

2010 World Conference Message shared by President Stephen M. Veazey, Sunday April 11

“We Share a Vision”

Let’s celebrate!

Celebration builds healthy community. So let’s celebrate some anniversaries!

Twenty-five years ago women were first ordained to the priesthood. Today women serve at every level of church ministry and leadership.

It took divine revelation to get us moving. However, we responded to the Spirit’s call! As a result, the worldwide church is blessed with ministerial gifts that otherwise would have been lost.

We are growing in expression of an Enduring Principle of the Restoration: “All are called according to their gifts.” Yes, we need more understanding about giftedness, calling, and ministry. However, we are headed in the right direction!

Thirty years ago church leaders started Outreach International (OI). Beginning with efforts in the Philippines, OI was created to reduce the cruel poverty seen by church leaders as they began to travel extensively throughout the world.

OI has emerged as a leading global humanitarian organization that specializes in “participatory human development.” This approach is one of the most-effective ways to create “sustainable good” in impoverished communities while avoiding long-term dependency.

Tonight we celebrate with OI—our partner in mission—its 30th birthday!

And, of course, at this World Conference we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the conference of the Reorganization, where Joseph Smith III accepted his call to prophetic leadership of the church. As noted by Church Historian Mark Scherer, a prophetic movement found a prophet, and a prophet found a prophetic movement!

The history of the Reorganized Church is the major portion of our sacred story. We need to mine that history for inspiration and guiding principles as we continue our faith journey.

Some had the opportunity to “meet” Joseph Smith III last night during the Presidency’s reception. I offered to let Brother Joseph preside over this Conference, but he graciously declined, saying he already had done his part!

And that’s not all! During my April 5, 2009, address to the church, I said I had a dream of building on the success of the Co-Missioned Pastors Initiative by making the best of that program available to many more pastors and congregational leaders. Through the generosity of a church family, we have received a gift of \$4 million to be used exclusively to train, support, and

network congregational leaders throughout the church, including a focus on equipping young adults to be congregational leaders now and in the future.

We have a lot to celebrate! If the person next you has not shown any signs of thankfulness, joy, or celebration—not even a smile—at this point, check to see if they have a pulse!

Now let us turn to the future: **What kind of church do we really want to be?**

Or stated better: **What kind of church does *God* want us to be?**

The counsel shared January 17, which I am formally submitting to the World Conference tonight, is about answering that question together. For me, paragraph five gets to the heart. The questions before us this week may be resolved successfully if we open ourselves to the meaning of these words:

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 sign of the coming reign of God.

We want to get right to resolving specific issues. But the Spirit says we need to revisit and master the basics of discipleship first!

Paragraph 5 describes the church we will become when we discern the full meaning of baptism into Christ. It emphasizes the gospel is not just about you or me; it is about us—*all of us!*—and how we can live in community if the spirit of Christ fully lives in us.

Do we really comprehend the meaning of these words? When baptized into Christ we embrace a new identity that transcends all other identities and allegiances that previously defined us. We are no longer male or female first. We are not primarily of a particular social or economic class. We are no longer of a particular ethnicity or nationality first. We are first and foremost “one in Christ!”

Let me put it this way. If you are truly baptized into Christ, anything that happens to sisters or brothers in Christ—good or bad—happens to you and your family. It happens to me and my family!

If an earthquake rocks Haiti or Chile, it is not just a compelling news story; it is happening to all of us! If people are being denied safety, basic human rights, and opportunity because of gender, age, nationality, sexual orientation, or economic status, it is happening to me and you and our children. That is what it means to be one in Christ!

When the church fills with disciples—especially communities of disciples—who are living this vision to the best of their ability, the new creation Christ gave his life to birth will become increasingly visible.

Restoration is about recovering the heart of early Christian vision, faith, witness, and loving fellowship. That restoring vision and spiritual impulse lie at the heart of what it means to be *Community of Christ*.

Our actions this week will move us closer to or further from being that kind of church.

If we move closer, the issues before us—such as conditions of membership and moral behavior—will be transformed. We will approach them with a new spirit and perspective. Ludwig Wittgenstein describes this transformation:

Once the...new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture, for they go with our way of expressing ourselves, and if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garments.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

What an interesting phrase: “...if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression...” From Galatians we read that truth expressed more specifically about baptism into Christ:

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.

—Galatians 3:27–29

Perhaps difficult questions are on our agenda to compel us to go much deeper in our understanding of what it means to be *Community of Christ* and “one in Christ.”

Perhaps the Spirit is prompting us to go beyond what we think the issues are to discern what we really need to explore.

Should our discussion about conditions of membership be about whether to protect the doctrinal “rightness” of our church? Or should it be about whether our sacraments done in the name and spirit of Christ create more reconciliation, blessing, and unity in the world?

Should our discussion be about whether our priesthood has the only divinely given authority to baptize people? Or should it be about how the Holy Spirit is leading baptized Christians to seek church membership and what that means?

I have experienced the beauty and power of baptismal authority expressed through Community of Christ priesthood in the sacrament of baptism. I also have seen the obvious fruits of baptism in people converted to Christianity and baptized long before they were introduced to Community of Christ. Can both be true?

Not long ago I visited with an older Asian gentleman who told me how he first heard of Christ and responded. He was baptized in a pool in a cave where Christians met to avoid detection.

He told of the persecution he and others experienced for being Christian. He told of his pastor being jailed for many years, yet never recanting his testimony of Christ. He described walking barefooted at night to avoid detection to worship with other Christians.

Ending his testimony, he said, “I have found in Community of Christ the best expression of the Jesus I already know. I want to be part of your church and not just a friend.”

The Spirit assured me his baptism had occurred through the grace and authority of Jesus Christ. It also assured me that God’s grace had reached him in the unique circumstances of his life and that his baptism should be respected.

I held this experience in my heart as I continued to study and pray about conditions of membership. Over several months the Spirit orchestrated a union of scriptural insight, personal experience, and testimony from the church that shaped the counsel recently shared.

The counsel provides direction. All the policy details are not yet clear because of complexities around the world.

However, if the counsel is approved the church will have a standard practice of baptism by immersion of people at least 8 years old while not denying or discounting the baptismal experiences of other Christians. I believe this is the right direction for the church today.

Now let us move to another topic of the counsel: moral behavior. The church is wrestling with complex issues in many nations. We can view these issues as big problems. Or we can receive the greater blessings in having to struggle with them.

The way to receive the greater blessings is to ask, “What is the Spirit trying to do with us?”

Perhaps the Spirit is pressing us to better understand how we use scripture. Sometimes it takes big questions that are not easily answered for us to see the inadequacy of our current viewpoints and approaches.

According to Alice Ogden Bellis and Terry L. Hufford:

Whenever people grow too comfortable with their understanding of [scripture], new developments arise that call people of faith to wrestle. Like Jacob, we may emerge limping, but with a blessing.

—Alice Ogden Bellis and Terry L. Hufford, *Science, Scripture, and Homosexuality*, page 122

So what do we need to learn about using scripture at this point in our journey? I am indebted to Fred Craddock, a professor emeritus in preaching and the New Testament, for the following illustration:

Joseph is engaged to Mary, discovers she is pregnant, and knows he is not the father. What should he do? He runs to some friends who say, "Just do what the Bible says." Well, here is what Joseph's Bible says. It is in Deuteronomy 22: She is to be taken out and stoned to death in front of the people.

Quoting from Craddock:

Joseph is a good man and he rises to a point that is remarkable for his day and time. He loves his Bible and he knows his Bible...But he reads his Bible through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of God who is loving and kind. Therefore, he says, "I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her." Where does it say that, Joseph? In your Bible? I'll tell you where it says that. It says that in the very nature and character of God.

Craddock continues:

I am absolutely amazed that Joseph is the first person in the New Testament who learned how to read his Bible. Like Joseph, we are to read it through the spectacles of the grace and goodness and the love of God. If in reading the Bible you find justification for abusing, humiliating, disgracing, harming, or hurting, especially if it makes you feel better about yourself, you are absolutely wrong. The Bible is to be read in the light of the character of God.

—Fred Craddock, "God is With Us," *The Cherry Log Sermons*, page 5.

Is that what the Holy Spirit is trying to do with us? Is the Spirit trying to free us from the polarized religious and secular culture of our day? It is a culture that both applies scripture indiscriminately and literally without any informed understanding of its background or—at the other extreme—dismisses scripture as irrelevant to today's issues.

Perhaps the Spirit is urging us to take scripture more seriously and to learn to use it more responsibly. Difficult questions can compel us to do that.

Perhaps, by putting perplexing questions in our path, the Spirit helps us see how our own judgmental attitudes and biases keep us from being Christ's community.

Jesus spoke directly to this all-to-human-tendency to condemn the "sin" of others while quickly excusing our own faults when he asserted:

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. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

—Matthew 7:1–4 NRSV

Jesus stressed that we should be very slow to judge other people because our sins may be just as great or greater.

Perhaps the Spirit challenges us with hard questions so we will become more reliant on God's guidance rather than our own thinking and emotions. Maybe we need humbling.

Before Joseph Smith III accepted his prophetic call he wrestled with hard faith questions and difficult life experiences that taught him—by his own admission—to rely more humbly on God's direction.

It was only after emerging from a time of struggle that Joseph could stand humbly before the waiting Saints and say, "I have come in obedience to a power greater than my own."

To resolve the questions before us we need to humbly rely more on a power greater than our own intellects and feelings.

During my morning devotions the other day I read from Psalm 25:9: "He leads the humble in what is right...." While reflecting on that verse, I also read Doctrine and Covenants 10:6: "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."

It occurred to me the sequence of phrases is important. We must learn to "do justly" and "walk humbly" before we can "judge righteously." Being competent in justice—God's kind of reconciling and restoring justice—and humility must precede making decisions about difficult moral issues.

What is the Spirit doing with us? Perhaps, the Spirit is helping us find better ways of making decisions as an international church and at all levels of church life.

I believe the church is being fashioned to make an important contribution to the healing of communities that are ripping apart because of people's disagreements over moral, theological, and political issues.

Jim Wallis, in an article titled the "Urgency of Civility" wrote:

I...get calls from people in churches who describe how the political warfare is creeping into their life together as the body of Christ. The church, which is supposed to help overcome the polarization of society, is instead being overcome by it.

Perhaps the faith community could lead by example...where civil discourse seems to have broken down—by showing a “better way” in how we treat each other in our faith communities, even across religious and political lines.

—Jim Wallis, “The Urgency of Civility,” *Sojourners*, December 2009, page 7

Could it be the Spirit is urging us to become a “signal community” to show how to talk civilly about heated issues and to find resolutions that do not tear people apart?

Is this the blessing found in our attempts to create unity in diversity? Listen to this divine counsel:

It is for divine purposes that you have been given the struggles as well as the joys of diversity. So must it always be in the peaceable kingdom.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:4b

Is it possible that our struggles related to human diversity were given to us for divine purposes?

Fortunately, continuing revelation provides a compass for navigating the swirling currents before us. The answers we seek and the blessings we need will be found as we move forward.

Surprisingly, the direction given in recent counsel is first to remember the meaning of our baptism! Do we really believe that when we are baptized we die to our old life and rise to a new life in Christ?

Do we believe that through baptism we are incorporated into the Body of Christ, which is God’s new creation; a new creation that buds and blossoms as sacred community in which human differences are embraced and people are affirmed primarily as children of God?

Once we embrace that vision we need to come to consensus on the meaning of certain fundamental theological and spiritual principles before we create more specific policies about moral behavior in diverse cultures throughout the world.

The *We Share* document in your Conference notebook identifies the church’s vision, mission, Enduring Principles, and basic beliefs. These principles will not lead us astray. If we embody these principles we will grow in Christ’s vision for the church. The *We Share* document should be a primary focus of church leadership and membership education everywhere.

The recent counsel gives more insight into foundational principles of moral behavior and relationships. It lists them as the worth and giftedness of all persons; protection of the most vulnerable; an emphasis of Christ-like love; mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness.

These principles point to the true nature and character of God. That is the lens we need to discern direction and make policy. Understanding these principles and consistently applying them in particular settings is the challenge and opportunity before us.

This World Conference is asked to truly become a World Conference with worldwide understanding; not a Conference dominated by the issues and perspectives in some nations. By focusing on universal principles and allowing national or field conferences where appropriate to address more-specific applications, we can involve many more people in determining how the common principles will be lived in diverse settings that many of us simply do not understand. In this process, we will take additional steps toward becoming a prophetic people who are called “to discern the divine will for your own time and in the places you serve.” (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c)

Even as this World Conference begins, I see beyond the current questions, perplexities, and anxieties. We will find our better natures, move through this time, and spiritually grow from it. We will emerge as a worldwide faith community better equipped to address serious questions that arise at the dynamic intersection of the gospel and human life.

I see a not-too-distant future when the issues we currently face will be mostly resolved. Sure, there will be other issues—perhaps even more-difficult issues—but we will have more experience and the necessary tools to deal with them.

More important, we will be able to devote much more of our effort and resources to our core mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ and restoring people to communities of peace! The greatest danger we face is to allow differences over the issues at this Conference to divert us from our mission! As the counsel concludes, “The mission of Jesus Christ is what matters most!”

Christ’s mission is to expand the reign of God’s salvation and peace into the lives of many more people and nations. While we are debating internal church issues, people are dying of physical, spiritual, and relational starvation! They are dying next door to our congregations and on the other side of the world. We are concerned about all of them because God is concerned about all of them!

Shall we go forward in this great vision and mission? Or shall we turn back to the safety and security of former days and understandings?

When Joseph Smith III left to go to the 1860 conference of the Reorganization, friends took him and his mother, Emma, in a small boat across the Mississippi River to catch a train. The wind and waves rocked their little boat, and it began to take on water. No doubt fear gripped their stomachs as the shore they left grew more distant. Go forward or turn back?

Evaluating the situation and revealing his inner conviction, Joseph courageously acted. He removed his shoes and used them to bail water! And we are here 150 years later as a result!

Forward or back?

It is your choice now.