

# Community of Christ

## Counsel to the Church: Questions and Answers

*This is the third in a series that answers questions about the counsel to the church presented January 17, 2010, by President Stephen M. Veazey.*

### **1. The counsel speaks about receiving previously baptized Christians into church membership through confirmation. What types of baptisms would be accepted?**

The counsel provides general direction for the worldwide church about conditions of membership. If the counsel is approved, it will be interpreted through official policies and procedures. The World Church Leadership Council recently discussed extensively how the counsel would be understood and applied. The following statement will provide the foundation for developing a baptism and confirmation policy if the counsel is approved. The material below is not the official policy statement. An official policy statement will be released following discussion at World Conference.

**Revised baptism and confirmation procedures will not be implemented until *September 1, 2011*, to allow time for church-wide education and preparation.**

#### **Community of Christ Beliefs and Practices**

Baptism and confirmation are fundamentally important in Community of Christ. Nothing within the counsel should be understood to lessen the significance of these sacraments. They are essential in lifelong disciple formation. We believe:

**Baptism is how we initially express our commitment to lifelong discipleship. As we yield our lives to Christ in baptism we enter Christian community (the body of Christ) and have the promise of salvation.**

**—Basic Beliefs of Community of Christ, “Salvation”**

Baptism has several important meanings in Community of Christ. Through baptism, God’s generous grace revealed in Jesus Christ is made evident in human lives. In response, we

- choose in faith to accept God’s invitation to enter a covenant relationship;
- express our commitment to follow Jesus Christ in a life of Christian discipleship;
- demonstrate an attitude of repentance and receive the promise of forgiveness;
- become part of the body of Christ and begin the formal process of becoming a church member;
- receive the promise of salvation and new life through symbolically engaging in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We invite everyone to enter a covenant relationship with God by following Jesus Christ and to live out their discipleship as members of Community of Christ. This is done through the sacraments of baptism

and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, which also is confirmation of membership. In Community of Christ, baptism

- may occur when a person is at least 8 years old;
- happens by immersion in water;
- is performed by Community of Christ priesthood who use the phrase: “Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.”

Following baptism, time is taken to further prepare people for the sacrament of confirmation and lifelong discipleship as a church member. This preparation includes more exploration of the vision, mission, Enduring Principles, beliefs, history, scriptures, and sacraments of the church.

Confirmation is performed by Melchisedec priesthood members (elders and high priests), who lay their hands on the candidate’s head and offer a special prayer of blessing. The confirmation prayer

- acknowledges the grace and authority of Jesus Christ through which baptism occurs;
- affirms the presence of the Holy Spirit acting in the person’s life to lead the person into covenant with God and others through membership in Community of Christ;
- Seeks God’s blessing in helping the new member grow in covenant and share giftedness in support of the church’s mission to *Proclaim Jesus Christ and Promote Communities of Joy, Hope, Love, and Peace* throughout the world.

### **Accepting Other Baptisms**

Recent counsel to the church states:

**In harmony with God’s will, the Holy Spirit leads some people already committed to Jesus Christ through Christian baptism to further focus their response through church membership.**

**Individuals previously baptized of water in an attitude of humility and repentance and as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ may become church members through the sacrament of confirmation of the Holy Spirit.**

—Counsel to the Church, January 17, 2010

If the counsel is approved, the church will create a policy that allows people previously baptized in other Christian churches to become Community of Christ members through confirmation if certain criteria are met. People may be rebaptized by immersion if they wish, but they will not required to do so. For the purpose of becoming church members by confirmation, we will receive baptisms that were done

- as a personal expression of faith in Jesus Christ;
- by an ordained Christian minister;
- using water.

We will not require someone to present proof of their baptism or the baptizing minister’s credentials, since that would be impossible in many places throughout the world.

The phrase “using water” allows for baptisms done by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. Accepting baptism by means other than immersion—while upholding the church standard practice of baptism by immersion—is done in response to recent counsel and inspired direction given to the church in 2004:

**You have already been told to look to the sacraments to enrich the spiritual life of the body. It is not the form of the sacrament that dispenses grace but it is the divine presence that**

**gives life. Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church. In such matters direction will come from those called to lead.**

**—Doctrine and Covenants 162:2d**

Each person who desires to become a church member through confirmation, whose baptism meets the criteria above, must

- complete a time of preparation for membership before confirmation;
- be confirmed by Community of Christ priesthood;
- be confirmed when they are at least 8 years old.

### **Infant Baptism**

Community of Christ believes that baptism is a personal expression of faith and repentance in response to God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Counsel recently given to the church does not specifically address infant baptism. Therefore, emphasis will be given to existing beliefs as expressed in Community of Christ scriptures and traditions.

Our beliefs strongly emphasize human agency (responsible choice) in response to God's grace in Jesus Christ. We understand "covenant" as God's initiative in Jesus Christ to which people respond in faith and commitment. Baptism as an intentional choice is deeply imbedded in our identity and theology.

The church's proposed policy on baptism and confirmation is not intended to define who is Christian. It will define how one becomes a Community of Christ member. Nothing in the recent counsel or policy should be used to malign the beliefs of other churches.

There are many dedicated Christians baptized as infants who embrace their baptism as their initial commitment to Jesus Christ. We understand that infant baptism is intended to express the effectiveness of God's grace even when people are unaware of it. It also highlights the faith communities' responsibility to nurture children, as part of the body of Christ, until they choose to embrace Christian discipleship. However, we believe that personally deciding to be baptized and experiencing the meaning of baptism are central to becoming a member of Community of Christ, given our understanding of baptism.

### **2. Some have said the reason we want to accept baptisms from other churches is to get more members by making it easier to become a member. Is that true?**

No. The 2007 World Conference passed a resolution (WCR 1293) that requested the Presidency to "examine the issues of rebaptism in the context of the worldwide mission of the church" and "following prayer, reflection, and discernment...issue instructions relevant for today regarding requirements for church membership." The counsel emerged in response to the Spirit's guidance as the church engaged with the Presidency in prayerful discernment. It allows some to become church members through confirmation without requiring rebaptism. However, it also stresses more-thorough preparation before confirmation. The counsel raises our membership expectations by requiring more-intentional preparation. It also urges all members to become more serious about their baptism and membership commitments.

### **3. Is accepting baptisms done by other Christian ministers the first step in accepting the authority of other church's ministers to perform all Community of Christ sacraments?**

No. Only Community of Christ priesthood members are authorized to perform Community of Christ sacraments.

**4. Is the proposal to have national and field conferences to address some policy issues taking the principle of “common consent” away from World Conference?**

Common consent will function at World Conferences in numerous ways. These include considering proper legislation, approving inspired counsel, having non-legislative discussions, and sustaining World Church leaders. If the Presidency rules legislation out of order based on the principle that deciding a specific policy for the whole church will likely cause harm in some nations, the World Conference has the option of appealing to see if that decision reflects the will of the delegates.

The provision for national and field conferences will create more opportunities for achieving consent about how direction set by the World Conference is implemented in different national settings. This approach promotes common consent closer to the point of implementation. Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c says the church is called to discern divine will “...for your own time and *in the places where you serve.*” Also, we plan to introduce models of consensus-building at national and field conferences and at World Conferences that are more in the spirit of “common consent” than some parliamentary processes we currently use.

It is important to recall the World Conference already has acted to refer legislation calling for a United States conference to the World Church Leadership Council *with power to act.* That means if church leadership decides a United States conference is best for the church, the World Conference already has indicated its consent for proceeding. So, the concept of national conferences is not a new consideration.

**5. How does the Presidency decide which issues should be considered by World Conference and ones that should be resolved in other ways?**

The Presidency has extensive discussions with the Expanded World Church Leadership Council composed of about 50 members (World Church officers, World Church directors, and field and cultural representatives) to gain a clear understanding of how legislation on certain topics likely will impact the church in various nations. The Presidency also consults with individual field apostles and teams of apostles to determine whether real “harm” is likely to occur in some areas. The Presidency has provided criteria it will use to determine whether legislation is in order if the counsel is approved. (See question 16 in the second “Questions and Answers” article.) If the Presidency decides to rule legislation out of order, the ruling statement will explain its rationale.

**6. What are some examples of how legislation being proposed at World Conference could be harmful to the church in some nations?**

First, we are not talking about issues that have a strong World Church direction or consensus. Simply being Christian in some nations may put one in “harm’s way.” The counsel refers to how we should handle moral issues when there are significant cultural differences. Consider this example: The World Conference could approve by simple majority vote a position on a conflicted moral issue that could cause real harm in some nations. That action would be an injustice to members in those nations, especially when they are not represented fully at World Conference and have stated they cannot discuss the issue because of its “taboo” nature.

As an example, homosexuality is a conflicted topic. It is difficult for some church members to discuss it. The topic is “taboo” and is not talked about. Several national church leaders have stated that if family and members back home knew they were talking about homosexuality, serious harm would result. They cannot take written material home that suggests acceptance of homosexuality. Likely ramifications include painful family conflicts and members and congregations leaving the church.

Government and religious officials in some nations look at our website and official material to determine our church's beliefs and positions on moral issues. If they find positions that are not acceptable according to national laws or cultural norms, our church's presence or ability to function effectively in those countries could be jeopardized. In some countries such as Haiti, numerous African nations, various Central and South American countries, India, and several Asian nations, homosexuality and same-gender relationships are not tolerated by most of the population. In some nations a homosexual relationship is illegal. Persons in same-gender relationships and their allies are persecuted and even killed with little or no legal consequences.

Being part of Christian ecumenical associations in some nations is important to our national leaders' ability to function as Christian ministers. Where there is broad negative Christian reaction to homosexuality our church could be officially categorized as "non-Christian" if we adopted certain positions. Our ministers would be excluded from Christian organizations and not granted the security and support given to other Christian leaders.

**7. How can counsel today present direction that is different from the "revealed doctrine" contained in earlier sections of the Doctrine and Covenants?**

The preface to the counsel lists Doctrine and Covenants references that state that instruction given previously is subject, at times, to more interpretation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The following excerpt from a 1966 *Saints Herald* article by Apostle Arthur Oakman provides vital insights into this principle:

**There are, strictly speaking, no revealed truths. There are "truths of revelation"—statements of principles which stem from the actual revelatory experience. These may be, like the map, guides to the beatific vision—but they are not the vision itself.**

**...The object of the formulated statements of belief is God as revealed in Christ, and no sensible Christian worships either the scriptures or the creeds. Statements of belief (such as are found, for instance, in Doctrine and Covenants 17) are not themselves the revelation but compilations of inferences drawn from living experience with God, the object of which is to bear testimony of that living experience and thus aid [people] to find a similar blessing. So, ever and always, the living Spirit of God is the guide and mentor of the theologian who recognizes that any present formulation of...faith or belief is not irrevocable, but such formulation needs constantly to be illumined and interpreted by the Spirit.**

**—Arthur A. Oakman, "Theology—Its Place and Meaning," *Saints Herald*, May 1966, page**

**25**