



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

20 September 2017

A Time to Act!

When I was ordained prophet-president I promised to do my best with God's help to speak truth to you. Sometimes truth is good news. Sometimes truth is hard to hear.

The truth I speak today has two parts. The first part is a word of calling, hope, and possibility. The second is a description of financial issues that must be resolved so that calling, hope, and possibility can be fulfilled.

The word of calling, hope, and possibility emerges from the reality that great change is happening in the world. And the rate of change is accelerating. This change includes how people view God, culture, finances, technology, politics, and religious institutions.

A related trend in Western nations is that involvement in traditional forms of church life is declining, especially among younger generations. This trend is part of a much larger shift in how people are viewing church organizations in relation to their personal spirituality.

Churches are responding to change in different ways. Some are trying to go back to the past, attempting to recover a lost feeling of certainty. Others are persisting in familiar models of congregational life, hoping that if they work harder they will be more successful. Still others are discerning the true nature of the changes. With the Spirit's guidance they are discovering opportunities to innovate and offer more relevant ministry in a new time.

The word of calling, hope, and possibility is that new ways of understanding, communicating, and living the gospel in response to changing circumstances already are happening in Community of Christ. The church's future is related directly to our willingness to go where the Spirit is calling us to go.

As we respond to the unavoidable change in the world, simply persisting in typical church activities will not take us into the future. We need to adjust how we understand, communicate, and live the gospel in a new time.

The gospel is essentially about how we live in relationship to God, others, and the whole creation. If we focus on truly loving others in the spirit of Christ and caring for the whole creation, we truly will know God as God is. Our souls, families, congregations, and communities will become more whole.

It is ironic and intriguing to me that our current challenges are providing added incentive for us to ask essential questions about the essence of the gospel and the church. These challenges—financial and cultural—have pushed us into a kind of spiritual labor, and the future church already is being born.

I sense the future church will be focused more on spiritual, relational, and missional growth and less on debating correct doctrines or maintaining organizational structures. The

future church will fulfill the counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 163:1 that as we embody our name, Community of Christ, by embracing its full meaning, we will become a blessing to many.

The future church is being formed by a basic concept: Our chief purpose is to birth, nurture, and multiply communities of disciples and seekers engaged in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action. This basic blueprint—spiritual formation, community, compassionate ministry and action—is true to the vision of Christ. Everything else, like organizational structure, resources, funding methods, congregational forms, etc., should support this primary purpose.

Such communities of disciples and seekers can gather anywhere, any time. While some may choose to do so, they are not dependent on owning buildings or property. They will be connected locally and globally. They will be salt, leaven, and light.

Current efforts like Leading Congregations in Mission (LCM), the Spiritual Formation and Companionship project, and the development of virtually networked congregations are taking us in the right direction.

Our journey into the future will continue through more congregations becoming willing to transform in response to new opportunities. It also will occur through starting new expressions of the church to model what we are talking about. We already are working on all of this and more.

However, some serious financial issues are hindering the church as we try to respond to God's call. These issues must be resolved so we can be free to move ahead.

Before I describe those issues and our plans, I want you to know that last weekend the Presiding Bishopric convened a summit of church member business leaders; skilled financial planners and managers; real estate developers; legal professionals; and major contributors. We asked participants to review financial information and interpretations of data and then to evaluate our plans. They also explored implications or alternatives we might have missed. On behalf of the church, I want to thank them for their participation and insights.

For the past six months Worldwide Mission Tithes income has been less than projected. This follows a year when tithing increased through a "grassroots" effort to avoid some planned reductions. However, projected levels of increased giving are not being achieved this year. There is time to reverse that trend before the end of the year. But church leaders must develop budgets now based on current trends.

It is not just a matter of annual tithing income. The number of contributors in Western nations has been declining for decades. This mostly is because of deaths of generous contributors who are not being replaced by new contributors. This trend is accelerating.

Also, as previously reported, we experienced a setback on the balance in our endowments due to a low appraised value in June 2016. We are encouraged because the appraised value of our largest investment property increased noticeably this year. However because the endowments largely are invested in property, we still are not able to provide income to the budget using a spending rate.

Based on what we can forecast, we need to develop the fiscal year 2019 budget at \$5 million below the fiscal year 2018 budget. Obviously, a new budget level will reduce the number of church services, resources, and staff. It also will require us to significantly change how we operate.

Of course, the question arises, "What can we do to lessen reductions?"

I don't think we can ask faithful members who are giving all they can to give more. To these faithful disciples I express my deepest gratitude for your generosity. May your joy and peace increase in this life and beyond!

The answer is that we must increase the number of disciples contributing regularly to Worldwide and Local Mission Tithing.

Increasing the number of contributors requires effective evangelism as emphasized by our first Mission Initiative: Invite People to Christ. Increasing the number of contributors is not the primary purpose of evangelism. However, it is a result of evangelism.

We also must increase the number of current members who contribute regularly. Increasing the number of current members who are generous contributors is a matter of priesthood leadership. If some priesthood members do not embrace the stewardship principles and practices of the church, then I assume they are not teaching or encouraging others to do so. This is a matter of gospel faithfulness and ministerial integrity.

While the worldwide church can help, increasing the number of priesthood and member contributors ultimately is a congregational responsibility. It is time for congregational leaders to increase the number of contributors who are giving according to their capacity to support Local and Worldwide Mission Tithes.

It also is time for more congregations and mission centers to respond to the counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 165:2e-f:

Stewardship as response to the ministry of Christ is more than individual giving. It includes the generosity of congregations and jurisdictions that give to worldwide ministries of the church to strengthen community in Christ in all nations. Sharing for the common good is the spirit of Zion.

I am amazed by the generosity of a growing list of congregations and mission centers that have examined their capacity and chosen to make one-time or recurring contributions to Worldwide Mission and Bridge of Hope Tithes. I have read the list of names and given thanks for each of you. You have rightly discerned the meaning of Doctrine and Covenants 165:2. You are living the spirit of the New Testament church described in 2 Corinthians 8 as pursuing a "generous undertaking." Your eagerness to give as a congregation reveals your mature understanding the spiritual-relational nature of the church as one body in Christ.

I invite all congregations and mission centers to act now by following your leadership. Please let the Presiding Bishopric know what your response is by the end of December.

I think you will be interested to know that church leaders are exploring several new mission-funding approaches. This includes a mission-funding model that would receive and keep all mission tithes locally. Congregations and mission centers would approve annual amounts to allocate to worldwide mission, along with amounts for congregation and mission center support. Individuals still could give directly to Worldwide Mission support and special projects as desired.

We think there may be several advantages to this method, including greatly simplifying giving options for contributors. It also would provide regular opportunities for congregations to consider their capacity to support the mission of the church locally and globally. There will be a church-wide conversation in 2018 to explore this idea.

As explained in prior updates, our financial challenges are not limited to annual tithing amounts and numbers of contributors. We also have inadequate sources for funding retirement and post-retirement benefits obligations.

Meeting retirement funding obligations is a responsibility of the entire church. Those being supported in their retirement years have faithfully—often sacrificially—served the whole church in various roles and assignments. Fulfilling retirement obligations to the best of our ability is a legal, moral, and missional imperative because of the fiduciary, ethical, and justice principles involved. Plus we need to do it now, so future generations will not have to.

As a reminder, the retirement obligations I am speaking of are two benefit plans. As of December 31, 2015, both plans were closed, so no new employees would receive benefits, and no additional benefits are being earned for employees in the plan. Ongoing retirement benefits for current employees are funded annually in the Worldwide Mission Budget.

Based on recent actuarial studies, \$115 million is needed to fully fund these fixed retirement obligations. We have about \$25 million in the retirement trust. Expenses for retirement and post-retirement benefits are between \$7.5 million and \$8 million annually.

As stated previously we plan to fund retirement obligations from the sale of historic and real estate assets not essential to mission and contributions to Bridge of Hope Tithes. I have two updates to share about our progress:

1. We have asked members who pledged to the new Worldwide Mission Endowment to re-designate their pledges to Bridge of Hope Tithes to be used first to fund retirement obligations. We are very pleased to announce that \$38 million in pledges (annual and long-term gifts) have been re-designated to help fund retirement obligations.
2. After a year of negotiations with several potential buyers, last week we accepted an offer from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) to buy the Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon for \$35 million. This is a record-setting price for a historic document. The net proceeds from this transaction will be used to help fund retirement obligations.

The Printer's Manuscript is a written copy of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. The church bought it in 1903 with some other items for \$2,500.

Church leaders know that letting go of this document will sadden some members. We feel sadness, too. However the church's use of the Book of Mormon as scripture and our appreciation for our history do not depend on owning the Printer's Manuscript. Letting go of this document does not affect the rights of Community of Christ to publish its editions of the Book of Mormon. When a decision had to be made, we chose the well-being of people and upholding the current and future mission of the church over owning this document.

As I am speaking, a joint statement from Community of Christ and the LDS Church about this transaction is being released publically. Additional details will be presented in upcoming communications with the church.

Re-designated pledges to Bridge of Hope Tithes and selling the Printer's Manuscript significantly reduce the amount needed to fund retirement obligations. We have made significant progress, but the entire amount is not funded yet. So we are announcing the following actions:

1. Negotiations are continuing to sell other historic assets not essential to mission.
2. Efforts are underway to raise at least \$25 million by selling property assets around the world that are not essential for mission. Proceeds from these sales will be used to help fund retirement obligations.
3. Beginning today we are implementing a church-wide pause on major facility and property purchases and building projects except for essential maintenance, repairs for safety, and building code compliance. This applies to the World Church, mission centers, campgrounds, and congregations. We need to work together on the financial challenges before us without creating additional obligations. This is similar to the church-wide hold on building projects put in place as we prepared to build the Temple. Any exceptions will have to be approved by the field apostle, director of Field Ministries, and the Presiding Bishopric.

In summary, we have reduced significantly the amount needed to fund retirement obligations. Efforts are underway to further reduce the amount. Future generations of church leaders and members will be grateful for our determination to address this issue.

We move forward with calling, hope, and possibility. A church-wide conversation is beginning. What kind of church do we really want to be? Consider topics such as organization, mission priorities, new approaches to congregational life, and mission funding. These conversations will occur more often in the months ahead and continue through 2018.

World Conference 2019 will be pivotal in terms of making necessary decisions and discerning direction in response to God's call. The announced World Conference theme, "Discover," is very timely! Engage in the conversation and decision-making by being at World Conference.

So it is time to act! What can you do right now?

- Pray to see clearly how the Spirit is guiding our journey as a church.
- Respond to God's grace by giving to Worldwide Mission and Local Tithes.
- Participate in congregation and mission center discussions about giving financial support to the Worldwide Mission Budget and Bridge of Hope Tithes.
- Pray for ongoing efforts to fund retirement obligations by selling historic and real estate assets not essential to mission.
- Talk with others about what kind of church we want to be. What does it mean to focus on the primary purpose of birthing, nurturing, and multiplying communities of disciples and seekers involved in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action?
- Plan to participate in the 2019 World Conference, when we will make important financial, organizational, and mission priority decisions together that will shape our future as a worldwide movement.

Thank you for your time and attention. May God bless you!