



A 'COFFEE BUZZ' INTERVIEW

STEVE VEAZEY ON THE YEAR AHEAD

Community of Christ President Steve Veazey offered these thoughts, edited here, regarding questions in a recent Project Zion podcast. To hear the entire interview go to projectzionpodcast.org. This is the sixteenth episode of 'Coffee Buzz' that retired Apostle Linda Booth has taped with a member of the First Presidency.

LINDA: As 2021 unfolds, what issues weigh most heavily on your heart, and what brings you hope?

STEVE: I review world news from various sources each morning to make sure my awareness truly is global in scope and concern. Of course, like many, I am concerned greatly by the increasing health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While hopeful about vaccines, I am troubled that they will not be readily available to millions of people in regions and nations that include large numbers of church members. This is a basic human justice issue.

I gain hope in various ways. One is the group of church members — I call them the committed core — who are incredibly dedicated, supportive, visionary, and generous. They inspire me daily. Of course, the Holy Spirit, which bears witness of the eternal purposes of God being realized regardless of current challenges, is a source of abiding hope. Hope is the heart and soul of the gospel and discipleship.

LINDA: Speaking of current challenges, what is the relationship between church and politics?

STEVE: That is a complex topic! Our call is to discern and embody the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ and faithfully express it through the church's life throughout the world. Jesus was born into poverty and oppression under Roman rule with legalistic religious authorities in cahoots with imperial officials. This alliance caused suffering for many and was contrary to the just reign of God. Scripture describes Jesus as being engaged with, not isolated from, the social, political, and religious issues and powers of his day. Jesus offered an alternative way of living that challenged religious and political systems that crushed some people while favoring others.

Christ-inspired efforts include abolishing poverty, ending needless suffering, and pursuing justice and peace on and for the Earth. Doctrine and Covenants

163:3b states: "Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue peace." The "peace" in this passage is not an imposed façade of peace or one that simply seeks to keep the status quo. It is God's peace (shalom), which is justice, well-being, and wholeness realized for all people and the entire creation.

Often when concern is expressed about church involvement in politics, the main issue is partisan politics or showing preference for a specific political party or its candidates. Some in the church avoid anything that might cause others to feel uncomfortable or offended. The challenge is that in a highly politicized environment people assume that partisan politics drive almost every church position. Once issues are defined through the lens of oppositional partisan politics it is hard for some to see them any other way.

The church shapes its public positions from careful, prayerful consideration through the Six Lenses for Discovering God's Will (Scripture, Tradition, Knowledge and Reason, Personal and Community Experience, Continuing Revelation, and Common Consent). The church also refers to our Enduring Principles, Basic Beliefs, World Conference resolutions and other official statements as it seeks to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the church's prophetic witness in the world.

LINDA: The January 6 mob attack on the U.S. Capitol and Congress shocked and disturbed people nationally and internationally. You joined some denominational leaders who signed an open letter from the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA that stated the time had come for President Donald Trump to resign or be removed from office. Why did you sign the letter?

STEVE: Being a member of the National Council of Churches, as authorized by World Conference Resolution 1276, means that Community of Christ is a governing board member. On the Friday following the U.S. Capitol attack governing board members were contacted with an invitation for presiding officers of member communions (churches) to sign an open letter with their respective titles to stand united as Christian leaders.

The letter was a joint response of NCC member church leaders to a matter of great moral significance and urgently needed accountability. The magnitude of the issue and imminent risk of incitement of more violence rose far beyond partisan politics and should not be diminished by the short time remaining for the current administration to be in power. (The full text of the letter and list of signatories is at <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us>.)

The letter is a type of nonviolent action called “speaking truth to power” that is rooted in a long scriptural tradition of prophetic witness. When functioning in that way, I do not speak for all members of the church nor do I represent myself as doing so. However, I hope church members will be prompted by such actions to explore deeply the grave moral implications and far-reaching consequences of occurrences like the attack on Congress, and consider what responses are appropriate for them to make as followers of Jesus Christ, the peaceful One.

LINDA: Last year and continuing in 2021, protests have occurred in some nations, backed by various groups. Some of these events spawned rioting, violence, destruction of property, and looting. What is your perspective on these events?

STEVE: Regardless of the issue, Community of Christ does not support or condone violence, looting, or destruction of property. Peaceful public protest is a form of protected free speech in some, but not all, nations. It is a way of drawing attention to issues and advocating for change. Some members participate in protests as a matter of personal conscience and agency. The church emphasizes that such activity should be nonviolent. World Conference Resolution 1319 approved at the 2019 World Conference calls the church into a serious discussion about the meaning of nonviolence in our daily lives and in group efforts to achieve positive change in society.

LINDA: Speaking of nonviolence, how is the development of a church position on nonviolence going?

STEVE: Nonviolence has many dimensions and related questions. Through the Peace and Justice Team, all World Church teams have been asked to provide perspectives on nonviolence from their areas of expertise such as theology, human rights, spirituality, Earth stewardship, diversity, and ecumenical/interfaith ministries. Their content is being used to provide study

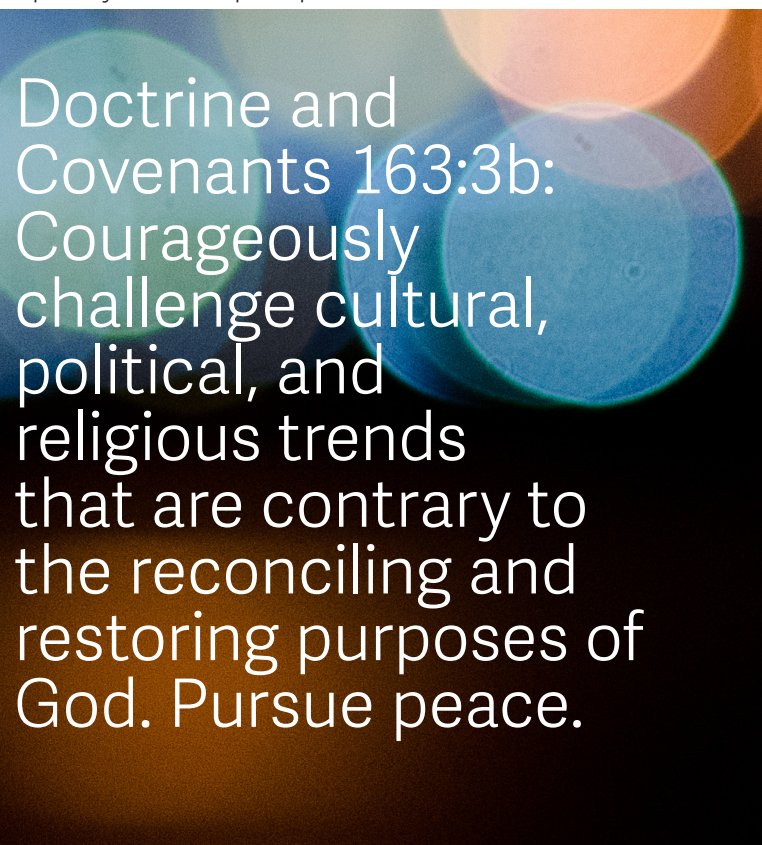
material such as 2021 reunion resources. Planning for World Conference includes consent-building steps to explore a synthesis of the team reports and delegate views as we discern our way on this topic.

In some ways responding to WCR 1319 is simply part of the process of ongoing disciple formation as we work together to become the community God created us to be. At the end of the 2019 World Conference, I asked the church: “Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?” That question was related to the approval of WCR 1319, but it also is foundational to who God is calling us to be. We must begin conversations about justice and peace with a faithful understanding of who Jesus, the peaceful One really is.

To help the church explore this topic, we are using it as a guiding question and have developed multimedia resources related to it that explore nonviolence (www.CofChrist.org/guiding-question). Also, there is a nonviolence section on the Herald House website under Member Created resources that contains material developed from around the world.

LINDA: Some view the church’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic as too cautious, overreaction, or even a lack of faith in God. Why has the church responded as it has?

STEVE: Church leaders stated at the outset of the pandemic that decisions were being made with the most current public health information in mind. We also stressed that protecting the most vulnerable is a priority that is a principle stated in Doctrine and



Covenants 164:6. This principle with others such as the Worth of All Persons, Christ-like love (love of neighbor), and Responsible Choices, should be evident in our approaches.

Protecting the most vulnerable, such as older and health-compromised folks, leads to a more cautious approach than what may occur in the larger society. As an issue of having faith or not, we should not “tempt” or “test” God by putting ourselves in obviously risky situations to try to prove our faith or prove that our faith is greater than others. Such actions may harm us or cause others to make unwise choices. Making Responsible Choices is an Enduring Principle that urges us to consider carefully how our actions may impact personal and community well-being.

The church has responded creatively to ministry needs during this pandemic by increasing online experiences to provide ways of connecting, communicating, caring, and growing in spiritual community. We have provided guidelines to make all sacraments available online when in-person contact is not possible or wise. We look forward to a future when the pandemic no longer impacts so many aspects of our lives.

LINDA: How is the church doing financially during the pandemic when in-person church gatherings are not possible or wise in many places?

STEVE: Church member commitment and vision are reflected in their ongoing generous support of Local and Worldwide Mission Tithes.

The church gave more than \$12 million USD in Worldwide Mission Tithes in 2020, landing within our goal range. We’re so thankful to all those who through this difficult year supported Christ’s mission. The Worldwide Mission Tithes goal range for 2021 is \$11.7-\$12.2 million. If this past year is any indication, I know we can do this. (For information about the church’s financial status, go to www.CofChrist.org/contributions-update.)

We have been monitoring Local Mission Tithes, and giving locally was less in 2020. However, as of the end of November, Local Mission Tithes had received almost \$13.4 million, about \$3.4 million more than Worldwide Mission Tithes. We are aware that campgrounds especially are being stretched, as the need to limit gatherings impacts revenue.

While supporting Mission Tithes is essential, equally essential is annual progress on the Bridge of Hope retirement responsibility goal. Investing certain amounts contributed annually is critical to our plan to reach the final goal of \$120 million by December 31, 2023. As of December 15, the church has raised \$80 million toward our \$120 million Bridge of Hope goal. This is an increase of \$4 million since June 30, 2020.

As noted previously, mission centers and congregations are being impacted by reduced income due to the pandemic, including income needed for locally funded staff and campground operations.

How this pressure will impact jurisdictional Bridge of Hope contributions is a growing concern. Efforts continue to identify church assets that can be sold to ensure we will meet our goal on schedule while trying to minimize impact to mission. If we don’t achieve our goal on time, meeting church pension and post-retirement obligations will be more expensive in the future.

LINDA: At the 2019 World Conference the High Priests Quorum approved a letter of concern to the First Presidency about the climate crisis and the dire consequences of not responding soon enough to this global problem. What perspective do you offer?

STEVE: I urge people to read the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This panel is a United Nations agency responsible for assessing climate research to provide a realistic view of global warming; its probable impact on environmental, health, and economic issues; and recommendations on how to lessen these impacts. The reports are eye-opening to say the least!

In addition to educational efforts by the Earth Stewardship Team, church members in Canada and the United States have formed a North American Climate Justice Team sponsored by the Greater Pacific Northwest Mission Center. This team is coordinating a series of webinars on climate change due to global warming at CofChristclimatejustice.org.

Doctrine and Covenants 150:7, approved in 1972, sounded a message of obvious environmental concern:

These are portentous times...the land is being desecrated by the thoughtless waste of vital resources. You must obey my commandments and be in the forefront of those who would mediate this destruction while there is yet day.

In 2007, the World Conference approved this counsel to be included in Doctrine and Covenants 163:4b:

The earth, lovingly created as an environment for life to flourish, shudders in distress because creation’s natural and living systems are becoming exhausted from carrying the burden of human greed and conflict. Humankind must awaken from its illusion of independence and unrestrained consumption without lasting consequences.


Each year there are worsening global warming impacts through the rising number and severity of wildfires, storms, droughts, diseases, ocean acidification, air pollution, and species extinctions. We can take actions as described in the IPCC reports to “mediate this destruction while there is yet day” (Doctrine and Covenants 150:7). We must accelerate the pace of taking those actions or we have abdicated our calling as stewards of God’s good creation.

LINDA: The World Church Leadership Council has been involved in a group discernment process. How is that going?

STEVE: It is going well! We have learned a lot about group discernment as we continue to explore our working discernment question: "God, where does your Holy Spirit lead us next as we embody the soul of Community of Christ?" This is a question worthy of any church group's attention.

Last September we focused on listening deeply to people throughout the church invited to respond to our discernment question. This provided helpful insight into the hopes, insights, and yearnings of church members across generations, socio-economic levels, and ethnicities.

In December, we began to identify what we were hearing as insights, concepts, or emphases to guide our way into the future. Now we are in a process of testing and refining our perceptions as we seek confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

The discernment process has shaped and equipped us as a community of international servant-leaders called to support the church as a people called to "discern the divine will for your own time and in the places where you serve" (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c). During the discernment process we have sensed the affirming presence of the Holy Spirit instilling hope and vision for the church's future in demanding times. The Holy Spirit is urging us to trust what is being born even though we may not understand it all in the present moment. This is the way of prophetic faith and vision! 

“These are portentous times...the land is being desecrated by the thoughtless waste of vital resources. You must obey my commandments and be in the forefront of those who would mediate this destruction while there is yet day.”