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**Section 161:1a:
Beyond Anti-Fundamentalism and Liberal-Retreat**

This essay commemorates W. Grant McMurray and the encouragement and compassion with which he led the church. This is a reflection on a section of the Doctrine and Covenants given under his leadership, which, I believe, highlights the combination of pastoral, yet prophetic leadership, which marked his character and sense of direction. Grant’s relentless vision was for a church that both trusted God’s future and embraced its sacred past. It is with this in mind, I hope the church continually revisits these canonized words. We face an uncertain future. Section 161:1a resounds that Spirit of pastoral, yet prophetic presence that remains the legacy of President McMurray’s courage and compassion.

*“Lift up your eyes
and fix them
on the place
beyond the horizon
to which you are sent.
Journey in trust,
assured that
the great and marvelous work
is for this time
and for all time”*
Doctrine and Covenants 161:1a

At first glance, the title of this paper might give the impression of a young man struggling with the grunting pace of institutional change. That’s true. The young man that wrote these words was a forty-nine year-old Canadian, a church secretary turned President/Prophet, grappling with his prophetic responsibility.

It was 1996 when W. Grant McMurray charged the church¹ to start looking to a “place beyond the horizon” toward which it would have to move. After four years of mulling it over, these words were

¹ An introductory note to my use of the term, “the church”: Recognizing the need for a growing global consciousness in our increasingly world-wide church, this presentation is self-consciously North American. I write from within our church’s historical North American heritage, and am writing about the reigning North American paradigms and self-image that dominates the Restoration movement – even the Community of Christ. In using the term “the church” I am talking about a historically dominant, even hegemonic, cultural frame, of which its center has been unmistakably North American. Aware of

canonized and the church answered by changing its name.² Today, this same spiritual summons remains for us as the church struggles with decades of decline in North America and divisive tensions. More than ever, it beckons us on theologically.

Like all scripture, spending time with Section 161 exposes us to words that emit a relentless kind of counsel. Each of its 14 verses, indeed thirty-one of its thirty-nine sentences, launches off the page with a divine imperative: “Claim your...place”, “Walk proudly”, “Become a people”, “Fulfill the purposes”, “Open your hearts”, “Do not be fearful”, “Understand”, “Be patient”, “Stand firm”, “Heed the call.” Each of these imperatives has that “You” implied – the church – which is the subject of each urgent sentence. Written with this kind of force, it reads as a profoundly pointed pastoral, yet prophetic letter.

But, what makes this counsel particularly prophetic is not any disclosure of divine information. There’s no buried plates or celestial secrets in Section 161. And true, the pastoral instructions demand courage, but they are pretty plain. Instead, *what makes Section 161 prophetic is its urgent charge to look, then move, into the unknown.* God’s command is to set our eyes toward a place we literally have yet to see. It is “beyond the horizon,” in another day, and outside our present vision, yet a place we have already been sent. Hence, there is a comforting sentence given to the church, “journey in trust.” This prophetic imperative to peer into and lean toward the unknown is what leads me to this paper.

the limits and particularities of this cultural view of the church, I talk about “the church” not to exclude, but aware of the traditional use of the term “the church” to expresses the peculiarity and unity of the RLDS movement in the North American context. As a member of the church who grew up in the church informed by its North American heritage, I’m acknowledging that heritage of intimacy and common identity that is available in using the term “the church” as a term that when used in RLDS company, everyone knew what was meant. However, in using this term for the Community of Christ, I am also explicitly trying to move beyond this narrow and assumptive set of understandings that dominate our very ability to talk about and know the meaning of “the church.” Implicit in this paper is a critical desire to move beyond a still, albeit updated, North American understanding of the church toward a greater awareness of the historically shaped and culturally embedded plurality of differences that make up the theology and spirituality of the Community of Christ – including its many North American expressions and communities. Like many in the church, I celebrate and mourn the intimacy and sense of belonging inherent in using this intimate term, “the church.” However, I’m equally aware of its trappings. I am more committed at this time of transition and reinterpretation as a church to the spirit of revelation and community-seeking that characterizes Christ’s incarnation and the Spirit of this faith movement. For me, our self-understanding as a *movement* necessarily means moving out of the familiar and into the anxious responsibility and revelatory possibilities of living together more faithfully with others, in order to see God.

² The adoption of Section 161 into the Doctrine and Covenants, and the RLDS name change to Community of Christ occurred at the 2000 World Conference.

Anti-Fundamentalism and Liberal-Retreat: A Theological Framework Forty Years in the Making

The theme of the 2005 Theology and Ministry Forum centers on the clashing world-views of evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and the Community of Christ.³ This theme is a helpful entry point into understanding the church's guiding theological framework, which directs and determines the church's current theology and sense of identity.

One way to read this year's theme, the way I think is most honest and accurate, is to understand that "the clash" referred to is a clash with the theological perspective currently reigning in the church. It is a theological perspective that is *not* fundamentalist or evangelical,⁴ (in its most used sense). It is something else. Clarifying the "clash" pointed out in this year's theme is crucial. There is a strong and clarifying theological disposition in the church, one in which I am calling (not surprisingly), anti-fundamentalism. Coming clean about our deep seeded anti-fundamentalism helps us see more clearly. It is a disposition operating at the core of our current theological thinking, and is a disposition that 161:1a may suggest limits the church's vision.

Our church's anti-fundamentalism, however, does not stand alone. The church's reigning theology is better understood if we appreciate it a unitary theology, but a dynamic and historical tension I call "anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat." For the last few decades, our church has been in a painful struggle to move away from our sectarian roots toward a more ecumenical and inclusive Christ-centered understanding. The Community of Christ, today, is the fruit of that struggle. Yet, this fruit is not ripe. In moving toward the more moderate denominationalism we know today, our church has developed a kind of encumbered and conceptually heavy approach to faith, which is still determining our identity and organizationally-minded religious structure. This conceptual machinery and corporate approach is the result of our turn to the resources of liberalism. It is here we seem stuck, struggling to move beyond. We

³ The theme of the 2005 Theology and Ministry Forum was, "Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, and the Community of Christ: Ministering among Clashing Worldviews."

⁴ Here, I am putting evangelicalism and fundamentalism together on one end of a spectrum. As I will describe, the church's anti-fundamentalism and "liberal-retreat" is on the other side.

openly want to en flesh that new life and community promised on the other side of transformation, but we have yet to reconcile ourselves internally with what it means to embrace both the future and the past of the Restoration. This remains a unique and daunting challenge.

The church comes by its current theological struggle righteously. All ideas, especially the ideas and intellectual dispositions in the church are not without history. Hence, I will start fleshing out a deeper understanding of the church's current anti-fundamentalism and liberal-treat by framing it in historical perspective.⁵ Putting the church's corporate theology in a historical framework will help us grapple with the dominant thought defining our sense of faith and identity. Hopefully, this will help us grapple with the limits of present thinking. Moreover, contextualizing our theology in a historical backdrop will help evade the many reactionary theological controversies that seem just below the surface of the Community of Christ today.⁶ These tensions cannot be wholly avoided, however. We often move year-to-year heartened by visions that ring inspirational, but struggle to gain ground spiritually or congregationally. Transformation may be our corporate vision, but it has yet to manifest new approaches to reconciling or transforming with our internal tensions. Moreover, it has yet to affect the looming crises of participation in the North American church.

In the following section, I give a historical treatment, a kind of genealogy, of intellectual movements and ecclesial events which have helped shape our current theology. This theology is not a unitary one, but a tension I am calling anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat. This will clearly have a North American focus,⁷ and I will accomplish it in three moves. First, I'll trace the seismic theological

⁵ Let me just clarify and yield to the limits of my skills and thinking. I'm not a historian, nor claim to be. Rather, I am concerned with the church's intellectual history insofar as it is shaped by surrounding culture, which in turn, shapes church theology. I've been critically aware that history has pretty much ceased to be written for the church about the same point in which theology began to be written for it – somewhere in the 1960's. I am eager for the day when historians begin writing the church's intellectual and ecclesial history since the 1960's, but understand the difficulty of doing so. Whether a fundamentalist religion or liberal institution, history legitimates the powers at be and the current tension underlying the church's identity and mission remains unresolved.

⁶ Historicizing things has the power to subvert those ahistorical and moralistic debates about the divine, those debates that get locked in personal experience, metaphysics, or political oppositions. That is its value here.

⁷ This North American focus, considering the church's majority non-North American membership, is important to note. Even though there are more Community of Christ members abroad than in the U.S. and Canada, North America is, of course, our

changes of the last forty years in the church discussing their two roots: international expansion and ecumenical theological exploration. Second, we'll see how these forces shaped and were reshaped in the fundamentalist-split in the 1980's, following women in the priesthood and Section 156. From there, I'll move to more recent times, to the transformative intension of our current leadership. Here, I'll demonstrate, thirdly, that the church's liberal turn extends through the ordination of W. Grant McMurray, the RLDS name change, and pervades the church's current theological program.

In the final half of the paper, I take a critical look at to how the North American church remains in a struggle for transformation, facing serious decline and internal tensions. I'll try to show how the church's anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat contributes to much of the church's organizational anxiety and theological tensions. Then, I'll turn to Section 161:1a. Here, I'll argue that "fixing our eyes beyond the horizon" means recouping the Spirit of our church's last forty years and constructing a new history. I will argue that Section 161:1a challenges the North American church to re-member, as in putting back together, the courageous theology and ethic of risk that brought us into the unknown of the late 20th Century. This will mean, necessarily, looking toward an anxious, even insecure future, and remembering that disruptive Spirit of risk-taking and exploration that summoned the church to embrace Section 156. I'll be looking specifically to re-membering⁸ a theology of incarnation: a theology that calls the church beyond its conceptual machinery and organizational ruminating and toward enfleshing the communal Christ. The future comes toward us; we have already been sent. Christ lies beyond our current theological tensions in the courageous embrace of both past and future. It is in the courage to clarify our past, face the present, and embrace a difficult future that Section 161 makes the most prophetic and pastoral sense.

tradition's geographic center and historical home. It is still the church's primary financial base. Save a few exceptions, North Americans dominate the cultural perspective of the church's guiding leadership. It is here, within the church's North American core, that the church has undergone seismic changes that have transformed our membership, the way we talk about ourselves, view our scriptures, understand tradition, orient our past and future, as well as the constitution and character of our leadership. This geographic and historical location is also the home of the church's anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat.

⁸ As in thinking back and putting back together.

*The Two Roots of RLDS Anti-Fundamentalism and Our Liberal-Retreat:
International Expansion & Theological Education/Ecumenical Exploration*

In simple terms, I've come to understand that there were two series of events that began shaking the traditional foundations of RLDS faith and identity in the 1960's. I will discuss them briefly. The first was the church's international expansion beginning dramatically in the 1960's. Second, was the force of ecumenical dialogue and theological training that the church embraced during the same decade. Both have had, and continue to have, tremendous impact on the rethinking and remaking of the Restoration.

From the 1920's through the 1950's, the RLDS church maintained presence in twelve nations world-wide. By the end of the 1960's, this amount almost doubled to twenty-three.⁹ Realizing the impact of international expansion, Apostle Chuck Neff foresaw its implications in 1976. With prophetic foresight, he wrote,

“Because of our peculiar and definite rootage in American soil and U.S. systems of politics, government, economics, and other distinctive aspects of culture, it is really possible for us to be a world church?...Because our church is presently so highly authoritarian and centralized in its approach...is it really conceivable that we can tolerate the pluralism required for the church to become indigenous – that is, identifying meaningfully with all the culture of the earth where the gospel seed can be planted?”¹⁰

Demonstrating it in print, Neff realized that the church's emerging multi-culturalism held serious consequences for the cultural center and historical identity, which defined the church's cultural and theological core. The shrinking world and its inherent plurality would eventually trouble a fundamental RLDS claim: that we were the “one true church.” Indeed, it did. Insightful minds on the forefront recognized cross-cultural outreach overwhelmed the limits of RLDS piety and cultural parochialism. These limits were religious boundaries that defined church's very identity. In time, these traditional structures would fracture to breaking point, which would send the church into various directions seeking clarification of RLDS identity and theology.

⁹ Larry Tyree, “Field Organization.” (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ, West Central Field, July 2001, photocopied)

¹⁰ Charles Neff, “Zion: Remnant or Leaven,” *Commission: Called into Being – Sent into Mission* (January 1976), 10.

The penetrating questions arising from international expansion, however, did not shake the foundations on their own. About the same time, fundamental questions were also being asked about RLDS identity amidst ecumenical discussions occurring both within and outside the church's headquarters and leading educational institutions. With the ordination of W. Wallace Smith and the World Conference of 1958, the seeds of influence for ecumenical discussion and greater theological training had been planted. Bill Russell gives an account of a historical chain of events in his essay, "The Fundamentalist Schism, 1958 to Present."¹¹

An influx of broadened perspectives from theologically educated and ecumenically minded individuals affected both the church's core institutions simultaneously. Russell accounts key faculty changes occurring in Graceland's Philosophy and Religion department in the years of 1958-1960,¹² about the same time headquarters staff began taking classes at Saint Paul School of Theology, a Methodist seminary newly opened down the street.¹³ The church's Department of Religious Education and the *Saints Herald* editorial staff were also impacted, affecting mutually the church's principle educational institution and communication hub.

Probably the most significant and controversial symbolic event took place in the late 1960's. Richard B. Lancaster, director of the church's Religious Education department, was finishing up his Master of Divinity from Saint Paul. At this time, "private seminars" were taking place between Saint Paul faculty, its administrators the church's Joint Council.^{14, 15} These discussions were explicitly theological in nature. Following these discussions, internal initiatives led to the writing of the infamous

¹¹ William Russell, "The Fundamentalist Schism, 1958-Present" in *Let Contention Cease*, Roger D. Launius and W.B. "Pat" Spillman, eds. (Independence, Graceland/Park Press, 1991)

¹² Russell, 130.

¹³ Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri is at 5123 E Truman Road in Kansas City. It opened in 1959.

¹⁴ Russell, 132.

¹⁵ First Presidency, Council of Twelve, and Presiding Bishopric. The church's leading council now includes additional members and is called the World Church Leadership Council.

and exploratory “Position Papers”¹⁶ at the end of the 1960’s. The “Presidential Papers,”¹⁷ which reflected much the church’s developing theological discussions, were given to church appointees and field officers in 1979. Generally, these papers were intended for discussion on exploring the nature, direction, and meaning of the church’s mission and theology. The earlier “Position Papers” were, unfortunately, prematurely and unofficially distributed, which fed their later factional impact.

*These Two Roots Converge: RLDS Anti-Fundamentalism Post-156*¹⁸

The apex of conflict over the new Spirit of inquiry and exploration came in the 1980’s. As many today will remember, the events on the Conference floor in 1984 and events following cemented the church’s anti-fundamentalist feelings after dissenters seceded¹⁹ from the church following Section 156 and its call for ordination of women. In a two to three year period, the very Spirit of the Restoration enacted a historic change. In face of rupture, the previously distinguishable forces of a growing cross-cultural consciousness and exploratory theological conversations converge. Said simplistically, they are subsumed in a factional struggle over tradition and change. In the wake 156, a whole new regime of leadership and new vision for the church would be developed.²⁰

A critical historical account of these decisions and difficult times is still largely unpublished. However, it’s clear that Wallace B. Smith’s administrative success in calling for and carrying out the ordination of women and its ensuing Restorationist-split²¹ both opened the door and set the tone for the

¹⁶ The “Position Papers” were commissioned by the First Presidency for exploration of new theological directions in the church. They were leaked by someone on a “reaction committee” and circulated at the 1970 World Conference by church members opposed to them. Wayne Ham, interview with Matt Frizzell, January 5, 2001, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁷ The “Presidential Papers” were a series of presentations given to appointees and executives that discussed the foundations, future, and mission of the church. They were presented at a meeting in January 1979. A summary statement of the presentations was printed in the March 1979 *Herald*. After March 1979, paper copies of the presentations were made available through the First Presidency’s office by request. A copy of the papers with letters from the First Presidency are available in the Temple Library, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁸ 1984 World Conference and the adoption of Section 156 of the Doctrine and Covenant, which hailed the ordination of women.

¹⁹ Many were also silenced in the church.

²⁰ For more information, see Matt Frizzell, “A Baby Boomer Transformation: The Current Generation of Leadership and The Remaking of the Reorganized Church.” Presented at the 2004 Theology and Ministry Forum. Published in *Theologies Across the Generations* Independence: Herald House, 2005., 37-69.

²¹ Or “Fundamentalist Schism” as used by Bill Russell.

next generation of younger Baby Boomers into leadership. The completion of this hand-over was symbolized in the ordination of W. Grant McMurray in 1996.

Journeying Another Path: 10 years into Liberal-Retreat

Portions of Section 157, 158, 159 reveal a real grieving process happening in the church.²² The RLDS church had to spiritually move on, but with an open wound. The opportunity for reconciliation with RLDS-Fundamentalists (also called Restorationists) remained open, but church authority had been exercised. This period between 1984 and 1996 concluded with the release of *Communities of Joy* (1994) and W. Grant McMurray's ordination (1996). These events symbolize the institutionalization of anti-fundamentalism. Moving beyond the rigid authority of tradition and through its rebirth in the fundamentalist reaction was key to handing the church to its next generation of leaders who would move the church into the future. The completion of the Temple in Independence and ordination of W. Grant McMurray marks the church's turn toward an explicit transformation, a reinterpretation of the church in a more contemporary and liberal denominational scheme.

The formula for reconstruction was presented in 1994. This was the year *Communities of Joy* was published. Leonard Young has joked on occasion about how few actually read his text,²³ however Headquarters clearly intended to adopt its paradigm and vision. The theoretical perspective and paradigmatic concepts that make-up *Communities of Joy* became the framework from which the new discourse of transformation, identity, and purpose would be launched in the church. *Vision, Mission, and Celebration*, today, are elemental theological terms. The process outlined here significant. It has mapped the leadership's announcement, implementation, and celebration of Transformation 2000 and the church's programmatic and institutional re-emergence. More generally, this trinity (*Vision, Mission, and Celebration*) has enabled a kind of transparent transition from a traditional theocratic religious movement

²² Read, in particular, Section 157:13-15, Section 158:9-11, then 159:6-8 in succession. The process of bereavement and hope, in light of the Temple, is particularly poignant when read in this order back to back.

²³ This refers to comments made by Leonard Young at the 1998 Congregational Leaders' Workshop at Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa.

to a goal-driven and organizationally-minded religious institution, which is no less than a contemporary make-over of the RLDS church.

What's at the core of *Community of Joy's* theoretical workings are a set of organizational ideas fused with notions about spirituality and leadership. Complimented by a variety of praxes (or implementations), these prescriptions are intended to purposefully realign the organization of the congregation and the church. We've seen how *Community of Joy's* sense of vision and mission has impacted World Church budgets, its managerial style, educational and training programs, and specifically, the overall spiritual ethos of the church and its initiatives. However, it's also clear that the church is still diligently working out this alternative way of thinking about itself.

Embedded in *Communities of Joy* and Transformation 2000 is a call for a church that is fundamentally framed by an accommodating liberal-kind of theological thinking. Made explicit in Transformation 2000 and the "Path of the Disciple," the church has expressly moved into a process of redefining. This process is both enabled and managed by *Communities of Joy's* introduction of interchangeable spiritual concepts and organizational processes, which intertwine individuals in a schematic understanding of the church's corporate developmental vision and sense of discipleship. This basic assumption of discrete individuals forging their own journey toward a greater spirituality and sense of community is the hallmark of the church's liberal turn. This assumption operates now at the basis of the church's collective vision and spiritual purposes. Other distinguishing characteristics are liberalism's inclination toward a future-orientation,²⁴ its management through theory and concepts,²⁵ and emphasis on intentionally convertible secular/religious language.²⁶ This more accommodating, individualistic, and participatory vision for the church was the liberal alternative from traditional authorities and the heavy-handedness of fundamentalism.

²⁴ Versus the repetition of tradition and fundamentalism's entombment of the past in doctrinal propositions.

²⁵ Versus mythology.

²⁶ Versus traditionalism's emphasis on ritual and fundamentalism's sharp dualisms.

In short, liberal alternatives enabled the church to see itself as a spiritual organization instead of history-bound tradition. It accommodated the North American church's growing ecumenical aspirations and culture of individualism. Moreover, it reformulated the basic concepts by which the church could reason its purpose and theology.

The church's new emphasis on the individual persons, their immeasurable worth, their endowed agency, their personal walk on the path of discipleship, and aspirations for community and meaningful involvement was the vision behind the continual processes of Vision/Mission/Celebration. This revision fundamentally reformed our ecclesial self-understanding and updated the church with a more denominational self-image and theology.

What must not be forgotten, however, is that this ecumenical denominational thrust springs from a clear negative orientation. As the church is exploring and redefining its ministries, educating its ministerial staff, producing resources, and gathering for various purposes, it does so under clear intentions *not to regress*. The church is no longer the movement of God's third dispensation, the chosen to follow God's anointed spokesperson to a Zion in America's Midwest. It is now a collection of individual agents with a divine call to the reconciliation and well-being of the world. This anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat defines the church's current vision and theological struggles. Principally, the question is how to clothe this new mission and vision with the principles of the Restoration. How can the church's predominantly North American core recognize the new Community of Christ as a modern reclamation of its RLDS roots and identity? That's the task.²⁷

The Church in the Wake of the Transformations and Tensions of Anti-Fundamentalism and Liberal-Retreat

²⁷ See particular Section 162 and W. Grant McMurray's comments following its acceptance into the Doctrine and Covenants. Available online at <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/section162.asp> Accessed January 27, 2005.

Some persistent and significant questions remain in this time of transition. Specifically, how is our new theological approach to faith and identity serving the church? Where is this trajectory taking us? Who are “we” and where are “we” heading?

Fixing our eyes beyond the horizon is not possible without spending time with the many concerns emanating from just below the surface of the church. Reflected, for instance, in the anti-fundamentalism and suspicion of evangelicalism energizing this year’s Theology and Ministry Forum, there is apprehension in the hearts and minds of many in the church’s North American core. This included leader and member alike.

On the one hand, there are theological insecurities. The media presence and ideological force of Christian conservatism is making its presence known in the church as well as American politics.²⁸ How could these forces of religious conservatism pull the church back into dogmas and intolerant positions that it has taken decades to theologically overcome? On the other hand, there are more basic insecurities about the fragile future of the Restoration. How will we know that the church we love and grew up will survive these huge transitions? Will our children and grandchildren know the blessings and community of the Restoration? Will the Community of Christ ever truly “become?”²⁹ Obvious signs of insecurity persist throughout the church amidst continuing decline in North American congregations and financial concerns.

Responding to these pressures, the leadership’s policy has been responsive with the spiritual leadership paradigms of *Communities of Joy*, invoking optimism and responding with programs that promote participation in the church’s vision. Given the cultural strata of our current church leaders, this

²⁸ This influx of conservative Christianity is very real in the church as congregations have turned frequently to conservative Christian publishers for Sunday School material and members have found inspiration, as well as a source for certainty for their spiritual questions, in the abundance of evangelical devotional material flooding America’s religious media market.

²⁹ The language of “We will become” was a key phrase of the T2000 initiative. Its concluding presentation was made by W. Grant McMurray in a sermon entitled “We Have Become” given at the 2000 *Jubilee!* World Conference. The sermon included general outline of the church’s accomplishments in meeting its goals.

response is generationally appropriate.³⁰ However, considering the church's recent history there are other forces working on how we present our challenges. Namely, there is the reality that any signs of failure or institutional hardships simply vindicate the prophecies of Restorationist dissidents.³¹ This, undoubtedly, affects our church's communication with its members.

Thus, pinched between strong strains of anti-fundamentalism – including anti-RLDS Fundamentalism – on the one hand, and deep investment in an optimistic corporate vision to transform the church with an accommodating, inclusive, and transforming vision, the Community of Christ struggles for ways to present and consider itself more critically. The theological renaissance of the last forty years has created such a complex and conceptually heavy body of theological and organizational machinery, old barriers are reinvented and corporate structures remain a hurdle for those wanting to influence or participate change. This is true throughout the organization, from local congregations to corporate headquarter. Without theological training, professional qualifications, personal charisma, or adequate priesthood authority, many find it difficult to find a safe *and* effective place to participate in the church, share their concerns, critically question current theology, or participate in this new and creative ways of denominational way of thinking. Processes for consensus and information gathering may be present, but often fall short of effectiveness or constrained by fear of conflict.

These challenges are not direct causes, but nonetheless related to the crisis of participation in the North American church. A down-turn in church activity has been evident in the church's membership records for at least 25 years.³² This erosion of membership began before the Restorationist-split in the

³⁰ Frizzell, "A Baby Boomer Transformation," 15.

³¹ Though it is not true of many or most Restorationists, claims of apostasy and negative prophecies against church remain and can be found on the internet on the sites of outspoken Restorationists. The most recognized example, perhaps, is Richard Price, who represents many who identify themselves as keepers of the true RLDS faith. W. Grant McMurray's resignation was seen by some Restorationists as vindication of their apocalyptic claims.

³² Membership trends show the decline in baptisms began before the call for women in the priesthood in 1980.

1980's and its roots in North America are found in America's cultural reframing of how we think about religion and religious affiliation.³³

Estimations suggest participation in U.S. and Canadian congregations in the Community of Christ is down some 35-50% since 1980.³⁴ On average, membership in the church's North American core is dropping about 1% a year.³⁵ One result is that in 1992 more people started gathering for worship in RLDS/Community of Christ congregations outside the U.S. and Canada than within.³⁶ Increasingly, the church is not a North American movement but more clearly a world church. Moreover, the downtrend in North American congregations is affecting the church financially. Following Transformation 2000, the goal to hire 200 full-time field ministers³⁷ was followed by some 70 positions³⁸ that were either lost or left unfilled in 2003.³⁹ In addition, the latest issues of the *Herald*⁴⁰ explain the extent of the church's budget crisis,⁴¹ which is just as much a crisis of how many persons are giving as how much they are giving. Unfortunately, the reality of this situation is often misperceived. Many members are not cognizant that the effects of this crisis in church income has been padded for nearly a decade by unprecedented returns in the church's investments in the 1990's.⁴² Hence the shift in attention at World Conference Bishopric Reports in the last twenty years from "what are we spending our money on," to "how are the investments doing." What the Community of Christ faces in North America is not simply a

³³ See Frizzell, "A Baby Boomer Transformation."

³⁴ Larry Tyree, "Mission to North America." (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ, West Central Field, July 2001, electronic copy)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ 170 of which were accounted for in W. Grant McMurray's "We Have Become" sermon at the 2000 World Conference. Available online at http://www.cofchrist.org/docs/wc2000/en/we_have_become.asp. Accessed January 25, 2005.

³⁸ This was the number I recall reported when working for the church in 2003.

³⁹ See W. Grant McMurray, "Up Front," *Herald*. February 2003.

⁴⁰ November & December 2004, January 2005

⁴¹ Echoing W. Grant McMurray's urgency concerning the church's financial short-falls (*Herald*, November 2004), Presiding Bishop Larry Norris repeats in the January 2005 *Herald*, "If we don't see improvement in meeting the annual income need of about \$10.9 million in Mission Tithes, then leaders will need to make even more hard decisions concerning ministers and ministries in the field." ("Q&A: A Far-Reaching Discussion with Steve Veazey and Larry Norris," *Herald*. January 2005., 18)

⁴² Though institutional authorities, in a variety of reactions and reasons, often shun questioning church reliance on interest income, there is nonetheless in the wake of their impact on church vitality (positively and negatively) a host of questions about faith communities' direct financial dependence on the rise and fall of market activity from the perspective of economic justice as well as its impact on polity and ecclesiology.

challenge of corporate spirituality or organizational leadership, but of complex of cultural, social, and informational distances between congregations and its corporate center, between our theological thinking and the faith of younger generations, as well as alienation from the language of the tradition.

Caught in these tensions, the church's liberal-leaning vision has so far proven ineffective to confront the theological and cultural conservatism that has been an alternative source of theological certainty and religious identity for many in the church. We can look again at the clash highlighted in this year's Theology and Ministry Forum theme. Bracketing for a moment international perspectives, our North American church remains ill equipped to deal with the diverse questions of human sexuality and remains crippled to be anything but suggestive on its positions regarding preemptive warfare, economic globalization, and America's growing sense of moral and political sovereignty since 2001. These very issues are redefining the very meaning of "world" in World Church. Dealing with these complicated, yet critical issues implicates our very credibility when using language such as "pursuit of peace," Christian community, worth of persons, prophetic people, or discipleship. It is difficult to escape the piety of American denominationalism. Our liberal alternative remains unable to clarify what community means as we face the many polarizing issues surrounding scriptural interpretation and scriptural authority.⁴³ The resultant tensions and concern for the church's future are plain.

Positively, pockets of critical social concern, theological study, and ecclesial transformation are taking root in the church. With the support of church leadership and enthusiastic response from membership, the Peace Colloquy and Theology and Ministry Forum have become important institutions. A seminary has been organized and new initiatives to train and educate our extensive lay ministry, such as the Co-missioned Pastor Initiative, have been developed. Moreover, new and innovative ministries are consistently covered in the *Herald*, which put positive attention on sprouts of new life.

⁴³ This is evident in the church's recent concern to elevate "scriptural literacy."

But do these advances adequately address the atrophy and stagnation of the Community of Christ's North American church? It seems we struggle to effectively apprehend the forces of demographic and social change, ideological tensions, and plural expressions of faith that get lost and unacknowledged in the parochialism of the church. To be sure, the church's own anti-fundamentalism and liberal-retreat has arisen because of these shifting cultural conditions, but their effects have been largely limited by the church's hierarchy and the access given to one generation. Diversifying the church's leadership, however, will not necessarily address this predicament. What is needed is real commitment more critical reexamination. The fact of difference, which is categorically different than that of dissention, and pluralism remain the frontier of our theological thinking.

The church is not an island of sectarianism. Nor, can it simply afford to be a product of the surrounding culture and its corporate thinking.⁴⁴ This awareness should effect a conscious reconsideration of the way we do theology. The trapping of liberalism is its cultural accommodation. In this church, the culture accommodated has been largely defined by America's professional middle-class and the impact of a generation. It cannot be overstated, however, that the question of a common theology and identity cannot be answered by organizational development or a unitary theology. The question to be posed is, then, can our tradition's newfound love for theological exploration create energy to face newfound challenges?⁴⁵ Where are these insights? What will be the result of continual decline? Is there life in the Community of Christ beyond anti-fundamentalism and our post-RLDS liberal retreat? Section 161:1a suggests there is "a beyond" beyond the horizon. Moving with eyes fixed toward a new day, the answer can only be stated as a confession and that confession is, "Yes."

Fixing Our Eyes Beyond the Horizon: Beyond The Trappings of Anti-Fundamentalism and Liberal-Retreat

⁴⁴ This is, of course, evident in the language we've incorporated and now share with much of America's corporate Christianity, as well as America's cultural religious tensions.

⁴⁵ One way to specify these challenges is to break free from the paradigms driven by the post-WWII membership to the spiritual perspectives of the post-1980's church, its growing cultural and ideological diversity.

I don't naively pretend to have a blueprint or 10-step program to alleviate the multiple challenges facing the North American church. I'm aware of the great care needed in dealing with the complexities implicated in this essay. Nonetheless, I am convinced by the tone of Section 161 that a Community of Christ worthy of its name must press an open and critical discussion of the reigning paradigms defining the church's theological thinking and sense of identity. The church's thinking and decision-making have to move on.

The following is a contribution to that discussion. It's hardly adequate, but is a contribution to the continuing project of doing a historically conscious and theologically informed discussion of the church. It isn't complete. Rather, it's an attempt to plot theological locations that demand attention. It is given in the spirit of invitation. History provides no romantic escape from its grip or its current tensions. Looking forward as we have been admonished, however, it is my hope that fixing our eyes beyond current conditions and negative trappings we will see Jesus incarnate. His elusive command to those who knew him best was consistently, "Follow me."

*Overcoming Our Legacy of Negative Identity:
Looking Beyond Anti-Fundamentalism*

This paper begins with a historical outline of events that led to our current theology. It is a historical formed structure, which at its heart, is a tension. It is a resistance to all forms of fundamentalism and a deep investment in exploring liberal alternatives. I suggested the two forces that led to the ferment of schism and transformation were the questions arising from the church's international expansion, and expanding ecumenical dialogue and theological training. It is there we might do some looking.

These separate but interrelated courses of events invoked a struggle for change in the 1980's. Looking back, we can see how opposition to rigid traditionalism was necessary for the acceptance of

Section 156 and the post-Temple RLDS church to emerge. In reaction, RLDS fundamentalists redefined themselves. They declared the church an apostate and themselves keepers of the true tradition. Many cemented their dissent in fundamentalist convictions, marking themselves the apologists of RLDS dogma. The theology of the post-Temple church, in response, inescapably reinterpreted RLDS tradition and theology in a shape oppositional to the faith and politics of these fundamentalists. This sent the post-Temple church into the future toward a frontier that became a part of a new understanding of RLDS tradition and history.⁴⁶

The unavoidable impact of schism, however, has meant the emerging Community of Christ has, once again, been formed by an unmistakable RLDS legacy: an identity shaped by negation. Historically and scripturally, the Restoration has been founded on negative identity. It began with Joseph Smith, Jr.'s revelation that he mustn't join any of the existing church. Our church began on a blanket negation of prevailing Christianities, called to be "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth."⁴⁷ This tradition of negative identity continued in 1860 when the Reorganization founded itself as the true group of dissenters united against west-bound Mormons following Brigham Young. Influential today on many Restorationist break-offs, this tradition of dissention created a particular brand of RLDS remnant theology.⁴⁸ Our own negative identity persisted up through the 1990's as the anxious appendix, "*not the Mormons*," remained an informal fixture on the explanation of the RLDS name. This

⁴⁶ It's an important to note the cultural tensions involved in reshaping the RLDS church, particularly the Fundamentalism schism of the 1980's. The trinity shaping RLDS sectarian identity and religious authority – scripture, tradition, and its myth of origins – was increasingly under the pressure of modern theology and its secularizing force in society. Increasingly influenced by these two forces, the question of cultural relevance became a motivational concern and, for many, retreat into fundamentalist rigidity, parochialism, and dualistic super-natural theology became hardened. Prevailing anti-fundamentalist sentiments meant the membership would face the fire of schismatic tensions, corporate pain, and personal loss. Centered primarily in the North American church, its historical and cultural home, the polarization of church and society mirrored what was happening throughout American Christianity. As I've footnoted in other work 1984 marks the same year women were admitted into the RLDS priesthood which is the same year the Southern Baptist Convention experienced a conservative take-over and women were explicitly barred from positions of religious leadership. The church's negative disposition to both hard and soft fundamentalism today is culturally shaped and historically formed.

⁴⁷ Doctrine and Covenants 1:5e.

⁴⁸ By remnant theology, I mean that cosmological and theological perspective with which we identify ourselves as God's remaining faithful or chosen few. Remnant theology is explicitly a theology of identity, negative in the sense it defines itself *against*. It's elemental place in RLDS history is seen in the name of the one of the Restorationist groups, "The Remnant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." This theology is a fundamental framework of the Book of Mormon. Brands of remnant theology are, nonetheless, found throughout Christianity.

negative distinction was central to clarifying to outsiders our doctrine and identity. Can this tradition of negative identity end with the Community of Christ?

Born-again in schism, the Community of Christ today finds itself again standing on negative foundations. In earnest attempts to break the mold of sectarianism and RLDS mythology, the Community of Christ searches for itself based on a negative trajectory. Despite our attempts, it is difficult to think of the Community of Christ outside our religious opponents, against fundamentalism, against America's evangelicalism, and against the tradition of dissention that has always separated the RLDS from others. This distinctly modern approach to identity, this negative spring-board from which the Community of Christ denominationally arises, presents the deepest challenge to the Community of Christ. How does the Community of Christ "become," looking beyond divisive struggles, beyond a choice between old and new, change and tradition, loyalty and conviction. Do we have to be negative to be true?

Lifting our eyes and fixing them beyond the horizon summons the Community of Christ to a yet-unknown self-understanding. This is a self-understanding beyond our current thinking and tradition of negation. It seems obvious. If the Community of Christ is going to embrace the present malaise and debilitating tensions defining its North American church, it must look toward a day and identity yet-unknown. This is a day where the RLDS tradition of negative identity is finally displaced.⁴⁹

For any Community of Christ to be incarnate, a positive identity must be both conceptualized *and* performed, both imagined *and* enacted. This is reflected in the imperatives of Section 161, for instance verse 1b, which tells the church to "claim your unique and sacred place." What place is this? This scriptural imperative pushes the church to enact a future beyond ideologies, struggles over tradition, and negative tensions. Peering back to before the schism, we can salvage the roots of a positive identity forged in a Spirit of risk and newness that is the hallmark of any community of revelation. There, we

⁴⁹ It cannot be eradicated. I'm not sure this is possible. The dualistic structure of negation (positive) is conceptually inherent with our use of language. Language functions on the structure of difference. For further information, see the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

might recover a spiritual adventure and theology of inquiry that birthed the transformation the Community of Christ struggles to embrace today.

Looking Forward by Re-membering: Recovering Our Theological Renaissance and Its Abiding Spirit of Ongoing Challenge and Transformation

I was born in 1973. A key reason I searched to understand the course of events that led to the church's current theology and internal tensions was to deepen my understanding of history and expand my own memory.⁵⁰ Much like remembering Christ at the center of Restoration, identifying our root requires lots of critical and difficult remembering. This is crucial task for the North American church.

As the church ages, Community of Christ theology and corporate life continues to be scarred and shaped by a generation whose memory is shaped by schism. Though some might adamantly argue the church is beyond or adamantly trying to forget the split, the negativity of schism still seems embedded in our current theological tensions. This suggests we are still being shaped by it because it is anchored in both the membership's personal and the church's corporate emotional memory. Considering the age and heritage of almost all the leading quorums of the church, the memory of schism unavoidably continues to define, inform, and deform our church's identity and way of thinking.

Examples abound in our corporate mindset and in congregations that struggle to persistent in decline or simply maintain. In the wake of decades of decline and schism, many congregations are so shaped by these realities that they are unable to take positions of risk or make congregational decisions constrained by fear that someone or some family will leave. Other congregations and pockets of membership, more evangelical or culturally conservative, are entrenched in resistance to World Church direction. Moreover, the culture of liberalism only underwrites these congregations' struggle with stagnancy. Liberalism carries with it a set of ethics that demand that each individual tolerate each other; it sees individuality as the foundation for diversity. As such, congregations are encased in a religious

⁵⁰ One aspect of this need to recover and remember our history is discussed in Section 162 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It speaks of recovering Restoration principles that are central to our identity.

ethic to respect each other's opinion and privacy, and not to offend. This is fertile ground to build enclaves of strong resistance to World Church initiatives or any other unwelcome authority.

At institutional levels, the Fundamentalist schism leaves traces of painful memories of difficult decisions and oppositional politics, which is not inseparable from a managerial culture that resists losing control and the perception of failure. On the one hand, there is the real fear that internal conflicts over sexuality or scripture would cause another schism, or the announcing our struggles with transformation would only vindicate Restorationist prophecies. On the other hand, there is a corporate dread of theological or organizational chaos, which only mirrors the disregard of fundamentalist dissidents and further threatens World Church authority. Thus, congregationalism looks like disorder and charismatic ministers and ecstatic worship resemble rogue propheteering. Both extremes resemble the extremism that RLDS denominationalism was trying to leave behind. In this kind of tense environment, open conflicts seem like more immediate threats than death by indecision, stagnation in silence, or religious boredom. Though it may oversimplify the church's present complexities, it remains important to recognize there is no transformation when there is a fear of schism. In the face of disillusionment and decline, conflicts over beliefs and mission caricature church leaders as theology police, bishops are professional fund-raisers, and administrators crisis-centered micro-managers.

Looking beyond our current tensions requires reshaping of our collective memory. This means constructing our recent history on a trajectory of positive foundations, not on a negation of fundamentalism or fear of repeating our factional history.⁵¹

The imagery and language of journey is important here, not only because of its scriptural and programmatic usage, but because of its historical consciousness. "Lifting up our eyes" can enable the church to look back without turning back.⁵² Re-membering our recent history in order to recover its spiritual movement can affect the church's formative scars of eruption and division. Constructing

⁵¹ Refer, again, to the tone and spirit of Section 161.

⁵² Again, I refer you to the language of Section 162.

history requires tremendous courage and honesty. The 1960's to the 1980's were a time of theological and spiritual growth, as well as, heavy contention and dissensions. Nonetheless, that period also holds the roots of the future church, the post-Temple church, from which the Community of Christ continues to construct its theology. The current generation of leaders cannot wait, holding out, until their vision is secure. This is an entitlement that died with the previous leadership.

Looking forward to discern the meaning of a post-modern and multi-cultural church will require remembering critical perspectives that brought forth courageous decisions. Theology is an embodied, self-consuming, and risky sort of task. However, it seems less risky than maintaining organizational development and the corporate status quo. Beyond the horizon there is a place beyond the conceptual machinery and organizational processes of ongoing consensus building. These are processes that miss the root causes of our cultural tension and theological indecision.

Critically constructing a positive memory of the last half of the Twentieth century for the North American church is obviously complicated and requires the kind of broad work that will foster spiritual reflection and, hopefully, healing. It inevitably existentially throws us into a deeper awareness of the limits of our present corporate theology. Lifting our eyes and fixing them toward a place beyond the horizon to which we are sent will undoubtedly test our *present* convictions, the limits of our *current* theology, and our *contemporary* consciousness of identity and diversity. However, it also promises to recover that spirit of transformation and theology that, a generation later, we are now able to profess.

*Remembering An Apostle's Multicultural Conscience:
Recovering the Questions that Move Us Beyond A North American Tradition*

I've named one aspect of the church's reigning theology liberal-*retreat* to indicate a break. That break was schism, which redirected the church to a more self-consciously liberal or liberating scheme.

The church's liberal turn allowed it to demythologize and reorganize itself into a Christian denomination. However, it has utilizing organizational tools and conceptual machinery that transform the church's very theology and self-understanding. As been the case historically, liberalism has been a tool to

morally oppose the totalitarian rule of religious authority in favor of individual freedom and democratic organization. This has meant a shift from traditional authority to a hybrid of institutional and spiritual authorities. This made possible the move away from rigid traditionalism and fundamentalist faith, which held an exclusive claim on RLDS authority and identity. The result of the church's liberal turn has been a church with a more individualistic and participatory scheme, which is presented in the "Path of the Disciple." Here, the principle is the individual on their own faith journey in a search for God, personal meaning, and divine community.

This liberalism, however, also structures many of the church's theological tensions and organizational challenges. In its partial replacement of the church's mythology and traditional authority, the church has increased its investment in the weight of institutional machinery. A bulky system of spiritual concepts, organizational processes and professional personnel now define the church's corporate life and spirituality. Liberalism has meant placing the individual at the center of the church, on journey which is the basis of the church's polity and programmatic underpinnings.

Thus, where fundamentalism preserved the form and expression of traditional RLDSism, i.e. its theocratic hierarchy, exclusive identity, and sacred mythology; liberalism protects the individual in a democratic spirituality. It incorporates a theology informed by critical history, emphasizes the fiduciary, administrative, and educational functions of the organization, and manages the church's political structure through conceptual (primarily theological) and organizational machinery. Here rests the intersection of the church's individual and corporate spirituality. Built on idealism, the promises of liberalism are a vision for individual freedom, inclusivity, and spiritual harmony.

The clear challenge remains, however, how the church's new organizational processes and understanding of theology are going to embrace an inclusive multi-cultural church. This church is a church, according to Apostle Neff, of incommensurate cultural differences. It is a church that goes

beyond a North American leadership and North American institutional understanding. Apostle Neff's admonitions in 1976 can be echoed today.

“We cannot provincialize the restored gospel [or the gospel] to any one nation or continent or culture. We cannot cease the struggle to put new faces and forms on the principles of the restoration, and to put down the strangling thought processes and systems and structures which keep us provincial and self-serving.”⁵³

The provincialism Charles Neff refers to are any foreclosed cultural understanding of the church, defined by fundamentalism or a more liberal understanding. His critique applies as much to the church of 1976 as it does to the present Community of Christ, whose theology and authority remains preeminently in the cultural control Westerners in the heart of white middle-class America. Over 25 years later, how does the Community of Christ continue to embrace Apostle Neff's prophetic challenges?

In the same article, Neff poses the question, “Is it really conceivable that we can tolerate the pluralism required for the church to become indigenous?”⁵⁴ This seems doubtful considering the difficulty the North American church is having harmonizing its theological differences. But what is even the greater challenge is imagining how the overwhelming number of North Americans making up the current quorums of leadership will culturally diversify. The church's liberal turn, thus far, has not meant dismantling the church's centralized structures. This is the very structure of authority, which enabled the next generation to assert its influence. In fact, the liberal turn has further entrenched our need for centralized structures, creating the need for a continual pool of organizationally minded and theologically educated professionals to operate, maintain, and improve the denomination's growing organizational and conceptual machinery. This is certainly a reflection of the church's North American roots. Is the Community of Christ leadership ever going to reflect the plurality of theologies, cultures, ethnicities and histories that constitute the plurality of its membership?

⁵³ Neff, 11.

⁵⁴ Neff, 10.

Apostle Neff's questions are magnified today. Now multi-culturalism transcends the limits of national boundaries. North Americans barely perceive the obsolete nature of the terms "international" and "domestic" church. We have international ministries happening right within our American cities. And, we are reminded that more people are gathering for worship outside the U.S. and Canadian church since 1992. This makes the pressure to truly realize Apostle Neff's understanding of an indigenous church even more imminent. Our very use of the term "the church" in North America assumes the Community of Christ shares a common theological, historical, or confessional core. To a large degree, the World Church sees its responsibility to ensure that. However, our church's very pluralism presses up against this kind of cultural provincialism, its attempts to reach universal understanding, and retain the privileges that North Americans take in projecting their liberal view of individual and cultural diversity.

Looking beyond the horizon, it would seem, requires a heightened responsibility. It means a greater understanding of our own minority status (I am a white middle-class male, 6th or 7th generation RLDS) in our World Church and a conviction to help the church more embrace a multi-cultural conscience. This requires an ethic that moves beyond liberal foundations, beyond universal definitions or simply "diverse" understandings of the church and its theology, and beyond the privilege of assuming "the church" has a common core. It means moving toward a faith community that can sustain Apostle Neff's critical understanding of cultural pluralism. As we speak, there are multiple cultural expressions and widely varied testimonies that make up the empirical Community of Christ. We must look beyond mere decentralization of the church's structures to a decentralization of the church's very theology.⁵⁵ Neff pushes our identity out of Independence. He writes, "The primary cohesive agent of such a community is the centrality of Jesus and his principles regarding the worth and purpose of all humans, rather than a global uniform life-style involving rituals, forms, operational systems, and administrative

⁵⁵ Decentralization was a driving force behind the church's reorganization from Stakes, districts, and regions to mission centers.

structures.”⁵⁶ This is neither a domestic (i.e. North American), nor domesticable theology. To fix our eyes on such a horizon, the church must start professing an other-worldly responsibility to move beyond our North American organization, its theological tensions, and toward a liberation of incarnational possibilities.

Remembering the Theology of Incarnation

As I stated earlier, the metaphor of journey is important because it bears within it a memory of where we’ve been, a kind of historical consciousness.⁵⁷ Our journey is a journey with time. Attention is necessarily paid backward and forward; this is the movement of history. Similarly, the call to “Lift up your eyes and fix them on the place beyond the horizon to which you are sent” (Section 161:1a) is historically conscious. It calls the church’s attention toward to a place in future – a place out of sight, but to which it has already been called forth and sent.

It’s helpful to remember one of the most influential and controversial events leading up to the Restorationist split in the 1980’s and the redefinition of the church in the 1990’s was the seminars arranged between faculty at Saint Paul School of Theology and the church’s Joint Council in the 1960’s. In his account, Bill Russell references correspondence with Don Landon, an influential member of the church’s Department of Religious Education in the 1960’s.⁵⁸ Russell credits Landon as indicating, “The seminars focused on *the concept of incarnation*, stressing that the church is ‘true’ only to the extent that it reflects the spirit and personality of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ [my emphasis] This concept of incarnation is the theological foundation from which the post-Temple church must plot its future, herald its Transformation, and embraced its new name.

A theology of incarnation provided the foundation for the current spirit of transformation now at work in the church. The concept of incarnation is infinitely complex, yet is straight-forwardly simple. It

⁵⁶ Neff, 11.

⁵⁷ pg 18.

⁵⁸ See Donald D. Landon and Robert L. Smith, “For What Purpose Assembled.” (Independence: Herald House, 1969)

⁵⁹ Russell, 132.

is the idea that states: the sole call to Christ's followers is to incarnate the life and personality of Christ in the world. To look forward and see through such significant decline and debilitating tensions, we must remember and recover this basic confession. It convicts every member, priesthood office, and disciple to struggle with Christ's command to live a cruciform life, the life with Jesus presents to the world. On this journey, to "lift up our eyes" is the metaphor to look and see the one who turned and said, "Follow me."

In terms of a guiding theological framework, this means turning our organizational behavior and theological thinking from simply negative dispositions and oppositional thinking. These simplistic frameworks offer tremendous security. However, they often violently overlook the realities of lived life. Comfortable positions and familiar arguments only avoid the call of incarnational faith, where becoming human and taking up a cross suggests love and courage in extreme proportions.

The church's liberal turn in the last few decades has provided the church a great and marvelous framework of theological concepts and organizational processes with which leaders and members alike can – and should – place their energies. Striving toward transformation, to embrace the path of discipleship, and participate in the process of vision/mission/celebration are worthy of our very resources, spiritual energies, time, and conviction.

However.

Along that path lies the immanent possibility of running into the presence of Jesus, perhaps in the face of another or in the revelatory experience of our own or another's suffering. This is always a moment of conversion, when our attention is renewed and set again on yet another place. It is a place beyond institutional survival and the cult of the individual journey. It is a place beyond understanding, beyond the horizon, beyond denominationalism, or even spirituality.

The abiding spirit of transformation that lies deep inside the theology of incarnation summons the church to risk its own future by fixing its eyes faithfully beyond what we know. It brings us to the stinging possibility that tithing is not a matter denominational mission, but of Christ's own simple life and

call to divine economic justice. It means embracing frustrating reality that the path of discipleship is neither theologically nor organizationally tidy, but a mess of moral/political/social/ecclesial conflicts that are made evident in Christ's cruciform way of life. Christ brings us to the terrible fact that the Community of Christ has nothing to do with denominationalism, organizational paradigms or theological genius. Rather, it is a matter of living with one another in sacramentality, making courageous decisions, prophetically sharing life with those not at the center, but on the margins of our economic and political systems that afford many in the church the privileges of its society.

Incarnation necessarily means going beyond the eternal ideas of theology toward embracing various historical forms. We are called to an ongoing embodiment of our faith. To reclaim this theological vision, we will have re-member that Spirit of risk, exploration, and inquiry that challenged our most basic assumptions and spawned our last forty years of difficult and transformative history. It seems this is where the intellectual rigor and spiritual discipline of prophetic peace, reconciliation, and community take us. The Community of Christ is not the post-schism, but the post-Temple church. It is scripturally on the other-side of a new time and new history. In order to fix our eyes on that yet-unknown place and time, beyond the fear of more division, beyond negative dispositions and reactionary politics, and other theological distractions, we must come to some realization that the future is *not* a place we are going to create. The future has already been sent; it is unavoidable. Decline, pluralism, and opportunities for new life are coming at us. Christ has gone ahead, and is waiting. With this picture in mind, the urgent tone of 161 now makes more sense:

Vs. 1a: "Lift your eyes..."

Vs 1b: "Claim your...place..."

Vs. 2a: "Become a people..."

Vs. 2b: "Fulfill the purposes..."

Vs. 3a: "Open your hearts..."

Vs. 3b: “Do not be fearful...”

Vs. 3c: “Be patient...”

Vs. 3d: “Understand...”

Vs. 4a: “Do not neglect...”

Vs. 4b: “Be mindful...”

Vs. 5: “Be respectful...”

Vs. 6a: “Stand firm...”

Vs. 6b: “Heed the...call...”

Vs. 7: “The Spirit of the One you follow is the spirit of love and peace.”

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