



Chapter 3

Jesus Christ

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the world, fully human and fully divine. Through Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection, God reconciles the world and breaks down the walls that divide. Christ is our peace.

Introduction

This paragraph affirms that the heart of the church's life is not an idea, a cause, or a program, but a person. Jesus Christ is the living center of the faith, worship, and action of Community of Christ. We exist not to proclaim ourselves, but to proclaim him (2 Corinthians 4:5). Jesus gives the decisive shape and unique texture to what the church means when we speak of "God," for in our faith Christ incarnates the second person of the Trinity. In this way we can speak of Jesus as the "human face of God," and this is why he is so central to the church's identity. Apart from sharing and embodying the message of Christ the church has no reason for being. Our identity and story, our worship and sacraments, our mission and service to God's world all revolve around Jesus of Nazareth, like the planets of the solar system revolve around the sun. What the author of Colossians said about the universe is also true specifically of the church's life: In Christ "all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17).

"We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the World." The familiar words of this paragraph are not empty titles. They bulge with meaning and mystery. They reflect not only the consistent, life-changing experience of Christians across two

millennia, but also the experience members of our worldwide community continually have today as they come to believe in, know, and serve Christ. Swahili-speaking members sing, “Yesu ni muamba” (“Jesus is the rock”). Tagalog-speaking members sing, “Ang pangalan Niya’y matibay na sandigan” (“His name is a strong foundation”). Bemba-speaking members sing, “Takwaba uwanbanga Yesu!” (“There’s no one like Jesus”). Spanish-speaking members sing “Christo es la vida de mi alma” (“Christ is the life of my soul”). And English-speaking church members sing, “Jesus, name above all names.” In these and many other languages members of Community of Christ voice their encounter with the reality of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

The church, then, must thoughtfully reflect on its proclamation of Christ. Who is Jesus for us today, in our postmodern, global, multi-cultural church? Who will we let Jesus be, as the church works amidst the profound threats and challenges of our endangered planet? We cannot bypass these questions, because quite candidly this paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement affirms that what we believe and teach about Jesus will be, in the words of one important twentieth-century Christian thinker, the “touchstone” of our whole theology.¹

Biblical Foundations

The person about whom the church sings and testifies is not a dead teacher from the past. He is the Christ, risen and present among us. This church knows this first from the sacred story of scripture, which is the “indispensable witness” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.7a) of God’s healing and transforming work in creation. The scriptures bear witness that Christ is “alive forever and ever” (Revelation 1:18), and the church lives from the power of that testimony, confirming the reality of Christ’s presence in our own experience.

The New Testament’s witness to Jesus Christ is foundational for the church. These 27 books were written by early Christian authors to help their churches know, interpret, and faithfully follow Jesus. These books declare the central mystery of the Christian faith, whether in the four Gospels, which tell of the life and ministry of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, or in the Book of Acts, which tells how the Holy Spirit helped the community of his followers become a culturally diverse community, or in the Letters, by which apostles or their companions guided churches in the struggles of discipleship, or in the Apocalypse, which calls disciples to faithfulness in

¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 66.

the midst of oppression.

Christ who was crucified is risen and present among us as Lord. When the earliest Christians called him Lord (*Kyrios* in their native Greek) they were expressing that no one else, not even the Roman emperor, was worthy of their ultimate loyalty and worship. Surprisingly, they did not find their exalted language for Jesus inconsistent either with their Jewish heritage or the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures that “from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other (Isaiah 45:6). Instead, they saw his life, ministry, and presence in their midst as the further unfolding of the promises Israel’s God had made to their ancestors. Indeed, in Christ they experience that ultimacy which the faith of the Old Testament had reserved solely for the God of creation and exodus, of worship and wisdom, of hope and promise. As theologian Kathryn Tanner maintains, “The divine in Christ comes with no fanfare, no evident power and glory; what one sees is an obviously human life and really not much more than that. The divinity of Christ appears after the fact, as a kind of inference from this particular human life’s affects: ‘believe me from the works I do,’ to paraphrase John 14:11.”²

How did those early Christians come to that awareness? When Jesus first appeared, preaching the kingdom of God, he gathered a small group of disciples around him. These followers were both men and women, and were Palestinian Jews, like Jesus. The Gospels relate that, like us, they were sometimes very slow to understand Jesus and his message. They saw his deeds of power and heard his words of liberation and promise: “the kingdom of God has come near!” (Mark 1:15). Many of them simply dropped everything to follow him. They watched Jesus touch lepers, eat with sinners, invite the poor and the lost into God’s kingdom, welcome women as full disciples, and reclaim the rejected. The disciples heard Jesus teach with authority, challenge religious narrowness, command demons to leave the oppressed, and pray with tenderness to the God he called “Abba” — “my father.” But what did all this mean? Little wonder that at some moments all the disciples could do was ask, “Who then is this...?” (Mark 4:41).

Jesus questioned the disciples, too. At a pivotal point in his ministry, he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am”? (Matthew 16:15). In a flash of inspiration, Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). But Peter’s moment of revelation

² Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 299.

vanished as Jesus then spoke of what this really meant. To be the Messiah, God's agent of salvation, was not about domination or conquest; it was about self-emptying love that would take the form of death on a Roman cross. The disciples were not ready for that kind of revelation.

Only "on the third day," in the brilliant light of that first Easter, did the truth begin to dawn on the disciples. The One who was now powerfully present in their midst as exalted Lord had *always* been Lord. Only in Easter's radiance could they see that Jesus' cross was really God's love in action: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). They now believed and declared that his death and resurrection constituted the turning point of history, for a new creation had begun. Old barriers between Jew and Gentile had tumbled; the dividing wall between "us" and "them" had fallen; the world as the disciples knew it could not again be the same. What had happened was surely by divine action, and thus the disciples proclaimed that Jesus was and remained truly "God with us." In Christ they experienced the breathtaking, liberating, community-forming power of God as the Holy Spirit. They strained to find symbols, titles, and images to express the depth of this new experience: redemption, salvation, justification, reconciliation, new creation; Christ, Lord, High Priest, Sacrifice, Lamb, Life, Light, Bread, Son, even "God."

Out of this cumulative experience, the author of the Fourth Gospel penned verses that forever sum up why the church holds that Christ is the center of its life: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth....From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace....No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1:14-18). The insights that led to the doctrine of the Trinity (explored in Chapter 2) did not spring from esoteric speculation but from the experience of the earliest Christians. The road to that doctrine began as soon as Jesus' first followers dared to call him "Lord."

The New Testament testifies that Jesus is the unique, decisive embodiment of God's love and compassion. Jesus' every act exemplified *shalom*: that blend of community-forming justice and love that alone makes things right. With courage and boldness, Jesus had made known God's will, because he was God's will, in person. As the Risen One he makes it known still. Included in the divine will is the call for disciples to grow into Christlikeness as we come to know him and the promise of his kingdom more fully. Faith in Jesus Christ is vital for a church that bears

his name. He is not a second best, as if we could bypass him for God. For what we as Christians mean by “God” is glimpsed most clearly through the lens of the good news of Jesus. At the heart of the sacred story is this person, in whom God’s eternal Word became incarnate, who was sent for creation’s redemption and lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Tradition

The person scripture proclaims as Lord, Christ, Word, and Savior is also known to us through the centuries-long story of the Christian tradition. Community of Christ is linked to “Christians in every place and in every time by our mutual confession of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, author of our salvation, and head of the whole church.”³ Indeed, if generations of Christians before us had not faithfully handed on the sacred story and bore witness of the living Christ, Community of Christ would never have come into existence. We have often forgotten that fact in our past journey. Across the ages, people from diverse times and places have also found in Jesus Christ a sure foundation for their spiritual journey, both in life and in death. We are forever indebted to this great cloud of witnesses.

The voice of the Christian tradition consistently affirms that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. When our denomination confesses that Christ is “fully human and fully divine,” we identify with this long history of Christian faith and worship. The Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 C.E. declared that Jesus as God’s Son was “perfect in divinity and also perfect in humanity; truly God and truly a human being.” These words were not a later innovation or a departure from the Gospels, but a faithful reaffirmation of the central message of the New Testament, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). In another vastly different cultural setting almost fifteen centuries later, a few courageous Christians in Germany found the strength to resist fascism by declaring that Christ alone was their true center, “the one Word of God, whom we are to hear...to trust and obey in life and in death.”⁴

Again and again across the long arc of the centuries, thoughtful Christians have professed in every new situation that Jesus Christ is God’s self-revelation, worthy of their responsive trust. Community of Christ’s Basic Beliefs and an additional statement titled “We Proclaim Jesus

³ “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 58.

⁴ The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany (1934).

Christ”⁵ depend on and speak from this long Christological tradition and align us with it. These frail human words help us faithfully declare the divine mystery we experience through Christ’s presence among us. The Jesus we yearn to follow is one who has called martyrs and monks—Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu, Oscar Romero and Mother Teresa—to bear witness of him. Our community journeys in their company.

This historic witness of the Christian faith has been at the heart of our church since our beginnings in the 1820s and 30s. Joseph Smith Jr.’s earliest account of his vision in a grove comes from 1831–32. There Joseph recalls an experience he had when he was about 15 years old. As he prayed for forgiveness of his sins, the Risen Christ appeared to him. Joseph remembered that Christ assured him of forgiveness and reminded Joseph “I am the Lord of glory; I was crucified for the sins of the world....”⁶ It is important for us always to remember that our movement began in an encounter with Christ.

A few years later, in 1838, Joseph offered a compelling statement of the centrality of Christ for our community. He wrote in a newsletter at Far West, Missouri, “The fundamental [principle] of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven,’ and all other things are only appendages to these.”⁷ Joseph’s declaration here and also in an earlier statement (Doctrine and Covenants 17:5c–d, from 1833) echoes the language of the Bible and the ancient Christian baptismal creeds. In the spirit of that tradition, Joseph maintained that the apostolic witness of Jesus’ identity, death, and resurrection must be the central focus of the church’s life; everything else in our heritage must be considered secondary. Our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ and offer the world a credible twenty-first-century witness in word and deed of what it means to follow him.

⁵ See *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 4th ed. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2018): 58–60. Also found at www.CofChrist.org/we-proclaim-jesus-christ.

⁶ Richard P. Howard, “An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Restoration Studies I: Sesquicentennial Edition*, ed. Maurice L. Draper and Clare D. Vlahos (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 97. See also Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 51–67.

⁷ *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44.

Members of our church have constantly sought to reaffirm this truth and live by it, even when other forces and interests have distracted our attention. Familiar hymns, like Vida Smith's beloved "There's an Old, Old Path"⁸ and Joseph Smith III's "Tenderly, Tenderly"⁹ have reminded us across decades that Christ is our companion on our journey together. The sacraments, notably baptism and the Lord's Supper, regularly represent the way of Jesus Christ to us, recalling his baptism in the Jordan and setting before us the emblems of his sacrificial death. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God has ever inspired the church to work for a better world. In the 1920s and 1930s,

President Frederick M. Smith frequently reminded the church that following Jesus Christ was not merely about personal salvation but about social reform: to be disciples commits us to act for just working conditions, better societies, and a different kind of world.¹⁰ And as the church discerned the Holy Spirit inviting us to move beyond its limited traditional vision of itself in the early 1960s, leaders like Clifford Cole reminded us that "on the frontier all signs point to Christ."¹¹

It was in the context of this call to world mission that a profound experience happened in 1967. Church leaders knew that in order to respond more fully to Christ's mission, they must engage deeply with the historic Christian tradition and learn from it. So they invited several professors from a United Methodist seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, to begin a series of seminars with them. W. Paul Jones, one of those professors, later recounted an incident in the first meeting that marks a turning point in our church's journey. After a time of introductory conversation, he felt he needed to know how Christian this small and unusual church was. So he asked President W. Wallace Smith directly, "If our mutual studies of Christianity and the RLDS Church were to reveal a discrepancy between what Jesus taught and what Joseph Smith taught, which would you accept?" Jones remembered that the room became very quiet as all eyes turned to President Smith. He took a breath and without faltering said, "We would have to go with Jesus."¹²

⁸ *Community of Christ Sings*, 244.

⁹ *Community of Christ Sings*, 256.

¹⁰ See Frederick M. Smith, "Christianizing Society," *The Writings of F.M. Smith*, vol. 1, comp. N. Ruoff (Independence, MO: Herald House, 19), 147–60.

¹¹ Clifford Cole, *The Revelation in Christ* (Independence, MO: Herald, 1963), 88.

¹² Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016), 296.

That little-known incident marked a watershed for our denomination. From that moment on, all signs would indeed point to Christ. But in an important sense President Smith was saying nothing new. Rather, he was faithfully re-expressing an instinct as old as Joseph Smith's declaration in 1838: Jesus Christ, whom the church confesses to be the Word of God Incarnate and Giver of the Divine Spirit, is at the center of Community of Christ's identity, mission, message, and worship. All else is secondary.

It should come as no surprise that a church proclaiming Jesus as its center would eventually open its Communion table to all believers, change its name to reflect its true identity, join in ecumenical solidarity with other churches to promote justice, labor with Mennonites and Catholics and Quakers in the cause of peace and reconciliation, and welcome the baptisms of other Christians. The way of Jesus is the way of self-emptying love (Philippians 2:5–8), of losing ourselves to find ourselves, of service to others with no thought of cost to self, of spending oneself lavishly for the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:45–46). To believe in Jesus Christ is more than saying the right words; it is to covenant to these values of the reign of God, to be open to the risks and joys they entail. This is Community of Christ's "unique and sacred place," which we now take within the centuries-old, never-broken circle of all who call Jesus Christ Lord (Doctrine & Covenants 161:1b).

At this time in our shared journey it is imperative we make very clear that when Community of Christ uses the terms Christ, Son, Lord, Word, and Savior for Jesus, we mean exactly what the Christian tradition has always meant. Before the forces of violence, hatred, nationalism, ignorance, and greed confronting the Postmodern world, it has never been more important that we declare where our central point of reference is found. The Basic Beliefs Statement tries to do that in faithful openness to the One who calls the church to mission.

Application for Discipleship

Abba Paul was a fourth-century Egyptian Christian who belonged to a group of dedicated believers historians call the desert fathers and mothers. In the solitude of the wilderness they sought to live the radical depths of the gospel. Their sayings and deeds have captivated Christians for more than fifteen centuries as a testimony of whole-hearted devotion. Virtually nothing is known of Abba Paul. But one of his few recorded

sayings arrests our attention: “Stay close to Jesus.”¹³ These wise, simple words gracefully sum up what the life of discipleship is about. What does it look like to stay close to Jesus?

To believe in Jesus Christ should not be confused with holding a set of opinions. To believe, as stated in Chapter 2, is to entrust ourselves to the whole way of life Jesus embodied and taught. In our church in the 1870s and 1880s, it was customary in some locations for the baptismal candidate to “make the covenant.” This part of the sacrament occurred just before baptism. The officiant would publicly ask the candidate, “Do you covenant before God to take upon you the name of Christ, to obey his gospel, and to live up to it to the best of your ability while life with you shall last, God being your helper?” To an answer of “yes” the baptizer would then respond, “May God enable you to fulfill your covenant from henceforth and forever. Amen”¹⁴ This old formula is no longer used but still recalls a perennial truth: invited by God’s grace into the Way of Jesus, the disciple’s daily task is marked out by baptism. In baptism we yield to God’s embrace and pledge to practice the way of Christ, which is the way of self-emptying love. We stay close to Jesus by living in his love: for self, for neighbors, for enemies, for the creation, and for God.

We also stay close to Jesus by doing what he did. Jesus welcomed outsiders, like a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13). So, we will practice seeing Christ in the face of the stranger, the refugee, and the immigrant. Jesus was a friend to all, yet the special ally of the poor. So, we follow him by giving preference to the marginalized, outcasts, and the impoverished, and work for their well-being. Jesus confronted prejudice and injustice: whether his disciples’ racism toward Samaritans, or his culture’s economic exploitation of people in the Temple. So, the church will not be afraid to confront any who abuse, exploit, or mistreat people.

Jesus rejected interpretations of religion that oppressed or demeaned people. So, the church will reject as counterfeit any interpretations of the Christian message that diminish, oppress, or perpetrate physical or emotional violence against God’s beloved children. Jesus associated with people victimized by principalities and powers, and at risk to himself he empowered his disciples to create change. So, we will

¹³ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. with forward by Benedicta Ward; preface by Metropolitan Anthony (Trappist, KY: Cistercian, 1984), 205. The term “abba” was a respectful way to address desert monks who had advanced on the spiritual journey. “Amma” was the address for women monastics of mature spirituality.

¹⁴ John J. Cornish, *Into the Latter Day Light* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1929), 24.

be a community that risks its comfort for the sake of those who have no voice. We do well to remember the words of the twentieth-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who held that “the church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”¹⁵ This is the risk inherent in staying close to Jesus.

How else shall a church that believes in Jesus and his way stay close to him? Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God’s reign. So, we will pray as he taught, hallowing God’s name and making the kingdom of God our life’s deepest concern. “The kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus said (Luke 17:21). If the reality of God’s reign is already present, then we will live and serve in hope, connecting with people of other faiths who also share this vision of a transformed world. Jesus came to announce that God’s reign had dawned and salvation had come. So, the church will seek to make his work of releasing the captives its own way of life (Luke 4:18). Jesus forbade his disciples to fight for him or use violence to achieve any goals. So, we will learn to let Jesus disarm us and guide our feet in the way of peace, and we will work for peace and justice wherever we live. As Jesus embodies God’s shalom (Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a), so will we seek to live out the fullness of God’s peace in our homes, churches, communities, and in relation to the endangered ecosystem to which we belong.

If we want to stay close to Jesus, we will also not shrink from preaching the cross, as he did not shrink from accepting it. We will proclaim that in Christ crucified, dead, and buried we encounter the wounded heart of God. God’s self-emptying love reveals and heals our sin: whether that sin be our active or passive refusal to live by the love Jesus embodied. By the word of the cross the church also declares what God has done for the whole injured creation, entering the darkest depths of human misery. From the remembrance of Christ’s cross, we will learn day by day that only in relinquishing our intense desire to control others do we truly live. We will preach the cross of Christ, so that all victims will know that God shares in their suffering, and so that victimizers will see what they have done. As Jesus’ death broke down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14), so we will be a community that learns to practice the costly art of reconciliation. Christ was crucified once for all,

¹⁵ From Bonhoeffer’s 1933 essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in *A Testament to Freedom: the Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 132.

and so we will teach that history demands no more crucifixions, no more scapegoats, and no more casualties.

We will stay close to Jesus, the Risen Lord. On the way to Emmaus, he made himself known to two disciples in the breaking of bread. So, we will declare the resurrection of the Crucified One in every celebration of the Lord's Supper and every gathering of the church. Because Christ was victorious over death, we will make our churches places where life can always begin again. Christ has triumphed over the grave; thus, we will not be ashamed to speak of eternal life and the hope of the age to come. At the same time, we will fearlessly let our hope for the age to come empower us to make Earth into heaven now. Christ's resurrection brought change. Therefore, we will not let Christian hope become an excuse for oppressors to keep oppressing, exploiters to keep exploiting, and abusive systems to remain unchallenged. Christ is *risen*, and so we will not give half-hearted service to him, to the community, and all who need us. The Basic Belief Statement reaffirms that God raised Jesus from the dead; in that confession of faith the church finds the power to bless our world and its creatures, especially the weak and the powerless and the voiceless, and to stand against those forces that deal in hate and death.

Conclusion

The church's identity—all that it hopes for, affirms, and yearns to become—is already present in Jesus Christ. What we therefore believe and teach about Jesus of Nazareth matters profoundly. This has always been true for Christians and is at the heart of Community of Christ's journey. Simply stated, "staying close to Jesus" is both a disposition and an action. It is to be the disciple's daily response to the unfathomable grace of God we have experienced in Christ. Therefore, the second paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement places before the church once again the person in and through whom God has embraced, called, and liberated us for divine service. Jesus is the One into whose life, death, and resurrection we have been baptized, the One through whom we have glimpsed life in its fullness, the One who is "the light of the world" (John 8:12), the One who is our peace. "We live and serve in hope that God's kingdom of justice and peace will indeed come, bringing healing to the whole, groaning creation. Putting our trust in the Risen Christ, present among us by the Holy Spirit,

we press on together, giving blessing, honor, and glory to God, now and forevermore. Amen.”¹⁶

For Further Reading

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963 [1937]).

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999).

Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2014), chapter 4: “The Triune God,” 66–95.

William C. Placher and Derek R. Nelson. *A History of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2013).

Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

“We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs*, 4th ed. (Independence, MO: Herald House, 2018). Also at <http://www.cofchrist.org/we-proclaim-jesus-christ>

Testimony by Keith McMillan

Most encounters with Jesus begin with a simple invitation. The congregation I attended — Village Heights Community of Christ — was asked to begin an after-school program for kids in a difficult neighborhood called Hawthorne Place. Our first (my first really) response was that we were too busy. We are a good congregation with a healthy youth group and a great group of people attending on Sundays. We didn’t know these kids and were afraid to go into this neighborhood which had become dangerous over the years. But we also had just completed a year-long process with the evangelists of our congregation in discerning what God was calling us to do.

¹⁶ “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” 60.

A couple of us met with the director of the complex to ask if we could begin a program. Her first question was "Who are you again?" We responded quite proudly, "We are Community of Christ." Her response was: "Well no one from your church has ever darkened our door." As she looked over the material we intended to teach she said, "Can you take Jesus out of the program?" I immediately said, "No. It is who we are and what we teach kids to become." Her response surprised and pleased me: "Well we have messed up our community trying to kick Jesus out of our neighborhood and the only way we can fix things is to invite him back."

We began an after-school program called Jesus and Me (JAM). We taught the kids by telling stories of Jesus, making crafts, and singing about him. Mostly, though, we got to be friends with the people of the neighborhood. At the end of the first day as we gathered in the gym and asked the kids if anyone would like to pray. One little girl, Sekile, raised her hand immediately. We handed her the mic and she said, "What's pray?" After we explained that she just shared with God and Jesus what was on her heart, her simple prayer was: "Jesus will you keep my daddy safe in prison."

Our congregation is still doing the JAM program after more than 10 years. Thousands of young people have been through the program over the years and lives have been changed by the love shown, our devotion to telling the story of Jesus, and just becoming friends with kids we would probably never have the opportunity to meet. We don't always get to see how God takes our devotion and turns it into a relationship with others. But sometimes we do. Sekile, who raised her hand to pray on that first day, became a member of Community of Christ, as did her mother. They moved out of that neighborhood and I lost touch with Sekile until last summer when I ran into her at Graceland University's Spectacular camp in Iowa. I didn't recognize her as she came running up to me. She told me she was Sekile, had joined the church many years ago, and now went to another congregation in Kansas City. As we hugged goodbye I asked her, "What's next for you?" "Oh, I am coming to Graceland in the fall to study to be a nurse!"

Amazing things happen when we have the courage to share Jesus with everyone we come in contact with.

Spiritual Practice: The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is an ancient prayer taught and favored in the Eastern Orthodox churches, originating as early as AD 600. Within this tradition invoking the name of Jesus holds power and connection with the Holy.

Allow yourself to become comfortable and quiet, aware of the presence of Christ. Try to imagine him standing before you. Concentrate on your breath. As you breathe in, become aware of the air entering into your lungs, filling you with life-giving oxygen. Focus as you exhale on the release of all that is not life-giving (e.g. concerns, worries, anger, stress, etc.). As you breathe in silently say, "Lord Jesus Christ." Imagine you are breathing into yourself the love and grace and presence of Jesus and his peace. Hold your breath for a moment, aware that you are holding within you Christ's presence and grace. As you breathe out silently say the second part of the prayer, "Have mercy on me," and imagine that as you do this anything that impedes your ability to receive Christ's presence is removed from you. Continue this rhythm of breathing in "Lord Jesus" or "Lord Jesus Christ" (or phraseology that is comfortable to you) and breathing out "Have mercy on me."

Anthony De Mello writes: "The words 'Have mercy on me' do not mean just 'Pardon me my sins.' Mercy, as the Eastern Orthodox used the word, means much more: It means grace and loving kindness. So when you are asking for mercy, you are asking for Christ's graciousness and loving kindness and for the anointing of his Spirit."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Who is Jesus for you? (examples: savior, friend, example). Why do you choose this name?
2. If a child were to ask you "Who is Jesus?" how would you answer?