

# Extra Shot | Sale of Historic Properties | Stassi Cramm and Ron Harmon

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Stassi Cramm, Ron Harmon

### **Robin Linkhart** 00:27

Hello and welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is your host Robin Linkhart and I'm here today with Presiding Bishop Ron Harmon and Stassi Cramm member of the First Presidency, and recently called to serve as Community of Christ's next Prophet-President. On Tuesday, the fifth of March, world church leaders announced that the ownership of the Kirtland Temple, Joseph Smith Historic Sites in Nauvoo, Illinois, and various manuscripts and artifacts, officially transitioned from Community of Christ, to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for the amount of 192.5 million US dollars. It was a difficult decision involving the careful consideration of multiple significant factors. Ultimately, it was about responding to God's vision and call with our whole lives, resting in the certainty of God's promise to always be with us guiding and sustaining. Ron and Stassi are with us today to share more about that vision and mission as we look to the future with hope. Ron and Stassi, a very warm welcome to you today. And thank you so much for being with us on Project Zion Podcast.

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

Hey, everyone, it's good to be here.

### **Ron Harmon** 01:58

Yeah. Thanks, Robin. We're glad to be here.

### **Robin Linkhart** 02:01

Let's take a minute now to just have you introduce yourselves to our listeners, Stassi..

### **Stassi Cramm** 02:07

Yeah, thanks, Robin. So, to be honest, I wish we were here exploring an easier topic. But I am thankful for this opportunity to process together a big moment in the journey of Community of Christ and where God is calling us. I appreciated, Robin, how you contextualized our conversation. You shared also my official positions with the church. But first and foremost, I want to note that I'm a follower of Jesus, the peaceful One. I'm also a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a colleague and friend, my family and friend relationships strengthen me as I seek to lead a faithful life. And I want everyone in the world to have the loving support of a community that is grounded in living Christ's mission. That's why

the church's faithful response to where the Spirit is leading us is so personal to me. I'm passionate about who we are, and who we are still becoming. I believe that we have brought countless blessings into people's lives as we've lived our mission. And I believe we still have much, much more to share with the world, where Community of Christ members and friends live and serve.

**Robin Linkhart 03:30**

Thanks so much, Stassi. Ron.

**Ron Harmon 03:35**

Well, like Stassi, I recognize the weightiness of this topic, but I'm so grateful that we can explore the implications of this significant moment in the life of the church together. These days, I actually like to share first about one of my favorite roles, which is grandpa to Emma, Maddie and Oliver my three grandchildren whom I'm absolutely crazy about and in love with. And if this, if this was a video podcast, we would also be looking at pictures right now. They bring me great joy and needed balance, but they also have brought me a sense of renewed purpose about the task before us. They've, they've sharpened my vision and sense of urgency in pursuing a more just and peaceful world. You of course, Robin, shared about my leadership role in in your introduction, and oh my gosh, it seems like just yesterday, we were at World Conference. And I was being ordained as Presiding Bishop of the church. And at the same time, it seems like a lifetime ago. But that seems to be what it's like in the life of the church where there's just so much happening around the world as we engage in Christ's mission. My wife, Barb is a preschool teacher. And she paused her career, early about a year or so ago to set up Gramma School in the lower level of our home for Maddie and Oliver. And we also have three children. They're all married now and living in the Kansas City area. And I pinch myself every day that we're all actually in the same geographical location. We, of course, feel really fortunate in that regard. You know, I just have to say that, as a disciple, I've been captured by the vision of this movement, it's so much a part of who I am. And I consider it a privilege to do everything I can to support it, and to advance our mission in the world.

**Robin Linkhart 05:59**

Well, I'm tickled to death that you both are members of the grandparent club now, and totally relate to some of what you're talking about. And I know that many of our listeners can connect with that deep sense of call that you both speak to. The announcement that was shared with Community of Christ worldwide membership on the fifth of March was really profound. And it represents such a significant next step for the church that and it's connected with this deeply meaningful Restoration history. Can you give us some background about how we came to seriously consider this specific pathway?

**Stassi Cramm 06:47**

Yeah, so, let me start Robin. Community of Christ history teaches us that our journey has never been easy. At least that's what I read in a lot of our stories. There has often been significant struggles and sacrifices as we have listened to God's call, and worked together to faithfully respond. During these difficult times, our story reminds us of the importance of exercising wise stewardship over the church's mission, and the resources available to support that mission. Making difficult decisions is part of that stewardship and part of our story and calling. Discerning what matters most and living Christ's mission has always needed to be courageously and faithfully pursued by leaders at all jurisdictional levels. Most

recently, in 2020, and in early 2021, the World Church Leadership Council work together to prophetically imagine the future and discern how we might faithfully guide the church in responding to the Spirit. It was out of the spirited conversations, prayerful reflections and critical analysis that the World Church Leadership Council decided to explore a sale. So let me pass it to Ron and let him fill in some of those details.

**Ron Harmon 08:20**

Thanks, Stassi. I think you've really framed that, that journey and path we've been on well. We've been refining our ability to come together as leaders just as we have been as a church, to discern where we feel the Spirit is leading amid changing cultural and spiritual landscape that is impacting participation in church life in very different ways across the globe. Our approach to discernment, which integrates spiritual practice with contextual analysis, in the places we serve, has led to greater clarity about our missional challenges and opportunities. Of course, in nations where participation in the church has been declining, there has been also a gradual aging of active membership, and a drop in contributors over recent decades. And of course, this is something that, that we've been talking about, as a church for multiple years. These nations are our primary source of funding the church's worldwide mission. And we have made this a constant theme in financial updates and it's resulted in, unfortunately, multiple budget reductions impacting world church funded ministry services and staff. The trajectory of decreasing worldwide mission tithes and increasing expenses means that for us in 2025, we were looking at eliminating entire services and ministries that support the global church, including the possibility of losing a third of our current employees.

**Stassi Cramm 10:25**

Yeah, just hearing you say that number Ron kind of takes my breath away. This level of additional reduction would have been devastating to some of the momentum in mission we were just beginning to achieve. It's been about seven years, I think, since our last staff reduction. But then came the pandemic, which was another complicating factor. We are finally really beginning to explore the nature of who God is calling us to be in the various places where the church is on the ground. Our world is changing. Our message is constant, but we have to discover new ways of sharing that message and inviting people to pursue Christ's mission with us. President Veazey's "Way Forward" messages provided important indicators of where we need to head but we need time to move in that direction.

**Ron Harmon 11:26**

Yeah, I really appreciate Stassi, the way you're, you're really kind of balancing the, the pragmatic look, that we've taken as a church with really, in a sense, trying to respond to that unfolding vision before us, and that, that financial reality beginning in 2025, coupled with this deep desire that we have as leaders and across the church to respond to a compelling vision, a vision rooted in our Restoration story, and seeking expression today and signal communities of justice and peace across the globe. This was more than seeking to avoid drastic reductions in ministries and staff, even though that would have clearly been a result. But this was about our deepening sense of God's call to us at this time, it was about wholehearted response, where we're willing to do what whatever is needed to fulfill God's purposes in the world. Responding to these challenges and opportunities required a significant infusion of cash for us that, when invested, could generate recurring income over the next four to five years, while leaders continue to discern and implement missional and financial strategies for the future. It was

our assessment that the sale of our historic assets as difficult as it was to reach this conclusion, were the only assets that could generate this level of cash that could then be invested in our endowments, providing the needed income to continue ministries, services and staff supporting the global church as we continue to step into God's vision for us in the future.

**Robin Linkhart 13:39**

I think it's really helpful for all of us to listen as you set the stage and describe these multiple factors that are layered in parallel and intersecting with each other against this global backdrop of all kinds of things going on, not the least of which was an unplanned pandemic. We also know that letting go of these sites is a deep, deep loss for many church members. And for others, it feels different as a global faith movement. Talk to us a little bit about how this action is being experienced by a diverse world wide community.

**Ron Harmon 14:28**

Yeah, you know, I'm very much aware as I've had the opportunity to travel in the church, how people connect differently with our historic sites and I recognize in many parts of the world, the stories related to these historic sites take on more significance than the site's themselves. Some of our people will never have opportunity to travel to the United States. But, but the stories of the people who answered the call to gather in this bold experiment of Christian community in northern Ohio in Kirtland, particularly is inspiring, equally inspiring as the commitment and sacrifice demonstrated in the building of the Kirtland Temple, as early church members anticipated, being endowed with the Holy Spirit in ministry and mission, and I, I still, I, it kind of sends chills up my spine thinking about the stories I heard, as a child about that, and how that inspired me. In the United States, especially in the interior midsection of the country, there, of course, is a significant connection to Kirtland and Nauvoo. Many have visited these sites and they've sensed the history of these places come alive, in stories retold and spiritual experiences in retreat settings. I grew up just a short 30-minute drive from Kirtland and I have so many formative memories of how that sacred space inspired my development as a disciple. The sense of loss is real. And yet, the stories we associate with these places, continue to live in us and shape us for the journey ahead.

**Stassi Cramm 16:44**

Yeah, I can feel the emotion, Ron, just in your story through your voice. And I just really want to underscore what you're saying. Through this process, there have been multiple times where we have paused and just given thanks for the many, many people who sacrificially built and maintained these historic sites for over 100 years. And it's heart wrenching to think of how they might feel about this sale. And yet, I believe that they would be grateful to know that their generosity will continue to bless not only the church, but the people that the church are sent to support and serve. As we move into the future. There has been a lot of emotion surrounding these discussions and these decisions. A lot of tears have been shed. And even within the World Church Leadership Council, the feelings and thoughts about the decision, were so very broad, and so very deeply rooted. And it felt like that what the Leadership Council was experiencing was likely a microcosm of what we imagined the reaction across our worldwide church might be. And I think that the way Ron has spoken about that from those who have just these personal deeply meaningful experiences in those locations, and yet others who have very, very little attachment, other than just the connection to being part of our unfolding story. So I think one

thing that is critically important to note is that we decided to proceed with seriously exploring a sale, because in spite of our various emotions, there was unanimous agreement within the Leadership Council, that moving forward with the sale was the best decision, the most faithful decision that leadership could make, given the context of our time. I also think it is important to emphasize that the context Community of Christ is experiencing is not limited to just us. In places like the United States, Canada, the British Isles, and Australia, those choosing to participate in Christian movements, or even other world religions are shrinking. This means that financial support of Christian movements is also shrinking. We know that some people yearn for times past when the levels of ministries and services supported through worldwide mission tithes were significantly greater. As World Church leaders diligently and faithfully vision the future where God is calling us, it became so very clear that supporting the people we are called to serve had to take priority over owning paper and property. As we discerned what it meant to position the church to respond to the opportunities that are before us as we listen to the movements and leadings of the Spirit, we knew we needed to risk something new. We recognized that this one decision does not solve all our challenges. But it strengthens the foundation for us to build upon. So even in the anguish that we knew this decision would make for many people, we believe that the hope of what is possible in the future would ultimately prevail. So we believe as the church prayerfully considers the decision that World Church Leaders made, that the hopeful future that is awaiting us, will unite the church in vision and mission, and strengthen the church's resolve to face whatever unfolds with unity, trust and faith as the Spirit leads us.

**Robin Linkhart 21:32**

Thank you, Ron, and Stassi for being so honest about this journey together with the World Church Leadership Council and your deep understanding of how this feels for so many people across the world church and in the context and backdrop of such global diversity. And as you said, this is indeed part of a much larger story and journey of a people. In the wake of this loss, we already see brand new possibilities unfolding, which bring so much hope and a renewed sense of vision for what lies ahead. Help us see and understand what this can mean now and in the days and years ahead.

**Ron Harmon 22:28**

I'm gonna let Stassi speak to some of the new possibilities for us as a movement that might be unfolding in the future. But it's that sense of vision and the future to which God calls us, that's what made decisive action, imperative for us, but not easy. As Stassi shared, the reality is that even a sale of this magnitude doesn't solve all of our challenges. Even if we invested every dollar of the sale proceeds into the Worldwide Mission Endowment and Temple Endowment, the annual income generated would only equal approximately 35% of our annual budget. Now that's significant. But it does not replace the need to continue to engage new disciples in our mission, who respond through whole life stewardship, and supporting the ministries of the church through their time, their talents, treasure and testimony. We'll need to continue to focus on innovative ways to engage spiritual seekers in our mission, especially in nations where we receive most of our funding like the United States. In addition, the Presiding Bishopric has outlined strategic priorities for generating alternative sources of income to fund our expanding mission and vision. As we move into the future, we will need to continue to focus on the following strategic priorities simultaneously. We're going to need to increase the number of disciples especially under the age of 50, who connect with our mission and respond through whole life stewardship in the United States. We're going to work on growing the Temple and Worldwide Mission

Endowments, which will in turn generate additional income to the worldwide mission budget. We're going to generate new alternative sources of income that will fund mission priorities in the worldwide mission budget and we hope in the future enable us to continue to expand the ministries and mission of the church. And we're going to work on creating new ministry partnerships that will provide exciting new opportunities to participate in funding of our global mission. President Veazey talked about these ministry partnerships and his Way Forward messages. These financial strategies, like the missional strategies will not be easy. But as Stassi said, at the beginning of the podcast, Community of Christ history teaches us that our journey has never been easy. There has often been significant struggles and sacrifices, as we've listened to God's call, and worked together to faithfully respond. It is challenging. But what makes it so meaningful to me is that we move into the future together. Stassi, I think this is a good segue to share about that renewed sense of vision and hope that Robin asked about in her question.

**Stassi Cramm 26:24**

Thanks, Ron. How much time do we have left Robin? There is so much that brings me hope, and a renewed sense of vision for the future. We just wrapped up our February World Church Leadership Council meetings, and we spent a significant amount of time talking about what's happening in the church, and where we see God's Spirit leading and people responding. Wherever this is happening, there is a sense of hope and a glimpse into God's vision of shalom, taking on actual form and meaning. And I don't know about how Ron and Robin feel, but I came out of those meetings tired, but really energized by the stories that we heard unfolding and about the potential that lays before us. The Communication Team has recently implemented a new application that allows world church leaders to record short videos about mission, so we can increase the sharing of these important stories with everyone. So watch for those videos in the coming days and months, as they are made available through the church's website and social media challenges, not challenges social media channels. So I already mentioned that President Veazey's Way Forward messages are important. In the midst of all that has been happening, it would be easy to forget about them. But I want to call people's attention to them and encourage people to explore them for road markers for our journey into the future. I know we probably need to wrap up this podcast. But I want to encourage people to remember a couple of core principles before we end. First, we can find hope in our history, that God has always guided this movement, when we open ourselves up to listen and faithfully respond. Second, we can find hope, because our story is not finished. And we get to write it together with God and each other. How amazing is that? I am privileged and blessed to be part of Community of Christ. We are a strong and pure persevering group of faithful disciples who will not be deterred from working tirelessly in creating God's vision of shalom, what many of us know as Zion, in the places where we live and serve? I understand that we live in a world where division, hate and darkness press to consume everything. But our faith story teaches us that there's a better way. Just stop and think about the relationships you have made through this movement, and how those relationships have brought blessing into your life and how you have brought blessings into others lives. That's God's Spirit at work and that's also faithful people responding. So there's work we need to do together to prophetically imagine where the Spirit is leading us. Ron mentioned earlier, the desire to respond to a compelling vision of vision rooted in our restoration story, and seeking expression today in signal communities of justice and peace across the globe. Recently, I mentioned to the Council of Presidents of 70, when we were dreaming about the future together, that we need to create relationships, provide opportunities for new leaders and new

relationships to develop, and adapt to new ways of leading and being the church together. We need to be intentional about adopting ways to do this, working together to implement it in the various places where we live and serve. And then honest about evaluating how we're doing so that we continue to make adjustments along the way. I want to be honest, I am not disconnected from reality. I know that in earthly numerical terms, we will likely continue to experience decline in some areas of the church. And in other areas, we will struggle to form disciples in the Community of Christ identity, mission, message and beliefs because of limited resources and staff to provide sufficient training. But I find hope that even as we face those difficulties, we will follow the living resurrected Christ. As we've already said, the road to the cross is not without struggles and sacrifices. But those who have been convicted by the discipleship calling through Community of Christ can find hope in the promise that we are prepared and equipped for the journey ahead. If anyone is listening, is questioning whether it's worth making the journey into the future with Community of Christ. I want to emphasize my personal affirmation, that I believe so profoundly, that it is worth it, that I said yes to my recent call, when I could have opted for early retirement and spending all my time as Grandma. I have chosen a different path, because of all of our grandchildren. And because of the difference that I believe Community of Christ can make in the world. And others are also saying yes, and I'm inviting everyone listening to say, "Yes, hope is here. Let's choose it, and journey into the future that God is calling us into." Buckle your seatbelt, hold the hand of the ones near you. And let's do this together. Let's proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love and peace, where we live and serve, and watch the wave of Christ's peace that will flow in and through us, bringing blessings to those we are sent to serve. That has been our story. That is our story. And it's our responsibility and privilege to keep it going.

**Robin Linkhart 33:53**

Well preach it, sister! Thank you for your sacred Yes. Both of you for the yes, that you continue to say, in the face of very difficult times for the church, and for our world. And I know many, many, many of us stand right beside you with that sacred. Yes. willing to step out in faith. So do you have any last words that you would like to share for our listeners today, Ron?

**Ron Harmon 34:33**

Well, other than I want to take Stassi's words she just shared and turn them into a Disciple's Generous Response because I'm pretty sure that if she did that we would have money, so much money, we wouldn't know what to do with, because that was motivating for me to hear those words from Stassi again. I just want to express my deep gratitude for the generosity of our people, not just financially, but the generosity of spirit that is open to the challenges and opportunities before us. It's generosity that is expressed through lives of ministry and leadership. Also the offering of financial resources, and it's inspiring, and it gives witness to our unwavering conviction that God is with us on this journey.

**Stassi Cramm 35:44**

So I'll just pop in Robin and say amen to what Ron said. And I also want to express gratitude to Ron. I am so grateful that he said yes to serving as the Presiding Bishop and I look forward to our continued service and ministry together. I'm also so grateful for each and every one who chooses Community of Christ as their spiritual home and generously commits their time, talents, treasures and testimony in sharing Christ's peace, and inviting others into the journey. Never doubt that your faithful choices make a difference. Even when you can't see the results. Each one of you matters, and each one is an

important part of our unfolding story. I am honored and blessed to walk the path of the disciple with you. So thank you. And Robin, I also want to thank you for all the ways that you live Christ's mission, and you invite others into that process. You're special witness is a blessing to so many people. And thank you also for hosting us today and giving us a chance to connect with your listeners.

**Robin Linkhart 37:13**

Well, thank you so much, Stassi and Ron, for being with us today. It's been wonderful to host you right here on Project Zion Podcast, and we deeply appreciate everything you've shared with us today. So thank you, thank you. And a very special thanks to all our listeners. If you would like to hear more about this new chapter in Community of Christ's story, look on ProjectZionpodcast.org for our two most recent episodes, one with Lachlan Mackay, who shares about the new vision for Historic Sites Foundation, and Katie Harmon McLaughlin, who shares with us about the importance of lament. Look for links to more information on CofChrist.org in the show notes to this podcast episode. This is your host, Robin Linkhart. And you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take care, bye bye.