glad to hear that you've said some things that are bubbling up that are that are coming to the surface. And that I that makes me feel good about hearing that. Oh, Stassi, I just want to say thanks so much for being on this podcast. You've done a fantastic job. I only have one question left. But before I ask my final question, I wanted to ask if there's anything that you wanted to say that I didn't ask about?

**Stassi Cramm 29:16**

No, Carla, I think you really did a really good job, I think, and I know I sound kind of preachy, I guess it's because when you think about this stuff and pray about this stuff, like all day long, you have all these thoughts that are in your heart and in your mind, and you just kind of want to be able to like, share them, you know, with the church and let everyone know that Scott and I, we're just, we are aware that there are struggles, that there are difficulties, that people have concerns, that people are worried about what's going to happen to the church and whether or not there's going to be a church, and people are looking for absolute answers. And I know that probably they would like to have a podcast where we say, well, here are the 10 things that you can do and everything will be fine. But I also think that people understand that it's a lot more complicated than that. And so I guess what I want people to know is that one, we are aware and leaders between the Council of Twelve, the Presiding Bishopric, the Presidents of Seventy, other World Church quorums, such as the High Priests Quorum, are working to prayerfully discern what is needed in various parts of the world, and then to work with mission center officers and congregational officers to provide guidance and support. And that's the kind of top-down flow. But there's also that grassroots bottom-up flow. And so wherever you look around and you see God's presence bubbling up, help it grow, help it magnify, help make space for it, and that gets back to being hopeful. So God is bubbling up all around us. And we just need to keep looking for those opportunities, and cling to each other through the difficult times. I know that around the church that very difficult decisions are being made. People are having to part with ways of worshipping or part with congregational buildings or just other things that are really difficult. And yet, in the midst of it all, I hope people can continue to sense God's Spirit calling us forward into the future.

**Carla Long 31:47**

Yeah, thanks for saying that. Things are changing. You know, like, I don't know if this is helpful or not helpful for listeners to hear. But I once one of my seminary professors once told me that Christianity has changed massively changed every 500 years. And this isn't perfect, of course, but like, you know, the three hundreds Constantine forced everyone to become Christian. And that massively changed the way we saw Christianity. In the 1000s 1100s, we saw that had the Crusades, which massively changed how we saw Christianity and 1517, Martin Luther hammered his 95 Theses up on the Wittenberg Church, the castle church door, and that changed from Catholic to Protestantism. And guess what, we are almost exactly 500 years from that event, 1517. And so partly, I just, I definitely want people to hear that. Things have to change. We're in at a point where things are changing, and it's scary, and it's hard. But Stassi, I really appreciate you saying the First Presidency is thinking of you and hoping the best for the church in your congregation and your set of certainly not forgotten by members of the First Presidency. And that Stassi, I've heard that loud and clear. I hope that's what you wanted to say.

**Stassi Cramm 33:02**



Yeah, absolutely. And again, you can email us if you have concerns or observations, things that you feel like leaders should hear that they're not hearing, then email us at [FP@cofchrist.org](mailto:FP@cofchrist.org) Because we are all in this together and we are going to find our way together.

**Carla Long** 33:23

Amen. Amen. Okay, last question, Stassi. How did it feel to pass the mantle of the Presiding Bishop roll over to Ron Harmon after he was ordained in the role? How did that feel? I think we all saw how you were feeling but maybe you just want to tell us?

**Stassi Cramm** 33:41

Yeah, I think you were teasing me at one point about like a fist bump or something, you know, at the end, like yes, this has now happened. You know, Ron is a good friend. But he is also a faithful disciple and a very gifted minister. So I was 100%, supportive of his call to Presiding Bishop. I was delighted to pass the mantle of the Presiding Bishop to him. I had no hesitation about the leadership transition. And in fact, it felt like the right call at the right time for the right person. His business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit, combined with his deep knowledge of mission within Community of Christ and just the broader Christian context is going to bless the church in ways that I'm not even sure we can even imagine at this point. So when you talk about passing a mantle, I always think of like, you know, the yoke and so and we all know that in some ways, yokes can be pretty heavy, and there was this huge sense of both relief, but also genuine excitement as to what the new Presiding Bishopric is going to do moving forward and challenge the church with and try to help us grow. Because I think everything that Presiding Bishopric is working on is part of this big metamorphosis that President Veazey keeps naming that we're in the midst of.

**Carla Long** 35:17

Well, you can't ask for any more than that the right person and the right time and the right place and all that stuff that you just can't really ask for anything more than that. Well, Stassi, thank you so much for taking time out of your super busy schedule to talk to us. I really appreciate what you have done as the Presiding Bishop and as a member, the First Presidency and now just a member the First Presidency. I'm really happy for you, that you that you get. Because this is the first like, just now is like the first time you've only been a member of the First Presidency. Right? You're always right. Yeah.

**Stassi Cramm** 35:49

Yep. Correct. Yeah. And like I said, it's an exciting time. And Scott and I, we work well together, we we do not necessarily think alike, which is a good thing. But we can have healthy debates that are grounded in respect, and I think it overall makes for a better decision-making process. And yet at the same time, I know that Scott's always got my back. And I hope he knows that I've always got his back. So I feel like we are able to keep things moving pretty smoothly until President Veazey is able to come back and we are both kind of waiting with great anxiousness as to who will be called by the Council of Twelve to serve and once we have insights into that, we will then kind of figure out what's next and how to put things into place for that.

**Carla Long** 36:42

Absolutely. I think we're all kind of sitting here with bated breath, just wondering what the future is going to hold. So thanks again. Stassi. It's been wonderful to talk to you today.

**Stassi Cramm** 36:51

Thanks, Carla.