



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

President's Address

This address by President Stephen M. Veazey, given April 3 at the Temple in Independence, Missouri, explores the words of counsel section that deals with the evangelist blessing.

Today we continue exploring recent words of counsel. We will consider these paragraphs:

Involvement in Christ's mission is enriched and focused through spiritual growth and guidance. Following direction already emerging, the presiding evangelist and the Order of Evangelists, in concert with their colleagues in ministry, should concentrate on spiritually forming communities of disciples and seekers that live deeply and generously in Christ's Spirit.

For this purpose, offer the sacrament of evangelist blessing not only to individuals and congregations, but to families, households, and groups of people seeking spiritual guidance to more completely give themselves to Christ's mission.

The presiding evangelist will provide instruction for implementation at the appropriate time. Nothing in the instruction should be construed to lessen the importance of the sacrament of evangelist blessing for individuals.

Basically, these paragraphs emphasize the intrinsic relationships of spirituality, discipleship, and mission. Spirituality, discipleship, and mission are not separate areas of endeavor. Mission is an adventure in spiritual growth and responsiveness as a disciple. The Holy Spirit empowers, equips, and motivates disciples for ministries of evangelism, compassionate service, generosity, and justice and peacemaking.

These paragraphs point out that spiritual growth is personal and communal. We grow spiritually as individuals through spiritual practices like prayer and contemplation. We also grow spiritually in communities where the Spirit of Christ dwells deeply in relationships. The path of discipleship is walked best in the close company of other disciples who are growing spiritually.

These paragraphs also speak of blessing. Blessing is a gift of God's grace to help us live life more abundantly, deeply, and peacefully. When we notice the Holy Spirit helping, guiding, or strengthening us we often say we have been blessed. Another form of blessing is a spoken prayer that enriches our lives with affirmation, insight, and hope. The English word *ble*ss is a translation of the Greek word *eulogeo*. *Eulogeo* means to "speak well of." A spoken blessing is to "speak well of" the goodness resident in someone's life through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A spoken blessing uses "good words" to invoke fulfillment of human potential according to the purposes of God.

Numbers 6:24–26 NRSV illustrates the essence of spoken blessing:

The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Let's look at the meaning of the key words in this ancient blessing. To “keep” means to guard, protect, and enfold with safety. To “lift up his countenance upon you” asks God to give unwavering, favorable attention. To “give you peace” means to bless your life and relationships with shalom: salvation, wholeness, security, serenity, well-being, and harmony. Clark M. Williamson, in *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*, wrote:

Blessing is well-being, *shalom* (peace) with oneself and, because we are related to all else that is, with God, and with all our neighbors, with all the living things in the environment... (p. 16)

John O'Donohue, in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* describes the power of spoken blessing this way:

In the light and reverence of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way. In a dead wall a new window opens, in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer, and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew.

We are fortunate in Community of Christ to have the sacrament of evangelist blessing available. These words of counsel affirm the vital connection between the sacrament of evangelist blessing and the spiritual blessings we need as we respond to God's call.

The sacrament of evangelist blessing has a rich history in the church. I often describe it as a sacrament through which the universal love of God is experienced in very personal terms.

This sacrament is for individuals. Through it individuals are embraced by the warmth of God's love as uniquely created persons. Spiritual guidance is given that enriches one's life and relationships.

This sacrament is also for couples, families, households, congregations, and other groups of disciples and seekers devoted to divine purposes. In other words, it is a sacrament that guides and empowers community formation.

Writes David Clark:

I have come to believe that without a strong sense of community human beings will wilt and begin to die. Community is the foundation of human society, the zenith of interdependence, the epitome of wholeness; the end of our journeying.

—*Yes to Life*, p. 22, as quoted in Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 3

Because this sacrament already was available to individuals, couples, families, and congregations, one may ask, “Why were these words of counsel needed?”

I asked that myself when I felt the spiritual impulse to focus on the sacrament of evangelist blessing. Without understanding fully, I trusted that more insight would come as the church explored these words.

An answer came through discussion stimulated by the words of counsel among church leaders, a team of evangelists that explored the counsel, and others. It was serious discussion about the nature of sacraments, how sacraments evolve, and appropriate uses of the sacrament.

The Presidency specifically asked the Theology Formation Team to study the paragraphs about the sacrament of evangelist blessing. To understand the response of that team, we need to review the basic elements of all sacraments:

1. Tangible sign or symbol of God's grace revealed in Christ
2. Grounded in the ministry of Jesus Christ
3. Spoken words of blessing and petition, articulation of the covenant involved, and related opportunities, responsibilities, and promises
4. Eligible priesthood conduct the sacrament
5. Spiritual anticipation and preparation in a worship setting

The Theology Formation Team observed that given these basic elements, the blessing for families and congregations lacked a “distinctive marker” of sacraments. The missing element is a “sign or symbolic action” consistently used.

The prayer of blessing itself is not the symbol, since it is oral only; nor can the written text of the blessing—available only after the experience—function as the symbol. The symbol should be an integral element of the sacrament, like the laying on of hands during individual blessings. In the absence of a distinct symbol, it is difficult to distinguish the sacrament of evangelist blessing for families or congregations from a pastoral prayer.

These words of counsel affirm and continue a new work of the Holy Spirit begun previously, when evangelists started offering the sacrament of evangelist blessing to couples, congregations, and families. They also served to help identify the need to incorporate a symbol when the sacrament of evangelist blessing is offered for families, congregations, and other groups.

The primary symbol for all expressions of the sacrament of evangelist blessing is “hands of blessing.” According to guidelines being finalized, the symbol of “hands of blessing” most often will be expressed through the laying on of hands. Where that is not practical, the evangelist may raise hands of blessing at the beginning and close of the spoken words, much like Jesus did when blessing his disciples (Luke 24:50 NRSV).

At World Conference the Order of Evangelists will review guidelines for the sacrament of evangelist blessing and offer feedback. Then the guidelines will be finalized for use throughout the church.

When preparing this address I read again my evangelist blessing. I received it when I was 18 years old. I also reread my continuing-life blessing, given when I was an adult. Finally, I reflected on several congregational blessings I have been privileged to experience.

My personal blessing has been a spiritual guide throughout my life. Through it I experienced God's particular love for me and received insight into the possibilities of my life from the divine perspective. That experience strengthened my trust in the Eternal Creator, who was guiding me without infringing on my freedom and responsibility to choose wisely my life's course.

I requested a continuing-life blessing when I was an apostle in the Africa Field. I had found myself in several potentially life-threatening situations that caused anxiety. I also had a chronic illness with pain that flared every time I went to Africa. I did not know if I could continue in my calling and assignment.

That evangelist blessing provided understanding, consolation, encouragement, and peace of mind. It also offered insight for the rest of my life journey.

I have been present during several congregational blessings. I still marvel at how the Spirit weaves generations of disciples and seekers together into unique expressions of the body of Christ in different settings. The sacrament of evangelist blessing for congregations is vital in developing healthy congregational identity and shared understanding of mutual calling. The same principle applies to families, households, and other groups that connect people to each other and the Spirit of God.

In summary, this counsel emphasizes that God wants to bless us in every dimension of our lives. The sacrament of evangelist blessing is a vital ministry offered by the church. Through it we can open our lives more fully to God's grace and spiritual guidance for us individually and together.