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Christ's Spiritual Body?!:
A Reflection on What's Wrong with the
Community of Christ in North America

Preliminary Explanations and Ulterior Motifs

The title of this essay has some underlying assumptions that should be clarified at the onset. First, as the title states, I believe there are indicators that something's wrong with the spiritual life of the Community of Christ. The purpose of this essay is to call for a more critical look at the church's corporate spiritual life. The body of my essay will be explaining some themes of concern.

Second, the Community of Christ is a community of believers; it is Christ's spiritual body. The Community of Christ is a whole and living part of Christ's greater spiritual church whose earthly life and stewardship points to something beyond itself. However, the italics in my title represent a tone of sarcasm about this claim. Why? It is probably best understood by what Tom Beaudoin calls GenX's spiritual gift of irreverence¹ and Stanley Hauerwas' explanation that cynicism can be better than contentiousness in helping guard against self-deception about who we really are.² However interpreted, it needs to be clear that this sarcasm is by no means to belittle or disrespect. Rather, sarcasm helps me illustrate that today there are real problems with believing the church is Christ's spiritual body. Given our current time in history, our denomination is struggling tremendously with change and lacks clarity about its spiritual call to be Christ's church. The spirituality of the church falls in reality into some murky shade of gray. Some things are good, others not so good, some things, bad.

¹ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 179-180.

² Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "Self Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*," in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 87.

Lastly, this personal reflection on the church is written by a member of the Community of Christ in North America. Though I don't believe my observations and conclusions in the end stand alone, I recognize that we are a world church of many peoples, concerns, and conversations. Culturally, I am adding my voice to the church conversation of which I am a part.

Underlying the motivation for this paper is also an ulterior motive. I am hoping to contribute to church transformation by exemplifying an alternative and usable way for the people of the church to be prophetic. We have been called into the future as a prophetic people committed to Jesus Christ, but what does that mean?³ Our church today stands in real need of revisioning its prophetic tradition. I want to embrace and reclaim what it means to be prophetic people.

As W. Grant McMurray stated in his address, *Transforming the Church*, transformation is “the call to be made new, to create a viable future worthy of God’s trust in creation and God’s assurance of divine faithfulness,” and simultaneously, “the call to return home.”⁴ Our understanding of being prophetic must move us the same way. The church needs to move beyond the thinking that ‘being a prophetic people’ means merely that we host a prophet that writes modern-day scripture. However, we must also overcome the alternative belief that ‘being prophetic’ means we can supernaturally foretell God’s apocalyptic future. Being prophetic must lead us into demonstrating God’s viable future. This would anchor us in our origins, and who (and whose) we are.

Our scriptural tradition points a way. The prophetic role in the Old Testament tradition was to be a voice called by God to roam the streets of cities and speak to political leaders reminding them of their covenants. They warned when something was wrong. In the New Testament, John the Baptist called out from the wilderness preparing the way. Upon Jesus’ arrival, as a prophet, Jesus called others to live as

³ W. Grant McMurray. *A Call to Commitment* 7 Oct 2001 <http://www.cofchrist.org/docs/wc2000/en/call_to_commitment.asp> This was the closing address of the 2000 World Conference.

⁴ W. Grant McMurray. *Transforming the Church* 1 Oct 2001 <<http://www.cofchrist.org/docs/T2000/en/transfch.pdf>>

God's children now, to trust God's promises and act as chosen citizens in God's coming Kingdom. These stories ground what it means for us to be prophetic.

Believing we still live in God's scriptural time, being prophetic means reminding ourselves, and others, what it means to be God's particular community. It means calling out in the wilderness of transformation, speaking boldly, acting alone and against what's popular if necessary, to point out where we have problems living out our call to be God's reconciliation, peace, and justice. We are Christ's body. This does not mean we speak out of fear or in harsh supernatural tones with detachment judgment and superiority. Rather, it means speaking with passionate humility. Someone must call us, and others, together to reexamine our individual and communal response to God. This means in our world and in our church. Being prophetic means making ourselves anew to establish God's radical design for communities. The church is central to pointing the way to God.

Starting the Discussion on the Church's Spirituality

The theme for this year's Peace Colloquy focuses us on spirituality.⁵ Naturally, the question for the Community of Christ is to consider its own spirituality. What is the spiritual condition of the church? How is the church living out its call to be Christ's spiritual body? How is it a spiritual community? Moving toward dialogue about the church's spiritual condition, it is important I attempt to clarify what I mean by "spiritual" and "spiritual condition." I will start with a brief working understanding of spirituality.

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines *spiritual* as, "pertaining to the spirit or nonmaterial."⁶ *Spiritual condition* is defined as "a term used to describe the status of one's relationship with God."⁷ To discuss the spiritual condition of the church, I suggest we give our attention to those indicators that reveal our movement toward or away from our relationship with God. This means looking

⁵ 2001 Peace Colloquy, *Seeds of Spirit, Harvest of Shalom: Healing for All God's People*

⁶ Donald K. McKim, ed. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 267.

⁷ Ibid.

at the aspects of our corporate life that pertain the *nonmaterial*, the immeasurable and ethereal. However, we must acknowledge that there is more. As the *Doctrine and Covenants* explains, all things are both spiritual and temporal, or earthly.⁸ Thus spirituality includes both the spiritual and material, the unseen and obvious, the ineffable and the concrete. Spirituality is not only our beliefs, but how we live out our relationship to God. This is the testimony of the church. Thus, the condition of the church's spiritual life is not only what we project and profess, but also our tangible individual and corporate response to God. Our corporate spiritual condition includes our individual and corporate action, as well as our polity - how we govern, organize, and live out our spirituality.

Based on this view, I suggest there are three broad indicators that raise serious concern about the spiritual life in the church. These indicators suggest we should at least investigate, if not be gravely concerned about, how we are living out our relationship with God. They are, one, the continual decline in membership of the North American church; two, the question of the church's dependency on investment income for sustaining church mission; and three, the church's maintenance of its hierarchical polity. These actualities point to what we believe it means to live as Christ's spiritual body. Looking at them suggests something about our spiritual condition as Christ's community. Church membership, finance, and polity are key indicators of how the church unites its spiritual and temporal life in the world. They indicate its relationship to God, how we embody God's presence, and see ourselves as Christ's spiritual body in the world. They are at the heart of what it means to be "the church."

Struggling to See "What's Wrong"

Considering the spirituality of the church right now is no doubt a difficult task. Many recognize the time of transition the Community of Christ is undergoing. Thirty-five years of RLDS Reformation⁹ has put the Community of Christ, like many other mainstream denominations, in a whirlwind. We are

⁸ Doctrine and Covenants, Section 28:8b-9c. See also D&C 147:5a. This theological theme of the dynamic union of the spiritual and temporal is also clearly expressed in the theological themes of the Book of Mormon.

⁹ The RLDS Reformation is the name Larry Childers, current Community of Christ scholar and appointee, gives for the transition in RLDS tradition, its deconstruction and current reconstruction, starting from about 1965 to current.

still feeling the impact of questions raised from within American social culture, resulting from evangelism to nations overseas, and from theological and philosophical challenges. Post-modernism continues to pound the Western meta-narratives, or over-arching stories, and social structures that found the church. Much has changed since the 1960's. Traditions have been dismantled, scriptures questioned, conflicts erupted, members left, Zion's Temple built, and our name has changed. And still, many critical questions are being raised about RLDS/Community of Christ identity, mission, and its future viability.

Transformation has not ended. We struggle with clashing generational perspectives, multicultural issues, pluralism and institutionalism. Corporately, our fellowship and belief in Christ binds us together, but nothing else is yet clear – save our hope and optimism. The dust is still settling. What we know for sure is that we are in a time of transition, hopefully transformation. Consensus is still difficult. Dialogue is important. Opinions matter. All we have is what's left of our tradition, our challenges, and our imaginations. We struggle to face the hard questions standing between ourselves and God's future.

The obvious and reasonable answer for “What is the spiritual condition of the Community of Christ?” is to recognize it as a work in progress. However, being a work in progress does not mean we can avoid evaluating where we are. *The urgency of the world outside the church, and the urgent call to evangelize to other generations, pushes us to continue struggling with what defines us as Christ's spiritual community.* Interrogating and dismantling denominational distinctives has never meant silencing the spiritual voice of the Restoration. Rather, it means listening to it more closely. The Community of Christ is a unique tradition of Christianity. We are called with other Christians to live as Christ's spiritual body. Commissioned with this spiritual task, the questions of where we are, where we've been, and where we're going must continue to be asked. Change is no longer a one-time event. We may not have consensus on what are the right questions or answers, but the conversation of transformation must remain alive and moving.

My experience living in the church over the last twenty-eight years, and working for it over the last four, is that generally the Community of Christ speaks publicly about its successes and privately about its short-comings. Perhaps, the reasons for this are obvious. Psychologically, maybe the church is overcome by fear and doesn't speak negatively because individuals don't want to be perceived as judgmental. Socially, maybe the church is trying to live within the norms of Western business etiquette and professionalism. However, whatever the reasons, the spiritual impact of talking only positively in public about the church spiritually threatens the church's future, if that means our liabilities are not critically and adequately voiced and addressed. As we look toward the future, we must consider whether this lack of adequate candidness in the church about its failures, inadequacies, difficulties and short-comings may be why many young adults have become disillusioned and have left the church.¹⁰

Ignoring the church's short-comings only leads to a distorted spirituality. Avoiding the turmoil of intense feelings and hard questions only invites a spiritual self-deception to grow in community. Misplaced fear ends up masking our basic beliefs. We no longer know what it means to repent and reconcile ourselves to God. The meaning of sin is avoided and dismissed by sidestepping its implications and corporately colluding not to talk about it. Our pulpits become spiritually benign and uninteresting. Christ as our spiritual reconciler and redeemer becomes strictly personal; there becomes no need to live-out a corporate accountability to God. Discipleship carries little actual meaning, being more "spiritual," or abstract. In the end, the call to Christ becomes muffled. Our belief, discipleship, and spirituality become disjointed, hazy, and confused.

Once over, inhibiting public discussion about the church's failures and disappointments inadvertently creates a hostile unwelcoming environment. Corporately, the church is no longer a safe place to address the problems and spiritual pain the members privately feel. Maintain unity, the church

¹⁰ Young Adults, or Generation X (those born generally between 1962-1982) are generally suspicious of institutions and seek genuineness. Lack of candor is disillusioning and suspicious. See J. Walker Smith and Ann S. Clurman, *The Rocking the Ages: The Yankelovich Report on Generational Marketing*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 77-115, and Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 51-72.

unconsciously conspires a false optimism. Those who do not fit, fall to the wayside. We unwittingly begin to shut down conflict and become intolerant of judgment because of the discomfort it develops. Disagreements become divisive. The political conquers the spiritual. Eventually, the church factions, people leave, and the spiritual community naturally homogenizes. We begin to have *to seek out* diversity. More comfortable in earthly politics than Christ's spiritual truths, majority rule pushes out minority perspectives. Marginal individuals become oppressed or silenced. The tension they create soon needs to be regulated. In short, the process of revelation, healing, transformation, and reconciliation gets stunted. Eventually, the community's spirit fails. Transformation falters, or ends. Church leadership spends more and more institutional resources on keeping hope alive and optimism maintained.

If we do not confront the haunting task to a talking out-loud about what's wrong, we lock out diverse and divergent experiences and perspectives. Spiritual community is dead. However, Christ's life and death pointed his followers beyond a community of tolerance toward a community of salvation. The spirituality of Christ demonstrated to us a deeper belief in God. He convicts the church beyond the neatness of optimism and open-mindedness. Given the church's time of transition, the success of transformation rides on our corporate courage to stand in tension, and be daringly constructive. To prophetically embrace each other, we must embrace what is wrong.

Shall we begin?

Denominational Decline

Material published in a report by Apostle Larry Tyree¹¹ and information in the 2000 World Conference Bulletin¹² indicates a continual decline in the Community of Christ North American membership. Transformation 2000 contributed to a slight increase in baptisms during 1997 and 1998, however both reports illustrate continual decreases in excess of 10% over 10 year periods. Neither report

¹¹ Larry Tyree, "West Central Field Report." (Independence, Missouri: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, First Presidency, December 2000, photocopied)

¹² "H-1 Report on Membership Expansion," in *Jubilee! 2000 World Conference Bulletin, April 1-8, 2000* (Independence: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), 168-175.

shows any future reversal of this trend. As a matter of fact, they suggest its continuance. Interestingly, both reports indicate continual growth in many national churches overseas. In 1992, for instance, more RLDS members gathered for church outside the U.S. and Canada than within. What indication does this give about the spiritual vitality of the Community of Christ in North America?

The current shrink in North American congregations indicates there's been a spiritual breakdown between the spiritual beliefs and temporal responsibilities of the church. The church is a community of discipleship. Christ says to his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV), "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." I resound with the admonition issued by Theologian-in-Residence, Tony Chavala-Smith, "[Evangelism] is not optional for Christians."¹³ The spiritual covenant Community of Christ members enter into in baptism requires the tangible expression of discipleship. As older and younger congregational leaders find continual decline in their congregations, the church must spiritually ask, is there superannuation for discipleship and the responsibilities of the Great Commission? It's a good question worth troubling ourselves with.

Communally, something is obviously wrong. Membership in institutions may swell and contract over time, but is the activity of Christ's spiritual body ever supposed to atrophy and dwindle? Perhaps, only to rest on the Sabbath. I hope the decline of any cultural community within the church demands our contemplation and public questioning. The spiritual and material existence is intertwined in our corporate life together, and the North American decline demands urgency across the World Church, as well as our individual attention.

Communally speaking, when the church's invitation to outsiders begins to fail, spiritual health begins to falter in the church. The church cannot exist without strangers. Christ ministered to strangers, those who were outcast, downtrodden. By doing so, he made himself a stranger to his community.

¹³ Tony Chavala-Smith, "To Share the Word of Life: Some Reflections on Mission," *Herald* 148 (July 2001): 15.

Perhaps, there is a good model here. If we are not reaching to others, we must start asking the question out loud to each other, why don't people want to come to our worship anymore? What's wrong with the way we live out our commitment to Christ? Why don't others want to come to our church? Clearly, these questions need critical cultural, sociological, and historical perspectives. However, they ultimately have spiritual answers. We need to build God's community, and pierce the ambiguity of present transition. Changing the way we teach, preach, pray, and worship with one another might fulfill the Great Commission of Christ for the church. Temporally, we must begin to struggle with the question, "What's wrong with us?" Committing to evangelism everyday might force membership to realize the spiritual truth that we need to be disciples. This is necessary to continue Christ's transformation. The church's spirituality and health is contingent on reaching out and inviting others.

Investments and Interest Income

Given the relationship of temporal and spiritual, the church's spiritual condition can also be reflected in its stewardship. Stewardship activity gauges the church's spiritual commitment to God's work. Christ and his disciples are to be about God's work.¹⁴ Ideally, the hope of the church is to align together its spiritual convictions and temporal response. How close they are points to our closeness and trust in God.

The church's reliance on investments and interest income raises a host of interesting and necessary questions about our response. Besides the enormous peace and justice issues that accompany intermingling church resources in an economic system of disputable moral integrity¹⁵, it's my contention that any dependency on investment and interest income has a questionable impact on church spirituality.

It is not the scope of this paper to tackle all the moral and spiritual questions that could be raised around this issue. However, one over-arching issue should anchor our concern about endowment income.

With a surface glance, and armed only with Western middle-class beliefs and values, wisely investing

¹⁴ John 4:34 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Powerful critiques of capitalism and the morality of the socioeconomic realities it creates are being raised within Liberation theology, Feminism, Womanism, and post-modern ethics.

financial assets in order to enhance church income seems like a win-win. However, this is only true if the church sees its institutional responsibilities as primarily maintaining church personnel and bolstering financial resources for institutional mission. Any church dependency on interest income potentially creates a basic and foundational spiritual inconsistency with Christ's mission, which is first to make disciples.

Before the church begins to be concerned with its financial needs and its institutional program, its primary and spiritual responsibility is to make disciples of Christ. In Christ's community, the spiritual importance and *most important* benefit of giving tithes and offerings is not to fund the church's institutional program. Rather, it is the spiritual transformation that takes place when a disciple lives a life of giving. The spiritual discipline and practice of giving is primary for making disciples. Any reliance on endowment income for mission in the church misplaces the fiscal life of the institution's program ahead of its spiritual commission and discipleship responsibility. Confusion means reexamining our assumptions about disciples and dollars.

Endowment income paints the misleading picture that we can be a community of discipleship that doesn't need to sacrificially give, as instructed in the parable of the widow's offering.¹⁶ Reliance on endowment income distorts this spiritual reality. The transformation from being a part of a community of giving spiritually categorically should supercede any need for institutional growth. If institutional needs exceed disciples' giving, spiritual questions should center on why tithes and offerings are inadequate or in decline. What is going on? If church members are not giving to the church, the church might consider what its members are giving to, or if they are giving at all. These questions would speak much more clearly of our commitment to the mission of Christ's church.

¹⁶ Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4 (NRSV)

Combined with the church's decline in North America and other wealthy nations,¹⁷ reliance on endowment income also indicates that the spiritual life of the church in these areas is actually very bleak. If membership is declining in the world's most wealthy cultures, and simultaneously there's an increasing need for income generated by endowment funds in those areas, then the church among the world's privileged is spiritually dying. We must continue to dig deeper for the foundation of spiritual community in these areas. The Good News is that salvation and a renewed relationship with God is promised when we give in the likeness of Christ. It is our firm belief that a life of discipleship includes a life of giving. Scripturally, there is little dispute. More importantly, our testimony is that in giving we are somehow saved. Money cannot buy what we receive in return. In the end, a life of giving is the only life worth living for.

Maintaining a Hierarchical Polity

As stated earlier, the church's polity is a reflection of its spirituality. How the church administers its internal functions is a reflection of its understanding of God and community. An example is the church's legal organization as a theocratic democracy. Theocratic democracy is our understanding of God's relationship to humanity. The church is a body under God's authority. However, God has granted humanity individual and corporate agency. God's will is delivered to the church through a priesthood headed by a prophet (the theocratic component), and a democratic system organizes the church's corporate human agency.

The priesthood is a hierarchy of this spiritual authority. After thirty-five years of questioning RLDS identity and tradition, the priesthood has also been questioned.¹⁸ These questions may have changed our convictions, however they have not changed our polity's structure. The priesthood structure itself remains intact, today. It is still a centralized hierarchy of power and responsibility. The Community of Christ's highly organized priesthood still remains centered in Independence, Missouri. It is still a

¹⁷ "H-1 Report on Membership Expansion," 174. Similar trends in membership are shown in Europe and the British Isles.

¹⁸ Today, the church without question has softened its exclusive claim on God's priesthood authority.

bureaucratic and institutional, organized into different offices and functioning. It is still based on a mixture of Joseph Smith Jr.'s theology and the idealized social organization of the 1830's. Each office is a varying mixture of temporal and spiritual functions, with fewer offices for administration and higher "spiritual" functions and generally more priesthood for local and more "earthly" church activities.

In considering the church's spirituality, I want to question whether this hierarchal polity serves our mission. There are serious questions and feelings about whether our priesthood structure serves our call to be Christ's spiritual body in the world. In fact, there is growing sentiment that it does not.

In my experience, many voices inside and outside the church recognize the crippling effect our institutional organization and spiritualized hierarchy has on the mission of the church. Denominational institutionalism and spiritual bureaucracy all but squelch the community's ability to evangelize and do peace and justice. They cloak the church in an oppressive compartmental organization of hierarchical power. This is more a mirror image of oppressive power than it's transforming alternative. Moreover, bureaucratic church is exactly the kind of community many people immersed in American secular culture are trying to either transform or escape.

As the world calls out for hope and a new community of love for its future, bureaucratic hierarchy does not project Christ or how God moves in the world. I do not minimize the monstrous theological and institutional work needed to consider what must be done. I am not an idealist, rather a faithful pragmatist. If we are going to engage community-making and Christ's peace and justice in the world, we cannot speak of transforming the world outside of transforming us, the church. The judgment of hypocrisy from outside looms large. What I urge is that we must acknowledge corporately something is wrong and in need of discussion and radical transformation, if not deconstruction. Questions about the hierarchal layers of stakes, regions, and districts are already being contemplated. Field organization has been experimented with, and changed. Further questions ensue regarding church administration. Regardless of our fear of the answers, they demand our attention.

This is going to mean developing an understanding of power. Criticisms of patriarchy and Western systems are already leading the way. However, we must begin by asking ourselves what kind of relationships best fit our understanding of Christ's ministry and Joseph Smith Jr.'s prophetic Kingdom-building vision? Should we continue struggling in the twenty-first century with a nineteenth century vision of the ideal social community? If the church is going to spiritually represent Christ's body in the world, it must consider whether its modern hierarchal organization lives this out with integrity. Denominationalist and institutional biases may no longer serve our mission. Post-modern voices continue to remind us it probably does not.¹⁹

Conclusion

Thankfully, the church's expressed concern for evangelism²⁰, discipleship²¹, and peace and justice is pushing the church deeper. Concerns for our future are calling us to tackle the prophetic issues that confront us as Christ's church. Whether we see it or not, spiritual and prophetic voices are noisily speaking.

Many voices cry for a more genuine and renewed sense of spirituality. However, we still struggle to respond to the tension, issues, and trends that suggest that corporately something is spiritual wrong inside the church. Voices from the greater Christian movement have declared the end of denominationalism.²² Hope for denominations, unless they are radically redefined, has been exhausted. What the future is calling us to is a radical refocus on Christ's mission, Christian practice, and the need for a just and peaceful way to live on earth in sustainable spiritual community. These are spiritual issues that don't focus on consensus on disjointed and abstract doctrines and ideas, but on tangible ways Christ would have us live.

¹⁹ Many currents in post-modernism are critical of modernity, its ethics, social structures, and epistemologies. See in particular Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (Ithica: Cornell university Press, 1989). Bauman suggests that modernity and its institutional organization may actually cripple moral inquiry.

²⁰ The Council of Twelve has declared the future vision for a mission to North America

²¹ The Path of the Disciple is a growing initiative that is calling attention in the church

²² For example, see the work of congregational growth gurus, William M. Easum and Thomas G. Bandy.

It is truly an amazing time. Decline in North American membership, downtrends in accounting stewards, concern for future financing of the church, and an outcry to honor pluralism and local communal authorities are slowly receiving the attention of the church. Yes, *something is wrong* – and, if we have faith, we welcome its discussion. There is nothing more basic to being prophetic than calling all to a deeper faith in God. We need a prophetic spirituality. This means embracing the difficult, seemingly impossible, and divisive, conditions of our time for the sake of transformation and spiritual community. So, as we seek the *Harvest of Shalom*, I am excited to plant *seeds of Spirit* for the future. I am looking forward to it. I believe transformation is on.