

Coffee Buzz | First Presidency Non-violence Draft Statement

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SPEAKERS

Stassi Cramm, Steve Veazey, Robin Linkhart

Robin Linkhart 00:27

Welcome to Coffee Buzz, a Project Zion series where we have candid conversations with Community of Christ First Presidency, about all the latest happenings in the church and in the world. It's a time to hear from the visionary leaders who served in the First Presidency, each offering personal insights, prophetic reflections, and inspiring stories. Today I am here with Prophet President Steven M Veazey and Prophet President designate Stassi D Cramm, to talk about the draft non-violence statement released to the church 13, June for review and feedback. Welcome, Steve and Stassi, it is great to have you with us today.

Steve Veazey 01:16

Hi, Robin, and hello to all those who are listening to the podcast. I think we're talking about a very important topic. And I hope our time together will provide helpful insights and information.

Stassi Cramm 01:34

And I just want to add my hello from a very toasty Boston, Massachusetts day where the heat wave of July is moving across the Northeast. So, it's really good to be here with Robin and Steve. And it's always good, Robin, to connect with your listeners. And, as Steve said, today's topic is really important for the church. And so I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Robin Linkhart 01:58

Well, as I said in the intro, the First Presidency released a draft non-violence statement to the church in June and is requesting feedback from the church at large. We know the topic of non-violence has been of significant focus for several years now. Steve, why is this topic non-violence, an important conversation in the life of the church?

Steve Veazey 02:24

Well, I think we start with the big picture. We live in an extremely violent world. Just think about the last time you listened or saw the world news, the local news, the national news. So many accounts of violence, on all levels of society, causing suffering, destruction, and death. All this violence is not in harmony with God's vision of shalom, or peaceful well-being on Earth. In Community of Christ, we

follow Jesus Christ, the Peaceful One. But what does it mean to follow Christ in such a violent world? We know that Christ taught and practiced nonviolent ways of dealing with conflict and oppression. Jesus's sermon on the mount is an obvious example. Also, Jesus responding non-violently amid the events leading up to his crucifixion stands out. But the big question, how do we implement his teachings and examples today? So, a church-wide statement on non-violence will hopefully bring more awareness to the problem of violence on all levels of society. In all its many forms. It will also provide principles and guidelines to assist followers of Christ in living non-violently as they seek to follow the way of Jesus Christ more closely. And of course, any reduction in violence locally or globally, will be a blessing to people and the planet.

Robin Linkhart 04:52

Thanks, Steve. That brings a lot of focus to us on that topic. Stassi, can you tell us how this topic began to move forward in the global church community. And maybe the process that brings us to this point on the journey.

Stassi Cramm 05:10

Yeah, I think this process demonstrates what it feels like for us to faithfully explore and to live as a discerning community that considers topics together as a church. And then, as we learn about the topic, as we hear about different people's perspectives, then we determine where the church can reach a significant enough level of consent around a specific position that we can move forward. And that, I think, is what's unfolding for us. Before I jump like totally into the process, though, I just want to add a couple of things to build on what Steve said about the importance of the topic. He talks about how, you know, if you click online and read the news, that there's just so much being written about and being experienced in the world where violence is the "go to" solution, when there is dispute, or fear, or disagreement, power struggles. Just one example that occurred this weekend in the United States was the political violence that was targeted at a former president and current candidate for the next presidential election and the ongoing dialogue around that is even, you know, somewhat violent. And so, as Steve has said, it feels like violence is growing. And each of us, as disciples and friends and members of Community of Christ, can hopefully be converted and transformed through our conversations, so that we can become advocates for another way of being citizens in the world. So I pray that the unfolding conversation in the church will continue to change how people interact in all aspects of their lives, and help us speak against violence, such as political violence we just witnessed, but more importantly, that we will speak for how to explore solutions to the world's most perplexing challenges, where there are drastically differing opinions and perspectives, without resorting to violence. So that brings me back to your question, because we're in the middle of a process that raises a lot of emotions and feelings, that the conversation itself can create conflict and kind of a lack of unsettledness because of the wide variety of perspectives. And yet, I think we're doing a tremendous job in this process that has been unfolding. And I'm so grateful to everyone that has been participating. Of course, this process started by resolution 1319 that was approved back at the 2019 World Conference. And since that time, the church has explored the guiding question that President Veazey put before us, which was, "Are we moving towards Jesus, the Peaceful One?" That's happened through Herald articles, through online posts, through podcasts, through group discussions, through in-person classes, just a whole bunch of ways. One example of that would be that in early 2021, the adult text, Let Peace Dwell Here, was published, and it included study material from various World Church teams

that helped us explore the idea of non-violence as part of our discipleship, and it introduced a variety of perspectives. It also ended with inviting people's input. So throughout this whole time, the Presidency has continued to request feedback and suggestions for consideration in creating a statement on non-violence. And we are grateful that input has come from individuals around the church, from groups that have gathered, and from World Church teams. So, at the 2023 World Conference, the Presidency was a little bit concerned that maybe the church was losing interest in this topic. And so, we asked the delegates if they felt it was still important to continue working on a statement. And from our standpoint, the good news was that 82% of the delegates responded, had moderate or full support, that the church should continue to work on a statement. So based on that feedback, and with only two years to go until the next World Conference, the Presidency immediately began a focused effort to take all of the input received since 2019, about what should be included in a statement, about what should not be included in a statement, and try to work through all of that, and draft a statement that can be considered by the church. As you can imagine, the original draft that we wrote has gone through a number of changes as we've received feedback from World Church teams, from the Standing High Council, from the World Church Leadership Council, back to World Church teams, and so on. So, as you noted, we have now released that to the whole church. And what the church is reviewing is our attempt to represent the broad spectrum of perspectives on the topic that we've heard from the church. For some, this statement will likely not go far enough. They will maybe want stronger admonitions to be made. For others, it may go way too far. And, they may feel like that we've, you know, edged into areas that the church should not make statements on. But our goal was to find the common ground where we can unite as a people and make a statement about the role non-violence plays for all of us as a global community of faith. So, now the statement's in the hands of the church, and we hope and have already started receiving feedback on what people like and what they don't like and suggestions on how to make it even better.

Robin Linkhart 11:46

Thanks, Stassi, that really helps bring us full circle. And as you were sharing, I was just thinking, oh my gosh, right after the 2019 World Conference, I mean, not immediately, but within months, we were in the full swell of a global pandemic and navigating all that that meant, and at the same time, holding "how are we moving toward Jesus, the Peaceful One?", which became a very key focus, and one maybe that we could really dwell in more deeply because we were so isolated for such a long time. All right, so, the 2025 World Conference is not the first World Conference that this topic has been on the agenda. And even looking back to previous World Conference resolutions, we see things connected with non-violence that have been passed by the body of the church. We are very aware there are diverse experiences of violence across the various nations of the church as well as diverse opinions about the role of non-violence in today's world. Steve, why is it important to engage some form of the common consent process before moving forward with a statement on this topic as a denomination?

Steve Veazey 13:11

Oh, yeah, that's a great question, because it takes a lot of time and energy. So achieving a significant level of consent, before moving forward, basically assures broader support, and the willingness of church members and friends to implement the statement's vision, and all of its provisions. One can imagine that if it were simply a "for and against vote," and the vote was close, there could be hard feelings. And, we've seen that in the past in the church, or even fractures in the body given the intensity around this topic. While it takes more time and effort, utilizing a common consent process can be

transformative, and greatly increases the probability of the statement having its intended impact. So, the process for achieving a significant level of consent encourages all perspectives to be heard, equal opportunity for all perspectives, all questions that anyone wants to ask, plenty of opportunity for that. And through that part of the process, potentially, refinements to be made to the draft statement. That will include additional insight So, in our view in keeping with our identity and mission, this is a more peaceful and transformative way to proceed through the consent building process. We're learning. We're always learning. We're learning to interact and speak about sensitive or, or highly conflicted topics, such as non-violence in ways that are more peaceful and productive. And, in the end, the statement will be much better and have a greater impact because of the broad input of the common consent process and all those who participate in it.

Robin Linkhart 15:49

As I'm listening to Steve, I'm remembering how different World Conference has been, as far as the common consent process since the First World Conference I attended, which was 1998. And through those years, as we really intentionally looked at how we talk about highly divisive issues in the life of the church, and I'm sure many of our listeners as well, as everyone on this interview can specifically remember times where we have witnessed like this almost miraculous transformation of people's depth of understanding, and oh my gosh, I get the tingles all over just thinking about it, because it truly, truly has been a conduit for the Holy Spirit to work with the body. [Steve: Absolutely.] Yeah. It's so exciting. Okay, so between now and World Conference 2025, which will be held in Independence, Missouri 30 May to 6 June, how is the First Presidency inviting the church to participate in the conversation about, and refinement of, the current draft non-violence statement, Stassi?

Stassi Cramm 17:09

Yeah, I would love to talk about this, because I feel like that we can't use enough avenues to try to get the invitation out there that we are really seeking people's feedback. And so we are looking for all of that feedback to be provided from the church by 28, February 2025. And so, that's seems like a far away date, you know, that we've got the holidays and everything in between now and then, but I feel like we're going to just blink our eyes, and it's going to be upon us. So, I know you put links sometimes, Robin, you know, along with podcasts, so maybe you can put the link to where people can find the invitation online, because that'll take you to the survey. The survey is available in three languages. And to help people review things, we've included an introduction section before the statement, and a further context section after it. And so, what we're asking is that, we also provide some background. So, we welcome everyone's feedback on the survey about the introduction section, about the statement itself, and about the further context section. Additionally, we will be hosting online discussions later this year and early next year to facilitate deeper engagement with the topic. So, people can watch for announcements through social media and on the website about these discussions. And, hopefully, people will plan to participate, because having diverse voices in those discussions is really important. Then in March, the Presidency will review all of the feedback that has been submitted through the survey process. And we will look at any adjustments to the statement that we feel like would be helpful to make it more representative of the church's perspective on what it should include, and to hopefully increase the church's satisfaction with the way the statement is presented. So, then at the 2025 World Conference, delegates will be receiving the revised version and we'll be making that actually available to the whole church. And then, during conference, there will be three sessions during the legislative

time as the body continues with the alternative common consent process in considering this statement. So, during these sessions, delegates will get to explore why people hold the perspective they hold about this statement, they will get to hear from people with various perspectives about the statement, and then they will expand able to express their level of support for the statement and why they have shared that level of support. So, hopefully through that process, we will get a really good sense about what the church is feeling through the delegates. And then, these actions will be very similar to the things that the conference delegates have done in the past, when we have used the common consent tools on other topics. It will be a little slower because, since we're going to have remote sites, we won't have some of the immediate feedback that we would normally have if everyone were in the same room. Because some of our remote sites will have to do things with pen and paper, and they will have to tally results. But, at the end of the three sessions, if there appears to be significant support for the statement, then during the final legislative session of the 2025 World Conference, we will actually vote on whether or not to adopt the statement. If there's not significant support at the end of the three sessions, then the Presidency will take that under advisement, and consider what needs to happen next to continue to work on the statement, and to determine what's necessary to further improvement. And we'll be taking all of the feedback from World Conference as part of that process. If we need to continue to hone and perfect the statement.

Robin Linkhart 21:55

Well, I hope our listeners have now removed any doubt in their mind that when the Community of Christ First Presidency says we want your feedback, you really mean it. Because you do, I mean, this just as you've outlined, it just underscores all these very proactive ways that the church is building in so that everybody can have an opportunity to have a voice and share their perspectives. I often hear members and friends talk about how much they love our enduring principles and mission initiatives. I also participate in lots of conversations about what it looks like to embody and live these principles and to live out mission in our everyday lives. I also have heard people say that peace on earth is a wonderful vision. But at times it feels lofty and really far from our grasp. Steve, how might having an official non-violence statement, which the whole church helped shape, and which is supported by elected delegates representing every single mission center across the globe...how might that impact how disciples live out our mission?

Steve Veazey 23:14

Yeah, that's an important question. I can think of a variety of ways it could be used in living out our mission. First, it may be an instrument in transforming the way that members and friends view violence and understand what it means to be a follower or disciple of Jesus Christ, the Peaceful One, in the world today. So, individual lives may be touched and transformed by the statement. Second, I've been conducting my own preliminary surveys, and I've been asking people what they think about non-violence. Typically, people respond in very general ways, and inevitably end up with more questions than answers, but at least they've begun to think about it. A church-wide statement on non-violence will provide more common understanding and motivation to embody non-violence as a community with more common understanding, and motivation. I think important conversations can occur throughout the church, that will lead to group missional activities in harmony with the statement. So, I think that would be an important outcome. Third, in a way the statement may contribute to our outreach efforts. For example, we know there are people exploring the church all the time, perhaps from a distance, looking

in our material, looking at our statements, a clear statement on non-violence will evidence to them how serious we are about sharing the peace of Jesus Christ in ways that matter. This, I think, will be very appealing to some people who may choose to live out their commitment or their discipleship in and through Community of Christ, because how seriously the church is taking a stance on non-violence and peacemaking. Fourth, ecumenically speaking, the statement will, I think, open doors. It will open doors to partnerships with other denominations and organizations that have embraced non-violence, or are exploring non-violence. These partnerships, working together will amplify our efforts, resulting in greater effectiveness of all of our peace and justice seeking efforts. So, those are some of the ways that I see the statement being more than words, but moving into the lives and souls of people and groups, and making a difference.

Robin Linkhart 27:01

Thanks so much, Steve, that really is super helpful. And it just breaks it down into very tangible, concrete actions and, and ways of being really, really helpful. It just makes everything come alive in a very personal and like you say, a discipleship way. And it's not just about inside the church, it's outside the church and bringing opportunity for new connections, which always bring possibility. There is a lot happening in the world between now and the closing legislative session of World Conference 2025. Stassi, can you please help chart our path as we journey the way together, whether folks are able to attend conference or not? What happens next?

Stassi Cramm 27:52

Yeah, I think that's really important. And I do hope that if people cannot attend World Conference, that they will try to register to participate online and to receive materials so that they can stay connected to what's occurring at conference, even if they can't be physically present. So, I would invite all your listeners who can't make a space in their calendars, because I understand that not everyone has that flexibility, but that those that cannot be there, that they find other ways to stay connected. Of course, it's a bit hard to know the exact next steps. Since none of us know what the conference delegates will do when they respond to all of the questions that will be asked about the statement. Given the evolving nature of this process. We appreciate everyone's flexibility and openness as we work together to discern the best path forward. And that's part of the nature of being a continuously discerning community. We look out a little ways. We journey to that place We reassess and listen to the guidance of the Spirit. And then, we keep going. So, as I already mentioned, there's at least two possible outcomes from World Conference. One is that the conference supports the statement, and it is adopted as a new resolution. And so, that's one possible outcome. The second is that the conference is not supportive of the statement, and so more work is necessary to get it to a place where the conference will support it. And, of course, that would be a future conference. So, Steve talked about how an approved statement can be used to live our mission and to guide our choices and behaviors in our discipleship. So, if the statement is approved at the 2025 World Conference, then the really hard work of becoming a people who are guided by our commitment to non-violence will begin. I imagine as creating resources to help explore this concept. I also imagine that this will become one of the focuses of the 2026 Peace Colloquy. So, let me pause here and share the exciting news that we are restarting the International Peace Colloquy. And that is where the next International Peace Award will be given. So people should mark their calendars now to attend this event in person or online. The dates are 16 through 18, October in 2026. The event, you know will be an in-person event in Independence at the

temple. But we will also try to make several of the activities and worship experiences available online. So, that will be a great place for us to explore this statement if, and what it means and how it affects us, if it's approved. It may also be an opportunity for us to work with people in how we can really adjust the statement to make it more acceptable to the body. Of course, if it's not approved, then we will be looking for continuous feedback through all of the various means, so that we can attain greater support. And, the next opportunity that we would have to actually put the statement before the church again, would be the 2028 World Conference. So in the end, of course, it's not the statement that is most important. So, I know that like, for some, it feels like oh my goodness, if we don't have a statement until 2028. That's like forever, it feels irrelevant. But as Steve said, our conversations are changing the way we think, the way we believe, and the way we act in the world. Even in the absence of having a statement, I know that the conversations that I have been a part of have been transformative to my own observations and thoughts and behaviors. So, the transformation of our lives and actions as disciples who are called to be peacemakers in an often-violent world, is what matters most. And even through this, what feels like a very long process of getting to a statement, good things are already starting to happen. So, I'm confident that the conversations around the statement will continue to shape us, and that once we have a statement that has significant support, that hopefully we will have that recognition that that's the beginning, not the end, as we explore how to use it as a guide in the real work of what it means to bring about God's vision of shalom and to explore peace and justice, but in non-violent ways.

Robin Linkhart 33:13

Yeah, for sure. This has already bubbled over and blessed the church in so many ways, this ongoing conversation. And, for sure, this summer as we focus on "Heal the Earth," and considering climate justice and, and you know, non-violence, a commitment to non-violence enters into many, many threads of that conversation as well. Well, thank you, Stassi. That really helps as we look to the future and beyond World Conference 2025. Super excited to hear about the Peace Colloquy in 2026. We'll make sure to put those dates in our show notes as well. So what closing comments might you have for us today, as we wrap up our time together?

Steve Veazey 34:02

Well, I just want to express my appreciation to all those who already have been part of the process, and that's no small number of people, and have been involved in shaping the draft statement as it is today. All the feedback, the personal stories, the questions submitted, have been very, very helpful in developing this draft statement. And so going forward, I hope people will stay engaged, and that new people, additional people, will join the process, so that the eventual statement will reflect all of our best insight and effort.

Stassi Cramm 34:58

Yeah, and I just want to underscore what Steve said. We really are counting on everyone studying the package that is online. It's also in the July/August Herald pieces of it are, and then sharing their opinion online via the online survey. So thanks, Robin, for being willing to post that along with this podcast, because everyone's voice really is important. And, we know that our members and friends live in lots and lots of different contexts around the world, and they experience and observe violence in ways that, you know, we can't always imagine. We can't even imagine what it's like for what other people's experiences are. And that's why having all of the feedback really helps us incorporate the best of who

we are into the statement. And it increases the chance that we will be able to achieve enough support for the statement in June that it becomes a new resolution, that would be an exciting accomplishment. And it would allow us to move forward into the next phase of becoming a people who seek justice, based on our agreed to statement on non-violence. And it would also help us engage in the conversations about how we put our knowledge into actions. It's one thing to know something, but then we have to figure out how to live it out. So I think the work we are doing together will continue to shape who we are as a people. I realize that we may be small and numbered compared to some organizations, but we have the calling and the potential to be that yeast, or that salt that helps bring, you know, growth or flavor to the movements of justice and peace to rise where our members live and serve. And I think that matters. And so it's, you know, it's worth everyone's time and effort. It may feel a little overwhelming at times, but I have been saying a lot this summer to people. Just imagine what the world might be like if we get our mission right.

Robin Linkhart 37:21

Thank you. Thank you for those last sharings Steve and Stassi, and thank you so much for being with us today. We always appreciate this opportunity.

Steve Veazey 37:33

And I want to thank you, Robin for hosting this opportunity to explore this evolving work in the church on a non-violence statement. It's an important conversation.

Stassi Cramm 37:48

Yeah, and I just want to say it was great to share with both you, Robin, and Steve today. Steve and I and the rest of the Presidency get a lot of chances to talk about this topic together. And so it's fun to be able to expand that conversation to others. And, I always appreciate the podcast and the chance to explore topics with you and hope that your listeners find the conversations helpful.

Robin Linkhart 38:16

If you would like to hear more from Steve, Stassi and their colleague in the First Presidency, Scott Murphy, please check out our series Coffee Buzz at Project Zion podcast.org. To hear other personal interviews with Steve Veazey please see Episode Five a personal interview about his life ministry and Community of Christ. Episode 16 for a live Q&A session with the Salt Lake City Utah congregation episode 239 on the enduring principles, and episode 313 Peaceful humanity a new creation. For personal interviews with Stassi Cramm, check out episode 55 for her personal story, and it's quite an adventure episode 451 on our faithful disagreements statement, and check today's show notes for easy access links to these interviews and other important information shared with you today. As always, a very special thanks to all of you, our listeners, for spending a portion of your day with us. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care. Bye bye.