



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

Impending Budget Cuts Inspire Generosity

President Steve Veazey talked with Apostle Linda Booth about difficult budget decisions and the growing spirit of generosity that will take us into a future where we truly bless and transform the lives of people in the world. See the video released March 23, 2016, at www.CofChrist.org/official-announcements.

Linda: On behalf of Community of Christ leaders, I want to thank you for your prayers, your many e-mails, notes, and letters of encouragement. While the budget struggles have been extremely difficult, we have felt your support, God's grace, and the Holy Spirit's presence in our midst. Joining me in conversation is Prophet-President Stephen M Veazey.

Steve, tell us about the difficult journey church leaders have been on the last four weeks to determine a budget that relies solely on tithing income and other highly predictable income, such as product sales and rental fees.

Steve: Well, it has been a difficult journey for all of us as we've met together for extended periods of time, basically clearing our calendars so we could focus on this challenge. The challenge being, supporting essential church organization functions that have to happen for us to operate, while at the same time trying to focus available resources on mission opportunities that are obvious to us. That sets up a difficult tension, but we have been able to do that. It did require us to get to a place where we just had to recognize there were some things we weren't going to be able to keep or address right now. But I do think we're building a bridge into the future to move through this time to a time when there'll be more financial resources available to the church. I think even though it was exhausting and excruciating, we find ourselves at a place feeling we've really done the best we could under the circumstances.

Linda: Steve, what blessings have you received in the midst of this difficult journey to decrease the budget by \$6,320,000?

Steve: I can certainly see personal blessing and blessings for the team that was working on the challenge. But let me say first, I feel blessed to be part of a team of such dedicated, conscientious church leaders who in the midst of their own pain were able to focus themselves on the issues that needed to be addressed. It's good to be part of a community of leaders who can do that, even as we were struggling with our own feelings.

I think we've been especially blessed by a number—a growing number—of messages of encouragement and support: individuals and congregations praying for the church, and those who have to make difficult decisions. We've felt that and I've felt that. We feel the church, as a caring community, in a very focused way. That's been a blessing to us. So, all of that to me speaks of the Holy Spirit working in this situation throughout the church. We've received those messages from many nations throughout the world. Whenever I reach the point where I think I just don't have any more energy to think or decide, the Spirit provides strength, and energy, and coping ability to continue to get the job done that we needed to address; and in the midst of that to bring consolation, and encouragement, and a sense of hope in the midst of the struggle. All of that I can only describe as a blessing.

Linda: It is a blessing. I can attest that the Counsel of Twelve as we've been deliberating this past week have had that sense of assurance and the Spirit's presence, too. I know it's because so many people have been praying for leaders and the church.

How do you respond to those who have suggested it would be helpful for church leaders to make an apology to the church because of another downsizing?

Steve: Of course we're sorry and apologize for any hurt, or confusion, or frustration, or pain that is being caused or will occur as a result of these difficult decisions. I also want to be clear myself that the decision to move to a more conservative or conserving financial management philosophy is enabling us to take steps that will hopefully ensure more significant adjustments are not needed in the future. I know it's difficult now; and we share in that pain; and we are sorry for it in that it's affecting the lives of people. But I believe those decisions are wise, they're prudent, and that they will actually position the church to withstand various economic pressures in the future that could occur. So, that would be how I would respond to that.

Linda: Thank you. During the last interview we shared in together, you expressed several feelings upon hearing the news, the new news in February that adjustments would need to be made. Some of the feelings and words you expressed were "surprise," and "distress," and "disappointment." Explain to us the use of those words and what that means.

Steve: Quite simply, on that day, early part of February, information was presented to me that I had not been given before. Strong recommendations were made that I had not seen or heard before. I had a deep emotional reaction to that because I immediately sensed the pain that it would cause the church and particularly staff members, congregations, and members of the church. I guess another word I could use is "heartbreak." I continue to be affected by that, while at the same time as we've moved through the experience, I also have to say that once again I see the wisdom of what's needing to be done. I'm also experiencing hope for the future that is helping me to understand that there is potential good and opportunity that's being preserved for the future. So, I guess that's how I would respond.

Linda: There's something remarkable happening now in the life of the church. A grassroots effort has started to increase sustainable giving through tithing to save some staff positions. Could you describe those efforts?

Steve: It's really something that's happening right now and it's continuing to build. We're grateful for all of those who helped catalyze it and communicate throughout the church using their networks. There is a growing number of individuals who are responding to the call to increase their world mission tithes by a thousand dollars, and then to sustain that for a period of years. There are church members all over the world who are making commitments to their capacity. It may not be a thousand dollars, but in their local currencies they're saying, "Here's what I'm going to give now and in the future."

Congregational response: We're both familiar with Chattanooga. When I received the information about the Chattanooga kids, some of them going out—first seeing what they had in their pockets in terms of coins—and then going out and looking for coins on the sidewalks and streets of Chattanooga, and then coming back and consolidating that. They sent \$15 to the World Church. That was a significant offering. That was to more than their capacity. In the same time a congregation in California that had sold their building for a large sum, redesigned their ministry to be more of a ministry in a local park using facilities nearby, and they had large reserves. As they were thinking about the current situation, they wanted to give out of their abundance, money that was just being held in reserve that they had no particular plans for. They sent \$150,000 along with a commitment to continue to send an amount each year that we could count on as part of their congregational, their joint response to world mission tithes. That was just wonderful.

Recently several families with significant financial capacity have committed large gifts. All of that combined together is creating a helpful lift that has resulted in some staff positions being retained that were initially on a need-to-reduce list.

That's still going on now as people are getting the news and responding. That's a remarkable response by the church. I guess one way we can understand the current situation is, it was a fairly abrupt wake up call. But having been awoken, now the church is responding with great generosity and I think that's going to continue.

Linda: I do too. In fact there's a cutoff date for those gifts, but I believe something's happening in the church that's releasing that generosity into the future.

Steve: It's like we've been talking about true capacity, but we had to be kind of disrupted in our normal patterns to see all the capacity that was there—and then to become agents of generosity for that capacity to flow to support the ministries of the church. That may be one of the good things that comes out of this situation.

Linda: It is remarkable. You and I have both heard, as have other leaders, some people saying I'm giving all that I can give to the church. What would you say to those faithful disciples?

Steve: I would say to them sincerely from the heart, "You're doing all you can and we know that. You're already giving to true capacity and that's obvious." Such persons or families should not feel any guilt or pressure to do more. They're already giving and they're giving in the way that they can, according to their capacity, and that's appreciated. It's respected, and it's celebrated. I think God would say to those people, "Well done! You're a good and faithful steward." I want to affirm that.

My invitation is to those who are not giving, but are members of the church, or in the priesthood and are not giving to world ministries tithes. If there's capacity in one's life to do that, then now is the time to begin or to respond more generously in order to support vital ministries of the church throughout the whole world. I would encourage them to that.

I was reading an article the other day that caused me to really sit back and reflect. It said that in the developed countries, in the western world, most of us do not understand our real net worth of the assets that we have. We need somebody to help us see that, and through that process discover greater capacity for giving through certain types of financial instruments or budget planning in our lives. I want to remind people we have a team of dedicated professional financial planners who are available to any church member or family, free of charge. It's a ministry of the church to help people do financial planning that will help them experience more of the joy of stewardship, giving to true capacity, and being a generous disciple. It creates a spirit of gratitude and joy as opposed to feeling it as an obligation or simply something that is expected.

Linda: Steve, Presiding Evangelist David Brock recently spoke these words to members of the Counsel of Twelve Apostles as we were struggling to reach budget targets. And he said:

Name and honor the losses of this time. Claim soul treasure hidden in grief and sorrow, but don't keep going over old history. I'm not closing things down. I'm opening things up. I'm stripping things away to get to a new freedom and hope.

What do these words mean to you?

Steve: I've read those several times, and I'm still allowing the wisdom and possibilities of those words to kind of work their way into my heart. My initial thought is, it's very hard to know when you're in the midst of a difficult situation to understand what may come of it in the future. And I think these words are speaking to God's faithfulness and creativity. The faithfulness being, God is in the situation with us setting the stage for the future and we may not understand what all of that entails. At the same time God is stirring creativity in us so that we can be a part of designing that

future in partnership with God. But you do that with the awareness that God is always about to do a new thing as the scriptures said. And if we are discerning of it and are alert to it, we'll find ourselves being blessed as we move forward.

Linda: What perspectives or advice would you like to share with the church at this particular time?

Steve: I think one of the great challenges is to stay focused on our mission. Stay focused on our mission, and the Mission Initiatives that keep us aligned with the whole mission of Jesus Christ and Christ's vision for the world. Not to become so inwardly focused that we lose sight of the mission and our priorities of mission in the world. I think that's very important.

I think it's very important for congregations to realize that we are in a new world and there are new cultural, and social, and economic challenges that are changing the circumstances in which we're called to offer faithful ministry. So, we have to always be asking ourselves at the congregational level what is it that we are doing or could do that will really touch, and transform, and bless the lives of people? And then focus in on those ministries, even if it means letting go of some habits, and mindsets, and ways of being church that are familiar to us because it worked in the past. Now is a time of needed innovation, and creativity, and to hear clearly the call of God to the congregation and what it is that God would be inviting the congregation into as needed expression of the gospel in the world today.

I'm hopeful that we can stay focused on mission and discerning God's call in congregational life to bring relevant ministry into the circumstances of people as they are now, not what we think they need, but as they are now.

Linda: My colleagues and I are convinced, and assured, and know that God isn't through with Community of Christ. So how are you, and how should all members and friends of the church, open themselves up to the unexpected presence of the risen Christ?

Steve: Well that is the message of the Easter season. As we follow that narrative of Christ's passion, the despair of the crucifixion, the burial, and then the incredible surprise of the resurrection. That is the heart of the gospel message. Even though we may think an end has been reached from our human perspective, that's not the case with God. It's never too late for God. And you can fill in the rest of that sentence. That's the message of resurrection.

We have stories like the Emmaus Road: the two disciples who are disappointed. They're depressed. They feel forsaken. They're confused. Things are not the way they thought they were or were going to be. They've heard this testimony of something incredible that's happened. Christ lives again. But they're still not aware that the living Christ is their traveling companion.

Isn't that such a true expression of our human natures? We become so engrossed in challenges, and problems, and so forth, we're not aware of the very presence of Christ

with us, who's urging us on into a future that has already become real. We just don't know we're in that future yet. That principle speaks to me about our life as a church. We need to understand that Christ is walking with us and talking to us right now, asking us to be his body in a broken, confused world, and be faithful to his mission, and to not dampen our hope because Christ is our hope. And he's with us.

Linda: Absolutely. God is faithful and he will never leave us alone. So how can we be faithful disciples and respond to God's call to us in this time of resurrection and new beginnings?

Steve: I think it's to be together as community. To listen to one another. To continue our spiritual practices that help us be open to God's Spirit and God's call. To respond as we feel led. To trust the Spirit that's always guiding the church even in the midst of difficult circumstance. I think it means as congregations, that we become communities in which the resurrected Christ comes alive. That's the Easter season. That's the message.

That if we are the body of Christ, then Christ who lives in us touches the lives of people all around us. That's our calling. And also the words that are toward the end of the recent words of counsel that I presented in 2013 are kind of the ultimate challenge. Don't just talk and sing about Zion. Live, love, and share as Zion right now.

Zion, that is the community of people committed to be visibly one on Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed. That's a powerful vision. I think faithfulness is not just to talk about the gospel, or think about the gospel, but to live, love, and share from out of the gospel. That's our challenge. That's our call.

Linda: Thank you, Steve. The resurrected Christ continues to call us into his mission: to Invite People to Christ; to Abolish Poverty, End Suffering; to Pursue Peace on Earth; to Develop Disciples to Serve; and to Experience Congregations in Mission. We claim our role as Easter people who believe in the promise of resurrection. Who live as disciples who daily carry the cross and who feel great hope for a future where God reigns. Remember, as much as we love the church, God loves the church more. Stubborn hope reigns.