



Chapter 9

The Church

God intends Christian faith to be lived in companionship with Jesus Christ and with other disciples in service to the world. The church of Jesus Christ is made of all those who respond to Jesus' call. Community of Christ is part of the whole body of Christ. We are called to be a prophetic people, proclaiming the peace of Jesus Christ and creating communities where all will be welcomed and brought into renewed relationship with God, and where there will be no poor.

Introduction

In Community of Christ, “church” has many meanings. The word “church” commonly refers to a building or place. It can also mean the specific group of people who are one’s worshipping and missional community. In this sense, the word stands for congregational life, whether the gathering is large or small. Often, we use the term “church” to refer to our denomination as a whole. And we also use the term for all those who in every place look to Christ as God’s love revealed. The community called “the church” births and nurtures disciples, those who follow the way of Jesus.

In Community of Christ we experience being the church at reunions and camps, at conferences in mission centers, in online ministries, in other creative new expressions of practicing Christian community, and gathered at International Headquarters for World

Conference. We experience the life of the church in worship and singing, in works of hospitality, healing, and justice, in celebrating sacraments, and in the struggles and delights of life together. God has formed the church in the world to proclaim Jesus Christ and live out a glimpse of God's future reign in the here and now. The idea of church has universal and even cosmic significance. Indeed, we believe the life and witness of the church is one of the primary ways God pursues the divine mission of reconciliation in the world.

Biblical Foundations

"Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation" (Psalms 111:1). Biblical authors understood that life before God was essentially a collective experience. From Israel's liberation from slavery to the Day of Pentecost, the narrative of scripture identifies as God's chief witness in the world the worshiping community. Moses tells Pharaoh that God says, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exodus 8:1). Paul appeals to the church in Rome, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). God intends the life of faith to be life in community.

The sacred journey of the Old Testament recalled an ever-widening circle of relationships between the people of Israel and God. The initial relationship was between God and a family. God enters into a mutual covenant with Abraham and Sarah for the blessing of all the nations (Genesis 12–18). Israel later preserved the memory that God was the God of their ancestors. The phrase "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" was an abbreviated way of recalling that the story of God's people began with extended families.

God remains faithful to this ancestral covenant by compassionately freeing the descendants of Abraham and Sarah from slavery in Egypt. The story of the Exodus reminds its readers that God did not release the Israelites to be a loose association of individuals, pursuing their own private ends. Rather, God liberated them to be a servant community. The Mosaic covenant begins with a reminder to the newly freed slaves that theirs is to be a shared life in service to God: "you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God's gracious call and act of redemption in the Exodus was the foundation of the covenant relationship. Worship and service was the people's response to God's gift to them. The Old Testament understands that the call to community is at

the heart of God's revelation. Israel's response to the gift of a covenant relationship with God was to live in gratitude and justice. Importantly, their task as God's people depended on God's prior gift. God's grace forms people into a community with shared memories and a shared vision of their life in the world.

New Testament writers use the word "church" over a hundred times. In their native Greek, the term for church was *ekklēsia*. It literally refers to a group of people who have been "called out" or summoned together for a task. In the New Testament, as in the Old, to be a covenant community is a divine gift before it is a duty. God's call is what gives the community its distinctive identity; its mission flows out of this gift. This is why Paul so often refers to members of the community as "saints." It is not because they possess extraordinary personal holiness. They are "saints" or "sanctified," rather, because God has set them apart to engage in the divine mission. As Israel was set free so that they might worship God, so did the Holy Spirit sent through Jesus Christ form Jews and Gentiles into a new worshipping community, called to live in love and service (Romans 12:1).

The church was born out of Jesus' activity of calling women and men to be part of his new community. There was nothing inherently special about Peter or Mary Magdalene or Thomas or Salome. The Gospel writers do not conceal from readers that imperfect people made up the nucleus of the church. What bound them together was their response to Jesus' invitation to follow him. Following meant that they were to learn from Jesus, to imitate him, and to live in his way. And they were to do this together. The church was to be a communion of disciples, not a loose connection of spiritual individualists. We see this truth clearly in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. Even though the disciples are depressed and scattered, the experience of the resurrection calls them to find each other so they can be together again. It is essential for members of Community of Christ today, especially in individualistic cultures, to rediscover from the Gospels that "being church" is intrinsic to following Jesus. This paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement affirms that the church was not an afterthought or a hindrance to the way of life Jesus taught. Life in sacred community *is* the way he taught.

Jesus Christ is God's eternal Word made flesh. He came embodying "the fullness of deity" (Colossians 2:9). If God's nature is love, an outgoing love focused on the well-being of the other, then we should not be surprised that Christ created a community. Not only would this community bring the good news to the world, it would be Christ's body—

his very presence—in the world. During Jesus’ ministry people who were near him found peace and a new vision of life. An inexpressible power drew people to Jesus—often people who would not have associated with each other. This same power drew his followers to each other in what the New Testament writers call *koinōnia*: “fellowship,” or better, “community/communion.” Community is God’s language of unconditional love. That is why Paul uses the same word that refers to the Christian community to identify the experience of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13).

The Spirit works for the conversion and transformation of life precisely in the relational setting of the church. Connecting with Jesus changes people. Interestingly, in the Gospels, this connection with Jesus typically happens in gatherings. “As he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples” (Matthew 9:10). Acceptance and reconciliation were communal experiences, not just individual ones. God’s revelation in Christ formed not just individuals, but a people—a *koinōnia* with a common *koinos* (vision).

Jesus’ death jeopardized the future of his community of believers. Amid the grief of Good Friday and the darkness of Holy Saturday, the community itself experienced a kind of death. Yet through the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna, the embryonic church survived this trauma. The church would be reborn “on the third day” at the astonishing news, “He has been raised” (Mark 16:6). The resurrection was not only an event that happened to Jesus; it happened to his disciples, too. Through the risen Christ’s own counsel to his disciples in the form of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20), and by the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2), the community Jesus created in Galilee took new shape. Jesus’ disciples began a mission that would embrace the whole world. The presence of the Risen One among them transformed them and set them aflame with passion for the way of life he had shown them.

Among the values the new community cherished were hospitality to strangers, care for the poor, and right relationship with God and each other. They regularly recalled Christ crucified and present among them by celebrating the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11: 24–26). The signal characteristic of their life together was *agapē*: love that sought only the welfare of the other. The church was the body of Christ, the visible means of grace by which this kind of good news could be lived out and proclaimed everywhere.

The church is not incidental to the good news. It belongs, rather, to the essence of the good news. Human beings were created for the community. We are the image of God, a God whose very being is an eternal community of three coequal persons. Thus, forming and living amid the joys and risks of community is part of the revelation in Christ. A responsible reading of the New Testament insists that Christianity without the church is unimaginable.

Tradition

God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is the author of the marvelous work called the church. As Anne Clifford observes the English word “church” derives from the Greek word *kyriakos*. It means, “belonging to the Lord.”¹ This word originally reminded Christians that the church has its being in Christ the Lord. Because the triune God is the church’s own source and ground, no one can claim ownership of the church or even grasp the full implications of this divinely formed community. We cannot “own” the church, but we can belong to it. We cannot fathom the church’s mystical depths as the visible body of Christ, but we can grow in community.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the earliest Christians used the term *ekklēsia* for their shared life together. The Greek word *ekklēsia* comes from a verb that originally meant “to call.” This originating meaning points properly to the activity of God. The church is a group of people that God has “summoned” to be together, but in a real sense God has called this community into being. The church is thus God’s work, which makes its members God’s coworkers. Understanding these important aspects of the church helps us avoid the common mistake of first thinking of the church as a building. Interestingly, it was not until the third century that Christians had “churches,” special buildings for gathering and worship. Until that time “church” always referred to a group of people. Whether with or without buildings, Jesus Christ continuously calls the church into being. His body consists of all those who have responded to his love and yearn to follow and proclaim him as Lord. Christ is thus the church’s “essence.”

Late in the second century Christian communities faced a dangerous challenge from a philosophy called Gnosticism. Gnostics used Christian language and texts, but interpreted them in abstract,

¹ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 133.

individualistic ways. Gnostic teachers typically denied the value of the material creation. Because they viewed flesh and matter as evil, they did not believe the Christian God was the creator of this world, and they consequently rejected belief in a real Incarnation. Christ, many Gnostics said, only seemed to be a full human being: he wore the body as a disguise that he shed later. Redemption depended not on believing in his life, death, and resurrection, but only trusting in secret truths that told Gnostics of their true identity as beings of light trapped in bodies. Salvation in the Gnostic view was not of the world, but from it. To many early Christian leaders and thinkers, these views endangered the good news of Jesus and belief in God's love for the world. While Gnostics often associated with Christian communities, their belief that most Christians were not "mature" enough for more enlightened Gnostic beliefs threatened the integrity of Christian communities.

In this context Christian communities developed a statement of faith that would eventually be called the Apostles Creed. This creed was first used in baptism services. It helped the fledgling church stay true to its core experiences and beliefs. This creed affirmed belief in God as creator of all things, in the saving reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and in the church as a visible community of the faithful. In fact, this statement of faith affirmed the importance of believing in "the holy, universal church."² This statement, in other words, asked candidates for baptism to pledge their loyalty to the visible, flesh and blood community. It rejects the Gnostic ideas that the church, like Christ's body itself, is unimportant, and rejects the idea that members of the church who believed in Christ's Incarnation could be dismissed as unenlightened. Instead, Christians affirmed that the life of the church is part of God's revelation to the world. In this way the Apostles' Creed appropriately restated a belief that was central to the Gospels and Paul's letters.

By believing *in* the church ancient Christian thinkers upheld several beliefs at once. One was their belief in God as creator and the goodness of creation including social structures. They affirmed the flesh and blood reality of Christ, now present in the flesh and blood community called the church. And they affirmed the world as the setting of God's mission and their role as leaven in the world. The *Letter to Diognetus* is an anonymous late second-century Christian text. It eloquently depicts the

² The Greek word for "universal" is *katholikos*, meaning literally "according to the whole." One of the first Christian writers to use the word was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, around the year 110 CE.

church's identity with an analogy from ancient psychology. "What the soul is to the body," writes the author, "Christians are to the world" (Diognetus 6:1).³ Christians are to give life to the creation, and especially to their social world, not to despise or reject these. The calling of the church is to be in the world and bring blessing. The church is not to flee from the world, but to help hold it together (Diognetus 6:7–10). It can only fulfill this calling, notes the author, if it is true to its own identity in Christ.

The story of the growth and expansion of the Christian community in the centuries that followed is complex, and so interwoven with world history, that it is impossible to tell the story fully here.⁴ But as the church developed, it faced, and always faces, a constant tension. That tension is between faithfulness to its identity as the body of Christ, and relevance to the varied cultural contexts in which it finds itself. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches grew out of the church of the late first and early second centuries. They worked to maintain continuity with the apostolic message in the late Roman Empire and then in the medieval world. These communities literally preserved and fostered the development of the Christian tradition for almost 1500 years. To them we owe deep gratitude, for many reasons, among them the fact that they bequeathed to later generations the manuscripts of our shared scriptures and much of our vital theological language, sacramental theology, and practical Christian wisdom.

The Reformation movements of the sixteenth century opened a space for new worship practices and new ways to use and understand the Bible, as well as for new approaches to imagining the church itself. In the centuries that followed, various revival movements tried to make Christianity practical and experiential for the masses that lived increasingly in the industrial and individualistic settings of the modern age.

We also owe a great debt to two twentieth-century theologians for their wisdom about the nature of the Christian church. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) maintained that the church is itself sacramental; as the elements of bread and wine, for example, are visible signs of divine grace, so the church itself is a visible sign of God's self-giving love for the world. The second figure is the Lutheran

³ *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. and transl. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 703.

⁴ See Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 2010).

theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). He is well known and widely revered for his resistance to Nazism, which cost him his life. Bonhoeffer taught that the church is actually the way in which the Risen Christ exists in the world. He held that to share life together in visible community, even with its struggles, is “grace, nothing but grace.”⁵

The postmodern situation of the church today brings major challenges to all churches, including Community of Christ. Old familiar forms of being the church seem increasingly irrelevant in the rapidly shifting landscape of the present time. In response, some Christian communities are evolving into new shapes. For example, the global pandemic that began in 2020 forced many Christian communities to experiment with meeting in the online environment. New expressions of “church,” such as online gatherings, create the opportunity to form fresh interpretations of Christian community that speak creatively to our global pluralistic world. In this context rediscovering from the New Testament and early Christian tradition that “church” was first and foremost a community of people, and not a place, has become powerfully relevant.

Community of Christ draws inspiration for what it means to be part of the church from all of these traditions: ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern. But we steadfastly affirm that from the time of Jesus to today, the world has never been without faithful manifestations of the body of Christ. It is within this centuries-old circle of “those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ” that we claim our “unique and sacred place” (Doctrine and Covenants 161:1b).

The experiences that birthed Community of Christ sprang from a yearning for the restoration of spiritual authority and authentic community, as early nineteenth-century American Protestants understood them. Features of this context included new democratic assumptions about religion, a belief in the validity of individual spiritual experience, suspicion of tradition, a desire for simplicity, and competition among various denominations. This theological context shaped the mind and experience of Joseph Smith Jr., the prophetic leader of the fledgling church. There were other prophetic figures in frontier religion, but few of the communities that formed around these leaders remain today.

Those who united with Joseph Smith’s movement also believed him to be a prophet and became a church around their convictions about his teachings, oracles, and interpretations of the gospel. Today, we can be

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. with intr. John Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 20.

both critical and grateful to the pioneering figures of our church. We can see that the church of these early Restoration ancestors shared in the patriarchal assumptions of its culture. They often over-focused on the prophet's authority, which eventually led to the need for reform and division. But the early Restoration church emphasized care of physical as well as spiritual needs and encouraged all believers to use their stewardship for the purpose of God's reign on earth. They also believed passionately that life in community best expressed both the gift and demands of the gospel. They viewed the church not merely as a way to prepare for life in heaven, but as a covenant community called to build heaven on earth. They believed the life of the church ought to transform things here and now. Their profound experiences of divine nearness continue to nurture Community of Christ's ecclesial imagination today.

Our movement is called to undertake God's mission in the world. This mission invites the church to live out a vision of God's peaceable kingdom wherever our community is found. The story in the Book of Acts that describes the earliest Jerusalem church sharing resources so all could live in equality (Acts 2 and 4:31–35) captivated early members of our church. From the experience of building the Kirtland Temple in Ohio, when the community had very few material resources, to the outpouring of gifts in recent years that helped put roofs on churches in Africa, sacrificial giving has characterized our experience of life together. The memory of these formative historic experiences and our ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ has opened us to the call to build "signal communities of justice and peace that reflect the vision of Christ" (Doctrine and Covenants 163.5a). This call highlights key features of our unique place within the Christian circle. To promote "communities of generosity, justice, and peacefulness" (Doctrine and Covenants 164.4b) is part of our vocation as a prophetic people.

Our tradition hands on to Community of Christ today the unique image of being a prophetic people. Our identity is found not only in the fact that the church is guided by a prophet. It is also found in the Holy Spirit's call to the whole church to live prophetically: to be a "prophetic people." An important twentieth-century leader of Community of Christ, F. Henry Edwards (1897–1991), voiced this awareness as early as 1963. He wrote:

Beyond doubt it is the will and purpose of God that his people shall be a prophetic people....The people of God should have neither time nor inclination to follow after every widely heralded cause which lays claim to their support.

But...church members lack the maturity required of their calling if they stand supinely by while members of minority groups are exploited or are denied their human rights, or if they neglect their duties as citizens because they consider politics “dirty business,” or if they manifest no sustained indignation against the betrayers of public trust, or make no significant protest when the children of the poor go hungry, or ill housed, or half educated. These are the things that concerned the prophets....⁶

Edwards’ remarks appeared in the context of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. He saw that the church’s past experience of being oppressed and marginalized gifted us with eyes to see and hearts to respond to the brutal experiences of racism and poverty—if we would listen. Indeed, deep listening to the cries of the oppressed characterized the ministries of the classical Hebrew prophets. So did courageously confronting political powers and social forces that had stripped people of dignity and laid waste to whole communities. Community of Christ as a church has been slow to rise to the challenge of its prophetic charter. To be a truly prophetic people remains one of the great challenges before Community of Christ in the twenty-first century.

Many denominations still claim to be the one true church and deny that salvation is possible outside their particular community. Community of Christ once followed that exclusivist path. But we are grateful that embedded in our tradition is the belief that God continuously calls the church to transformation. Through a long process of conversion, aided immensely by international mission and careful theological reflection, Community of Christ no longer claims to be the only Christian denomination with divine authority. In 2010, in fact, the church became a full member of the National Council of Churches of Christ, one of the premier ecumenical associations in the United States. Even before this time, Community of Christ members and jurisdictions had long experience in ecumenical and interfaith ministries around the world. We recognize that the Holy Spirit, like the wind, is free to blow where it will (John 3:8). Each community is called to offer its giftedness as part of the whole body of Christ. One of Community of Christ’s unique offerings is our passion to so live from God’s call that we embody in every aspect of our life together the image of Zion, where there are no poor and where every person is welcomed to a place at the table.

⁶ F. Henry Edwards, *The Divine Purpose in Us* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1963), 215, 218.

Application for Discipleship

The church is an intentional work of God. As the universal body of Christ, it exists as the means by which the Holy Spirit brings people into a living encounter with Jesus. The Spirit of Christ is working everywhere to transform people from self-centeredness into trust in God, from individualism into genuine communion with others. But the church is God's primary means of grace. It is one of the ways by which God brings forth the peaceable kingdom on earth. In our tradition, we have called this work the "cause of Zion."

We believe that God's will for creation is that every creature may come to know that kind of wholeness, justice, and peace, which the Hebrew Bible calls "shalom." The church exists as a visible community to forward this divine purpose. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!" (Matthew 6:10). The church's mission is inspiring, and it ennobles those who pursue it. It challenges disciples of Jesus to live in union with him, and to nurture healthy relationships with one another. Given the raw facts of the human experience, as explored in Chapter 7, authentic community has never been easy. Yet it is exactly this kind of life to which the Spirit of Christ calls us. This may be why Jesus prayed for all his disciples, "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). This prayer invites the church ever to enter into the trinitarian life of love for the other. In the spirit of that prayer, Community of Christ will actively work with and seek reconciliation with other communities in the circle, as well as those of other religions.

As the church pursues God's mission for the world, it is important for us to live in company with Christ who embodies that mission. Jesus said in John 15:5 "Apart from me you can do nothing." This means even in its most persistent efforts in mission, the church's work depends on the prior gift of new life in Christ. We nurture companionship with Jesus through spiritual practices and through mutuality in community. As people commit themselves to prayer and meditation, study and reflection, worship and *koinōnia*, this opens us to personal and corporate transformation (Doctrine and Covenants 161:3d). In this path transformation takes place in two ways. First, grace renews us as we travel in the inward journey toward Christ. Second, renewal comes as we travel the outward path with the community in service to others. The twenty-first century has brought widespread interest in spirituality.

Community of Christ congregations are called to live out distinctively Christian spiritual practices. This is not to diminish other ways. It is, rather, to claim the way we have been given. That way appears in the divine call to be a prophetic signal community in which the love of God for every creature is lavishly present.

What kind of community will we become? This is the kind of question a prophetic people ask themselves. They ask it because they know that powerful, destructive forces in the contemporary world seek to divide people from each other. Will the church let forces of nationalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, hatred, fear, and violence dictate our self-understanding? In the freedom that characterizes human life, God will indeed let us be who we want to be. But a prophetic people must ask a counter-question: into what kind of people will we let God make us? Here we can glimpse a distinctively Community of Christ answer in our mission initiatives: Invite People to Christ; Abolish Poverty, End Suffering; Pursue Peace on Earth; Develop Disciples to Serve; and Experience Congregations in Mission.

This path is deeply rooted in the Bible. It also has deep roots in the best thought from centuries of Christian tradition. And it is faithful to our historic journey. This contributes to the church's unique and sacred place within the circle of all who call upon Jesus Christ. Will the church be faithful to its unique vocation?

The Spirit has urgently reminded the church of its calling, its unique reason to exist: "God is calling for a prophetic community to emerge, drawn from the nations of the world, that is characterized by uncommon devotion to the compassion and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:11a). But this prompt is prefaced with the words, "Be vulnerable to divine grace" (163:10b). The way forward for the church called Community of Christ is the path of vulnerability. This is the way of Christ, which is the only path the church can take. A community that is truly vulnerable to God can also become a community vulnerable to a suffering world: open and exposed to the pain of creation, which simultaneously opens us to the healing power of God. This is the kind of community we want to be.

We bring to the table Christ's message of peace and our gifts of relationship and community building. We offer sacraments to people inside and outside the church. We strive to work ecumenically and with interfaith movements. We testify that God is working to bring us closer to the Christ who embraces everyone regardless of religion, race, color, gender, and sexual orientation (Galatians 3:28). We confess that the church

is to be a community where everyone experiences love and acceptance, a place of refuge and safety, a place of sanctuary and peace. We realize our limits to fulfill this task, and thus we ask always for “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:13). With God’s assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation, we yearn to create new expressions of the church where each person is welcomed and recognized, where no one experiences discrimination or prejudice, and where the transforming presence of Christ is vitally present. We proclaim the Christ whose love has no bounds. This is the kind of community we want to be.

More than a community with a prophet, we will struggle to become a prophetic community. Christ, the Word of God, became flesh. The church as part of his body continues his ministry. A Community of Christ affirmation titled “We Proclaim Jesus Christ” states it this way:

[Christ] prophetically condemned injustice in the temple and proclaimed the good news of the coming reign of God on Earth, preaching liberation to the oppressed and repentance to oppressors. He taught his followers to love God, to love their neighbors, and to love their enemies. By eating with sinners, serving the poor, healing the unclean, blessing children, and welcoming women and men as equals among his disciples, Jesus declared that all persons are of worth in the sight of God.⁷

Our prophetic message is to bring forth the peaceful reign of God on Earth and we generously commit our energies and resources for its realization. To be prophetic entails risk. It takes courage to boldly confront the systems and structures of selfishness and make them give way to God’s will and reign. “Above all else, strive to be faithful to Christ’s vision of the peaceable Kingdom of God on earth. Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue peace” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b). We will be a community that risks all for the peaceable kingdom.

Peace is central to the vision and calling of Community of Christ. It is deeply interwoven through scripture and embedded in our Enduring Principles, sacraments, and Basic Beliefs. We strive to be faithful to Christ’s vision of a peaceable kingdom, of a world in harmony. Jesus Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14). He is the source of our experience of peace, and our model of peacemaking. Jesus’ life and ministry personifies shalom. This kind of peace is costly. As a faith community striving to proclaim the peace of Jesus Christ, we will embrace the “cost of

⁷ “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 58–59; also at <http://www.cofchrist.org/we-proclaim-jesus-christ>.

discipleship” (Bonhoeffer). To seek peace and pursue it is our permanent commitment. This is the kind of community we believe we are to be.

One of the modern-day purposes of the church is to end poverty and unnecessary suffering. The Holy Spirit confirms that God is concerned for the welfare of the poor and those who suffer. In the cries of the poor we will train our ears to hear the call of the prophetic Spirit (Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a). A church that turns away from the poor and abandons them to their own fate has ceased to follow Jesus Christ. A church that follows Jesus, on the other hand, will make his mission (Luke 4:18–19) its own mission. It will unflinchingly extend compassion to the poor, and in the spirit of the Social Gospel Movement that since Frederick M. Smith’s ministry has contributed to our identity, we will work to confront and change those structures that condemn millions of people to suffering at the edges of their society. This mission started with Jesus. It defines who we are as a church and, if we follow it, we expect that we will never be popular. But we want to be the kind of community that unreservedly follows Jesus in the care and blessing of all, especially those who are the least.

Conclusion

God is leading the church into new and deeper forms of community. This is not for our own sake, even though blessing will come. It is for the blessing of the world. Far from being a useless relic from an earlier time, the church—life together in Christian community—has never been more essential to the health of the whole creation than it is in our time. Through consent or silence, churches can be complicit in the massive injustices the powers that be inflict on the world. Or the church can dare to be faithful to Jesus and “seek justice, correct oppression” (Isaiah 1:17 RSV). The God who breathed life into creation and the Holy Spirit into that small group of Jesus’ followers at Pentecost calls Community of Christ to be a peace-making, justice-practicing, difference-affirming community where wholeness and mutuality reign. The peace of Christ draws us into solidarity with the vulnerable people and creatures of the Earth. For the church to be a blessing to the world, it must fulfill its prophetic call.

For Further Reading

Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), chapter 6.

Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), chapter 11: "The New Community," 259–85.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1988).

Harold N. Schneebeck Jr., *The Body of Christ* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1968).

Testimony by Carlos Enrique Mejia

The church is where we find sanctuary, where we receive guidance to convert us into disciples. That is where we can grow in our relationship with God, grow in our faith, and where we create and strengthen our interpersonal relationships, where ministry is received and given.

I met Christ and the church in 1984 in a small town in Honduras. This has been the best and greatest blessing that could have come to my life. In the church I met my wife, we had a family, and it was there that we were born and grew spiritually through our relationships with God, Christ, and our brothers and sisters.

Together with my wife and family, I have been a part of and lived through all of the changes the church has had in the last 33 years. We, along with many other members, have gone through many difficult situations that the church has suffered. Many times, as human beings, we have thought that it was the end, but quite the contrary. I have always seen that, because of those crises, the church has become more united and strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the unity of its members. I call the church indestructible because it belongs to God. How has the church been able to grow, be transformed, and help so many other

people and communities in the world? It has only been possible through the Holy Spirit that supports it, sustains it, and guides it.

My eldest daughter asked me one day: "Papi, what would our life be like if we didn't know Christ, and we weren't in the church?" She told me, "I feel the church is our second home where my family is so much bigger and more diverse." I felt a great satisfaction at hearing what the church means to her and everyone in our home, and to see the fruits of those examples and teachings that, together with my wife, we have been able to ingrain in our daughters. Today I can see how this eldest daughter and her husband are transmitting the same example to their son. I'm happy to see my entire house serving the Lord and the church.

I see my father, a man who is 84 years old, being the pastor of that small congregation in my hometown. Every day they worship he walks sixty-eight steps up to get to the sanctuary. Sometimes I tell him he shouldn't be climbing those steps anymore, and he responds, "I do it all for love of God and the church; I'm happy serving it." This is a marvelous example for me.

Many times, in the field where I serve as apostle, I have heard nonmember friends say Community of Christ is different. They say there is something special reflected in its members. When I think of our Enduring Principles, they tell us what defines the essence, the heart, and soul of our identity, mission, and message. They describe the personality of the church that is expressed through its members and its congregations.

Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to love our spiritual home, to transmit to other generations God's love through Jesus Christ and the church. I love the church so much that I say: "If one day they throw me out the door of it, I'm going to come back in through the window!"

Spiritual Practice: Invitation and Hospitality

*One of the hallmarks of the church has been the extension of hospitality, not only to friends and family but to strangers as well. Hospitality is not about impressing others with well-decorated homes and churches and with gourmet cooking. It's not simply for the gifted or those with lots of money. Neither is it just for women. Hospitality is a way of loving our neighbor in the same way God has loved us. Parker Palmer says in his text, *To Know as We Are Known*, that hospitality is a way of "receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care." One of the Mission Initiatives of Community of Christ is *Invite People to Christ*. We can invite others into conversations, into*

friendship, to our homes for a meal, to the experience of sacred community, to the church for activities and worship, and to the awareness of a loving God.

Allow yourself to be open to the possibility of who you may invite and to what you will invite them.

Pray for the people you invite.

Pray for them as you invite them.

Pray for them during their conversation/visit/experience/gathering.

Pray for them as they leave.

Reflect on how your sharing of hospitality has connected you with those you invited as well as with God. Offer thanks for the experience and consider the next opportunity for invitation.

—Adapted from “Hospitality,”

Pastors and Leaders Field Guide (Community of Christ, 2012), 15.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When you think of the church, what comes to mind? Consider as many different dimensions of “church” as you can.
2. Why are you a member of Community of Christ? What is most important to you about the church to which you belong?