

**Mormon Stories Episode 590:  
Stephen M. Veazey – Prophet-President of Community of Christ Pt. 1**

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**Location:** 99 West South Temple, Salt Lake City, UT.

A City Creek condominium owned by Terry Wittenberg [fan of John Dehlin]

**Content:** Community of Christ Prophet-President Stephen Veazey talks about growing up in the RLDS Church (p. 4 – p. 12), describes the functions of Community of Christ Aaronic Priesthood offices (p. 7 – p. 9), how he got involved in church ministry (p. 13 – p. 14), what it means to give a testimony in Community of Christ (p. 14), living through a time of transition in the 70s/80s (p. 15 – p. 18), describes his relationship with the Book of Mormon and what how it can be used for a teaching peace (p. 16 – p. 18, p. 24 – p. 27), and dynamic changes in Community of Christ (p. 28 – p. 30).

**Interviewer:**

*John Dehlin (Dehlin):*

John Dehlin is a researcher, podcaster, and social activist. He has a Ph.D. in Clinical and Counseling Psychology from Utah State University. John is the founder of Mormon Stories Podcast (2005-), the most popular and longest running podcast within Mormonism. Mormon Stories Podcast was established to explore and challenge Mormon culture.

**Interviewee:**

*Stephen Veazey (Veazey):*

Stephen M. Veazey is president of Community of Christ. Prior to his ordination on June 3, 2005, he served as a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles, the leading missionary quorum of Community of Christ. He is the eighth president of the church and the second who is not a direct descendant of church founder Joseph Smith Jr.

**How This Interview Came About:**

In 2014/2015 the board of the Open Stories Foundation (2010-), a non-profit headed by John Dehlin promoting “understanding, healing, growth, and community for people experiencing or impacted by religious transition,” looked to introduce inactive LDS to other spiritual paths as a part of their mission.

In February 2015, “Mormon Stories #526/527: John Hamer on Community of Christ as Church Home for Transitioning Mormons” was filmed inside the Salt Lake City Community of Christ congregation. John Hamer, someone who grew up LDS then joined Community of Christ as an adult, shared a presentation on what former LDS seeking a spiritual home could find in Community of Christ. (Also see: “Why I Am A Member” by John Hamer in *Touched by Grace: LGBT Stories in Community of Christ*)

Afterword Seth Bryant, pastor of the SLC congregation at the time, suggested to John Dehlin that Prophet-President Stephen Veazey would be someone important to interview. Stephen Veazey later accepted the invitation to be interviewed on Mormon Stories.

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**Dehlin:** Hello and welcome to another edition of the Mormon Stories Podcast! I'm your host John Dehlin. It is October 20, 2015. We are recording today thanks to Terry Wittenberg. We are recording from 99 West South Temple which is the address for the City Creek condominiums. We are very delighted to be here today, and it's a really special Mormon Stories episode because we have the great pleasure of interviewing President Stephen M. Veazey who is the President of Community of Christ. And it feels weird to say Community of Christ and not *the* Community of Christ, but before we began this recording, I learned that actually the church is not referred to as *the* Community of Christ. It's referred to as Community of Christ. And, so, that's an important thing to note just on the outset. Just something I should know but didn't. So, again, President Veazey or Steve as he prefers to be called could also be referred to as the Prophet or the Prophet-President of Community of Christ. So, it's a real honor to be able to spend a few hours with him. I'm really delighted. This interview came about because thanks of the good work of John Hamer. Many of you will remember John Hamer from past Mormon Stories Podcast episodes. We discussed the history of Community of Christ extensively in video and in audio with John Hamer. So I'll refer listeners to those episodes to really go into depth about on the history but we're grateful for John for arranging this interview along with Seth Bryant who is with us today and he is also recently sort of called to be the replacement pastor I'll say for the Salt Lake City congregation of Community of Christ because *their* current pastor was just called to be an Apostle for Community of Christ. So, super exciting stuff in Utah related to Community of Christ! And we're just really honored, President Veazey or as you prefer called Steve.

**Veazey:** [Shot of him smiling and nodding]

**Dehlin:** We are grateful to have you on Mormon Stories.

**Veazey:** Well, thank you, it is a real privilege to have the opportunity to share in conversation.

**Dehlin:** And tell us real briefly why you're here in Salt Lake City.

**Veazey:** Well, the primary purpose is really two-fold. And that is to be involved in some Community of Christ church activities, but that was related to the Parliament of the World's Religions which was held, just recently completed here in Salt Lake City [it was held October 15-19, 2015] so we had a good Community of Christ contingent at the Parliament of the World's Religions.

- Dehlin:** As I understand there was a life-sized cut out of Joseph Smith the III that people could actually pose to take pictures with. [Laughing]
- Veazey:** Yes, it's a part of our story, our memory, that Joseph Smith the III attended the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 and so we've tried to keep that tradition going including participation in the most recent one.
- Dehlin:** Wonderful. Well, I have to admit that it's a little bit strange for me to have a change to interview the President or Prophet of a church mostly because of my background in the LDS Church where I could probably have a hard time getting an Elders Quorum President to do an interview with me and yet in your tradition you're comfortable having a largely unscripted interview for multiple hours with some random podcast guy. Is there anything you can tell us just about the culture or the leadership of your church that would make this something you'd be interested in wanting to do? Why are you here? [Laughing]
- Veazey:** Well, first of all, I'm here because there was a gracious invitation to participate and I wanted to respond to that. I think inherent in Community of Christ's mindset is a willingness to engage in discussion and conversation as people are seeking to find truth in the world and in their lives. I think we also have a value as a church that we want to be transparent. So, wherever church leadership travels in the world, it's not unusual at all to have just a question and answer session and members, local leaders, seekers, inquirers can ask questions and in community we try to be open and honest and responsive to those questions, so.
- Dehlin:** So, you actually speak to your members?
- Veazey:** Yes.
- Dehlin:** And you meet with them?
- Veazey:** Yes.
- Dehlin:** And you actually field open questions and answers with them?
- Veazey:** I do the best I can with the questions that are asked even if the best I can do is just engage in discussion and conversation, but it seems to be something that's really valued among our members throughout the world. I think it reflects our understanding of community and the worth of all persons.
- Dehlin:** Do you speak to media?
- Veazey:** Yes, Uh-hu.
- Dehlin:** Do you do media interviews?

**Veazey:** Yes, yes.

**Dehlin:** Isn't that scary?

**Veazey:** Yes. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** In the Kansas City area, in Independence where our church headquarters is located, the Community of Christ would be more known and prevalent and when we have a World Conference or a major event, the local media are interested in that or if we're considering particular issues or topics at our World Conference that relate to national or international issues there's interest in that and occasionally, the national media makes inquiries.

**Dehlin:** Alright. Well, it's a pleasure to be with you today.

**Veazey:** Thank you.

**Dehlin:** We always begin Mormon Stories by having the guests speak a bit about their childhood.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** And I'm just really interested in kind of where you grew up, what- you know what your parents did for a living and what role- I'm assuming it was called the RLDS- the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints when you were growing up?

**Veazey:** Yes.

**Dehlin:** So, what role did the church played in your life growing up?

**Veazey:** Well, I was born and raised in Paris and usually-

**Dehlin:** Paris?

**Veazey:** I pause at that point and then I add Tennessee. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** A little town in northwest Tennessee named Paris. In terms of my family life, I had an older brother whose- whose passed away now. A mother and father- my mother was many generations of the RLDS church that is my grandmother, my great-grandmother so on the maternal side I was shaped in the RLDS faith community. My father came from an interesting Baptist tradition called Primitive

Baptist and so on occasion out of respect to my grandparents on the Veazey side, we would go and share in the Primitive Baptist Church services and I was shaped by both, but predominant by the RLDS Church. My mom was a stay-at-home mom who nurtured her two boys and was very active in the church and in the community. My dad worked at a manufacturing company in Paris that made the old Holley carburetors, and he was a computer specialist on the front end of the evolution of computers for inventory control and process management. So, I grew up primarily in the RLDS tradition and fortunately, from my perspective, there was a fairly large population of RLDS members in my home county. We had two congregations.

**Dehlin:** Near Paris, Tennessee?

**Veazey:** One in Paris and then one about eight miles to the north. So in Western Kentucky and Western Tennessee there's a line of RLDS congregations and quite a history of early church missionaries both from the original church and also from the Reorganized Church who came down from Illinois through southern Illinois and dip down into Western Kentucky and Western Tennessee and planted churches so I actually have in my possession some old letters that trace that history and where they had the first baptisms down on the Tennessee River which is near where I grew up.

**Dehlin:** Fun.

**Veazey:** But generally had normal growing up in terms of school- public schools, participating in athletics. Highly involved in the congregation, the local congregation.

**Dehlin:** What were your sports?

**Veazey:** Football and track.

**Dehlin:** Really, what position in football?

**Veazey:** I played fullback and linebacker.

**Dehlin:** So, you were a runner?

**Veazey:** Yeah. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** And stocked, right?

**Veazey:** Yeah. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** And linebacker?

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Wow, I didn't know linebackers could become prophets.

**Veazey:** [Laughing] Well...

**Dehlin:** You'd think those temperaments are irrefutable. [Laughing]

**Veazey:** Yes, there are certain things I've had to lay aside.

**Dehlin:** So, I think someone lets just say in the LDS church which is primarily my audience or someone who comes from the LDS church might not have an idea what it's like or what it might have been like in the fifties and sixties to grow up in Community of Christ. Maybe just spend a minute speaking very briefly about some of the main activities or beliefs or experiences that might be considered highlights to your childhood growing up in the church.

**Veazey:** Sure. In terms of the Community of Christ congregational experience, a lot revolves around Sunday morning activities. We had a fairly typical period of time: Sunday School, age appropriate classes and we studied a variety of topics and then we would have our worship service and typically the worship service involved a lot of singing - Community of Christ loves to sing - preaching or testimonies. Our sacrament service that we call the sacrament of communion or sacrament of the Lord's Supper occurred once a month on the first Sunday of the month and that was a very special time and usually the highest attendance was on the First Sunday as people referred to it. It was a time to feel the strength of the community. We had youth activities for teenagers their Junior High and High School years as well as younger. Our youth group was called Zion's League and we had a cycle of fellowship, recreation, study and service so we would do a service project in the community as an expression of our understanding of what the kingdom of God is all about or Zion is all about. We also had potlucks or dinners where everybody brought their favorite dishes and that was a highlight. Some people in the RLDS-Community of Christ tradition call potluck one of the other sacraments of the church. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** Because people so enjoyed it and we came together, multigenerational and had food and fellowship and just visited and enjoyed telling stories and connecting with each other.

**Dehlin:** Was Jell-O involved?

**Veazey:** Jell-O was involved.

**Dehlin:** Alright.

**Veazey:** Was always there.

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** -and I usually casseroles. [Laughing] All kinds of casseroles.

**Dehlin:** [Laughing] Alright.

**Veazey:** In the summertime, we had youth camps for youth different ages but the highlight of the summer was what we called Reunion and that's a family camp and we all come together for a week and we would have fellowship and worship services, classes, recreation - just time to visit that was devoted to being together and a real strong sense of community developed because the participants in Reunion came from congregations in a multi-state area in that part of the country and people really look forward to that as a time of renewal and revival so our priesthood structure by office is the same as in the LDS tradition so they're were priesthood meetings and a lot of the priesthood work just focused on pastoral care - visiting or outreach with families that were interested in the church.

**Dehlin:** So, would you have- you know in the LDS church when you're a 12-year-old male you become a deacon and then the teacher at 14 and then a priest at 16 and you're first passing the sacrament [communion] then preparing it then blessing it. Would it have been comparable for you at that time?

**Veazey:** No, it's not comparable in that sense. The two priesthoods, Aaronic and Melchizedek, would be used in the same sense of groupings of offices and the same priesthood offices, but in the RLDS tradition there's a great deal of emphasis on the pastor or presiding Elder discerning calls for individuals according to their temperaments, their gifts, their life experience so someone could be called to be a Deacon at any point in their life and they might remain a Deacon and be fully devoted to that service or they might be called to be a Priest or an Elder. Some people might be called to one office for a period of time and then to another office. The key was the discernment of spiritual call for the person and then getting that approved in a supervisory line and then going to the individual and sharing testimony of the call and inviting them to consider the call and taking time with that and then if they choose to respond, presenting that to the congregation. So that the congregation can also bare testimony in support of the person and when I say bare testimony, it's personal experience of discernment of the call for that person and it becomes a very rich experience. It's not just routine. It's actually a worshipful experience and then the congregation voting to support that person in their ministry and then they're ordained.

**Dehlin:** And so, if there were to be an average age that someone might be called to be a Deacon, that age would be what?

**Veazey:** There's not really an average age.

**Dehlin:** Could it be 12?

**Veazey:** It- very rarely would it be 12. There are some young people called in their teenage years. I was called to be a Deacon when I was 16 that was considered a little unusual. It wasn't typical at all. My grandfather was called to be a Deacon as an adult, and he was a Deacon his whole life and so it's hard to talk about what is average or typical because it's seen as very individual and personal.

**Dehlin:** And do Deacons pass the sacrament? Is that their main job?

**Veazey:** In RLDS-Community of Christ, the main focus of the Deacon is the physical preparation of the facility or the setting so that the event or the worship can occur without having to be concerned about those kinds of details.

**Dehlin:** I think that's what our Doctrine and Covenants actual says, and I remember reading that thinking we don't totally do that... but-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Yeah, okay.

**Veazey:** We would also expect Deacons to teach principles of stewardship of one's life, so the Deacon relates the physical to the spiritual is one way to describe it.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** And shows the spiritual that's in the physical. In terms of very practical things like recently I was baptizing some people in Michigan and there was a deacon there who was just making sure that everything was going well and that people understood where they could change clothes and so you weren't worried about all the physical aspects of what was happening and everybody could focus on the sacrament of baptism.

**Dehlin:** Beautiful and so real briefly, what does the Teacher do?

**Veazey:** The Teacher in RLDS-Community of Christ is a peacemaker, a reconciler, so the Teacher is to be aware of the dynamics of relationships. Individuals to the church, families within families, families to each other and is to work to help people resolve and manage and conflict in just and peaceful ways.

**Dehlin:** So, if there is a Hatfield-McCoy dynamic, they would try to defuse that?

**Veazey:** We would- the teachers would go in there first. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** [Laughing] Love that. That's beautiful.

**Veazey:** And then call for re-enforcements. [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** That's beautiful, okay.

**Veazey:** As needed.

**Dehlin:** And the Priests?

**Veazey:** Priests can baptize and service the sacrament.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** They are also focused a lot on what we call the ministry of presence, so if you think about the Aaronic Priesthood: teacher, deacon, priest, we describe the ministry of physical presence so that people are beginning to understand the nature of God's love and concern-

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** -and teaching the basics of the gospel and home visiting as pastoral care. How are you doing? Are there needs? And sometimes visiting with other priesthood members depending on the situation.

**Dehlin:** Beautiful.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** And when you were growing up, women were not allowed to hold priesthood offices. Is that right?

**Veazey:** When I was growing up, they were not.

**Dehlin:** Okay, okay.

**Veazey:** It was beginning to be discussed.

**Dehlin:** Discussed, okay.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** So, really briefly, in- when an LDS person is growing up, sort of two really significant sort of teachings or doctrines are always on their mind. You know, one is the Word of Wisdom. Do they try alcohol or do they abstain? Do they smoke or not? Do they try drugs not? Tobacco or not? Like it's a real- for me it was a huge

emphasis. I'm going to make it to high school and never try alcohol and never smoke and never do drugs and stay clean that way. And then with the Law of Chastity, as we call it, you know- you got to not pet and not go past kissing and never have sex and like if you do, you know, you worry about a Bishop maybe punishing you or telling you can't take the sacrament or having to tell your parents and like that's a pretty significant challenge or opportunity or blessing or whatever you want to call it for a- for an adolescent Latter-day Saint. And then there's the issue of sort of sexuality and masturbation. Would you have- would those things have been on your mind? Was there the same sort of pressure, expectations or obsessions around those things or not so much?

**Veazey:** Well, I think they were on our minds as young people and we were experiencing both the culture of the church, the larger culture which was somewhat in transition but also I grew up in the Bible Belt so the influence of Evangelical Christianity was very strong in the local culture too and our challenge was to try to sort all of that out and understand what it meant. Now an interesting part of the RLDS-Community of Christ experience was there is and was, there was and is, a traditional dimension of the church that would have emphasized the Word of Wisdom and certain ethical teachings as they were understood. I don't remember this, but people tell stories about how dancing used to be viewed as a sin and so didn't happen at church camps or Reunions and then that changed over time. There wasn't a sense of somebody always looking to see if you were obeying or disobeying. There was an understanding of certain ethical standards, especially if you were in the priesthood. There was more emphasis on human agency and our responsibility to make responsible choices and people also can make mistakes and so the response was usually more graceful and forgiving and restoring than it was finger-pointing and being critical of you. It was more the person is more important than other standards that may be there and everybody, as human beings, we may not get it right all the time.

**Dehlin:** Was there the dynamic of saying: if you went too far with a boyfriend or girlfriend that you couldn't take the sacrament. There sort of public shaming?

**Veazey:** No. That would be considered private and personal. There were standards like that that were taught, but there wasn't-

**Dehlin:** What were the standards?

**Veazey:** Oh, no smoking or using tobacco. No drinking. What you're describing as I heard you say the chastity was taught, but it was understood in general that not everyone lived up to all of those standards and so the attempt was to hold up certain guidelines for ethical choices as understood at the time, but to emphasize that the good news of the Gospel is that sin is more of a human condition of separation from God. It's not a listing of certain vices. That's a very shallow understanding theologically but that it is the direction of one's life and the mission of the church

is to bring people into closer relationship with God and each other and that was the goal no matter what.

**Dehlin:** You're not just giving us the favorable interpretation? That was your experience?

**Veazey:** That was my experience, and yes, that's all I can speak to.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** Now if a priesthood member was a drunkard, there would be administrative sanctions and they could be removed from the priesthood and so if it became something that was poor representation of the church or really out of bounds, there were certainly responses to that, but we always tried to maintain relationships with people. So even those actions of administrative sanctions on someone's priesthood or removing priesthood authority or authority to represent the church was always couched or nested in pastoral concern and the hope that someone could be restored to their ministry in the church or leadership position in the church.

**Dehlin:** So, if an elder had a beer discreetly there wouldn't or even if people knew he had a beer that wouldn't-

**Veazey:** That's where human nature comes in. Probably depended some on the area, of the congregation. Who's in the congregation, but it probably wouldn't have been a big deal, but they would have been told: you really shouldn't continue to do that. That's not a good reflection on priesthood ministry and so if they had persisted in something that wasn't considered to be in the best interest of the well-being of the congregation then there would have been guidance given, you know, and support given and then a line drawing at some point.

**Dehlin:** So, there was sort of a cultural expectation that priesthood holders wouldn't drink alcohol.

**Veazey:** That's right.

**Dehlin:** Premarital sex, same type of thing?

**Veazey:** Same type of thing.

**Dehlin:** Okay. Adultery?

**Veazey:** Right.

**Dehlin:** Definitely, that could get you what?

**Veazey:** That could get you removed from priesthood.

**Dehlin:** Okay. How about your membership?

**Veazey:** No.

**Dehlin:** Not your membership.

**Veazey:** No, it doesn't impact membership in good standing at all.

**Dehlin:** Okay, okay.

**Veazey:** And I remember an experience where one of the priesthood members was engaged in an affair. It became common knowledge. Priesthood was removed but ministry was offered. That individual eventually was restored to ministry after a time of not being in ministry with the support of his family and the congregation.

**Dehlin:** What would the issue of sort of homosexuality, as it would have been referred to back then, would that even have come up in your childhood or adolescence in your church experience?

**Veazey:** It wasn't really coming up, but I think that was more a part of the local culture because I- as I reflect back, I remember in elementary school a young boy who was very feminine and I don't know if he was homosexual or not, but he was taunted and bullied and I couldn't understand what was all going on and that was like second or third grade, but I remember him just standing there weeping and I just felt a lot of empathy for him but I wasn't understanding what was happening so it wasn't discussed a lot in families or the church. It was there in families and the church, but people just didn't talk about it.

**Dehlin:** Okay, that makes sense.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Real quickly, you know in the LDS church used to be 19, now it's 18 you get called to serve a mission. Is that how it worked in your tradition?

**Veazey:** No, that's not an assumption and it's not automatic for a lot of people. There are opportunities for young people in high school and in college to be a part of what we refer to as the World Service Corp and it's not so much proselytizing as it is going to different places in the world and volunteering a summer, a year or several years and being of service in the congregation and in the community but it's not a high expectation across the board for all young people.

**Dehlin:** And your saying your missionaries focus more on service than on conversion?

**Veazey:** Well no have missionaries, but we consider our chief missionaries to be the members of the Quorums of 70 and also the 12 apostles who are to lead the missionary or evangelism efforts of the church throughout the world. The 70s would especially have responsibility for evangelism but a focus of the 70 is to train the membership in how to share their faith if people are interested and inquiring.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** So, the 70 and the Twelve help the whole church be outreaching and evangelistic.

**Dehlin:** So when you graduated from high school, did you go to college?

**Veazey:** I went to college.

**Dehlin:** What'd you do?

**Veazey:** I went to the University of Tennessee.

**Dehlin:** You're a Volunteer!

**Veazey:** I'm a Volunteer in a number of ways-

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** -but I'm a Volunteer and this is a very interesting story. I did my undergraduate work in natural resources management with an emphasis on wildlife biology, so I was very interested in the environment and natural systems. I thought that's where I was headed after I graduated. Now during that time, I had also been asked to be a pastor of a small group near where I was going to go to college so as a college student, I had been called to be an Elder in the church and was serving as a pastor. But after college as the church was beginning this experience of opportunity for young adults to be of service [Older Youth Service Corps] that was offered to me and I decided to respond and I was sent to the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada to work in youth ministry and evangelism and community service and I never went back after that. Another period of time, I went to the San Francisco Bay Area and worked for the church full time and was supported by the church so that I could work full-time and then I've been working for the church in various roles ever since. So ever college, I've been working in a full-time compacity for the church.

**Dehlin:** So, you've been an employee- sort of full-time employee for the Church since graduating from the University of Tennessee.

**Veazey:** Yes.

**Dehlin:** So, no graduate school?

**Veazey:** No- well, as a part of my Church leadership training, I completed a Master of Arts in Religion from Park University which is in the Kansas City area.

**Dehlin:** Yeah. Excellent. Okay, you're sort of a life-long church employee then?

**Veazey:** Yes.

**Dehlin:** Okay. As, you know, another main experience of an adolescent young adult LDS church member is sort gaining a testimony, right? And for us it's about believing there's a God, believing that Jesus is God's son and the savior of the world, believing that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the church is true - you know, the LDS Church is true, that the Book of Mormon is true, and that the modern Prophet kind of leads- you know if I had a testimony glove as they call it-

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** -those are kind of be the main fingers on the testimony glove and some just sort of picked that up as a child and that's just- those are things they believe in. Others sort of at various times in their life struggle with the digits on that hand, but the goal is to sort of have a firm conviction of those things by the time you're an adult. What would have been on your testimony glove growing up? You know how would you- is there a comparable bearing of testimony that's a tradition within yours and if so, what would what would be on the glove? What fingers would be on the glove?

### **Giving a Testimony in Community of Christ**

**Veazey:** In terms of testimony, the RLDS conception of that would be more: what is your ongoing personal experience? So, in many congregations when I was growing up, we had Wednesday evening prayer and testimony services. Prayers were spontaneous. The testimonies might be: here's an experience with the love of God I had last week or tonight I'm remembering this experience that I had, you know, several years ago and so the testimonies are very personal and they're not so much point-by-point typically. Now in Sunday School what we memorized were the Six Principles of the Gospel so I guess that would kind of be the testimony glove: faith, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit, Eternal Resurrection, Eternal judgment and so those were considered kind of the basic principles of the Gospel but most of our focus was life as a disciple of Jesus Christ as a member of the church so testimony flowed out of our growing experience with our best understanding of the Living Christ in the world and the love of God and how we were experiencing that and trying to express it to others and what happened.

- Dehlin:** And so what did you think about or what role did Joseph Smith play in your adolescence and adulthood? What about the Book of Mormon? What about the Doctrine and Covenants? You know the notion of authority, you know, exclusive authority? Book of Abraham? All that stuff.
- Veazey:** Wow, yeah that was a lot.
- Dehlin:** Was that part of your upbringing? Not like-
- Veazey:** So, I'd need to set the Book of Abraham aside.
- Dehlin:** Kay.
- Veazey:** I didn't become aware of that until later in life.
- Dehlin:** So, that's an LDS thing?
- Veazey:** Yeah, no, we recognize it in history, but it wasn't a part of what talked about at all or discussed.
- Dehlin:** It's not in your canon.
- Veazey:** No, it's not in the canon and I think to help everyone understand so I grew up in a period of transition in the RLDS Church-Community of Christ. So, I was taught the basic story of church history and there was a lot of focus on the founding experiences of the church. We had plays and dramas and we took a tour of historic sites to Nauvoo and in Kirtland and in other places to learn the history. So we talked about it, but I grew up during a time when the church was saying our history is precious. It's a sacred story but it's a journey and our history does not dictate or is not the gospel. It's our story, but it's not the gospel. We understood what we believed because we taught others what we believed, but it wasn't something that we were seeing as just propositional. You know believe all these statements and you have the gospel. Our understanding was the statements point us towards God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ and what the church is to be all about in the world, but we're growing in our understanding of that so their pointers. They point us to the truth.
- Dehlin:** Would you have thought of the RLDS Church as the One True Church growing up?
- Veazey:** Initially.
- Dehlin:** Originally?
- Veazey:** Yeah, that's what I was taught.

**Dehlin:** Okay, okay.

**Veazey:** And in the missionary presentations of the church. Not only were we the One True Church but we had to distinguish ourselves as the One True Church in relation to the LDS Church.

**Dehlin:** Right.

**Veazey:** So, that was part of the burden, if you will, of being RLDS so you had to take the story not only from the founding experiences but then you had to show how that truth continued in the RLDS church. So yeah, I was taught that. There are still members of Community of Christ who would hold that position. The majority of the Church would not hold that position now.

**Dehlin:** Would you have read the Book of Mormon every day as a young adolescent boy?

**Veazey:** I can't say every day. We studied in Sunday School and I read scripture, not every day.

**Dehlin:** But I mean was the Book of Mormon like the central scripture that you looked too?

**Veazey:** I wouldn't say it was the central scripture. It was more of a focus on Biblical scripture first and then in the RLDS-Community of Christ experience the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as witnesses of support of the Biblical scripture and all of them pointing to God's self revelation in Jesus Christ-

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** -and in the RLDS Church, the idea of continuing revelation and open canon of scripture was very dynamic so every two or three years, the Prophet-President perhaps or would offer Inspired Counsel to the church that was included in the Doctrine and Covenants at the World Conference. So, that was a very dynamic and living book in the life of the Church, so we referenced it a lot to be in touch with our own journey as a people.

**Dehlin:** Would you even ever considered like the historicity of the Book of Mormon back then like is it true or is not? Were there really gold plates, you know, or would have you just accepted that narrative is factual and had not even really thought about it?

**Veazey:** As a child?

**Dehlin:** Or as an adolescent?

**Veazey:** As an adolescent-

**Dehlin:** Yeah.

**Veazey:** I pretty well accepted the historicity of the Book of Mormon and that it was true because that's what this loving faith community has taught me at the time and then during the late 60s specially in the 70s as I was moving along in my education in terms of school and learning to inquiry and question and look at multiple sources and you know so forth and then in college and beyond those questions began to emerge but they were being raised by the church itself. The church historians and other scholars started raising questions and that created real tension in the RLDS church.

**Dehlin:** So, tell me when and how, I mean I'm aware of the issue of polygamy being really central to the evolution of Community of Christ.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** A matter of sort of blood succession. I don't know if that's how you'd described it of your Prophet-President. Eventually, you know, women and racial minorities as being important things and then also the historicity of scripture and Joseph Smith, etc. Maybe talk about how those matters presented themselves to you and then what your memories are of how the church grappled with those-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -during your adolescent or adulthood.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Were you like- were you aware that those questions were being bantered about? Do you remember hearing about it, struggling with it and how were you? Were you worrying about the church and what happened to it- like...?

**Veazey:** I was aware more as a college student, young adult.

**Dehlin:** Early 70's?

**Veazey:** Yeah, early 70's, through the 70s, early 80s after I'd graduated from college-

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** -and had gone to work for the church.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** I first heard about it through local members kind of grumbling about it.

**Dehlin:** Which issues?

**Veazey:** All the ones you've mentioned.

**Dehlin:** Oh, okay.

**Veazey:** So, through some of the church's curriculum for education of young people and adults, a certain view of history that was broader and looked at historical events more in context of the time. Those began to surface. Members of the church who were academically trained began to write articles and papers and those papers were circulated and so people began to question and there was a segment of the church that was interested in exploring those topics. Others wanted to retrench and affirm the faith as they understood it and had accepted it. Later on, especially when I went to work for the church and went through some training- we called it Temple School- I had an opportunity to interface with the people and interact with the people so were writing the articles and doing the research and I was in classes on restoration scripture and church history and all of these issues were thoroughly explored and discussed without being forced to take a position, but being encouraged to become more informed and people moved along at various rates with that. And since then I've just continued to read and both Community of Christ resources and resources from the New Mormon History school and just continue to stay open to all of the questions and continue to explore: what do I understand? What do I affirm?

**Dehlin:** Is it sensitive and difficult for you kind of in your position to talk openly about things like polygamy and succession and Book of Mormon historicity and like is it the type of thing when I bring up those topics for you is it like oh my gosh if I talked about this, it could be problematic for lots of my members like coming in- cuz obviously our tradition, again, I couldn't even get an interview from an Elders Quorum President- let alone the President of the Church. Here you are not only taking an interview but I'm bringing up what I'm guessing might be some of the most sensitive issues-

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** -your community has faced and maybe is currently facing. Does that like- is there a bit of that strikes a bit of the fear-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -into you of like this not even go there because it's too controversial and too difficult.

**Veazey:** No, I think- not think, I'm comfortable talking about those issues. My concern for some of our members is more pastoral because I know they would disagree or not

want to explore issues that could become upsetting to their understanding of the church's history or its faith but as a general principle, we believe in honest open theological and historical inquiry and we believe that that's far more healthy for individuals and for a faith movement than not and so as a leader in the church, I need to demonstrate my willingness even to wrestle with the questions in a more public way. Now, I am a bit cautious cuz people can take things out of context and- [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** Sure, sure.

**Veazey:** -they get on the web and then it may be upsetting to people, but-

**Dehlin:** So just- we'll do a couple minutes on this and here's how we'll do it: I'll relate my understanding of what your history has been and you can correct it or not and then you can just focus on what it is now.

**Veazey:** Okay.

**Dehlin:** Is that alright?

**Veazey:** Sure.

**Dehlin:** So, my understanding is that one of the main differentiators between RLDS and LDS historically was the originally RLDS- the RLDS Church believed that the president or prophet of the church should sort of be a descendant of Joseph Smith [Jr.] or of the Smith family and that is some point there's a perception that you ran out of like decedents of Joseph Smith [Jr.]. Although, John Hamer I believe has told me that that's not true. You've always had people that you could have tapped-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -but that at some point you decided that it didn't make sense. Correct me if I'm wrong and then talked about maybe now.

**Veazey:** I think in general that's correct but let me bring some refinement of understanding to that. In the RLDS-Community of Christ experience in the earlier years forging an identity as the successor to the early Church in terms of up to the time of Joseph and Hyrum's murders was very important to us. So a lot of the energy was focused on the Reorganized Church, its legitimacy, its authority in relation to those who that migrated West and other groups and what became the Mormon or LDS Church so Smith family lineage and in the earliest years oldest son was a way of understanding a way for leadership succession without getting into a lot of arguments or controversy or counterclaims so that provided stability to the movement, but then there came a point where it was not the oldest son but a direct descendant is so that continued for a while in the Smith family and that provided identity and stability and-

**Dehlin:** So it's not a constant succession problem.

**Veazey:** Not a constant succession crisis because we came out of that and we were a dissenting group in those days that chose not to follow the migration West so it served both a spiritual need as well as a practical need but then there came a point and this was Wallace B. Smith in the 80's and early 90's began to signal that the church had been served well by the Smith family and from RLDS-Community of Christ perspective that's true, but that a time had come where there was a large pool of potential leaders and that the key factor in presidential succession was calling through the Spirit of Revelation and so he was involved- not involved, he was the one who called his successor Grant McMurray whose the first president of the church who wasn't a direct descendant or of the lineage of Joseph Smith.

**Dehlin:** Is he still alive?

**Veazey:** Grant is still alive, yes. Yeah. And so, and that came through continuing Revelation which was canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants so now it's part of the church's understanding. It wasn't imposed but the church supported that and had that included in the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church.

**Dehlin:** There's a quote I once heard I think attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. which is that "power never relinquishes itself voluntarily. It must be forced." and I'm wondering whether- was it Wallace B Smith? Is that right?

**Veazey:** Yes, Wallace B.

**Dehlin:** I mean he's sort of really on behalf of the Smith family relinquished power-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -and I'm wondering, I might- the skeptical side of me is like someone must have made him do that-

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** -but he did it and so-

**Veazey:** He did it, and I would say in the councils of church leadership, there was some very open discussion of leadership succession. There's a part of the church to this day who yearns perhaps for a Smith to be leading the church because they draw sense of legitimacy out of that, but that's primarily in relation to other expressions of the Restoration. Most of the church would not be at that point at all. There are some groups that have broken off of the RLDS church who would still hold that.

**Dehlin:** But to me that's a remarkable occurrence.

**Veazey:** It's very courageous and if you knew- we lovingly call him President Emeritus Smith.

**Dehlin:** Still alive too?

**Veazey:** He's still alive. He's in his eighties. A very gracious and caring person who is fully supportive. He was of Grant and he is of me, and he doesn't intrude but always there to be an encourager.

**Dehlin:** Beautiful. The next main- the main issue I hear the story that you know Emma Smith denied that polygamy happened and that for many years a main distinguishing factor between RLDS and LDS is that the RLDS Church so sort of denied that Joseph even practiced polygamy and didn't practice polygamy and that at some point I've heard- you know in the 60's, maybe researchers started going woah, I think maybe he did and then at some point you guys sort of had to do a public we got that wrong and we admit that now but we're not going to do it.

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** Correct me if I'm wrong and- [Laughing]

**Veazey:** Well, that's one way to describe it.

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** Yeah, in the early Reorganization, the official position of the church- the teaching a lot of what the missionaries did especially out West was to draw distinctions between the two churches and we were not polygamist and we also asserted strongly and consistently that Joseph Smith Jr. was not a polygamist although if you read the history carefully there were members of the Reorganization or the Reorganized Church who had been with the church to the Kirtland and Nauvoo eras who were writing to Joseph Smith the Third and saying, you know, you better be careful with that. But publicly the position was "No he wasn't, no we're not" and that's a part of our identity and that was carried on for quite a while especially as the LDS Church grew in national prominence and visibility on the religious scene. It was one of our distinguishing teachings. Yeah, during the 60s there was the openness- I think some scholars before that we're talking about it, but at that time the questions began to surface more publicly in discussions and classes but it still took a long time for there to be more acceptance in the church and today there are still church members who would insist that that's the case. That he was not involved in any way in the beginnings of celestial marriage and polygamy and of course Community of Christ was never involved in, so more recently as the church in his own works have tried to be more honest about history as it was being understood. A lot of us were just taught that was the truth, but as additional inquiry occurred then there began to be in academic papers in scholarly

journals more recognition of that and a gradual acceptance to the point that the RLDS-Community of Christ position is in general on history: we don't legislate or mandate an official version of church history. We encourage people to look at all good works, all scholarly works, and come to their own conclusion so in the RLDS Church-Community of Christ you can be on the spectrum of understanding about that issue of polygamy and celestial marriage as President of the church in an article in our official Church Publication called *The Herald*, I was interviewed and I felt it was appropriate and responsible for me to say on this journey of understanding our history that I had had to go through some personal changes in my understanding and that I had to by reading the historians persuasively come- they had persuaded me to come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith [Jr.] was involved in the development of those doctrines, but not everybody agrees with me but that's part of the dynamic of the Community of Christ.

**Dehlin:** So was there ever a moment where the Church felt the need to sort of say “we were wrong! We apologize!” you know “this happened!” or did the church not feel the need to do that kind of-

**Veazey:** We really haven't felt the need to do that-

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** -because we've tried to be responsive, but we haven't done that. It's never really been presented to me as a need to do that.

**Dehlin:** Okay, and then I'll just say about, you know, the historicity of the Book of Mormon- I'll just- I don't know what the history might have been and how the church has approached that? Did it have a similar sort of moment or phenomena where that became a big issue and the church and its leadership had to grapple with it at some point?

**Veazey:** Same time period.

**Dehlin:** Same time period.

**Veazey:** Yeah, late 60's especially, the 70s, 80s and then even today but again the positions we take are: do honest inquiry and study and in the Community of Christ, belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon is not a test of fellowship or membership. It's not a litmus test so that's where we are today, and you would find people at different points of understanding.

**Dehlin:** So, could somebody say, you know what I think Joseph [Smith Jr.] used his creative mind and you know sources available to him and it was sort of a work of fiction that we respect. Could somebody have that point of view?

**Veazey:** Yes.

**Dehlin:** And be an active member?

**Veazey:** Yes.

**Dehlin:** Even be a leader in the Church?

**Veazey:** Could, yes.

**Dehlin:** Would you say that amongst the leadership that would be a- could you even give sort of an estimate of like what percentage would be the Book of Mormon as delivered by Golden Plates and translated by the power of God versus sort of something different from that? Would even have a sense for-?

**Veazey:** I'm not sure I could. We haven't had a conversation as church leaders. We respect each other's journeys in that regard. We expect our church leaders to affirm the basic beliefs of the church in relation to scripture and what we say is the Bible is our foundational book of scripture and we use the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants to support the witness of Biblical scripture and to help us understand who we are and how God has been active in our own movement.

**Dehlin:** There's something really- and maybe this just reflexes me but there's something extra significant about the Book of Mormon to me and to many people who listen to podcast because you know whether or not Joseph [Smith Jr.] saw God no one could really say and he should have some sort of emotional or dream-state experience that could really not ever be fully conclusive but you know there's something about the materiality of gold plates where like either an angel delivered and if an angel did no deliver them. And if an angel did not deliver them then Joseph [Smith Jr.] made up a story that you know some don't like the word fraud but you know reasonably say that's fraudulent to claim that you got a golden plates when you didn't and then it claimed to produce this text as a translation when it wasn't and of course there's all this conversation now about the seer stone and the method of translation but, you know, a believing person- there's all sorts of crazy beliefs out there so a believing person could just as easily say: I believe it! An angel delivered Golden Plates and we have the Book of Mormon as a translation! But I imagine you could have sympathy for someone who goes: you know, there's enough problems with the Book of Mormon that I don't really think it's a translation which means plates really weren't delivered which means that Joseph Smith kind of made it up which means that kind of book is based to put it kindly untruths and to put it sort of harshly a fraud. How would you- let's say a member was coming to you saying "I kind of am in the fraud camp" or a leader like let's say an Apostle came out and said "I think Joseph made that up. Now I pay respect." Like what would say? How would you respond? Would that be grounds for excommunication? Would like be like "oh, no big deal. We don't care."

**Veazey:** It's certainly not grounds for excommunication.

**Dehlin:** Or removal of office or priesthood?

**Veazey:** It's not grounds for removal of priesthood. As a leader of the church then we would have to explore what are the implications of that in terms of how people view you in your leadership and role of ministry? We would have conversation about it, but I could be understanding of the questions, the dilemma that people would have because it's like many things in religion it ultimately comes down to a matter of faith. Now it's helpful when there's evidence there that can support you, but ultimately there is this dimension of who you are that we describe as faith and it goes beyond just human reason and so that's how I tend to have conversation with people and focus more on what has been the value of the book of scripture because scripture has all kinds of types of literature in it: poems and hymns and references to other passages of scripture and metaphor and symbol and it's an attempt to communicate truths that are really beyond the capacity of human words to express so has scripture helped you in your understanding of God or what parts of scripture have helped you? I often hear our members talk about certain parts of the Book of Alma where it says: awakening your faculties! Arise! Awaken! Even if you have a desire to believe then let that desire work in because that's a seed and they can relate to that as devotional scripture that has value in their lives, so we talked about scripture more in those terms. We're interested in scholarly studies and what's being found but that's not necessarily the final word to a person of faith.

**Dehlin:** Was that question of the Book of Mormon's historicity ever important to you and did you at some point come up with conclusion and have you talked about that or?

**Veazey:** Oh, I've stayed informed. The question was somewhat important but not one of primary importance to me because I've experienced the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture in my understanding of scripture. It's had an inspirational effect on me so in my context of scripture, questions of historicity are interesting and somewhat important, but I primarily look to my understanding and experience with scripture itself.

**Dehlin:** Okay, so maybe you don't feel the need to sort of conclude for yourself whether or not there were plates or whether or not it was a historical book?

**Veazey:** I don't think at least based on my current understanding that final answers can be found because it comes out of personal accounts and testimonies so what we have is Joseph testified, Joseph reported that, Joseph indicated that. So not a lot of it was observable as historical event that others fully participated in or saw and that moves it then into the realm of: what do I believe? Where do I ultimately put my faith? So, it's not a primary question for me.

**Dehlin:** And have you had to grapple with sort of the DNA evidence and the you know the anachronisms and the archaeological sort of findings? Have you had to grapple with that?

**Veazey:** I have.

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** Yeah, and I've read all the articles from various sources and I find it interesting. I think we're in the midst of an explosion of knowledge and I'm going to follow that that knowledge-

**Dehlin:** Okay.

**Veazey:** -and I'm going to listen to people and hear their perspectives and I don't feel personal pressure to give answers of yes or no or ultimate certitude on these questions because they aren't ultimate questions for me in my faith.

**Dehlin:** So, for you the evidence is inconclusive and so it doesn't force you to take a stand one way or the other? You're still waiting for more evidence.

**Veazey:** Let me put it this way: in the Community of Christ, I'm much more interested in elements of the Book of Mormon that speak to our mission today. I'm very interested in what the Book of Mormon says about how is you're to treat the poor. I'm very interested in how the Book of Mormon speaks to some social justice issues and what happens when people move towards peace instead of war so I think we need a new reading of the Book of Mormon to find what is its message for today and that's when the scripture speaks so that's where my focus is.

**Dehlin:** Do you have favorite parts of the Book of Mormon?

**Veazey:** Well the one I quoted from.

**Dehlin:** From Alma.

**Veazey:** From Alma is a favorite part. I like the story of the baptisms where they talk about now if you're willing to mourn with those who mourn, you know and comfort those who stand- so it's talking about the relationships in the body if you're willing to be in that kind of community then what do you have against being baptized there by the Waters of Mormon so that's to me is powerful truth no matter what the historical roots may be. It is communicating truth that's in harmony with my understanding of what it means to become a disciple of Jesus Christ and that it's not just my relationship with God. It has a lot to do with my relationship with others in society and in community, so that's an important story for me from the Book of Mosiah.

**Dehlin:** My memory associates Community of Christ with a dove-

**Veazey:** A dove?

**Dehlin:** -and peace.

**Veazey:** Uh-huh.

**Dehlin:** And I'm mindful of- there are messages of peace in the Book of Mormon but there's also a lot of war.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** How do you think about all that war in the Book of Mormon and then the overall book's overall message about peace cuz I sense that peace is really important to Community of Christ and not- maybe even being opposed to war.

**Veazey:** It is a very important part of our identity as we have come to understand the mission of the church in relation to the reign of God which we see as a Peaceable reign even as the Old Testament prophets described it as a time of harmony, beating swords into plows, and so forth. Our church seal is a depiction of the Isaiah Vision: the lion, the lamb lying down together-

**Dehlin:** And a little child, right?

**Veazey:** And a little child shall lead them. That's right out of the prophetic writings of Isaiah who foresaw with his Peaceable Kingdom that's coming so we understand the mission of the church in relation to that and that would be part of our understanding of Zion or the cause of Zion. In terms of all the war in the Book of Mormon-

**Dehlin:** Or Laban losing his head, you know.

**Veazey:** Yeah. So all the violence just begets more violence. When are we going to learn? Can we take that from The Book of Mormon-?

**Dehlin:** [Laughing]

**Veazey:** -and when there were these rare times of peace there was prosperity, there was well being, there was harmony so there is an alternative to all that war so why do we keep following the pathway of all that war and we can read about it here in terms of all this suffering and the strife and so forth so if we can draw that out of the Book of Mormon that's a relevant message for today and in some ways I think Joseph [Smith Jr.] coming out situation of a poverty was very sensitive to the plight of people in poverty so there's the sermon by King Benjamin: we're all beggars when it comes down to it and that gives you a perspective on your

relationship to the poor so there's solid message there ever how it came about. It spoke to a nineteenth-century world in certain ways. Answering certain questions but it can continue to speak in relevant ways just like Old Testament, New Testament can continue to speak in relevant ways, but we have to responsibly interpret it, so that would be my position and I think a position of a number of people in Community of Christ.

**Dehlin:** As I think about how I internalized the messages of the Book of Mormon growing up in my church, I didn't get a real sense of you know- I got a sense that like we're a patriotic church and we are the first to sign up, you know, if there's a conflict, we'll defend and I don't remember any real conversation high, middle-level about how war might be a bad thing and how we might want to stay away from it and then I remember as I read the Book of Mormon these messages about the poor and the needy and Zion- it's a very communitarian sort of message from the Book of Mormon about no poor among you and yet, I seem to have experienced a more prosperity sort of message in my tradition where making money is great and being wealthy is great and if you make a lot of money, you can pay more tithing and City Creek Mall, you know. But it just seems like for LDS church members, many of the central messages of the Book of Mormon have kind of been lost and really it's like the book is true and that's the deal, right? But as far as like all those messages about the poor and materialism and peace, well maybe not so much emphasis and it sounds like even though maybe some would say the Community of Christ has deemphasized the Book of Mormon, it sounds like many of those central messages you still hold is very important.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Is that fair?

**Veazey:** I think that's fair and they're not only messages from the Book of Mormon but also as we understand Biblical scripture and as our own Doctrine and Covenants has increasingly emphasized certain themes in relation to peace, reconciliation, healing, generosity as a lifestyle not something to just respond to because tithing is a law but generosity is response to God's grace. God is generous so those have been emerging themes in our church and now they're being clarified and understood better.

**Dehlin:** Okay, so now this this macro-topic of evolution.

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** This is going to be a compliment and I'm setting you up for a response, so I remember hearing a Sunstone presentation by Bill Russell. Right, that's his name?

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** Love that man and he sort of traced a lot of this history of learning and how the RLDS Church-Community of Christ grappled with these changing issues and maybe had the option of hiding things or suppressing things or avoiding things and knew that there was probably a lot at stake by letting that genie out of the bottle or opening that can of worms of like really confronting and facing these issues and my guess is these- this New Mormon history that started emerging with Fawn Brodie in the forties, but then really escalated with you know the Mormon History Association and Leonard Arrington as the historians on both sides of our traditions through the 50s and 60s. My guess this New Mormon History wasn't lost on our leaders as it wasn't lost on yours but I just as I heard Bill Russell talk about that evolution, my interpretation was our churches took two very different approaches that while you know my church flirted with transparency and openness by installing Leonard Arrington in '72 or whenever it was and having this sort of Camelot years of history that very quickly the leaders got really uncomfortable with the implications of facing our history and so not only did they sort of extinguish that 10-year church history initiative and sort of farm out of those historians to BYU and sort of quietly released Leonard Arrington and act as though he never existed and then started actually excommunicating scholars and activists who talked openly about these issues and just sort of said we're gonna do a hard line, we're going to retrench and we're going to even going to discourage people from learning. We're going to call any source that raises any uncomfortable question anti-Mormon and were going to communication or punish or marginalize anyone who talks about these things for matter of decades which you know lasted- in some ways still exists but lasted in a very significant way through the early 2000s. It seems like and I just remember like- being- you know we talk about Gandhi and Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa as heroes in modern Western Civilization. I felt that same level of respect for the RLDS church or Community of Christ cuz it my interpretation of the history is that your leaders said and I don't need you to talk about the LDS church, not interested, but what I do want to sort of share my interpretation, see how you feel. It seems like a real act of integrity and wisdom for your leaders to say yeah, it's gonna- it might hurt us to admit the Joseph was a polygamist, it might hurt us to talk openly about the historicity of the Book of Mormon, it might hurt us to change how we handle succession in the church, it might hurt us to allow people of color to participate in the priesthood, it might hurt us to change own Church's name, it may hurt us to allow women to participate and it may hurt us to have an open dialogue but we're more interested in doing what's right than in money or numbers. We'll take the route of integrity. We'll do what is right. I don't know song that you guys sing, but we sing a song that says: "Do what is right, let the consequence follow." That's how I perceive the choice that your leadership makes and to me that's incredibly inspirational and I'm wondering- is this a softball?

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** I'm wondering if you perceive your history similarly and view it with even more pride than I view it?

**Veazey:** [Laughing]

**Dehlin:** Or do I have it wrong?

**Veazey:** Well, I appreciate very much hearing from you- your perception of that time. Sometimes inside the church, we don't see ourselves as well as others who are observing from outside the church see us so it's always interesting to hear the perspective of others. I would say generally and consistently what you're saying is true based on how I see our history and also church leaders who preceded me that I know and I know the quality of their character and there were pivotal times that decisions had to be made that we knew- that they knew would not be popular even in the RLDS Church but they chose a trajectory that they had concluded was the best and the healthiest and the most honest for our particular faith movement. I'm remembering a story that I've heard various church leaders point to- and this would have been in the presidency of W. Wallace Smith who preceded Wallace B. Smith. He would have been president '58 to '78 so 20 years. Basically, the time period we're talking about. And there was a seminar on various topics doctrinal, historical and so forth and some scholars from other traditions had been invited to be at the table with RLDS church leaders to explore these topics and at one point one of the scholars who was a professor turned to President W. Wallace Smith and he said "before we can continue, I just need to know one thing" and so is it's been described to me the room became very quiet and this professor said "if this group has to choose between something's Joseph Smith Jr said and our best understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ which are you going to choose?" and W. Wallace Smith said "we would have to go with Jesus Christ" and it was just like there was a transition in the leadership group. Now, I don't know if it was as pivotal as it is now viewed [Laughing] because a lot went on before that and a lot went on after that but at that point I think there was an understanding let's get first things first: God's revelation in Jesus Christ and our best understanding of that and the mission of the church and let's see how our sacred story contributes to that, helps us understand that and what are particular witness is in relation to that, but we are now focused on Jesus Christ and God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The church is not the Gospel. The church points to the Gospel so if that speaks to your question. Also in the midst of that there were times that church leaders had clay feet as humans because people say: "you do that, you know we're not going to support the church anymore" or "we're going to leave" or "we're not going to financially support the church" but I think the record shows when the big choices had to be made that the choice was always for honesty, transparency, truthfulness as we understood.

**Dehlin:** I'm just trying to imagine behind the scenes conversations: if we make this choice, if we let women have the priesthood, if we let blacks have the priesthood, if we change our church name, if change succession, if we acknowledge polygamy, if we allow open conversation, it might destroy the Church.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** It might cause a large percentage of members to leave, it might traumatically drain the contributions-

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -and it might even kill the church.

**Veazey:** Yeah.

**Dehlin:** -and I'm wondering how the leaders responded to those hypotheticals. During those moments, like really?

**Veazey:** In reading some of the oral histories that are available from the leaders of the church during those times, where they're pretty open and frank and they knew what was at stake but they felt they didn't have a choice because of their focus on faithfulness to their best understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the nature of God as we had come to understand it in the Community of Christ journey.

**Dehlin:** So, the guide really was “what does God want?” and “what is our understanding of Christ and His message and what Christianity is?” and that will be our guide.

**Veazey:** And remember we have a very dynamic doctrine and practice of continuing revelation so the Prophet-President after prayer, reflection, listening to the church but can gain broader, deeper, wider even new perspective on God's nature and will and share that with the church and the church has the opportunity to discuss that, debate that, ask questions, have dialogue about it and then come together in Conference and we call it corporate discernment of God's will and in a very prayerful attitude the church is able to say: we embrace this as continuing revelation and now it helps us understand all that has been and it also points us to the future so that allows the Community of Christ to... to breathe [Laughing] in the midst of difficult and complex issues and not just be tied to what has been said before or our history.

**(End of Part 1 of 3)**