Christ’s Mission, Our Mission: Exploring Our Faith

September 2012 Leaders Gathering

Community of Christ
The First Presidency coordinated development of this article with input, review, and feedback from the World Church Leadership Council, Standing High Council, Theology Formation Team, International Leaders Council, and individual theologians and ethicists.

Theological Foundations: God

Scripture testifies of one eternal God who is the Creator and Sustainer of life (Genesis 1:1 ff, Doctrine and Covenants 22:21–24). Scripture affirms God’s primary nature as everlasting love (Isaiah 54:10, 1 John 4:7–21). God alone is worthy of our worship and devotion (Exodus 20:1–3). We believe in monotheism (one God).

God revealed that God’s name is “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14 NRSV). Other translations of the original text are “I AM WHAT I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.” This revelation of God reminds us that there are facets of God’s being and will beyond what we perceive at a given time. God’s nature, activity, and self-revealing (revelation) is never limited to our current understanding of God. God is free to be who God is.

Our Basic Beliefs State:

We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit. We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

The church’s Enduring Principles describe God with phrases such as: full of grace; generous; Creator and still creating; revealed and still revealing; desiring people to experience wholeness of body, mind, and spirit; calling people according to their gifts; grants freedom to choose; urges responsible choices; works for peace, experienced in diversity and unity; and provides blessings through community.
God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are one God (Matthew 28:18–19, John 1, Colossians 1:15–19, Mosiah 8:28–32). We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons. The “three persons” of the Trinity are God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. To speak of God as Trinity is to speak of God as Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier who lives in eternal love, community, devotion, mutuality, and unified purpose. God’s nature is relational and social (2 Corinthians 13:13). Our living in healthy relationships and community is a reflection of God’s eternal nature.

“In the beginning” God created (Genesis 1–3, Ephesians 3:9, Mosiah 2:13–14). God pronounced different phases and results of creation as “good” and “very good” (Genesis 1 NRSV).

Variety in creation reveals God’s fondness for diversity. Creation is dynamic as it moves toward realizing God’s ultimate purposes (Romans 8:18 f). Central to God’s purposes in creation is divine desire for loving relationships that reflect God’s nature (Genesis 3:8–10, Isaiah 54:10).

All human beings are created in God’s image for divine purpose (Genesis 1:27). Being created in God’s image involves knowledge, thinking, creativity, self-awareness, and ability to make choices. It includes being created for relationships with God and others. Spiritual capacity, responsiveness, and giftedness are also expressions of being created in God’s image.

Humans find their truest selves and deepest joy and peace by relating in love to God, others, and the whole creation (Doctrine and Covenants 163:2). God is always seeking to restore us to our true created natures through reconciled or right relationships with God and others (2 Corinthians 5:18–20, Doctrine and Covenants 163:10).

God relates to humans, individually and together, to call forth and refine expressions of God’s nature in them and in creation. God as the triune community of Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier models how humans should relate in love, devotion, commitment, mutuality, shared purpose, and community.

Of course, God’s eternal loving nature is far beyond any love or devotion humans can express. Nevertheless, humans are called to relate to God, others, and the Earth in loving ways that reflect God’s nature to the greatest degree possible, given their life circumstances (1 John 4:7–12).
Theological Foundations: Jesus Christ

Christian scripture teaches that Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God’s nature and will (John 14:8, Colossians 1:15, III Nephi 3:63). We need to ground our theology in a faithful understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ as guided by the Holy Spirit (John 14:15 f) and experienced by the church community.

Our Basic Beliefs State:

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the world, fully human and fully divine. Through Jesus’ life and ministry, death and resurrection, God reconciles the world and breaks down the walls that divide. Christ is our peace.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

The church’s more comprehensive statement on the person and work of Jesus Christ (Christology) titled, “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” affirms:

Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, both fully human and fully divine. In him, we see ourselves and we see God, whom he tenderly called Abba, the compassionate One, who gave birth to all creation and declared it to be “very good.” Together with the Holy Spirit, they are one.

By the mystery of the incarnation, Jesus, born of Mary, came into the world to live and dwell among us to reveal God’s nature and will. He 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 the 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.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

Belief that Jesus Christ is “both fully human and fully divine” is foundational to Community of Christ Christology. (Read “We Proclaim Jesus Christ” at www.CofChrist.org/OurFaith/Christology.asp.)

**Jesus—Fully Human**

By saying that Jesus was fully human we mean he was a real human being who experienced human life in its many facets. He left footprints on the earth. He loved, laughed, and cried. Jesus was not an illusion or an image of a person who just seemed human. He was human in every possible way.

Affirming Jesus was a human is not enough. We need to examine what kind of person Jesus was. Daniel Migliore offers this observation in Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology:

> Jesus is indeed fully human, but his is a new humanity. The intimacy of his relation with God and his solidarity with sinners and the oppressed are new and offensive. He is the human being radically free for God’s coming reign and therefore radically free for communion with and service to the neighbor. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal child, Jesus extends the welcoming love of God to those who are thought least deserving of it (Luke 15:11 ff).

Jesus’ inclusive hospitality is a revelation of God’s all-encompassing love and the Blessings of Community. That revelation was shocking in his day and remains so for many today. However, if we take seriously what kind of person Jesus was, we cannot ignore his emphasis on realizing God’s justice and peace on Earth as “it is in heaven” (Matthew 6–10 NRSV).

**Jesus—Fully Divine**

With belief in Jesus’ full humanity, we affirm that he was fully divine. While this aspect of our faith is difficult for some to embrace in tandem with Jesus’ full humanity, it is an important part of the scriptural witness about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

New Testament teaching proclaims that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NRSV). This statement, which is the central witness of the New Testament, provides the foundation for these affirmations:

1. Our forgiveness, salvation, and reconciliation with God come through God’s initiative in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.
2. The full presence of God in Jesus Christ assures us that spirit and physical body are not opposites or natural enemies. Spirit and body together in Jesus Christ was the dwelling of God in creation. Any view of creation or human nature that separates spiritual as good and physical as bad denies a healing truth revealed in the incarnation.

3. God was fully present in Jesus Christ. Therefore, what Jesus did and said is a trustworthy revelation of God. God is not less than what we see, hear, and experience in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God relates to humanity from within all the joys, experiences, and suffering of the human condition.

The Greatest Commandment
As stated previously, what Jesus did and said is important to our understanding of God’s will. When Jesus was asked about which commandment is greatest he said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”


Viewing this passage as foundational, we affirm love—love of God and love of neighbor as self—as fundamental to Christian discipleship, theology, and ethics. But, how do we understand the nature of “love”?

We are helped by examining Greek concepts of love found in scripture to broaden our understanding. While it is challenging to precisely define the following words, providing basic definitions is useful:

Eros is the love that grows from one's need to love and be loved. It is love that fulfills one's dreams and desires. It is the impulse toward life, union, creativity, and productivity. Sexual attraction is a dynamic of eros, but eros is more than mere sensation of physical pleasure.
Agape is an equally significant dimension of love. Agape is unconstrained compassion for another. It is freely offered, selfless giving. It is generous response to another’s need beyond any gain for oneself. Agape love creates goodness and blessing in the world.

Philia is friendship and mutuality. Loyalty to friends and community is an expression of philia. It is the “brotherly” and “sisterly” love spoken of in many New Testament books (Romans 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:9, Hebrews 13:1, 2 Peter 1:10).

Storge is natural affection. For example storge refers to the warmth and fondness shared by parents for their children.

The qualities of love described by Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 also help us comprehend the kind of love revealed in Jesus Christ as God’s vision for our relationships:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

—1 Corinthians 13:4–8

We also need to clarify what Jesus meant by the word “neighbor.” A common definition of “neighbor” was clearly broadened by Jesus in the parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Neighbors are not just close relatives, friends, or members of the same tribe. Neighbors are other people as you find them in life. Neighbors include strangers in need, “unclean” outcasts, and even assumed enemies. According to Jesus, one should love all “neighbors” as if their condition in life were one’s own.

Do not turn away from them. For in their welfare resides your welfare.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a

Every aspect of our lives—including expressions of sexuality—must come under the authority and vision of the greatest commandments. Through stressing the greatest commandments, Jesus Christ graciously has revealed how to conduct our lives with assurance that we are living within God’s will. As we grow in true loving relationships with God and others we reveal God’s image in and vision for human life in the created order.

Jesus offered additional guidance about how we faithfully can live the greatest commandments. Particular attention should be given to Jesus’ proclamation of mission in the Nazareth synagogue as recorded in Luke 4:17–19 (NRSV):

...He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

To love God and neighbor as self is a call to embody the vision, love, and mission of Jesus Christ. While this call obviously involves loving others as they are in life, it also
includes a strong emphasis on helping people free themselves from unjust and dehumanizing situations in which they are trapped. Jesus’ mission is a summons to love God and neighbor by enlarging God’s reign of justice and peace on Earth.

Another area of helpful study when considering how to faithfully live the greatest commandments is the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5—7, III Nephi 5:50—7:2). These collected teachings of Jesus present his core message and peace ethics. In the early Christian community these teachings were considered essential for those entering the way of Jesus Christ through baptism and discipleship in covenant community with other disciples.

**Freedom in Christ**

In addition to presenting Jesus’ teachings about life in God’s peaceful reign, the New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ as the power of God’s grace, reconciliation, and salvation at work in the world. Reception of grace is not through strict obedience to all details of the Law (legalism). It comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1–11, Enos 1:7–10). From the gospel perspective, knowledge of the Law shows us how we have not lived up to all the demands of the Law. It can teach and condemn us, but it cannot redeem us (Romans 3:19–20, Alma 16:215)!

Instead of rigid rules and prescribed sacrifices to erase sins, the gospel offers freedom in Christ through faith and life in the Spirit, which includes freedom from religious legalism. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17 NRSV).

Freedom in Christ is freedom from fear that salvation and righteousness come through rigid obedience to the Law. This is freedom from having to gain God’s favor by works. Jesus described that view as hypocritical. He said it caused people to neglect “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. ...You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23–24 NRSV).

Freedom in Christ offers opportunity to shape life characterized by mature love, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, joy, hope, and peace. It is freedom to live the greatest commandments by making responsible choices in love. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the way of Jesus Christ: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2 NRSV).

Freedom in Christ built on the greatest commandments is foundational for Christian ethics. This freedom is not abandonment of moral standards or permission to do whatever we feel like. It is the call to embody the ethics of Christ’s love and peace, which leads to empowerment through the Holy Spirit to live according to God’s will. Such living brings great joy, hope, and meaning to our lives.

Apostle Paul urged:

> For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves (servants) to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

—Galatians 5:13 ff NRSV
Whatever we think, say, and do must be aligned with the greatest commandments and the gospel vision of freedom from legalism through faith in Christ and response to the Holy Spirit.

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Theological Foundations:
Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the life-giving, sustaining, and restoring “breath” of God at work in creation (Genesis 1–2, Ezekiel 37, John 20:19–22). The Spirit is the promised comforter and advocate—the Spirit of truth—and the enduring peace of Jesus Christ (John 14:15–17, 25–27).

The Holy Spirit sanctifies or empowers people to grow in righteousness in the image of God in Christ (John 17:17, Doctrine and Covenants 17:6). The Spirit is the “completer” of godly life in relationship to God, others, and the whole creation.

The Spirit also works to create communities from diverse people that reflect the communal and inclusive nature of God (Acts 2). It weaves people into community through baptism and confirmation to strengthen the witness and mission of the church (Doctrine and Covenants 164:2e).

Our Basic Beliefs State:
We believe in the Holy Spirit, Giver of Life, holy Wisdom, true God. The Spirit moves through and sustains creation; endows the church for mission; frees the world from sin, injustice, and death; and transforms disciples. Wherever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control, there the Holy Spirit is working.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

Anticipating his own physical departure, Jesus told his disciples they would continue to grow in their understanding of divine truth through the Spirit. Even though they had walked and talked with him, they did not fully understand the full vision and implications of the gospel.
The promise given to Jesus’ first disciple community is for all generations:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

—John 16:12–13 NRSV

Like the first disciples of Jesus and disciples of all generations, we need to gain insight about aspects of God’s nature and will that are still being uncovered as knowledge increases and we face new situations. Community of Christ scripture urges us to trust the promise of Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s guidance as we strive to better understand God’s will:

And now, verily, verily I say unto thee, Put thy trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good; yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy, and then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which is pertaining unto things of righteousness, in faith believing in me that you shall receive.

—Doctrine and Covenants 10:6–7

While the Holy Spirit blesses individuals with guidance, it also functions to shape awareness of divine will in the faith community. The Spirit collectively guides the disciple community through questions and shared experiences as we faithfully seek God’s will together.

Listen together to one another, without judgment or predisposition. Do not assume that the answers to matters of conflict have yet been perceived. There is much labor to be done. Reason together in love, and the Spirit of truth will prevail.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:5c

The Holy Spirit also ministers to form, bless, and restore healthy or right relationships aligned with God’s purposes. The Spirit weaves sacred community and establishes covenant relationships that strengthen commitment, wholeness, trust, justice, faithfulness, and peace.

The work of the Spirit is the reconciling work of God and Jesus Christ. Together, God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit have oneness of purpose.

The scriptures and the tradition (at its best) affirm that all life everywhere is a gift of the life-giving Spirit. The Spirit creates community between and among human beings, and between human beings and the nonhuman beings with whom we are in a covenant of moral obligation.

—Clark M. Williamson

Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology
The Spirit provides guidance for righteous or moral behavior that strengthens our resolve and ability to live the meaning of the greatest commandments.

True life in the Spirit produces fruits or virtues—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). These “fruits of the spirit,” which reflect God’s character, evidence that people are living in God’s Spirit and within God’s will. According to Galatians 5:22 (NRSV): “There is no law against such things.”

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Theological Foundations: Non-creedal Church

Some describe Community of Christ as a non-creedal church. What does that mean?

Basically, it means we do not have a prescribed list of beliefs or doctrines that must be entirely accepted for people to become church members or priesthood. We maintain that a list of beliefs, while very helpful for communicating our common faith, can never fully describe God’s nature and will. Our understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and our belief in Continuing Revelation prompt us to remain open to “yet more light and truth” on our faith journey with God.

As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his physical departure, he said:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

—John 16:12 NRSV

Unfortunately, growing individualism coupled with postmodern thought results in some people taking “non-creedal” to mean “anything goes” in theology and ethics. Whatever individuals decide by their reasoning, preference, or personal experience becomes the only authority that matters for them. If something does not fit within a person’s worldview, then it easily is set aside. This tendency has contributed to an increasingly broad array of individual beliefs and ethical perspectives in some nations where the church is established.

John Polkinghorne, author of Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion, accurately observes that:

...the extreme wing of the movement loosely categorized as postmodernism has suggested that instead of truth about reality, we have to settle for a portfolio of opinions expressing personal or societal points of view. Though there may appear to be conflicts between different perspectives proposed, it is said that there is no real competition because, in fact, there is not actually
anything to contend about. All points of view can claim equal authenticity, since none is constrained by an independently accessible external reality.

Community of Christ does not accept that "all points of view" can claim equal authority. We believe God's Continuing Revelation through Jesus Christ, the Living Word, as confirmed by the Holy Spirit, is foundational and ultimately decisive. At any given time the church presents its best understanding of divine revelation through statements of faith and Basic Beliefs, even as we endeavor to increase our understanding of such beliefs and how to apply them through the Holy Spirit's guidance.

The church recently developed official statements that describe its foundational beliefs and affirmations. These statements are presented in *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.* This collection of declarations about church identity, mission, Enduring Principles, sacraments, scripture, and Basic Beliefs was produced by leaders representing the worldwide church. It serves as a primary reference document for this paper along with other official statements.

Individuals may explore and decide their degree of alignment with the official beliefs and statements of the church without putting their membership in question. However, when addressing important theological and ethical questions the church's public theology contained in its authorized documents has priority over personal theologies. Also, priesthood members are expected to uphold the church’s official beliefs when engaged in public ministry.
Theological Foundations: Church/Community

The church is the called-out community of disciples who are committed to continuing the message, ministry, and mission of Jesus Christ in the world (Luke 4:18–19). The mission of Jesus was to proclaim and demonstrate the coming kingdom or reign of God on Earth.

The church is the “body in Christ” (Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 10:17 NRSV). As Christ was the revelation of God, the community Christ called into being is divinely commissioned to be the continued revelation and embodiment of God in Christ.

Our church’s mission statement emphasizes that *We Proclaim Jesus Christ and Promote Communities of Joy, Hope, Love, and Peace.* In Community of Christ, faithful proclamation of Jesus Christ is always connected to community life that reveals the vision of Christ and the fruits of the gospel living (joy, hope, love, and peace). We traditionally have referred to the communal dimensions of gospel living as the “Cause of Zion.”

The hope of Zion is realized when the vision of Christ is embodied in communities of generosity, justice, and peacefulness. 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 163:3a–b

Our church identity also is defined by Enduring Principles that express important themes from our journey as a faith community. These Enduring Principles provide a spiritual foundation and compass for the church in every age as we seek to be faithful to our heritage and God’s direction today. The principles are:

Grace and Generosity | Sacredness of Creation | Continuing Revelation
Worth of All Persons | All Are Called | Responsible Choices
Pursue Peace on Earth | Unity in Diversity | Blessings of Community

Our call as church members and participants is to enflesh (embody) these spiritual principles in our lives and relationships with those within and beyond the church community.
Our Basic Beliefs State:
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.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

Baptism and/or Confirmation
Through baptism and, in Community of Christ, confirmation of the Holy Spirit and membership, we enter into a sacred community that is God’s new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16–17, Mosiah 11:188). We no longer define our relationships or conduct ourselves “from a human point of view” according to secular biases and categories. We live by a new vision as members of Christ’s body in anticipation of the peaceful reign of God.

The church is called to reflect the oneness and love of the (triune) community of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The call is to radical relationality that embraces the conditions of others as our own. We are called to live out the meaning of our baptismal and membership covenant in sacred community with God and others (Doctrine and Covenants 164:2d).

A foundational scripture for understanding the nature of this sacred covenant is Galatians 3:27–29 (NRSV). Thought by scholars to be an early Christian baptismal commitment statement, it affirms:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

No Longer Male and Female
The meaning(s) of the phrase “no longer male and female” has been interpreted various ways over the centuries. President Steve Veazey cited Galatians 3:27–29 in the preface to Doctrine and Covenants 164. When asked regarding the significance of this reference, he responded:

During a time of prayer and study leading up to presenting the words of counsel that became Section 164, I was frequently drawn to Galatians 3:27–29. I was familiar with the scripture and considered it to be a beautiful expression of the ideal vision of Christian community. However, the Spirit pressed me to see something more of the scripture’s meaning in light of church issues today.
What was I supposed to see? I consulted several Bible commentaries. I discovered that in the early Christian church this text was considered foundational to understanding the radically new nature of community in Christ. In the first to third century CE, the phrase “male and female” or “no longer male and female” was a type of speech frequently used to describe the whole of something by naming its opposite poles. That is, it means “all human beings.”

To me, Galatians 3 is pivotal in scriptural explorations about marriage, ordination, gender, and human sexuality. It should be given significant emphasis in relation to passages that are more time and culture bound because of its broader, more-universal vision. It stresses that all humans—regardless of the labels we use to describe and separate each other (the human point of view)—are spiritually made one and equal in Christ through baptism and inclusion through the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the church community (body of Christ).

At this point, I sensed the Spirit stressing that male over female dominance still resident in society and many religions should not be practiced or condoned in the church. Through the Spirit’s witness, I also came to understand “no longer male and female” as a statement of equality in Christ that included all human beings along the spectrum of sex and gender identity. True community in Christ is built on a fundamental spiritual principle of equal worth and capacity for ministry that does not categorically exclude people because of social standing, economic capacity, ethnicity, sex, gender, or sexual orientation. All I can do is to lift up my testimony of our fundamental oneness in Christ. The church will have to discern what it means in various national and cultural contexts.

Section 164:5 issues a call for Community of Christ today to restore the vision of the earliest Christian communities for life together in Christ:

It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.

Baptism in Christ results in changed perspective about others that no longer relies on the old categories and labels like rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or Gentile (ethnicity), and sex or gender. Section 164:5 does not mean sex and gender no longer are part of Christian life and relationships. Obviously, they are part of created human life. Section 164:5 stresses that through baptism in Jesus Christ, human categories and labels, including sex and gender, should not be barriers to building ethical relationships of equality and oneness in the church.

Baptism in Christ results in a new community characterized by: “tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love” (Doctrine and Covenants 164:5). The degree to which the community of oneness in Christ, which reflects the nature of
God, is inclusive of all is the degree to which people can experience the fullness of Christ and a foretaste of God’s coming reign of justice and peace.

Note that the use of the word “tolerance” is not in the begrudging sense of simply “putting up” with others. According to Geoff Spencer in Geoff Spencer in The Hazards of Theology: Reaping the Benefits, Avoiding the Pitfalls:

Most dictionaries provide a range of definitions for the term “tolerance.” Maurice Draper has been helpful in pointing to the particular relevance...for theological process. In the first place, and probably most obvious, tolerance refers to freedom from bigotry, the maintenance of a fair and objective attitude exhibited by individuals in their relationships with others.

The real test of the degree to which we truly have been baptized into Christ and authentic Christian community is how we treat marginalized people and minority groups who experience discrimination. Do we seriously listen to their voices to better hear Christ’s voice? Do we provide equal opportunities for them to experience love, human worth, and the call to serve?

All Are Called, an Enduring Principle, affirms that “God graciously gives people gifts and opportunities to do good and to share in God’s purposes.” We also teach that all church members are invited to share in Jesus Christ’s life and ministry. This is an expression of a long-standing Restoration belief that:

All are called according to the gifts of God unto them; and to the intent that all may labor together, let him that laboreth in the ministry and him that toileth in the affairs of the men of business and of work labor together with God for the accomplishment of the work intrusted to all.

—Doctrine and Covenants 119:8b

We believe that all disciples are called to ministry that re-presents the life and mission of Jesus Christ (see Luke 4:18–19). We also believe that “Some disciples are called and ordained to particular priesthood responsibilities and ministries for the sake of the community, the congregation, and the world” (Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.).

The principle of “all are called according to their gifts” applies to priesthood as well as disciple ministry in general:

I say to you now, as I have said in the past, that all are called according to the gifts which have been given them. This applies to priesthood as well as to any other aspects of the work.

—Doctrine and Covenants 156:9b

Recently, the church received the following words of inspired counsel:

You live in a world with new challenges, and that world will require new forms of ministry. The priesthood must especially respond to that challenge,
and the church is admonished to prayerfully consider how calling and giftedness in the Community of Christ can best be expressed in a new time.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c

**Human Diversity Affirmed**

In response to the perceived gap between reality in many congregations and Christ's vision of equality, giftedness, and calling, the 1992 World Conference passed WCR 1226, entitled, “Human Diversity.” It resolved:

That the 1992 World Conference endorse the following “Affirmation of Human Diversity” and encourage its use in educational materials, worship resources, and leadership training.

The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the unqualified love of God and the inestimable worth of all persons. An awareness of God’s love and the love of others is essential to human fulfillment. For these reasons, we celebrate the rich diversity of human life.

However, human beings often fear, hate, and abuse each other because of ignorance about such factors as socioeconomic status, culture, race, gender, age, size, sexual orientation, and mental or physical disability. Such prejudicial behavior undermines the personal and spiritual development of both the abuser and the abused, and denies the mutual benefit of shared giftedness.

As persons of faith, we confess our own imperfections in attitude and action. Nevertheless, we accept the responsibility to resist fear and hate in all forms and to strive continuously to eliminate expressions of prejudice and discrimination.

We declare our belief that “all are called according to the gifts of God to them.” We therefore acknowledge and affirm human diversity by creating a spirit of openness and peace within our congregations where all persons may find acceptance and the opportunity to share giftedness.

We commit ourselves to work with all persons of goodwill to promote mutual respect, appreciation, and peace in all relationships.

Through Doctrine and Covenants 161:3, the church is counseled to:

Open your hearts and feel the yearnings of your brothers and sisters who are lonely, despised, fearful, neglected, unloved. Reach out in understanding, clasp their hands, and invite all to share in the blessings of community created in the name of the One who suffered on behalf of all.

Do not be fearful of one another. Respect each life journey, even in its brokenness and uncertainty, for each person has walked alone at times. Be ready to listen and slow to criticize, lest judgments be unrighteous and unredemptive.

As the community of those baptized and confirmed by the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, the church is called to faithfully wrestle with God’s constant call to fulfill Christ’s
vision of an inclusive community. We are called to embody our understanding of
tolerance, love, and Unity in Diversity to address the obvious gaps of inequality
within and without the church.
Theological Foundations: 
Humanity and the Worth of All Persons

Scripture teaches that human beings are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–27). Our Basic Beliefs stress this fundamental truth: “Every human being is created in the image of God” (Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.).

What does the phrase “created in God’s image” mean? It means humans have qualities that reflect aspects of God’s nature. These qualities include knowledge, creativity, self-awareness, freedom and capacity for moral choice, and spiritual light or intelligence. Also, humans have the ability to love God, others, themselves, and the whole creation. This reflects the relational (Triune) nature of God, who lives in perfect love and community.

Unity of Body and Spirit
A long-standing precept of Restoration-movement theology is that “the spirit and the body is the soul of man” (Doctrine and Covenants 85:4a). This concise theological statement emphasizes that the human spirit and body are not opposites or natural enemies. They are interrelated aspects of created human life.

Margaret A. Farley writes in Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics:

Created by God, sustained in being by God, offered an unlimited future by the promises of God in Jesus Christ, each human person—embodied and inspired—has the possibility of and the call to a destiny of relation and wholeness as embodied spirit, inspired body. The inclusion of the body in this destiny is by no means an afterthought on the part of a God who became embodied and whose own body now lives still in this world and in the reign of God.

The phrases “embodied spirit” and “inspired body” seem especially helpful to our understanding of human nature and related topics. Instead of separating spiritual and physical aspects of human life, these phrases promote a sense of desired integration, harmony, and unity of body and spirit.

The essential relationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of human nature is described in the New Testament using the concept of “temple”:

"The First Presidency coordinated development of this article with input, review, and feedback from the World Church Leadership Council, Standing High Council, Theology Formation Team, International Leaders Council, and individual theologians and ethicists."
Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

—1 Corinthians 3:16–17

This concept of human nature as “temple” is further expanded in Ephesians 2 as a quality of relationships in Jesus Christ characterized by love and peace that is “God’s household.” The community formed through the sacrifice of Christ that spiritually lives in Christ becomes a “holy temple” in which God dwells.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

—Ephesians 2:19–22

**Worth of All Persons**

Human worth is a fundamental principle of Community of Christ’s theological understanding of humanity.

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**Our Basic Beliefs State:**

Every human being is created in the image of God. In Jesus Christ, God took on the limits of human flesh and culture, and is known through them. We therefore affirm without exception the worth of every human being. We also affirm that God has blessed humankind with the gift of agency: the ability to choose whom or what we will serve within the circumstances of our lives.

—*Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.*

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Human worth has been a feature of the church’s witness and ministry since its beginning.

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; for, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men (people), that all men (people) might repent and come to him.

—Doctrine and Covenants 16:3c

From the earliest days you have been given a sacred principle that declares the inestimable worth of persons. Do not forget.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:6a
The Worth of All Persons is an Enduring Principle of the church. If we believe that humans are created in the image of God and that the “worth of souls is great” in God’s sight, then we must affirm that all humans are of equal worth.

The Enduring Principle, Worth of All Persons, stresses that “God wants all people to experience wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships.” In scripture, Jesus’ ministry often results in the blessing of wholeness in response to physical, spiritual, mental, or relational difficulties. Referring to Temple ministries, the desirability of wholeness in human life is lifted up in Doctrine and Covenants 156:5c:

By its [Temple] ministries an attitude of wholeness of body, mind, and spirit as a desirable end toward which to strive will be fostered.

What is wholeness? Wholeness is balance, harmony, and well-being of body, mind, spirit, and relationships. It affirms the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit in the created order. It does not mean a static perfected state, but rather the blessing of true peace marked by realizing the divine purpose in one’s life in all aspects of living.

September 2012
Theological Foundations: Sin and Salvation

The Enduring Principle, Responsible Choices, acknowledges that God created humans with the freedom and “ability to make choices” (agency) and that “human choices contribute to good or evil in our lives and in the world” (Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.).

Our Basic Beliefs State:
God created us to be agents of love and goodness. Yet we misuse our agency individually and collectively. We take the gifts of creation and of self and turn them against God’s purposes with tragic results. Sin is the universal condition of separation and alienation from God and one another. We are in need of divine grace that alone reconciles us with God and one another.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

Sin is a universal condition of human life. “Sinful” describes all of us and our need for God’s grace, forgiveness, and redemption through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23, Helaman 4:53–56).

Basically, sin is unwillingness to live in right and loving relationships with God, others, and creation. We become self-centered, greedy, and rebellious. We decline God’s passionate invitation to live in just and peaceful relationships. Consequently, we live lives of insecurity, fear, and carnal indulgence while dying spiritually to life as God intends it. This rampant condition disrupts our lives, others’ lives, and pushes creation toward chaos and destruction rather than wholeness and peace.

According to the New Testament, Jesus’ understanding of sin went beyond wrong outward actions and included inner desires, intents, and motives. He interpreted the Law in such a way as to deepen its meaning and redemptive application using the exhortation: “You have heard it said in the past...But I say to you.”

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.
“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire...You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

—Matthew 5:21–30 NRSV

Also, to Jesus, not acting in compassion, love, mercy, and justice toward others was just as sinful as engaging in wrong actions (Matthew 23:23–24, Matthew 25:31 ff.).

While sin is understood as a universal condition, scripture sometimes uses “vice lists” to demonstrate how sin reveals itself in human life (Romans 1:28–32, 2:1–16; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Galatians 5:19–21; 1 Timothy 1:8–10).

Such lists are neither meant to be complete nor to provide a ranking of sins from worst to not as bad. They should not be used to limit our understanding of sin to “checklists.” Vice lists illustrate the pervasive nature of sin, the hypocrisy of self-righteously judging others, and the need for all to repent and receive forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ.

The human propensity for quickly judging and condemning others while overlooking the condition of our own lives was challenged by Jesus: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matthew 7:1–5; Luke 6:37–38, 41–42; Mark 4:24).

Doctrine and Covenants 164:6 presents counsel that has clear implications for our understanding of sin. Section 164:6 is built on the ethical foundations of the greatest commandments and the gospel vision of freedom in Christ led by the Holy Spirit. It stresses that moral behavior and relationships should clearly, consistently, and totally respect the principles of “Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 164:6a).

Section 164:6 describes sinful behaviors as attitudes, actions, and relationships that are “selfish, irresponsible, promiscuous, degrading, or abusive” (164:6b). This is equally true for all types of relationships. From the perspective of Section 164:6, there should not be different standards in sexual ethics.

Salvation

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Romans 1:16 NRSV).

Our Restoration scriptures affirm:

And this is the gospel, the glad tidings which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us, that he came into the world, even Jesus to be crucified for the
world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him all might be saved, whom the Father had put into his power...

—Doctrine and Covenants 76:4g–h

The New Testament affirms that “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him—these things God has revealed to us by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9 NRSV). Also, “Beloved we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 NRSV).

Our Basic Beliefs State:
The gospel is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ; forgiveness of sin, and healing from separation, brokenness, and the power of violence and death. This healing is for individuals, human societies, and all of creation. This new life is the loving gift of God’s grace that becomes ours through faith and repentance. Baptism is how we initially express our commitment to lifelong discipleship. As we yield our lives to Christ in baptism we enter Christian community (the body of Christ) and have the promise of salvation. We experience salvation through Jesus Christ, but affirm that God’s grace has no bounds, and God’s love is greater than we can know.

—Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, 3rd Ed.

Community of Christ teaching about salvation is not confined to individual salvation alone. We believe the qualities of salvation begin to be experienced in this life as we are reconciled with God and others through faith response to the gospel. The “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22 NRSV) evidences this unfolding direction in our lives.

We also believe that salvation has social, relational, or communal dimensions. That is, the whole creation is ultimately the focus and beneficiary of God’s redemptive action:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.

—Romans 8:18–24 NRSV
Recent counsel to the church offers an invitation to the fullness of salvation that includes peace in this life and in the eternal realms of God’s universe:

Follow Christ in the way that leads to God’s peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:2a

The scriptural vision of the renewal of the whole creation calls us to hopeful action in response to the suffering and groaning of creation. We are called to “whole-life stewardship dedicated to expanding the church’s restoring ministries, especially those devoted to asserting the worth of persons, protecting the sacredness of creation, and relieving physical and spiritual suffering” (Doctrine and Covenants 164:9c), because “in their welfare resides your welfare” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a).

Final judgment, according to Matthew 25:31–45 (NRSV), will rest to a great extent on how we cared for the “least of these” during our life on Earth. How we treat the least, the lacking, and the labeled reveals the true quality of our love of God and neighbor.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

God
Jesus Christ
Holy Spirit

1. If our ministry and mission is aligned with our belief in the Triune (Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier) God, what qualities and priorities should be evident?

2. An important part of our mission statement is “...we promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace.” How is our emphasis on promoting communities of “joy, hope, love, and peace” an essential witness of our belief in the Triune God?
Non-creedal

1. What are the implications of individuals placing their personal theologies above the church’s stated beliefs when involved in public ministry? How would you counsel those for whom you are responsible to understand the priority of the church’s identity, mission, message and beliefs in their public ministry?

2. What approaches to inviting people to Christ work best in our church, where we do not have a creed? How is that different from churches with a creed?”
1. What would a congregation be like if all of its members were fully committed to the description of Christian community in Galatians 3: 27-29?

2. The presentation stated that the “real test of the degree to which we truly have been baptized into Christ and authentic Christian community is how we treat marginalized people and minority groups who experience discrimination.” How is your mission center doing in this regard? What signs of hope and transformation do you see?
Humanity and the Worth of All Persons

Sin and Salvation

1. We are called to center our lives on God. "Sin" describes the ways in which we lose that focus. How do we talk about sin in ways that equip disciples to stay true to our center yet avoid a list of vices?

2. Doctrine and Covenants 163 counsels us to "Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God." In your culture, what are these trends? How should the church challenge them?