

Spiritual Communities Are People Deciding Peacefully

Rooted in God's love, these groups have a specific role.



OUR MISSION

Pursue Peace on Earth

We are called to restore Christ's covenant of peace, even the Zion of our hopes. The hope of Zion will become reality when we live Christ's peace and generously share his peace with others.

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This is the fifth article in a series of resources developed in response to the Guiding Question: Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One? Church members are invited to consider these resources as we journey toward World Conference 2023.

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

—1 John 4:19–21 NRSV

CHRIST'S SPIRIT OF LIGHT AND TRUTH

A powerful personal experience that continues to inspire my view of the church's purpose occurred at the 2019 World Conference Communion service. As the event unfolded, I sensed Christ's spirit of light and truth. That feeling intensified as I looked at the assembly representing various languages, cultures, ways of life, and skin tones.

People gathered in response to Christ's invitation to come to his table of reconciliation and spiritual empowerment for living. Disciples came together to make decisions about the church's future.

Just then the Graceland University choir began to sing the first verse of Community of Christ Sings 285: "For Everyone Born." As the choir sang, the hymn grew into a spiritually penetrating sound of divine

nature and vision. It was overwhelming, inspiring, and humbling. I was moved to tears as I experienced spiritual community in Christ and considered the challenges and possibilities before the church.

The experience was not just one of feeling. I became aware of God's deep appreciation for the responsiveness of congregations and groups in aspiring to be sacred community in Christ in more than name only. I also sensed God's eternal hope for us to open our minds, hearts, and relationships more fully. God yearns for everyone born to have a place at the table of God's community of transforming grace and peace.

URGENT CALL TO MAKE SPACE

Prophetic counsel to the church over past decades points to a persistent and increasingly urgent call for the church to respond by making space.

Open your hearts and feel the yearnings of your brothers and sisters who are lonely, despised, fearful, neglected, unloved. Reach out in understanding, clasp their hands, and invite all to share in the blessings of community created in the name of the One who suffered on behalf of all.

—Doctrine and Covenants 161:3a

Generously share the invitation, ministries, and sacraments through which people can encounter the Living Christ who heals and reconciles through redemptive relationships in sacred community.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:2b

Beloved Community of Christ, do not just speak and sing of Zion. Live, love, and share as Zion: those who strive to be visibly one in Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed.

—*Doctrine and Covenants 165:6a*

The important call for Community of Christ today is to apply this spiritual direction during a time of intensifying polarization, hostility, and violence. Fallen humanity continually creates divisions of fear, discrimination, and inequality. Redeemed humanity creates sacred community locally and globally that offers healing, peace, and hope for the world.

CHRIST-INSPIRED PEACEFUL COMMUNITY

This vision of Christ-inspired, peaceful community is not new. The earliest communities of disciples, formed following Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, were admonished:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you indeed were called in the one body.

—*Colossians 3:14–15 NRSV*

This vision of Christ-inspired and Christ-shaped spiritual community has motivated disciples in every age. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who strenuously resisted the cruelty of Nazi Germany. That resistance eventually cost him his life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ but is Christ himself who has taken form among people.” On another occasion he stressed that the church is “Christ existing within community.”

This sacred community far exceeds what we normally associate with “community.” It is more than a social or special interest group. According to 1 John 4:7–21, sacred community is rooted deeply in God’s love, defined in character and action by Jesus Christ, the peaceful One, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. When people experience sacred community, they feel the love of God, encounter the peace of Jesus Christ, and receive the welcoming invitation of the Holy Spirit as never before. Involvement in sacred community changes, heals, and redeems lives.

Community of Christ is evidence of God’s continuing work through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring sacred community into existence. From the start of this faith movement, living the principle of the gospel in local and global community has been at the center of our purpose. The cause of Zion is how we strive to live that vision. It is at the heart of who we are

even as we grow in our understanding and expression of it. Growing in sacred community compels us to expand our circles of love, concern, understanding, and action. It motivates us to interact in new ways. This growth is sometimes difficult, but the vision of Zion urges us forward.

HOW WE DECIDE TOGETHER

An important aspect of growth in Christ-inspired community is how a group makes important decisions together. If a faith community is growing in the vision, love, and peace of Christ, there will be challenging questions to consider and related decisions to make together. Early in the Restoration movement, we were pointed to the principle of common consent as essential to our life together. Doctrine and Covenants 25:1b emphasizes, “And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith.”

Common consent provides opportunity for church members to participate in decision-making. It also allows the body to express support (or not) for church leaders entrusted to fulfill their responsibilities.

For many years, majority rule was the primary way common consent was accomplished in the church. This meant the decision was made based on whatever or whoever got the most votes. Unfortunately, this led to a sense of winners and losers, causing hard feelings and division.

In recent decades, the church has responded to the call to be a prophetic people who discern God’s will together by exploring alternative approaches to common consent. These approaches have strengthened the church’s ability to have difficult conversations about important and sometimes controversial topics. Guided by knowledgeable people, the church has studied, experimented, and gained valuable experience with common consent tools, steps, and approaches. This has helped us discover more productive ways to decide while embodying sacred community.

AN ALTERNATIVE COMMON CONSENT APPROACH

An alternative common consent approach begins with spiritual preparation. It is important to listen to God through discernment practices and using the six lenses discussed in the previous article. It includes engaging with one another to understand various perspectives on the topic and why people hold their perspectives. It makes space to hear the insights of minority voices. It values the opportunity of the body to refine possible outcomes. It honors the need for a strong level of support for a certain decision to move forward. Deciding may take longer; however, the way forward is often easier because the body understands



Invitation to Explore

and more readily embraces the decision.

As practiced in Community of Christ, the alternative common consent approach seeks a high level of agreement but does not need unanimous agreement. Considering this, the approach includes creating space for those who disagree with a decision while remaining committed to the church's mission. The church's "Faithful Disagreement Definition and Principles" provides guidance to ensure continued inclusion of people who disagree with a decision of the body when they share their views in respectful ways.

Seeking common consent is challenging but transforming. To be effective it is critical we set aside behaviors that stifle productive group discernment and decision-making. It is equally important that we approach conversations respectfully, avoiding combative debate. At the same time, common consent draws us together in seeking God's will for the body.

PEOPLE DECIDING PEACEFULLY

Peter Senge, in his preface to David Bohm's *On Dialogue* essay, observed that "Our habits are so strong to defend our view, to agree with views that correspond with our own, and to disagree with those who differ, that simply allowing diverse views to stand can be almost impossibly difficult." Quoting David Bohm directly, he stressed, "The thing that mostly gets in the way of dialogue is holding to assumptions and opinions, and defending them."

Peter Senge described this as "...the instinct to judge and defend, embedded in the self-defense mechanism of our biological heritage." As noted in the previous article, we can overcome our holdover self-defense instincts through spiritual formation practices such as spiritual indifference, shedding personal agendas, and practicing more peaceful ways of engaging one another.

One of our aims for the next World Conference is to have a verbally nonviolent conversation about nonviolence. It is important how we explore our personal and communal perspectives on the meaning of nonviolence and its priority as a faithful way to follow Christ.

May our exploration from beginning to end be characterized by spiritual centeredness. God invites us to listen deeply and carefully to various views and share our personal views by speaking in nondefensive ways. As we remain open to new insights, the Holy Spirit will guide us to a more commonly held understanding of the significant issues involved. Our faithful engagement as a sacred community will help us find a pathway on nonviolence that keeps us following Jesus the peaceful One.

In April 2019, the World Conference passed Resolution 1319, which resolves in part that "Community of Christ members and leaders discuss the role nonviolence plays in the pursuit of 'peace on and for the Earth' (Doctrine and Covenants 165:1d) and in the life and mission of the church."

President Stephen M. Veazey began this discussion during his closing message to the 2019 World Conference: "Scripture testifies that all creation waits 'with eager longing' (Romans 8:19 NRSV) for peaceful humanity to appear on the world stage to turn the tide of hate, agony, and destruction. ...Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One? Or are we retreating from Jesus by reverting to our old humanity and its destructive ways of interacting with others and creation?"

This guiding question has led us on a continuing journey to understand Jesus, the peaceful One and to lay down our preconceived notions of who Jesus should be. The question helps us realign our attitudes, behaviors, and actions with the identity, mission, message, and beliefs of Community of Christ. The role of nonviolence in the world is complex and is influenced by many cultural, theological, and personal perspectives.

As the First Presidency has faithfully engaged in the assignment given in WCR 1319, it has become clear that adequate time is needed for the church to diligently explore this topic. The presidency anticipates that the next World Conference (April 21–29, 2023) will be a time for further discussion and collaboration toward the creation of a statement on nonviolence. A future World Conference will have the responsibility of acting on a final statement, but only after sufficient consensus has been developed.

Materials for study and discussion are posted at www.CofChrist.org. Additionally, a place for resources on nonviolence has been created: www.HeraldHouse.org/search?q=nonviolence.

Your voice is an important part of this process. If you have suggestions for what should be included in a statement on nonviolence, email FP@CofChrist.org. The First Presidency reviews everything received as it discerns responses to its task from the 2019 World Conference.