

Community of Christ

President's Address

April 6, 2014

Between now and the 2016 World Conference, there will be five webcast addresses. The primary focus will be on the words of counsel presented at the 2013 World Conference. The first six paragraphs will be the focus of this address. Let's experience the initial presentation of those paragraphs again:

Community of Christ, a divine vision is set before you. Presented over the years through various inspired phrases and symbols, it is expressed now through initiatives in harmony with Jesus Christ's mission.

As a spiritual venture, boldly follow the initiatives into the heart of God's vision for the church and creation. Then, in response to growing insight about God's nature and will, continue to shape communities that live Christ's love and mission.

Lovingly invite others to experience the good news of new life in community with Christ. Opportunities abound in your daily lives if you choose to see them.

Undertake compassionate and just actions that seek to abolish poverty and end needless suffering. Pursue peace on and for the Earth.

Let nothing separate you from this mission.

Continue to align your priorities with local and worldwide church efforts to move the initiatives forward. Additional innovative approaches to coordinating congregational life and supporting groups of disciples and seekers are needed to address mission opportunities in a changing world.

Some members have sent me their insights and questions as they have prayerfully explored the words of counsel. Thank you! Such attention is exactly what we need to increase our understanding of the Spirit's direction.

Today, I want to share some thoughts about the first six paragraphs.

First, whenever we talk about a "divine vision" set before us, it is important to emphasize that we are not talking about a human creation. The vision for mission is God's!

God's will is to be fully known throughout creation. When God's nature and purposes are truly known, human lives are transformed. And when lives are transformed, the whole creation is blessed!

So, when we speak of mission, Mission Initiatives, or the church's mission, we are referring to God's loving action to reconcile and redeem creation. A major focus of divine action is the restoring of people to healthy, harmonious relationships with God, others, and the Earth.

Second, God's nature is revealed in Jesus Christ. We look to what Jesus did and said to understand God's character and mission. Jesus' proclamation of mission, found in Luke 4:16–21, is indispensable because it tells us what is most important to God.

Third, the church was called into being—divinely established or “restored”—to be the sacred community through which God's nature and mission, revealed in Jesus Christ, is made visible in the world. Community of Christ exists to serve Christ's mission!

Fourth, the Holy Spirit breathes life into the church community to motivate and empower it to fulfill Christ's mission. We cannot effectively participate in Christ's mission without regular spiritual-formation activities that open our lives to the Spirit's ministry and guidance. Jesus' inner spiritual life with God was the source of his evident capacity to discern and demonstrate God's nature and purposes in the world.

Only through continuous spiritual awakening, discernment, and transformation can we effectively engage in Christ's mission. That is why the words of counsel say, “As a spiritual venture, boldly follow the [mission] initiatives into the heart of God's vision for the church and for creation.”

Diana Butler Bass states:

To awaken spiritually means that we develop a new awareness of God's energy in the world in order to discern what is needed and to open the possibilities for human flourishing. Discernment leads to a new understanding of self, neighbor, and God—a vision of what can and should be. Thus, awakening demands we act upon the new vision.... What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God's love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world.

—*Christianity after Religion*, p. 37

Through spiritual practices of quietness, prayerful attention, and listening, we experience divine-human encounters that transform our lives. We are healed at our deepest levels of ego-centered insecurity and pain. We learn to yearn for God and then with God. We are freed to radically love others in true community that reflects God's nature and purposes.

The invitation to spiritual deepening is expressed well through hymn 151 (by Shirley Erena Murray), “Come and Find the Quiet Center,” found in *Community of Christ Sings*.

Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead, find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed; clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.

With that said, I would like to comment on the five Mission Initiatives affirmed in the counsel. The initiatives are not a list of tasks vying for attention in competition with other activities. They are foundational and essential to the church's life! They come from God's heart, and they lead to spiritual growth.

Focus on the Mission Initiatives draws us into the spiritual energy, vision, and passion of Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:5 NRSV states: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." As we incorporate the mind of Christ in us—individually and together—we increasingly live in "oneness" with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who are fully one in divine love and purpose.

We show different aspects of Christ's mission to emphasize the full scope of his mission. However, all Mission Initiatives must function together to express the whole mind and mission of Christ. Concentrating on only one or two initiatives diminishes their holistic, spiritually transforming power.

A way to envision the interrelatedness of the Mission Initiatives is to see them as intertwined strands of a rope. All strands are needed for the rope to be strong and fully functional. Any missing or weakened strand compromises the whole.

As a worldwide church we must focus on all Mission Initiatives. We must align our personnel, resources, structures, relationships, budgets, and giving with the initiatives. Let me provide some updates.

First: Invite People to Christ!

I am inspired by the testimony of the Washington, Indiana, Congregation.

This congregation was a small, rural congregation like some others in stagnation and gradual decline. In response, the congregation began a spiritual-formation process with two evangelists. Also, some members began praying the mission prayer. The mission prayer goes like this:

God, where will your Spirit lead today? Help me be fully awake and ready to respond.
Grant me courage to risk something new and become a blessing of your love and peace.
Amen.

The spiritual-formation process and daily mission prayer were foundational for what happened next. As one member, Jerry, regularly prayed the mission prayer, he began to awaken to God's future emerging in his everyday life.

He worked as a sheriff. One day he realized a program for inmate rehabilitation that just couldn't get off the ground was lacking the needed spiritual component. Then he realized his congregation could offer that support.

Through his example, congregational members became involved in the lives of the inmates, their families, friends, and others in the community. Note the emphasis on deepening relationships by expressing Christ's love in daily interactions beyond the church.

Over time, the focus on loving and inviting others resulted in a dramatic increase in new member-disciples involved in congregational life. The congregation since has outgrown its church and is looking for a larger place to meet. Spiritual vitality is evident!

What if we all prayed the mission prayer daily? If we did, and were willing to respond to the opportunities that emerged, the number of active member-disciples serving Christ's mission would increase significantly!

To this end, the words of counsel call us to:

Lovingly invite others to experience the good news of new life in community with Christ. Opportunities abound in your daily lives if you choose to see them.

What about Abolish Poverty, End Suffering? The Voice of the Spirit calls us to

Undertake compassionate and just actions that seek to abolish poverty and end needless suffering.

Let me comment on the phrase "needless suffering." Some suffering is simply part of being imperfect humans in an imperfect world. In fact, some suffering can stimulate personal growth. According to Richard Rohr, often suffering is the only thing powerful enough to break the grip of our self-centered egos, which stubbornly resist personal change.

However, much suffering—such as hunger, economic poverty, isolation, and violence—is not necessary and is not God's will.

Last summer I was in Haiti, visiting church congregations. One morning, as we waited for church activities to begin, the pastor apologetically informed me that many members could not come because they still were looking for food to feed their families that day.

Here is the reality! A majority of Community of Christ members worldwide—your brothers and sisters in Christ—through no fault of their own, live in cruel poverty. They are trapped by social, political, and economic systems that make them prisoners of poverty. Because we are told in scripture that there is "enough and to spare" on Earth, poverty is not ethically or spiritually acceptable.

I am pleased to announce the 2014 Peace Colloquy, scheduled October 24–26 at the Temple in Independence, Missouri, will focus on Abolish Poverty, End Suffering. The theme for the 2014 Peace Colloquy is "Poverty: God Weeps."

During the Colloquy we will explore the true causes of poverty. What actually works in terms of alleviating poverty, and, conversely, what is well-intended but not effective.

We also will continue our exciting adventure with our hymnal, *Community of Christ Sings*. We will once again experience the eye-opening, inspiring power of bold hymnody focused on Christ's mission.

Regarding Pursue Peace on Earth, I am pleased to announce I will be part of a small group of Community of Christ leaders traveling to the Middle East in November. We will join a delegation from "Churches for Middle East Peace." This group is working on peaceful resolution of the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That conflict is a major threat to peace in the Middle East and the world. Our trip will involve visits in Israel and Palestine.

We invite your prayerful support as we journey under the banner of Christ's peace in that volatile part of the world.

The final paragraph in this portion of the counsel states:

Continue to align your priorities with local and worldwide church efforts to move the initiatives forward. Additional innovative approaches to coordinating congregational life and supporting groups of disciples and seekers are needed to address mission opportunities in a changing world.

Great cultural shifts are occurring on the religious landscape of nations, especially in Western cultures. Diana Butler Bass observed:

All sorts of people—even mature, faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community.

Familiar ways of being the church need adjustment to respond fully to community-formation and mission opportunities today and in the future. To this end, this Spirit is calling the church to create innovative ways of connecting disciples and seekers—locally and globally—for spiritual and community formation in Christ. Experimental efforts are already under way in some fields. We need to accelerate these efforts!

In closing, the words of counsel speak of a spiritual venture to which we all are called. That spiritual venture is God's mission incarnated in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit today. Because it is God's initiative, there is no doubt the mission is true and will be fulfilled.

Christ urges us to bring our life experiences, gifts, relationships, and resources to help with the mission. The primary question is, how much will we respond?

If that question feels burdensome, there is good news! Underlying it is Christ's invitation to be immersed in God's Spirit. Spiritual renewal and growth will bring inner healing, peace, vision, and energy. For those spiritually alive in Christ, involvement in his mission is joyful, deeply meaningful, and freeing!

Thank you for all that you do to support the church in all of its expressions. May God bless us as we continue our faith journey, especially in the next few weeks as we go with Jesus to the cross and then share in the wonder of resurrection!

During my next address October 5, we will explore the following paragraphs of the words of counsel:

Free the full capacity of Christ's mission through generosity that imitates God's generosity. Discover deep joy and life's meaning by promoting divine purposes on Earth. Listen to the testimonies of those who are responding and follow your soul's yearning to come home to God's grace and generosity.

Remember, a basic discipleship principle is growing Christ's mission through both local and world mission tithes according to true capacity. Giving to other worthwhile organizations, while an important part of A Disciple's Generous Response, follows world and local mission tithing and should not diminish or replace it. If a law is needed to focus and balance response, then let these tithing principles serve that purpose.

Tithing is a spiritual practice that demonstrates willingness to regularly offer every dimension of one's life to God. When defined by faith, love, and hopeful planning, including resolving indebtedness, capacity to respond becomes much greater than initially assumed.

We will focus on the joy of generosity as a spiritual practice that draws one closer to God and others. I will also provide an official interpretation of the church's teaching and practice of tithing to support Christ's mission throughout the world.