



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

Letter about World Church Leadership Transition

February 18, 2016

To the church:

As announced previously, Stephen M. Jones was granted early retirement and release as presiding bishop effective on a date to be specified during the 2016 World Conference. Recently, Bishop Jones asked to move up the date for his early retirement and release to allow him more time to support his wife, Jan, who is facing serious health issues. Therefore, Brother Jones will retire and be released as Presiding Bishop on March 1, 2016. Keeping with the direction given in my September 8, 2015, letter to the church about Steve's future ministry, and recognizing his vital role in current efforts to increase funds for mission, Steve will continue to support mission funding efforts for a time before and after World Conference.

On March 1, 2016, Stassi Cramm, presiding bishop designate, will become acting presiding bishop. Sister Cramm will be released from the office of apostle and reinstated to the office of bishop, which she held previously. Then she will be appointed by me to serve as acting presiding bishop. These steps clarify roles, responsibilities, and supervisory relationships as important decisions are made about World Church budgets and related financial issues. Stassi is fully prepared through education, skill, and experience to serve as acting presiding bishop at this pivotal time.

The Presiding Bishopric is dissolved when the Presiding Bishop is released. As I have prayerfully reflected on the needs of the church, the Holy Spirit confirmed it would be beneficial if Steve Graffeo and Michele McGrath, Presiding Bishopric members designate, provide support to the acting presiding bishop during this time. Therefore, of necessity, the three of them will function as the Acting Presiding Bishopric until the 2016 World Conference. The World Conference will formally consider all general officer calls, including those related to the reconstitution of the Presiding Bishopric.

Let us remember Steve and Jan Jones and their family in our prayers as they navigate major challenges related to Jan's health and Steve's sooner-than-expected, early retirement. May they experience the blessings of compassionate, supportive community through all of us.

Also, let us sustain prayerfully those who are taking on more responsibilities sooner than expected in response to the needs of the church. May they be blessed with our unwavering support and confidence in them as we meet the challenges before us.

In the Peace of Christ,

Stephen M. Veazey
president of the church

Statements Regarding Financial Information

Steve Veazey:

As church leaders were involved in fiscal year 2017 budget planning, the Presidency asked the Presiding Bishopric, presiding bishop designate, and the director of Finance to evaluate thoroughly the church's overall financial strength, including considering possible future economic stresses.

A few weeks ago information was brought to the First Presidency that raised serious questions about current and future income assumptions used for budget planning. After further analysis, the Presidency asked Stassi Cramm to prepare a statement to present this information to the World Church Leadership Council, the World Church Finance Board, our world ministries staff, and the church. We will hear that statement now.

Stassi Cramm:

The time has come for the church to move to a budget supported only by tithing income, undesignated bequests, and service/rental income that come into the church annually. Based on the generous response of the church in calendar year 2015, beginning July 1, 2016, we are planning contributions of at least \$13 million annually of world ministries mission tithes.

Although we will build a budget based on \$13 million, we hope the church will tithe more than this. Additionally, we estimate that the church will receive \$3.5 million in undesignated bequests and service/rental income. Thus, World Church leadership will present a \$16.5 million budget for fiscal year 2017 to the World Church Finance Board. This is a \$6.32 million reduction to the budget we originally thought we would have. Because our budget expenses are 75 percent staff related, there is no option other than to significantly reduce staff again to meet this new budget target.

The church has faced financial challenges like this before. I recently was reminded of the debt-reduction years of 1931 to 1938. We are taking lessons from this period, and our hope is based on the outcomes of that situation, where, as F. Henry Edwards wrote, "it was recognized that what was needed was not recrimination but a united front in meeting a situation which posed threats against that which all held dear" (*The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, vol. 8) We are here today because of the faithful response of generous stewards who supported the church in those years and in the years leading to this moment.

Now it is our time to pull together as a church while tightening our belts to strengthen our financial future and remaining focused on Christ's mission, which is what matters most. The financial circumstances we now face have a variety of causes. In the late 1990s, the church significantly increased the number of paid ministers during Transformation 2000, hoping tithing would increase to pick up the budget requirements when the Transformation 2000 pledges ended. The increase did not happen. In many places, we also did not see an increase in existing or new disciples who became regular contributors according to their capacity.

Instead of making significant reductions, we depended on the strength of our endowments and other investments because earnings in the marketplace were very good. However, the economic downturn in 2008 significantly affected the church's finances. Since 2008, budget adjustments have been made, trying to find an annual level that was sustainable. Instead of making a significant reduction that might have been too much, we worked at reducing expenses annually and then reassessing sustainability. We've also worked diligently to keep full-time world ministries staff that support and lead the church's mission. Every budget reduction has been heart-wrenching as church leaders attempted to respond to missional opportunities that continue to open around the world. This process also impacted the principal of our World Ministries and Temple endowments.

Amid these decisions was an awareness the church has a significant investment in what has been known as the Little Blue Valley, now Harmony, development project. This is just over 3,250 acres in eastern Jackson County, Missouri. We have waited with anticipation, hoping the opportunity to develop this land would allow us to model for others the nature of healthy and diverse zionic community living.

We still anticipate the opportunity to embody this important Restoration principle through our ministry. But we now realize we have to make immediate budget decisions because income to support the mission of the church through this development will not be available. Because the global economy remains unpredictable, development of this land will not happen in a timely enough fashion to maintain our planned budget level.

Therefore, it is now apparent that by 1 July 2016 we need to move to a significantly reduced budget based solely on our incoming cash each year to allow the opportunity to strengthen our financial position and bridge to the future.

Our way forward is similar to the approach used in 1931 called "The Way Out."

1. We will reduce staff and expenses to work within a balanced and sustainable budget based on tithing and other cash sources projected in a fiscal year.
2. We will limit expansion and provide for future growth on a basis of increased tithing that is sustainable.
3. We will liquidate World Church assets that are not directly supporting the church's mission.
4. We will begin and continue the buildup of endowments and appropriately discharge debts and unfunded liabilities.
5. We will continue to preach and teach generosity and living to our true capacity in all aspects of our lives, including our finances, not because the church is in the fund-raising business, but because we are in the disciple- and stewardship-formation business. We are standing on our understanding from Doctrine and Covenants 147:5a that "Stewardship is the response of my people to the ministry of my Son and is required alike of all those who seek to build the kingdom. The spiritual authorities are urged to so teach with renewed vigor in recognition of the

great need, and let nothing separate them from those who have more specific responsibilities in the temporal affairs of the church.”

From our own story, we learn the response of the church was amazing to President Frederick M. Smith’s debt-reduction program and the presiding bishop’s statement titled, “The Way Out.” Through our story, we witness how God is always in our midst, calling us forward. We also recognize that Blessings of Community are realized in difficult times, as well as the best of times. We can step out with the assurance the actions they took and the actions we will take are not just “The Way Out.” Our actions are “The Way Forward” as we faithfully respond together with whole-life stewardship for the sake of the kingdom.

Steve Veazey:

For reasons that are obvious now, I have been reflecting a lot lately on a phrase from Doctrine and Covenants 161:7: “The path will not always be easy, the choices will not always be clear...” That certainly is true.

In fact, it seems the way hardly ever is easy for Community of Christ. Just as we pass through one storm, another forms and overtakes us before we can catch our breath. At least that’s how it feels right now.

Cynics may conclude the church is being punished for some failing or misdirection. I don’t believe that. If it were, then all previous generations of God’s faithful were condemned, too, because they all suffered severe trials during their sojourns on Earth.

Recently, I read portions of the Book of Hebrews. This epistle was intended originally for a community of disciples who had come to the Christian faith from the Hebrew religion. They had left all that was familiar to follow the way of Christ. Their faith and hope teetered on the edge of despair because of mounting disappointments and suffering. Some were about to give up.

The writer of Hebrews offered encouragement by reciting the famous and not-so-famous personalities of their past who had suffered just as much, even more. The message became clear and compelling. Faithfulness and righteousness do not guarantee an easy passage in life. Also, great difficulty does not mean those striving to respond to the call of God are going in the wrong direction. According to Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 NRSV).

Applying the Book of Hebrews’ perspective to our situation, we could say something like: We stand in a long line of faithful disciples who have withstood hardship, hunger, persecution, economic reversals, poverty, violent deaths of leaders, uncertainty, world calamities, and much more. And yet, every time, because of our stubborn faith and hope, and our commitment to the grand vision God has laid before us, we rise again to continue the journey.

So, what will we do? We will do whatever we must to meet and transcend the challenges before us. We will call out the best in each other as we work together to forge solutions. We will tend our wounds and allow our brokenness to enlarge our compassion for others. We will sacrifice so future generations of the church will thrive.

What can we do? Here are four actions we can take now:

1. **Let us pray for one another!** This will get harder before it gets better. In the final analysis, prayer, faith, and loving support will see us through.
2. **Let our generosity flow!** We must sustain our current levels of giving. And, for those who have the means, increase your generosity through world and local mission tithes.
3. **Let us gather together as a worldwide faith community!** We need to be with each other to worship, testify, and fellowship. Be at World Conference to join in important discussions and decision-making that will chart our future. Even if you are not a delegate, your participation is vital.
4. **Let us invite others to Christ and discipleship!** Many people will respond readily to our invitation to become disciples in fellowship and mission. We must increase our efforts to make new disciples of all ages!

Yes, as Section 161:7 states, “The path will not always be easy, the choices will not always be clear...” But don’t stop reading the passage there. It goes on to say, “...**but the cause is sure...**”

Recently a colleague sent the following reading by Parker Palmer that spoke truth to my soul:

...there is a hard truth to be told: Before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, **the conditions for rebirth are being created.**