

Metamorphosis Meets Discernment

PROJECT ZION PODCAST

President Stephen M. Veazey shared more about metamorphosis and discernment in a "Coffee Buzz" episode hosted by Linda Booth.

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While maintaining the church's mission, we must envision and embody more effective and relevant ways of being Community of Christ in a rapidly shifting world.

By Stephen M. Veazey

Community of Christ president

It has been two years since I spoke with the World Church Finance Board about metamorphosis. My comments also were shared online with the church and published in the Herald.

As I said then, given all the challenges and opportunities before us, we need more than incremental change. We need transformative change on the scale of metamorphosis. I wasn't referring to major changes in church identity, mission, message, or direction. I was referring to the need to envision and embody more effective and relevant ways of being the church in a rapidly shifting world.

Since introducing the metamorphosis image, I have discovered—not surprisingly—that metamorphosis is much easier said than done! At the same time, while difficult to see initially in terms of obvious outcomes, metamorphosis is happening.

ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is the primary driver of metamorphosis. While hard to quantify, I see ample evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the church.

At the close of the 2019 World Conference, Words of Counsel prompted by the Holy Spirit were offered. Let me quote from that counsel:

...go with conviction into the locations of your discipleship and be the peace of Jesus Christ. As you do, you will discover a variety of ways in which spiritual community forms and flows as expressions of the gospel of peace. Trust what is being born. Have faith in divine purposes. Persist in hope.

The phrase "...you will discover a variety of ways in which spiritual community forms and flows" is an indicator of significant possibilities being orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the sequence of sentences ("Trust what is being born. Have faith in divine purposes. Persist in hope.") highlight the spiritual qualities essential to moving with the Holy Spirit, even when we cannot fully understand what is happening.

Remember that for the caterpillar, life seems to end but then it emerges as a butterfly. Likewise, the first disciples—in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion—concluded they had seriously misplaced their faith in Jesus just before they encountered the

eternal Christ living in a new kind of community.

Many are aware that the World Church Leadership Council has been involved in a discernment process guided by skilled discernment facilitators. The purpose of the process is twofold: To develop discernment skills to better support the church in becoming a prophetic-discerning people locally and globally; and to explore church direction.

A vital step was settling on a working discernment question. This took time, as it often does in true discernment. The assumed question a group begins with often is not the same question it eventually discovers. Ultimately, after times of prayer and discussion, we agreed on: God, where does your spirit lead us next as we embody the soul of Community of Christ?

I think use of the word "soul" is significant. Soul is our truest self as created and shaped by God. According to Parker Palmer, "... soul wants to tell us truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether the truth is easy or hard to hear."

During this discernment process, which has lasted more than a year, the World Church Leadership Council experienced insight into what our communal soul is affirming about who we are and yearning for going forward.

The discernment process was disrupted by the global pandemic still afflicting all of us. However, we chose to use the time of disruption in routines to engage in deep listening to the Holy Spirit, one another, and diverse groups around the world through online connections. These included younger generations, representatives of diverse cultures, and non-English speakers, all of whom provided valuable insights, testimonies, and questions.

The process eventually led to two very similar discernment response statements that we are holding in mind together. The statements are for the WCLC and do not represent discernment consensus for the worldwide church. For the church's awareness, I will share one of the statements that received a high level of support.

The soul of Community of Christ is expressed most fully as we embody Jesus Christ, the peaceful One, and his mission. This happens through relational, spiritual, invitational, and

globally connected Christ-centered communities actively pursuing justice and peace on and for the Earth. The Enduring Principles are a guide for our continual discernment and practice of what is essential for the life, forms, and holistic mission of the church.

We are discovering that a posture of simplicity, agility, and flexibility will equip and poise us to faithfully live the heart of our calling in a changing world. We are growing in trust of what it means to be transformed in Christ and engaged in whole-life stewardship as we make decisions and courageously share all the dimensions of Christ's peace in our world.

Again, this statement reflects the ongoing discernment of the WCLC. It is not being presented as a discernment statement for the whole church. Church-wide discernment happens through a multistep process that includes culturally appropriate spiritual practices and consensus-building in all apostolic fields and multicultural deliberations at World Conference.

The WCLC discernment statement is a comprehensive, aspirational statement with interrelated elements. It points to some possible next steps. Recognizing this, the presidency proposed that the council focus on these phrases in the statement that seemed to point to the heart of the matter:

The soul of Community of Christ is expressed most fully as we embody Jesus Christ, the peaceful One...this happens through Christ-centered communities...Simplicity, agility, and flexibility will equip...us to faithfully live...our calling in...diverse contexts.

This linkage of phrases already is serving as a decision-making lens in the presidency. As we discuss issues, we frequently ask ourselves whether a proposed action will move us toward or away from embodiment of these phrases. In the leadership council, we are seeking consensus about next steps to take in response to these phrases. The words "simplicity, agility, and flexibility" especially seem to stand out. This has led to broad discussions about further decentralization and contextualization of church mission, organization, and finances.

The presidency is considering some recommended adjustments to church bylaws for World Conference consideration that could facilitate needed direction as the church responds. These include provisions for e-conferencing, making space for fresh expressions of the church that do not fit typical congregational patterns, and options for more decentralized approaches to mission, organization, and finances in nations or groups of nations.

In anticipation of this direction, we are updating our World Church website and creating a Cloud-based system for leaders to access the most up-to-date support and information in three languages rather than having to rely on out-of-date print resources

like the 2005 Church Administrator's Handbook and 2004 Priesthood Manual. A lot has happened since those resources were published, such as the launch of Mission Initiatives, national conferences, revised priesthood status categories, and guidelines for online sacraments.

In the United States a survey has been conducted to understand what World Church business and support services are most important to leaders and members. This is providing information about the most effective ways to provide priority services.

The guiding question, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?" emerged through the Holy Spirit's guidance and is becoming rooted in the church's awareness. Through worship, discussion guides, spiritual formation resources, and other mediums, this question is creating new awareness of our calling. Consideration of this question is occurring in sync with the World Conference-directed church-wide discussion on the relationship between nonviolence and peace.

We also are emphasizing next-generation leader formation and succession planning for leadership roles in all aspects of church life and mission. It is important to offer support and create space for new leaders to emerge.

We continue to see the Temple as a resource for mission and are engaged in discernment of how that can best occur. We are encouraged by a US church initiative to launch a fresh expression of ministry related to the Temple called the Center for Living Water. Its purpose is: "Seeking spiritual transformation and peaceful living through practice and action." A combination of in-person and online ministries will provide broad access.

Of course, all these efforts are occurring during a relentless global pandemic. The pandemic is tragic. It has caused suffering, death, economic hardship, and conflict. It has made the already challenging roles of ministry and leadership in all aspects of church life more difficult. I am grateful for those who are faithfully fulfilling their callings and responsibilities during this arduous time.

The pandemic is a help and a hinderance to metamorphosis. While making it difficult to experience church in familiar ways, it has caused the rapid movement of portions of the church to online ministries. This has birthed broader understanding of the nature of the church not limited to buildings. New opportunities for worship, community-building, disciple and leader formation, and outreach ministry through technology have the potential to reach many more people. Online ministries are not a replacement for meaningful in-person worship, fellowship, and other activities whenever and wherever possible. They simply open additional doors for people to participate according to their interests and circumstances.

The pandemic also is prompting some groups to ask potentially transformative questions about how best to be the church in their particular contexts. Growing involvement in congregational, group, and mission center discernment processes that mirror

the leadership council process is encouraging. I hope that through such discernment processes the church will become increasingly aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit as it seeks to position the church in its many expressions for the future.

Moving forward comes with some major challenges. These include reduced numbers of World Ministries staff from previous budget reductions. World Ministries staff and a growing number of volunteer mission center leaders are doing a tremendous job under trying circumstances. We are deeply grateful for all that you are doing.

Ongoing financial pressure on the church caused by the need to achieve the Bridge of Hope goal on schedule (January 1, 2024) and the incessant downward trend in Worldwide Mission Tithes in more affluent nations remain especially concerning. The December 2021 Financial Update to the church does show promising progress toward reaching our Bridge of Hope goal. (See page 34.) We are especially grateful to members, congregations, mission centers, and fields that have proactively given funds to lead the way in meeting our Bridge of Hope goal.

INTO THE FUTURE

The Holy Spirit is transforming people and groups toward the new creation in Christ emphasized in scripture and the church's vision. To this end, the Holy Spirit has given us the ancient and ever new symbol of metamorphosis to help us understand what is happening, how it is happening, and why. The Holy Spirit is moving Community of Christ into a more wholistic understanding of what it means to be part of the continuous incarnation of the Eternal Word in human life and cultures. We are being called to enlarge our understanding of the church's purpose and to increase our vision of all the ways that purpose can be expressed in communities of disciples and friends. Ours is not an individualistic faith. Ours is a communal faith, which I believe is a fuller expression of the gospel as Jesus would recognize it.

We are to share the peace of Jesus Christ through Christ-inspired community around the world. We are to be, birth, and multiply communities of disciples, seekers, and friends—of all sizes meeting in all kinds of in-person and online settings—involved in spiritual formation that inspires compassionate ministry and action. This brings hope, justice, and peace into the world. This is how the cause of Zion is being lived today.

The Holy Spirit is urging us to accentuate the noblest spiritual impulses of our movement, to liberate them from unnecessary burdens, and to give them wings to fly through all the means available to us today. This is a pivotal time in that process. It requires "trusting what is being born." ■

