



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

President's Address

October 4, 2015

Let's listen again to this paragraph from the words of counsel:

Regarding priesthood, God calls whomever God calls from among committed disciples, according to their gifts, to serve and reach all humankind. Priesthood policies and procedures provide a clear way for disciples to respond to calling. They also define the difference between a sense of call as potential and the need to align one's life with principles of moral behavior and relationships that promote the well-being of the church community.

A way God empowers and equips the church for mission is through priesthood ministry. As stated in Doctrine and Covenants 156:7a:

Hear, O my people, regarding my holy priesthood. The power of this priesthood was placed in your midst from the earliest days of the rise of this work for the blessing and salvation of humanity.

Priesthood members today are not far removed from the spiritual experiences of the founding prophet through whom priesthood was established in the early church. They also are closely related to the first disciples on whom Jesus laid ordaining hands.

These words of counsel highlight the continuing importance of priesthood ministry. They feature vital principles of priesthood ministry today.

The first sentence:

Regarding priesthood, God calls whomever God calls from among committed disciples, according to their gifts, to serve and reach all humankind.

This sentence emphasizes five interrelated principles.

First, God calls. Calling is a characteristic of God. God called and is calling creation into being. God called and is calling people to embody divine nature for the blessing of creation. We don't call ourselves. God calls.

Second, God calls whomever God calls according to divine will and freedom. We do not define whom God should or should not call. We trust in divine initiative even when we do not fully understand its aim.

Third, God calls some committed disciples to serve in specialized functions called priesthood offices for the sake of the body. A basic principle is that devoted discipleship is the primary calling. All disciples are called to ministry. Some disciples are called to particular roles called priesthood offices.

Fourth, committed disciples may be called to priesthood ministry because they have particular gifts related to a priesthood office. This doesn't mean those disciples are more faithful or superior to other disciples. It means God provides for certain functions in the church to support and equip all disciples and potential disciples for ministry.

And, fifth, a variety of people are called to priesthood ministry to reach all humankind with the gospel. No person, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or social group has all the gifts, insights, cultural sensitivity, and life experiences to relate the gospel effectively to all humankind. God calls all kinds of disciples to reach all kinds of people!

Now, with those five principles in mind, let's consider the next sentence:

Priesthood policies and procedures provide a clear way for disciples to respond to calling.

God calls and equips priesthood members **through the church**. This includes priesthood calling, education, and supportive policies and procedures. This may seem obvious. However, more than once, I have heard a priesthood member declare, "My priesthood is between me and God. The church has nothing to do with it!"

Actually, the church has a lot to do with it! Priesthood was placed **in the church** for divine purposes. The church is accountable to God for developing practices that help disciples discern and faithfully respond to priesthood callings. These procedures are the church's faithful response to the ongoing direction of the Holy Spirit as it works to ensure ethical, accountable, effective ministry for the sake of the body and its mission.

Updated policies, procedures, and educational materials about priesthood ministry have been developed in recent years. This material is being introduced under the heading of Ministry and Priesthood. A series of articles recently was featured in the *Herald*. I urge all to study these articles as well as other resources as part of our Ministry and Priesthood emphasis.

Now, the last sentence:

They (priesthood policies and procedures) also define the difference between a sense of call as potential and the need to align one's life with principles of moral behavior and relationships that promote the well-being of the church community.

A personal feeling of priesthood calling doesn't mean one is called right now. It may indicate calling potential if one decides to put one's life in a condition that makes calling possible. Such decisions may involve lifestyle changes.

Doctrine and Covenants 163:6a states:

Priesthood is a sacred covenant involving the highest form of stewardship of body, mind, spirit, and relationships. The priesthood shall be composed of people of humility and integrity who are willing to extend themselves in service for others and for the well-being of the faith community.

Recent words of counsel also emphasize "the need to align one's life with principles of moral behavior and relationships that promote the well-being of the church community." The church community is both local and worldwide.

What is "well-being?" Well-being has various elements. These include physical, mental, spiritual, ethical, and social health and integrity. Well-being is part of the biblical vision of shalom.

Shalom is holistic. It encompasses salvation, moral integrity, ethical relationships, justice, concern for vulnerable people, and environmental healing.

Jesus Christ is the incarnation or embodiment of God's vision of shalom. The New Testament directly links shalom to Christ's gospel of peace. Priesthood members are ambassadors and servants of Christ's gospel of salvation and peace.

Priesthood members make lifestyle choices that impact their ability to serve. These choices include personal habits, relationships, finances, sexual conduct, involvement in other organizations, and even how one uses social media. How do priesthood members decide what is moral?

Some writers describe the present as a time of moral confusion. Uncertainty exists about what should guide or determine morality. Is it primarily up to individuals? What is the influence of secular culture, and are we aware of it? What is the church's responsibility to determine shared vision and boundaries for priesthood conduct? How should the church apply its understanding of scripture and ethics guided by commonly held principles versus rules used legalistically?

Questions about priesthood ethics and related policies have arisen in various fields. These include concerns about sexual conduct, cohabiting before or instead of marriage, and drinking intoxicants.

The World Church Leadership Council is discussing these topics as requested by church conferences. Questions are being explored from pastoral, scriptural, theological, cultural, and ethical perspectives. The goal is to present statements before

or at the 2016 World Conference, providing perspective with policy rationale and clarification.

The answers we seek will not be found by simply creating more or different rules. We need holistic spiritual and moral formation for disciples and priesthood members so that good choices will arise from inner character. As Jesus taught: "...every good tree bears good fruit..." (Matthew 7:17 NRSV)

"Good trees" grow from spiritual formation that roots us in God's nature and vision for life. "Good trees" also come from consistently applying spiritual principles for discipleship and ministry that provide depth, direction, and boundaries.

As a church we have identified key foundational principles. They are in the *Basic Beliefs* and *Enduring Principles*, documents based on scripture and the Spirit's guidance today. Continuing Revelation included in the Doctrine and Covenants also points to principles of moral behavior and relationships.

Section 164:6a states God encourages behaviors and relationships "rooted in the principles of Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness...."

These principles are interrelated. They all work together. However, I want to say a few words about covenant. Covenant is much more than a feeling or intent. It is more than a human contract.

Covenant emphasizes God's initiative for human well-being and growth. It invokes God's blessing for a commitment or relationship to fulfill its sacred potential with the church's support.

In the church, covenant is established through sacred rites or sacraments involving worship, priesthood ministry, and symbols that speak of trustworthy promises if faithfulness follows. Covenant promotes well-being, integrity, and peace for individuals, families, congregations, the church, and society.

The church is a sacred community established and sustained by covenant for divine purpose. Ordination is a covenant with God through the church to live and serve others in certain ways. The most recent counsel stresses a principle that is part of this covenant. Priesthood member lifestyle choices are not just matters of personal desire, self-interest, or social influence. Ideally, they should improve the holistic well-being of others and the church community priesthood members serve.

As I wrote this address, I paused at times to pray. During quiet reflection, I recalled priesthood members who influenced my life. With growing gratitude, I perceived that much of what I know of God's grace and the gospel, I know through the lives of past and present priesthood members.

I still see your faces, hear your voices, and feel your touch. You were there when I was presented for blessing as a baby. You patiently taught me gospel basics and

pointed me to the path of discipleship. You facilitated covenant-making through sacraments at pivotal times.

You brought consolation when I was heartbroken. You were ambassadors of reconciliation when I could not find forgiveness. You came without delay when I faced the death of loved ones. Then, you made sure I was not alone as I walked through the valley of grief. You restored hope.

You showed me the joys of generosity through your personal examples of generously giving time, talent, and tithe.

You stirred me to work for equality and justice for all. Through you, I learned what it really means to take up one's cross and follow Jesus.

You continue to guide my feet into the way of Christ's peace.

I am grateful beyond words.

Faithful priesthood ministry matters!