



PROJECT ZION PODCAST:
SCOTT MURPHY

These adapted and condensed excerpts are from a Project Zion podcast in which former Apostle Linda Booth talked with Scott Murphy about his role in the First Presidency and as director of Field Ministries. The entire episode can be found at www.projectzionpodcast.org.

LINDA: Welcome to the second podcast of Coffee Buzz. Today I'm talking with President Scott Murphy, a counselor to President and Prophet Steve Veazey and director of Field Ministries. Welcome, friend.

SCOTT: It's good to be here.

LINDA: Your leadership trajectory has been focused primarily on mission as you've served in roles such as mission center president, apostle, president of the Council of Twelve Apostles, and since the 2013 World Conference as a counselor to the president, as well as director of Field Ministries. How have these missional roles prepared you to serve in the First Presidency?

SCOTT: I've been very fortunate to experience a variety of roles. When I wrestled for 2½ years in my previous career as a principal...and the call to serve full-time in the church, I could have never envisioned where my journey would take me. But over the 18 years I've been working full-time for the church, the experiences and assignments have been incredible.

Each has taken me deeper in an understanding of the life of the church, the mission of the church, and how the church continues to find its place in culture. In that regard, I'm grateful for that variety and the experiences that have continued to form and develop me.

But I'm not sure I came into the Presidency fully prepared. I would say I am continuing on a learning trajectory. Every day brings new opportunities and things I haven't experienced before. So I never get bored.

LINDA: Scott, I think you are the person who's best equipped to think comprehensively of the mission of the church throughout the world. Not only because you've traveled to many nations with an opportunity to participate and observe, but you've worked with apostles on mission throughout the world. So first I'd like to focus on Christ's mission as articulated in the Mission Initiatives in Western cultures.

More and more we hear that congregations are getting older and grayer; that there are fewer or no children and young adults in church on Sunday morning; and that congregations are shrinking or going away. What are some struggles you identified as you traveled to congregations in Western nations

like Australia, Canada, Western Europe, the USA, and the British Isles?

SCOTT: There is no question that the church in the Western context is changing. We cannot deny that things are in decline. But I struggle when I hear statements that the church is dying, because that's not my experience. The church is in transition. I think if there's a critical message we have to acknowledge; it's being able to hear that, name it, and not feel guilty or feel like a failure. The reality is that this isn't unique to Community of Christ.

Every Christian denomination, nondenominational organization, institution is facing this changing cultural dynamic. And it raises that question for us: How do we continue to be the church amid the changing culture? There is not a losing of desire for spiritual connection. People are not participating in the life of the church, but they still are deeply yearning for an authentic, meaningful relation with God.

Unfortunately, the standard forms of church just aren't creating those kinds of sacred spaces. So yearning and searching are going on.

When you go into Western Europe, Australia, Canada, they are further along in that decline. I read one statistic that in Europe a major denomination was losing almost a million members a year. It's that dramatic. In the USA I've read statistics that on an annual basis several thousand churches are closing their doors.

So we find ourselves wrestling with the big question: What does it look like to be the church in a culture that is not finding a way of connecting and finding meaning in the traditional Sunday-morning experiences? That simple question is sometimes just overwhelming because for hundreds of years that has been the norm of Christianity.

So even as we wrestle with a sense of loss, something compelling continues to call us forward. I had an amazing experience a couple of months ago in another nation at a retreat designed for reaching out to the unchurched. Fifty people were at this retreat. Maybe a third were Community of Christ members who were trying to work at creating opportunities for people to find connections in community.

The rest were non-Community of Christ members.

Half were there for the first time as strangers. Seeing the announcements and postings on Facebook and other things, they decided to show up because of their own yearning for finding meaningful connections.

That weekend was spent talking about our Enduring Principles, our Mission Initiatives, and speaking to people in ways that go beyond institutionalism but speak to the heart of what it means to come together.

Some attendees came from different faith traditions, some from non-Christian traditions. Yet they found this sacred place to be in meaningful relationships that you and I call Zion. Those moments remind me that the church isn't dying; it's just trying to find a new way of being meaningful and authentic in a changing culture. At the same time, the core identity of who we are as a faith community can be experienced beyond what we normally experience on Sunday mornings. Those kinds of experiences remind me of the importance of the work we're doing.

This is disruptive work because it means all the energies we put into doing church on Sunday mornings need to find a release, exploring the ways to come together that will not look like Sunday morning.

The reality for me is that we no longer can use the metric of Sunday mornings to define our success.

When we can free ourselves from that and spend time in discernment, I think we will begin to experience some incredible ways the church finds itself creating sacredness for people to come together, share together, be connected. But it will look different, and it won't necessarily happen on a Sunday.

This is at the heart of our conversations. We are trying to understand and trying to discern where God is calling us while creating pathways for new expressions of the church to emerge.

LINDA: I think something is being born that's different from traditional church. I was actually having this conversation that we have to stop using Sunday mornings as an indicator of our success. And during that conversation about how people come together, this pastor stood up and said, "I just realized that our church for us is happening on Wednesday." It was in what they call hot dog church, where they invite the community, the neighborhood around them to come. They serve hot dogs every Wednesday and have meals together."

SCOTT: They do activities and lessons for the kids. And people are coming. They've been doing this for multiple years now, and this pastor realizes there are actually more people participating in the life of the church on Wednesday than on Sunday morning. We somehow have been locked in that real church just happens on Sunday.



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I was at a reunion, having a really calm, serious conversation about mission. One individual talked about what was happening in a congregation on Wednesdays. Members once a month started inviting seniors to come together. People enjoyed it so much that they ended up coming every Wednesday.

They share together in relationships, and meal, and prayer. But, he said, we can't get them to come Sunday mornings. When I said to him in this class, "So why can't we recognize that is being church as much as on Sunday morning?" he just fell back into his chair and said, "I don't know."

I chuckle because it was such an honest expression of where we find ourselves. I love these moments when people see the church being lived in a different way. When that happens, it opens a whole another way of exploration and encounter of being the church.

LINDA: Yes it does. It's exciting when those aha moments occur, and people see that the building of authentic community isn't just for Sunday morning; it's for every day. And it can happen on a street corner. It can happen in a grocery store. And wonderful things can occur from that encounter and that relationship that's built.

SCOTT: I think a difficult reality we have to understand is that in the Western world life is complex. People's lives are filled with multiple things. People are just busy and seeking meaning in that. But we go back generations to look at the vibrancy of the church on Sunday mornings, when our congregations were filled. Church was at the center of culture at that time. Social life revolved in many ways around the church.

But as you and I know, the church now has shifted, and at times it's barely hanging onto the peripheral edge of society and culture. Church now, at least in the Western part of the world, gets about an hour, maybe an hour and a half of time. And our modes of worship do not create space for people to engage in each other's lives.

We sing together, we hear a message, we touch base, say "Hi, how's the family?" and all that. And then we're kind of out the door because sometimes we want to get to the restaurants before they fill up for lunch. I don't mean that to be sarcastic or demeaning, but there clearly has been a loss of relational dynamic in congregations.

I compare that to other nations. When I go into Africa, it's nothing for them to come together for three, four, five hours to share together. And they worship and they share together. They eat together,

they celebrate together. They're invested in each other's lives in a way that you just don't get when you come together for an hour once a week.

LINDA: You brought up one cultural dynamic. And that's postmodernism, where generations raised with technology have a skepticism toward institutions, especially religion. Would you comment on how that impacts traditional church models, postmodernism, spiritual not religious, and other movements?

SCOTT: I think the church is in some ways a perfect expression of the tension and sometimes the conflict we are experiencing between the modern-world cultural dynamic and the postmodern world that is emerging. Our current models of how we come together in worship have been formed over the last 500 years. Those models, very successful in the past, have not been well-designed to create space for postmodern cultures.

It's not to say those kinds of perspectives and attitudes are wrong; it's just that the way they have encountered the world has been changing. We know technology has a huge impact. It's here, it's with us, and it's not going to go away.

Now we're in transition to another way. That creates that conflict. Part of where we get frustrated is that we want people to come to the church. We want people to encounter who we are and to find joy in the way we have found joy as we have grown in the church.

Yet the challenge many postmoderns experience is that they aren't free enough to come in, be who they are, and bring their experiences of life. There's always a sense that you have to come, change, and be like us. So my hope for congregations is that they will not see this and treat this as competing, but that they will be open and say, "How do we create that kind of space for others to come in who have different life experiences than us?"

The other thing I would uphold is that we have to stop seeing this as an older generation versus a younger generation. The reality is that there are baby boomers and some in other generations who have a postmodern perspective. They're just dedicated enough to hang in there with the way things are.

Also, we talk and read about the spiritual but not religious, the unaffiliated. That number is increasing. The other numbers that concern me are the ones who have just lost hope and faith in the church that things will change, who say that if this is just going to be what church is, then it's just not meeting my needs.

They're the ones walking out of the church. That's a huge loss. My hope is that if new expressions are starting to merge that people don't see them as competing or wrong and try to sabotage them. We must try instead to say, "How do we support that opportunity for people to experience and encounter God in different ways, acknowledging that it may not be the way I have journeyed, but that's OK."

LINDA: A book by John Dorhauer is called *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*. He says Christians have always experienced radical shifts. He talks about three eras. The first is the early Catholic church, which he calls 1.0, and then the church after the Reformation, which is 2.0. Then the church we've been talking about emerging now, which he calls 3.0.

Do you see indications of a new church or a new way of being the church emerging? What might the future church look like, especially in Western culture?

SCOTT: I think it's important to understand that in none of this should we hear that 2.0—what we would call the more traditional church—is wrong. That's not being said at all. It has brought meaning for people, and individuals will continue to find value in a more standard form of worship.

For me, the other challenging factor here is that President Veazey's previous addresses to the church have indicated there is no clear blueprint on what a 3.0 church looks like. When we talked about church planting in the past, we all kind of had a blueprint in our mind. But today you first have to indicate it's not to look like what happens on Sunday morning.

From that, you begin to ask, "So what does it look like?" And that becomes part of the discernment journey. So what do I see happening that are expressions of what we would describe as 3.0

church? I talked about the hot dog church. First of all, it's not happening on Sunday mornings. The way they come together is formed around sharing meals. It's focused more on relationship building and to see where Christ emerges in the midst of that rather than just focusing on a message about relationships.

Stone Church, just across the street from the Temple, has a wonderful dinner going on that is sponsored by the community. The amazing thing is that it has brought participants from other denominations to work together for the welfare of the unprivileged. Again, it's a perfect expression of what I think Zion is about, coming together, finding that common purpose, and working together for the welfare of human life.

Also, I continue to point to Chattanooga as a blending of a 2.0 church that maybe is more like a 2.5 or a 2.7. What happens on Sunday mornings is not just traditional sitting in pews, but all of the other ways people come. But something still happens on Sunday mornings. So that falls within that kind of 2.0 realm.

The church is going into other communities and neighborhoods and forming these groups and sacred places for people to come together. They don't necessarily look like what happens on Sunday morning, but they are transformative and powerful in people's lives.

LINDA: They also are birthing, nurturing, and multiplying, which President Veazey talked about in the "Time to Act!" address. I heard last week there were 1,700 people participating in Chattanooga ministries. They're at dorm rooms, skate parks, all over the place.

SCOTT: Again, the people who participate on Sundays don't see that as competition. No, no. They're supporting those kind of Mission Initiatives going out.

I use the example of another congregation I had visited a number of years ago. In this congregation a few handfuls of people reached into the community. They started working with parents whose children had been taken away. As a means to bring families back together, they started offering parenting classes. Well, this ministry started happening on Thursday nights, not Sunday mornings.

For me, those are new opportunities in the life of the church. I think one other is the emerging opportunities of online communities. I was just looking at a report from one of the Council of Twelve members, Robin Linkhart, who's chairing the committee for online ministries—Australia, Asia, Europe, multiple places in Canada. We probably have 10 to 12 online communities of people and seekers who are being connected from all around the world, formed in community. This is a growing opportunity.

We know a number of congregations are



starting to stream their worship experiences. But this is different. This is people using the software platform Zoom, where you can see each other and talk to each other wherever you are in the world. I've had the privilege of joining a seeker community to talk with them and let them ask questions. What a wonderful experience to be connected with people from multiple places!

The question is, how do we create the sacred space for them to come together? What are the technologies? How do we apply budget to help support those kinds of explorations? This may be the only way people are able together to be part of the faith community of Community of Christ. I celebrate those opportunities.

LINDA: Absolutely. And it's not just coming together once a week or once a month. They check on each other. If you're using technology each day, they know about each other. I had the opportunity to sit with a group at World Conference who met for the first time, face to face. They'd been in these relationships for a year or two, and I was astounded at the excitement and joy they had to see each other. But more importantly, I was impressed by the deepness of the relationship they already had. They had been soul-to-soul, heart-to-heart, using technology to build deep and lasting relationships.

Well, we've talked about the challenges and opportunities for the church in Western cultures. But I recently returned from traveling with Apostle Catherine Mambwe in Zambia and Malawi, Africa. And I recognize there are a lot of challenges in those cultures, too. Also in India, in Honduras, and a variety of places. So what are some of their challenges, and how are they finding new opportunities to vision the future church?

SCOTT: There's no question the economy has an impact on poverty. Without resources it's hard to change that dynamic. At the same time, the Council of Twelve has been very intentional that with one of our Mission Initiatives—to Abolish Poverty, End Suffering—we're to continue to find ways to address poverty in many nations.

I think the other factor we face is that in many of these nations there is strong, dominant religious conflict. Not only religious conflict among Christianity, but with other religious traditions.

Though there's a large population of Christianity in India, it still is primarily a Hindu nation. The government and practices there make it challenging for our leaders, our members, to be Community of Christ and be part of Christian traditions because of persecution. I have such deep respect for what our members and leaders face in some nations, the risks and fears that they have.

I remember traveling with Apostle Bunda Chibwe in a nation where I was experiencing and seeing devastating expressions of poverty. I said to Bunda, "How do you cope with this?" And Bunda simply said

that what continues to give him hope is the message Community of Christ has about salvation. That salvation in its multiple dimensions isn't speaking to what happens after death. It's about how we are changing the conditions now.

He says that's so different because other Christian traditions are telling people this is what God's will is for your lives. So the only thing they can do is hope for what comes in the afterlife. That continues to give me a challenge. We have a different message, that salvation comes in a different way, and it can occur now in the aspect of social justice, economic justice, and the Worth of All Persons.

So there is hope because of the message Community of Christ has for them and their cultures.

LINDA: Yes. It gives them a freedom that would not be theirs without that understanding of salvation. So you've been talking about missional opportunities. What gives you hope for Community of Christ congregations and mission centers?

SCOTT: What gives me hope the most is the core identity of who we are. Yeah, I know people who may feel frustrated and feel like it's not the church it used to be. And in some ways I would say, "Yeah, you're right." But in other ways I would say the core identity of who Community of Christ has been from that moment it was birthed in Joseph Smith Jr. has not changed. Its relevant voice and message are in the midst of culture as it changes.

That gives me hope. Because when I encounter people seeing from fresh eyes, I say, "Yeah, this is who we are, and we ought to be proud, and we need to uphold that."

I am here even amid struggles of budget and all we have tried to honestly share with the church. I know there is so much more Community of Christ has to do. For me, it's just a privilege to be part of the church and part of the leadership at this time.

In the life of the church, we also must be thinking about preparing the way for future leaders and where the church can go. That's my hope in my role in the Presidency and in my responsibilities for overseeing the mission and operation of the church.

LINDA: Thank you. Scott, you have reminded us that Community of Christ, while small, is mighty. That we are being divinely led from the church's inception through the generations of people serving in congregations, mission centers, and new missional expressions. There is hope, even as we address radical cultural shifts. 