


mission in 2021

By Emma Gray Pitt, Herald team



The pandemic quickly pushed day-to-day social interactions online, offering challenges and opportunities. As we continue to seek authentic relationships and spiritual connection in person and online, how can we be the most meaningful, effective expression of Community of Christ in our time?

In the past year and a half, many of us have spent time on Zoom and social media to connect with family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers. Congregational and mission center leaders have worked tirelessly to bring worship services into our individual homes, and some of us have had opportunities to find online fellowship with people far from our location.

Life in a global pandemic—with its shutdowns, lockdowns, and stay-at-home orders—has expanded our understanding of how technology can be used to build wider, deeper, and more resilient communities. But as the need for physical distancing and isolation slowly dissipates, how will we carry these new insights into a changed world?

In a “Coffee Buzz” interview on Project Zion, Community of Christ President Steve Veazey chatted with retired Apostle Linda Booth about the church as it stands now and his hopes for the future.

Although vaccines are available in many countries and social distancing recommendations are easing, Community of Christ endeavors to act responsibly in the face of the worldwide presence of the virus.

“COVID is universal. Its impact isn’t limited to one nation or place, but has affected all global communities and Community of Christ congregations throughout the world,” Linda said on the podcast. Because of this, the First Presidency elected to postpone World Conference until April 21-29, 2023, when it is hoped delegates from around the globe will be able to safely travel, enter the USA, meet together, and return home without contributing to community spread of COVID-19.

Many considerations went into this decision, but one of the primary reasons was the current lack of equitable access to vaccines for all Community of Christ members and the limitations that would impose for travel to and from the United States.

“We want the conference to be as representative as possible of the global church,” Steve said. “As a principle that relates to our process of common consent, and also because we’ll have some important questions that we’ll be discussing and considering so we want the fullest representation possible.”

The First Presidency also considered the potential effect that a large international gathering would have on the host community in Independence, Missouri, USA. “We want World Conference to be a safe, healthy, memorable-for-the-right-reasons experience,” he continued.

While there will be no physical gathering in 2022, plans are in the works for a multi-day online event with opportunities to worship and celebrate the worldwide cultures of the church. This will also give church leaders the opportunity to share important updates and discuss issues and opportunities in preparation for World Conference in 2023.

Steve and Linda also briefly discussed the intentional work of discernment that is ongoing in the World Church Leadership Council (including First Presidency, Council of Twelve, Presiding Bishopric, and other quorum leaders). Steve said that one of the group’s primary lessons is that an attitude of openness is a daily posture that church leaders need to maintain. “True discernment takes time, and it takes refinement,” Steve said. “Sometimes true discernment leads to new questions that are perhaps more insightful than the ones you started with, rather than just quick, definitive answers.”

Over the past year and a half, nearly everyone has experienced some form of withdrawal from their previously busy and somewhat chaotic lives, but moments of clarity also emerged for some. “Our family life rhythms have been disrupted, but our sense of local neighborhoods has increased. And as we’ve huddled in our homes, it feels like we’re alone but together, which is a really strange dichotomy,” Linda said. “I believe God is up to something in the midst of this pandemic.”

Steve agreed and added it seems to him that “spiritual truth and movement is often seen or experienced in paradox or in creative tension.” The human desire for authentic community has been vulnerably exposed in struggles to socially distance. Some have realized that physical proximity to humanity is something that they had previously taken for granted.

Even as vaccination rates grow and people are able

to return to some degree of “normalcy,” the world will continue to move toward online convenience—a trajectory that began long before 2020. Retail, education, healthcare, and communications are examples of large fields that increasingly include online interactions. But this convenience also comes with a certain level of isolation as people lose personal touchpoints that were previously routine parts of their lives. As so many have observed, people feeling disconnected will long for and search for opportunities to be in community.

“The pandemic has accelerated the movement toward online ministries as a means of sharing the gospel, building community, and engaging in mission by decades, I think,” Steve said. By online ministries, he particularly pointed to gatherings that integrate online participants seamlessly, rather than as an afterthought or of secondary importance.

Rather than merely broadcasting an in-person event live, he suggested that congregations and mission centers should begin with online participants in mind and build activities from there. This could mean that not all online gatherings minister in the same way. “It actually opens up a whole menu of opportunities to reach people who are searching for a spiritual connection and a community that will nurture their discipleship,” Linda said.

“Community of Christ, if we understand its meaning, anticipates a time like this,” Steve said. “I think one of the primary implications for our pursuit of Christ’s mission is that we need to continue to reimagine our understanding of church. Church is not so much just the place we go on occasion. It is who we are in relationship to others, and to the larger world.

“It’s a daily lifestyle of how we interact with others in the world. As I’ve said before and would reemphasize, we need to focus on nurturing and multiplying Christ-centered, Christ-inspired groups of people in a variety of social, economic, cultural, and physical settings that are focused on developing deep, meaningful relationships that immerse the people involved in the love and Spirit of Christ.”

The stresses of the pandemic have also given way to a kind of spiritual awakening for many people as they discover or rediscover a dormant desire for connection with the Divine. This phenomenon should be understood within the existing trend of people moving away from organized religion in favor of a spirituality that is more personal and unattached to any single institution.

As a result, Steve said, “We must increase our emphasis on spiritual formation that connects with people’s deep yearning for authentic spiritual relationship to God, others, and the creation, which, as we know, really is the same relationship. ...So spiritual companions and guides, resources, supports

for families, spiritual formation activities that people can pursue daily in all the settings of their lives—that’s what’s going to be very important in the future.”

However, church members and leaders can’t assume that people will find Community of Christ on their own, rather we need to hear them and meet them in their seeking. “These communities—if they are truly Christ-centered and Christ-inspired—will always be inviting new people. They will be hospitable and inclusive, or they misrepresent Jesus as I know Jesus is,” Steve said.

Steve and Linda noted there is a particular desire among members to return to church buildings, which, while reasonable and expected, must be balanced with the church’s urgent mission. “We’re looking forward to coming back together, but is that only for us who have been together for a long time? Or will we be bringing some new people with us?” Steve said.

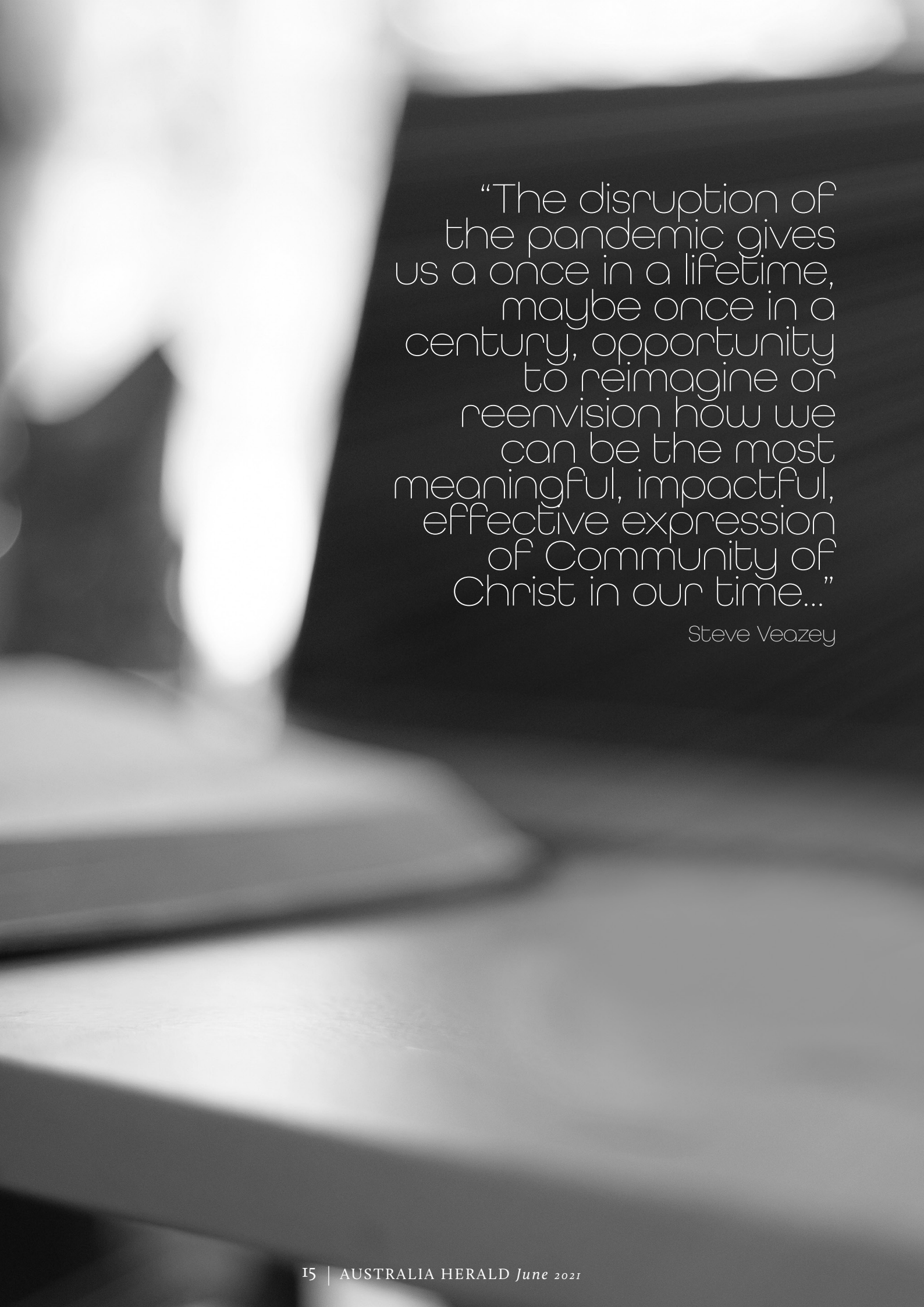
“Our mission statement and our mission initiatives, they send us outside of our church walls,” Linda said. “However, during the pandemic, we’ve been yearning to return to our church sanctuaries. We’ve been scattered, and now we want to gather in. Our tendency might be to stay in together rather than to go out into a hurting world.”

Steve said congregants should expand their thinking of “church” to something that’s happening, rather than a place that they go. Of course, when intentionally utilized, buildings can be valuable resources for disciple formation, mission, and worship, but the past year has further illuminated that the church can develop without dependence on a particular property.

“The pandemic has revealed to us that people can live deep and rich lives of meaning, discipleship, community, and service apart from church buildings,” Steve said. “We need to really focus, in my opinion, on seeing the church as empowering individuals and groups for our mission in the world, not as an end in itself.

“The disruption of the pandemic gives us a once in a lifetime, maybe once in a century, opportunity to reimagine or reenvision how we can be the most meaningful, impactful, effective expression of Community of Christ in our time,” Steve urged, “and that means to reimagine church—what it is, what it does. There will certainly be affirmation of some things that are very important to us that will continue with us into the future, but I hope we’ll perceive the church of the future as a missional movement.”





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