

A Defining Moment

President Stephen Veazey addressed the church from the Temple Sanctuary in Independence, Missouri, USA, on Sunday evening, April 5, 2009. Here is the text as printed in the May 2009 Herald.

This is a defining moment in the life of the church! Defining moments occur at the juncture of fear and hope, challenge and opportunity, hesitancy and faithful response.

The church has faced defining moments before. Times when deliberate choices had to be made to clarify priorities in the face of difficult circumstances. Such defining moments brought the best out of us and prepared us for the next phase of our journey with God.

What is this defining moment? In general, it can be framed by two questions: Will we allow certain circumstances and issues to divert us from our mission? Or will we clarify our mission priorities and focus on what matters most?

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the church, like other organizations, is facing financial challenges because of adverse economic conditions. I am aware this is a major concern of many members. So, let me address that concern first.

The church's long-term financial viability is not in jeopardy. The sacrificial generosity of past generations, the foresight of previous leaders, and the disciplined application of financial policies in the present continue to secure the church's long-range financial future. However, the continuing recession has caused a decline in [World Ministries](#) mission giving and projected income from church investments.

After carefully evaluating this situation, World Church officers have decided we must reduce our World Ministries budget. Our current plan calls for a decrease of about \$4 million. Most of the reduction will occur in fiscal-year 2010, which will begin in July 2009. The projected decrease will require a reduction in World Church-funded ministries, support services, and staffing throughout the world and at International Headquarters. How will we respond?

Before addressing that question, I want to thank all who are consistent contributors through Local and World Ministries Mission Tithes, especially those on fixed or limited incomes. Your steady support, especially during difficult times, encourages us. You already are doing your part, and the church is grateful for your generosity.

I suppose the current financial difficulty could be described solely in economic terms. However, I believe the economic situation actually reveals a spiritual issue that will require a spiritual response.

One of the church's [Enduring Principles](#) is “grace and generosity.” We respond to God’s grace, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, by giving generously and by graciously receiving the generosity of others. This is a deeply spiritual principle that arises from the nature of God. We are called, according to God’s eternal purposes, to grow spiritually throughout our lives in grace and generosity.

What is our understanding of the spiritual relationship between God’s grace, the gift of the gospel, discipleship, generosity, and church mission? Is it limited to what mostly serves our personal needs or what we like the most? Is it defined by casual, sporadic giving while we apply most of our life’s means to other pursuits? Or do we understand the heart of the gospel revealed in Christ is about compassionate, generous living that mirrors the generous nature of God?

In Community of Christ, when we become disciples of Jesus, we do not just become members of a local congregation. We become members of a worldwide faith community. The church is an international body that God has called into being to fulfill divine purposes related to the coming reign of God on earth.

Discipleship includes responding to God’s gift in Christ by giving consistently and generously, according to our full and—we hope—growing capacity to support local and world ministries. Such support is one of the most evident ways we express our spiritual commitment to the vision of Christ. Local and World Ministries giving are equally important for the church to fulfill its divinely mandated mission.

I want to be clear with congregational leaders and priesthood on this matter. We cannot expect growing generous response now, or in the future, as the economy recovers, if we are not currently teaching the principles of [A Disciple’s Generous Response](#) to all ages. Those principles include saving wisely, spending responsibly, and sharing generously through Local and World Ministries Mission Tithes. And, we cannot teach with integrity if we are not fully embodying those principles within our lives.

I would like to focus now on the church’s vision for mission. After several years of discussion and prayerful reflection, church leaders have presented an understanding of church identity, mission, message, and beliefs in a document entitled “We Share.”

“We Share” was created by a diverse group of church leaders and members from throughout the world. We were richly blessed by the Holy Spirit as we wrestled with important questions about church identity, mission, and message from multiple cultural perspectives. Eventually, we jointly discovered what I believe describes the heart and essence of the church’s identity, mission, and message today.

As the document was completed, I was given clear affirmation by the Spirit that it presents ample direction for the next chapters of our journey as a people of God. And, if enough members and congregations embody its principles, the church will move dramatically forward in fulfilling its mission.

Engaging this document is not about fussing over details or looking for exceptions. It is about being captured by the vision and direction that God graciously has provided us through the combined insights of our worldwide church family. When the principles in the document become the descriptors of our behaviors rather than just ideals, we will become the Community of Christ that God is calling us to become. [Copies of the “We Share” document may be found at www.CofChrist.org/discernment/weshare/.]

To become the Community of Christ that God is calling us to become we must address some important issues. The first has to do with how we relate to our history.

Our early church history is the story of faithful, inspired people who heard the call to embrace and share the gospel of Christ more fully. They did so with great enthusiasm. They responded with unusual commitment and creative energy, giving tangible expression of the gospel in community life together.

Over the generations, though, we have tailored their story to put the church in the best possible light. We have raised early church leaders to the status of spiritual heroes of mythical proportions, while downplaying their humanity and struggles.

In recent decades many books and articles have been written about the earliest years of the Restoration movement. While some previous works approached this period of history mainly by describing events, the more recent works explore the interrelated religious, social, and political factors that influenced the early church and its leaders. Many historians, with access to additional historical information, are writing with increased frankness and openness.

The Presidency recently released a set of “Church History Principles.” [These were printed in the October 2008 Herald and can be found on the church’s Web site at www.CofChrist.org/OurFaith/history.asp.] The “History Principles” were created to bring perspective to the relationship between history and matters of faith. While affirming the essential role of historical study, the principles state that history does not have the final word on matters of faith and unfolding direction in the church today. The history principles provide the guidelines needed to treasure our history, but not be totally defined by it.

Let me give you an example. Despite how our story often is told, we no longer can claim that we were just the innocent victims of violence during the church’s early years. While our forbearers were certainly the targets of persecution on various occasions, more than once they provoked and initiated violence because

of judgmental attitudes toward others. In the pressure-filled years of the early church, violence and militancy overtook Christ's message of reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace.

To move ahead with integrity in our emphasis on sharing the peace of Jesus Christ, we must repent of and learn from the violent episodes in church history. Only through honest examination, including identifying any remaining signs of these tendencies, can we continue on the restoring path of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit to which God calls us.

We can take these steps because we know that our history does not have to be without blemish to reveal the hand of God working in the movement. Ironically, one of the primary principles of scripture is that God's grace is revealed most clearly by its working in and through humanity, especially human weakness and sin. Viewing our history through this lens allows us to be affirming, honest, and sympathetic.

We also need to recognize the longer part of our history by far is the story of the Reorganization. That history makes up over 150 years of our heritage. It is the story of Jason Briggs whose account of his experience with the Spirit in response to prayer about the future of the church became the rallying point for the "scattered Saints." It is the story of the faith, courage, and tenacity of Emma Smith. Without her we would not be here. It also is the story of the pivotal response of Joseph Smith III to the leadings of the Spirit in his young life.

The 2010 World Conference will include a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the 1860 conference, where Joseph III accepted his prophetic calling. His fifty years of wise, pastoral, visionary leadership provided the tone and direction that continue to shape the church.

Joseph III set the church on the path to becoming a faith movement dedicated to the pursuit of reconciliation and peacefulness as the hope of Zion and the essence of the gospel. Speaking to a special conference in 1863 about the desired focus of church ministry, he said: "We should preach the peaceable things of the Kingdom." (The True Latter Day Saints' Herald, vol. 4, p. 30.)

In 1893 Joseph III went to the jail, where T.C. Sharp, the assumed leader of the mob that killed his father and uncle, was being held on other charges. Much to the chagrin of many members still nursing bitterness over the murders, he extended the healing hand of forgiveness. This is the kind of story from our history we need to tell more often!

I believe Emma Smith, Joseph Smith III, and all who followed the old, but ever-new path of the Reorganization would be pleased with the church today. I think they would see their hopes for the church being fulfilled in our emphasis on reconciliation and healing of the spirit; our openness to continuing revelation; our

growing understanding of giftedness and ministerial calling; our concern for the poor; and our strong focus on promoting peaceful Christian community as the hope of Zion.

Besides putting our history in perspective, we need to deepen our understanding of the nature of scripture.

For this part of our journey we need a light and a compass. Our light is the witness of the Holy Spirit that illuminates divine truth. Our compass is the church's "Statement on Scripture" that provides reliable direction. [The "Statement on Scripture" may be found at www.CofChrist.org/OurFaith/scripture.asp.]

Basic to the "Statement on Scripture" is the understanding that scripture is an amazing collection of inspired writings that is indispensable to encountering the Living God revealed in the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Scripture speaks with many voices, including testimonies, stories, poetry, metaphors, commentary, and parables. All of these ways of communicating point us to divine truths beyond the ability of any language to express fully. Scripture is authoritative, not because it is perfect or inerrant in every literal detail, but because it reliably keeps us grounded in God's revelation.

Here is the heart of our challenge. Over the last several centuries a doctrine of scripture emerged in Christianity that insists that all scripture—every single word—was dictated directly by God and is inerrant in every detail. This belief emerged as a response to the questioning of religious authority from those who held that human reason alone was the most reliable pathway to truth. So, a doctrine of scripture emerged that enshrined the literal words of scripture as inerrant and as the sole authority on all matters.

This view still dominates much of global Christianity. It also strongly influences more than a few members of Community of Christ who have adopted it from the larger culture.

However, that doctrine is not how scripture was understood in Christianity for many centuries after its birth. It is not how Jesus used scripture. And, it is not how Community of Christ officially views scripture today.

The church affirms that scripture is inspired and essential to our knowledge of God and the gospel. In addition, we believe that scripture should be interpreted responsibly through informed study, guided by the Spirit working in the church. Scripture was formed by the community to shape the community. Therefore, interpreting scripture is the constant work of the community. In other words, understanding and applying scripture is not just a matter of reading a passage and deciding on our own what it means.

Community of Christ also stresses that all scripture must be interpreted through the lens of God's most-decisive revelation in Jesus Christ. So if portions of scripture don't agree with our fullest understanding of the meaning of the revelation of God in Christ, as illuminated by the Holy Spirit and discerned by the faith community, the teachings and vision of Christ take precedence. This principle applies to all of our books of scripture, especially any passage used by some to assign God's disfavor, negative characteristics, or secondary roles to others.

This is why our belief in "continuing revelation" is so important. This belief keeps us open to "yet more light and truth" so we can grow in understanding of God's supreme will as revealed in Christ.

Doctrine and Covenants 163:7d states that "Scripture, prophetic guidance, knowledge, and discernment in the faith community must walk hand in hand to reveal the true will of God. Follow this pathway, which is the way of the Living Christ, and you will discover more than sufficient light for the journey ahead."

We will be sharing some additional reflections about how we relate to history and scripture in coming months in the Herald. Having addressed this issue in general, let us turn to some particular opportunities and needs now before us.

The 2007 World Conference passed a resolution asking the Presidency to bring guidance to the church about our practice of rebaptism as a condition for church membership. After a time of study and reflection, the Presidency is inviting the whole church to engage with us in prayerful discernment about this issue. We believe this approach is in harmony with Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c, which states: "As a prophetic people you are called, under the direction of the spiritual authorities and with the common consent of the people, to discern the divine will for your own time and in the places where you serve."

The obvious opportunity before us is to sharpen our skills as a prophetic and discerning people. The importance of the process is much greater than how we will resolve the issue. Its ultimate importance lies in enriching our capacity to engage in fair, Spirit-led dialogue about important issues. The skills and experiences gained in this process will be essential to us in the future as we address other issues. Resources providing individual and group help will be mailed to pastors and soon will be available on the church's Web site at www.CofChrist.org/CofM/.

While we appreciate the enthusiasm and conviction of those who already are sending in their final answers, we encourage all members to participate in the prayer, study, discussion, and discernment process before sharing your perspectives.

It is telling that much of what I have addressed so far is about internal church issues. This is the greatest challenge we face. Will we be able to put internal church issues in proper perspective so we can focus first on our mission to Proclaim Jesus Christ and Promote Communities of Joy, Hope, Love and Peace? Everything else which may be of concern is secondary to pursuing this mission.

For example, I began by addressing economic challenges facing the church and by assuring you that our long-term financial viability is not in question. Is that the most important question we should be asking? The most important question for a missional church is not about long-term survival. It is about how we passionately pursue Christ's mission in a suffering world that groans for the liberating truths of the gospel (Doctrine and Covenants 155:7).

Are we mobilizing to provide pastoral care and tangible help to individuals and families that are barely surviving because of economic pressures? Are we responding to the increasing hatred and violence toward immigrants and ethnic minorities because others want to make them scapegoats for our common difficulties? What about the children in your community? How are they doing? What does it mean to be a prophetic people who speak and act in the name of God and Christ in times like these?

Many of our members live in countries with developing or nonfunctional economic and political systems. Their situation is much worse than anything many of us in more affluent areas are experiencing. What matters most to them is how to free themselves and their neighbors from the devastating effects of poverty, disease, and human conflict. The missional question for the church is, "How does the hope of God's peaceful kingdom become more than a faint dream for them?" What will we do as a church whose mission is grounded in restoring people to wholeness in community?

I am pleased to announce the Presidency, in concert with the Community of Christ [Peace Support Network](#), is convening a summit this September to address this question. We are inviting leaders of church-related ministries and all our affiliates—such as [Outreach International](#), [World Accord](#), [Graceland University](#), and the [Seminary](#), just to name a few—to meet with us.

Our goal is to create a vision and cooperative action plan for promoting communities of economic justice and peace throughout the world. Coordinating and integrating our compassionate relief, educational, advocacy, and community-development ministries will allow us to make an even greater impact.

In many parts of the western world a primary concern is sustaining, reviving, and growing congregations to carry out the church's mission. The [Co-Missioned Pastors Initiative](#) is a pilot project designed to discover the most effective pastoral

training, resources, and support for leading healthy congregations that engage all ages in focusing on Christ's mission.

We have learned a lot from the pilot project. Despite the financial challenges we face, it is essential that we expand access to this support and training for more pastors, congregational leaders, and priesthood. Instead of one hundred pastors who now are completing the pilot, I see five hundred, eight hundred, or one thousand pastors and congregational leaders who will respond to the call to become effective, visionary congregational leaders. Leaders who know how to incorporate all generations in congregational life. Leaders who have the insights and skills to guide congregations in discovering the ministries God is calling them to pursue in the communities they serve.

I am aware of the frustrations of some youth and young adults with the seemingly slow pace of congregational life in response to mission. I also am aware of your disappointment with not having opportunities to serve and lead as you feel called. In response, let me say the church needs the insights and gifts of all ages to be healthy. Congregations that ignore this principle do so at their own peril.

I also know words are not enough. We need to do something now. I and other church leaders personally commit to meet with young adults in various locations to listen to concerns, perspectives, and hopes. We want to envision the future of the church with you. We want to explore models of ministry, mission, and leadership to open more doors for your participation. We are making plans for such gatherings right now. The first will be here in the Temple Lecture Hall immediately following this address. I invite all young adults present to meet with us tonight. Yes, there will be food. (And, if your children are young adults or older youth, you are no longer a young adult. I have had to accept this fact, and so can you.)

Young adults, the church needs you. We need you now. We need you to help us become who we are all yearning to become.

If you are ready to cause change right now, go to www.we-cause.org. At this site you will find a special video message from me and additional information about our plans for meeting with young adults. You also will find information and links for specific opportunities for involvement, and tangible ways to support the church's mission right now.

So, after all that is said, what matters most? I hope it has become clear. The vision and mission of Jesus Christ matters most! What matters most is for us to become who God is calling us to become so the restoring ministry of Christ can be shared in every possible way in every possible place.

As I was preparing this address, I prayerfully asked God many times, "What more does the church need to hear?" On several occasions, I sensed the impress of

the Spirit. In response, I want to give voice to what I sensed through the following words to the church:

Fear not! Do not be afraid to become who God is calling you to become. God, the Eternal One, has been with you in your past, continues with you in the present, and already is waiting patiently for you in the future. Through your lives the sacred story of the Restoration still is being written.

Engage the current challenges and opportunities before you with commitment and hope worthy of the dedication and sacrifices of those who went before you. Creatively build on the faith foundations they laid. Open windows and doors to the future.

Beloved community, God has chosen you to assist in accomplishing divine purposes if you will choose to live out of your better natures and potential. Deepen your faith. Refine your sensitivity to the guidance of the Spirit so that you are not distracted by other influences. Explore your scriptures with openness to new insights that will come. Increase your compassion and generosity. Strengthen your relationships so the peace of Christ may be magnified through you.

Have courage and hope. Gather in the gifts of all ages and cultures so the ministries of the body can become whole and fully alive. Others are being prepared around the world to join their efforts with yours, if you will move ahead according to the direction offered to you by the Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, there is a way into the future that holds the promise that our best days are yet before us.

May we choose it is my fervent hope and prayer.