

DISCERNING OUR CALL

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“ *It's been our practice for generations to come together to listen to the Spirit and be led into the unknown.* ”

Presentation by Ben Smith at the Australia Mission Conference Sunday May 30th 2021

Find the recorded session here -

<https://www.cofchrist.com.au/mc-2021-recorded-sessions>

D&C 163 11a,b

11 a. God is calling for a prophetic community to emerge, drawn from the nations of the world, that is characterized by uncommon devotion to the compassion and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through divine grace and wisdom, this faith community has been given abundant gifts, resources, and opportunities to equip it to become such a people. Chief among these is the power of community in Christ expressed locally in distinctive fashions while upholding a unity of vision, foundational beliefs, and mission throughout the world.

b. There are many issues that could easily consume the time and energy of the church. However, the challenge before a prophetic people is to discern and pursue what matters most for the journey ahead.

We have a history, a way, of listening to both the still small voice inside us, and to each-others voices as we discern our place in the world. It's been our practice for generations to come together to listen to the Spirit and be led into the unknown. It's taken us on some pretty wild rides, some which have caused division and others a drawing together. This is the cost of discerning and pursuing the Spirits call in our life.

When we examine the words in Doctrine and Covenants 163 11 a and b, we see a call for the church to be lived out in distinctive local expressions, at the same time as having a unified global mission. This call is then clarified, with a challenge.

There is so much need in our world. So many things the church could do with its time, and we could try and make our way through all that need until the world is at peace. Yet, that's not the counsel. The challenge is to discern and pursue what matters most for the journey ahead. Discern and pursue what matters most. Discern and pursue.

Discernment is hard. Or should I say, can be hard. In my experience we are often tempted to have a result

from discernment which is contained in a neat list of things to do, or even answers to the challenges we are facing. But discernment is different to planning. It's different to fact finding and research. It is the intentional listening, the peeling away until the core of the matter is exposed and is revealed to us. This can be frightening, as the 'what matters most' bit is often not on our radar, or something we've been prepared to do. Sometimes it's actually something we plain don't want to do! But that's the process.

What's even more wonderful, is that discernment isn't about an external thing for us. It's looking into the centre of our being, the whole thing, both ourselves and collectively, and revealing God's vision for us. It's combining our voices together to help articulate that vision, and then living it out to the best of our ability.

So, what happens next? We've listened, discernment took place, what next? My good friend Zac Harmon McLaughlin, Dean of Seminary, would say 'it never ends.' It's not a linear process where one starts and finishes, indeed it's a cyclical process of questioning, listening and acting, and coming back to the question again. It's an active process of living out the call to be who you are. And if we combine that with the second

part of this prophetic call, to pursue what matters most, I can see one of those circular fireworks which hang on a tree branch, spinning around and around shooting sparks everywhere. The pursuit of our call is to live it out fully, with authenticity, whatever the cost. Our role in the world is to be the church, as fully as we can be, to practice our discipleship in communities of joy, hope, love and peace.

We are in a place right now where we might feel a little worried about the church. Our membership is ageing, baptisms are not keeping up with deaths, the wider community is rejecting organised religion as a way of life, the pandemic has altered the way we meet... and therefore I think we feel pressured to find an answer or answers to turn things around in a hurry. I share some of those concerns too. Perhaps, though, we are a little distracted by the look and feel of the church (as in, there should be this many people in the pews and songs should sound like this because they always have) and how it should feel to me, given the experience I've had in the past, instead of focusing on what we are being called to live out or be transformed into. We know God isn't static, and yet our experience is often formed that way, subconsciously. We know that God is active in our midst, changing our lives on the daily, so we know we're not alone! Indeed, we're so connected that we cannot deny the living Christ is active among us.

In his message 'A time to act' in September 2017, Steve Veazey shared: "The future church is being formed by a basic concept: Our church purpose is to birth, nurture and multiply communities of disciples and seekers engaged in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action, this basic blueprint – spiritual formation, community, compassionate ministry and action – is true to the vision of Christ. Everything else, like organisational structures, resources, funding methods, congregational forms, etc, should support this primary purpose."

For me, this is the call. In combination with the challenge in D&C163, the formation of disciples and seekers in our communities is at the heart of our call, and the basic blueprint offered by our prophet president can be held up as a pathway to action. When we intentionally ask the question 'where are you calling us, God?' and not 'how can the church survive, God?', we may well be asking the primary question which is essential to our future.

When our collective hearts join together, as we've done for generations, in decision making and collective discernment as a people of faith through conferences, we say 'yes' to the call to continue building the kingdom of Zion. Not because of our decisions, but because of our willingness to ask the questions, and

live in the questions, sometimes for years before clarity is revealed. Your voice is critical to this chorus. Your voice in this process means it's not one or two people calling the shots, it's all of us sharing our wisdom, our prophetic voices to call us all forward into a time of peace and wholeness. When our focus is on the mission of God, and not on the church itself, our hearts are lifted with a collective sense of hope, as we know we are living our purpose. I witness it in our small groups meeting in playgrounds, in homes, in offices, in cars and online. I witness it in prayer circle, in online worship, in staff meetings, in phone calls and text messages, in online gaming platforms and discussions on facebook and twitter. I witness your prophetic voices joining together, challenging systems of oppression around the globe and this tells me the church is alive! So alive!

This week our focus theme for conference is God is Calling. The reality is that God has always called, beckoned, and always will. Our job now is to listen. To pick up our end of the conversation and say, 'here I am, willing!' How are you answering? Is it with an exclamation point? With a question mark? With a full stop? Or perhaps even a semi-colon. We will pray together, laugh together, cook together, learn together, pause together, decide together. We will do it all online, as that's where we find ourselves at this time. With no less distance between our souls, wherever you are in your journey as a disciple, I'm glad you're here. I'm glad we are here.

In this place, you have a voice.

