

**Mormon Stories Episode 591:
Stephen M. Veazey – Prophet-President of Community of Christ Pt. 2**

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

Content: Prophet-President Stephen M. Veazey discusses church membership growth and decline (p. 1 – p. 2), how women’s ministry had impacted Community of Christ (p. 3 – p. 4), how diversity in leadership helps the church (p. 4 – p. 6), discusses Community of Christ’s understanding of God and if someone with minimum traditional religious belief would be welcome in the church (p. 6 – p. 9), discusses what it takes to be excommunicated in Community of Christ or removed from priesthood office (p. 10 – p. 11), discusses the church’s views on scripture (p. 12 – p. 16), discusses his connection with God, how he receives revelation, and the Church’s role in discerning scripture (p. 16 – p. 19).

Dehlin: What was the impact of sort of all these cumulative decisions? What was the membership sort of it it’s speak of RLDS-Community of Christ and where is it today and if you had to describe the consequences of all these changes, what is it done to the church? Positively and negatively?

Veazey: Yeah. The answer to that has several elements to it. The Community of Christ has continued to grow membership wise throughout this whole time, but it's been growing internationally so the primary growth has not been in the western world, but it's been in other parts of the world so overall of the membership has continued to increase.

Dehlin: So, you’ve outset domestic losses with international conversion?

Veazey: If you are just looking at numbers of members. It’s very different realities in some ways. In the United States, Canada, Australia, British Isles the membership has slowly declined kind of following the track of some Mainline churches and we're impacted by some of the cultural factors. We did have several migrations of members out of active participation in the RLDS church following the approval of the ordination of women to the priesthood. Now that was kind of a combination in my opinion of a lot of the issues that had been discussed in the late 60s, the 70s, and the early 80s but that kind of became the break point for some people: women in the priesthood.

Dehlin: And around what year was that?

Veazey: ‘84 that was approved and about a year later first ordinations of women to the priesthood. The experience in the church that I think has been most difficult is

that of people choosing to develop what they call Independent Branches or congregations of the RLDS Church and wanting to take the name of the church with them RLDS and that has split families and congregations and those groups say that they are wanting to be the RLDS Church with its original doctrines as the during the time of the early reorganization.

Dehlin: So, there a kind of fundamentalists?

Veazey: They are fundamentalist RLDS-Community of Christ who got to a point that they felt they needed to separate. Some are still formally on the Church's membership rolls, but they participate in these groups where they say they're not under the auspices of Community of Christ and I've heard various estimates of the number of members but given our relative size it was fairly significant.

Dehlin: So, you're hundreds of thousands is that right?

Veazey: About 250,000.

Dehlin: Worldwide?

Veazey: Worldwide members, with a nose count we know a lot more people are in church than that, especially in places like Haiti or Africa but they're not just- haven't joined the Church or our records haven't caught up to what's happening in those congregations. So, there was a departure from the Church 80s and 90s, but at the same time we experienced some people becoming more active in the church and new people joining the church because we made the decision to ordain women, but overall there was an impact on numbers of members and church finances from that decision. Recently, when in some nations, we approved the ordination of homosexuals and same-sex relationships and marriage where it's legal or a covenant ceremony where marriage is not legal. It was predicted that we would have another mass migration that would put the church in a very difficult situation. That has not happened. Some people have left and there's been some impact on Church finances but not as much as some said it would be if we made those decisions but it's mainly relational. Hard feelings from people who felt they basically say: You know I didn't leave the church. The church left me. So, they understood the church in a one true church model and is being very static and just persisting no matter what the circumstances may be, and they feel hurt. We have made several, very sincere attempts to reach out, to reconcile. Some have reconciled but it's usually on an individual and family basis. Not on a congregational basis so there has been pain. Now how we've been blessed is this whole cadre of gifts and sensitivities in ministry that women have brought to the church and they've become pastors. They've become jurisdictional leaders. What we called Mission Centers, groups of congregations. There in every leadership group of the Church and the perspectives they bring have in my opinion given us a better understanding of the full depth of the Gospel. The nature of God and it's

helped us grow and be better in our understanding of what God's about in the world.

Dehlin: So, talk a bit more about how having female leaders and pastors has benefited the Church. Do you have stories, examples?

Veazey: Sure, I have a counselor in the First Presidency who's female. She is very sensitive to individuals or groups that may feel excluded and so in the Presidency whenever we're discussing an issue be it pastoral or practical, administrative or doctrinal. She's always bringing a perspective of what it's like to be the minority or to be the marginalized or what it's like to be female in a world where patriarchy is still dominant in a lot of ways. That enriches our discussion and as much as I, as a male, would try to be sensitive I think only a female could really bring that perspective and that experience. Same thing in the Council of 12, in the bishopric of the church. Pastors, there's a type of sensitivity and compassion that I think has really helped us with the issues related to homosexuality that maybe a lot of men didn't have the capacity before, but the female perspective has really helped us on issues of sexuality and sexual orientation and deep sensitivity to relationships and so we've been enriched by that in all aspects of the Church.

Dehlin: So, the church has been enriched by having female leadership at all levels.

Veazey: Yes, it has and even in countries that are still strongly male-dominated, and Christianity is clearly male-dominated to have an alternative there among those expressions of Christianity is extremely valued. So, I've travel to Haiti and Africa and in Asia and I talked to our members. I just asked them: "why are you a part of this movement?" and some of them are new members who have come from other religions, some have come from other churches and they list several things. They talk about our emphasis on the worth of all persons. So, they're coming from societies where females are subservient or there's a strong caste system which we would not recognize in the Church. Now that is so valuable to them as human beings and that the notion that they could become an ordained minister is just phenomenal to them and extremely freeing in terms of fulfilling their potential as children of God. So, it's very important to them. The way we express it is all are called according to their gifts, worth of all persons, unity in diversity. Not to do away with diversity and that is picked up as a very life-affirming, person-affirming, community-affirming message throughout the World.

Dehlin: Is there anything that would preclude a female from being called as President-Prophet at this point?

Veazey: No.

Dehlin: Do you envision that might happen at some point?

Veazey: Yes, yes.

Dehlin: Would you like to see that happen?

Veazey: Yes!

Dehlin: You would?

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Okay, alright.

Veazey: I think even though a member of the [First] Presidency is a female that when a female becomes President-Prophet of the Church that will truly signal that there's no role, there's no office, there's no responsibility that's not opening and available to anyone according to their gifts and desires and God's call so again in Community of Christ, its emphasis on who is God calling and God can call people from very surprising life circumstances to serve in ministerial roles.

Dehlin: Okay, what about people of color in leadership? Is that a reality in Community of Christ? How that been for the church to have diversity of leadership?

Veazey: Well, it's certainly a reality.

Dehlin: Talk about the racial composition of like the Quorum of the 12 or the 70.

Veazey: Sure.

Dehlin: First Presidency or whatever.

Veazey: In the Council of 12, we have an apostle who's African. A very good friend of mine. He's from Zambia. We also have an Apostle who's from Central America, Honduras. We have an Apostle who is from French Polynesia, a woman. So the spectrum of color is in the leadership councils of the church. In the presidents of 70, right now, we have 10 Quorum's of 70 organized around the world. There are presidents of the missionaries of the church who are from Africa, Asia, Central America. When we meet as Church leadership, we use three languages so everything is being translated: French, Spanish, and English. So that we can communicate with each other and I expect that diversity of cultures and races will just continue to occur. Of course, we have male and female in the Leadership Councils, Quorums of the Church. Throughout the church we have congregations that are diverse in terms of cultural makeup depending on where they're located. We have congregations that are all Hispanics or all African-American. We have congregations that are all Anglo. Its kind of reflects the local culture. but we encourage all of our congregations to reach out to include diversity as a positive expression of the church so that's a value that we hold. In terms of racial issues, just after the Civil War-era Joseph Smith the Third indicated through Revelation

that we shouldn't be hesitant in ordaining people using the term of the time "of the Negro race" when a lot of people were saying to him: don't move too quickly on this. There's a lot of tension in the country and there had been African-American members of the Church prior to that, certainly. So, in terms of racial issues, our people are human so there were struggles in the Deep South during the Civil Rights-era but we as a church tried to be prophetic in our stances and then help the church align with the vision of racial equality and inclusivity. Now the human nature still comes through and people struggle with that but overall that's the trajectory of the church and we have evidence we're moving more and more in that direction.

Dehlin: So, for our tradition 1978 was the big year. Was there a big year for you? Was it just post-Civil War, kind of?

Veazey: Right after the Civil War.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Nice! Nice job.

Veazey: [Laughing]

Dehlin: So, you know as you may have heard, there were three vacancies in our Quorum of Twelve recently.

Veazey: Uh-hm. [Yes]

Dehlin: Many of us were hoping that the church would see that as an opportunity for some people of color to be called. That didn't happen. Not only did that not happen it was three white males from Utah [Ronald A. Rasband, Gary E. Stevenson, and Dale G. Renlund] and honestly was very surprised like that It felt such a bold thing in 2015 with a church that's so global to continue on that trend of only calling white males from Utah, Idaho sort of into the Quorum of the Twelve. Can you talk a little- and this maybe for you this is an obvious question, but can you just talk about the importance of having a racial diversity at the highest levels?

Veazey: Uh-hm. [Yes]

Dehlin: Why is that valuable? How is that enriched Community of Christ?

Veazey: Yeah, broader perspective and greater understanding helps us better understand God's nature and will. So, we would believe that the diversity that is evident in creation is a reflection of God's nature and so having diversity in the church and having diversity in the leadership of the church helps us draw closer to

understanding God's nature and will so there's a blessing in there. There's struggle to understand issues from various perspectives, but I understand that as a white male, I am privileged in society and in the church in ways that I don't even fully comprehend and it's only when there are people from other experiences who are given the opportunity and empowered to speak and share their perspective and their truths from their life experience do I get a much better understanding of the nature of God. What the focus of ministry should be: we need to listen to the marginalized people. That's where Jesus would be. That's who He would be having food with. That's who He would be talking to so they actually help us grow closer and understand better where Jesus is at work in the world today from their life experience, but the richness of cultures and languages that help us see issues from various perspectives is so much better than just being monolithic or monochromatic or homogeneous. Well in nature itself- I mentioned I was initially trained as an ecologist-biologist. Diversity is considered to be a healthy ecosystem because it can survive and thrive in changing circumstances. It's when there's too much sameness that systems get in trouble so even from a practical scientific perspective diversity is a strength and a blessing but most of all I sit in church leadership meetings and we're talking about issues and my African friend Bunda Chibwe whose an apostle in the Council of Twelve. He'll sit back and listen cuz that's important in this culture and then he'll begin to speak from an African perspective and I'll say "I never understood like that way and I never understood that dimension of Gospel in that way and I've been blessed" or Mareva Arnaud Tchong, apostle from French Polynesia, to speak from an island culture and to talk about their sense of community and generosity which so different western individualism and greed. I'm blessed. I'm enriched. The church is blessed and enriched.

Dehlin: So, someday a President-Prophet who's a person of color as well?

Veazey: Yes! Oh yes, I just assumed that.

Dehlin: You would welcome that?

Veazey: Yes, yes. I think that would be great.

Dehlin: Okay, great. So, there's- I really want to get to what it means to be a prophet in your tradition and what revelation means and what scripture means in your tradition. Before we do that, I want to briefly touch on just some high-level matters of doctrine, and I want to do it in this way so we know that you're going to have whatever birthrate you have and whatever conversions you have domestic and international. You'll have that and your church will hopefully grow at some growth rate maybe 1% or 2% a year. Does that sound right? Yeah and but there's this broader world out there, right? And the broader world is within the LDS Church, there are high numbers of people disaffecting from the church. There's still a decent growth rate because of birth rate, but there's a very low retention rate internationally and some are wondering whether within a good 10 to 20-year

period that growth is sort of going to flatten. It's definitely slowed already for us. It's- some are saying is going to flatten and maybe even start decreasing within a 20 to 30-year time period. And, you know, internationally of course as long as we have money, we could send out missionaries and grow the church internationally but what we know is in the western world: in Western Europe, in developed Asia, and definitely in the United States and Canada, outside of sort of restoration sort discussion there's a broad trend toward secularization. While the Catholic Church may still be slightly growing because of birth rate and immigration, we know that Mainline Christianity is in trouble as I understand it in terms of membership decline. We know that from the Pew Foundation that those who no longer affiliation with any religious tradition are the largest and the fastest growing group of any religious group. We called those the “nones” (N-O-N-E) and just as we've seen in Western Europe sort of churches on the decline. That's the environment here in the United States and developed western world. So, it's a tough time to be a church, a Christian Church and then add to that, you know, my understanding of the LDS tradition which is over half of those who leave of the LDS church, end up becoming- identifying as atheist or agnostic. They don't even like just go “okay, well we'll put Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon aside...” They put the whole enchilada side and it's like atheism and secularism and Jesus is just, you know, maybe he lived, maybe he didn't. Bible is just as fallible as the Book of Mormon and you know it's very common for there to be sort of a complete dismissal of religion all together. Almost an allergic reaction where it's like: I'm never stepping in within the walls of a church again. I'm not interested in anything and especially not building on a restoration tradition when I know so many unpleasant things about Joseph [Smith Jr.], so that's- you know a lot of my listeners are in this boat, just lost all appetite for religion so I'm going to ask you just a very high-level- I'm going to go through some major religious beliefs and ask what Community of Christ has to offer in 2015 about some basic teaching in that context. So, for example, many are atheist today and if not atheist, definitely a very “small g” sort of version of god which is maybe there's some energy or power force in the universe. Call that god or not but sort of the anthropomorphic idea of a God is certainly losing favor amongst the people I talk to and sometimes the idea of any God whatsoever. What does Community of Christ have to offer about a view of God that can speak to a Millennial or a disaffected Mormon in 2015?

Veazey: Well, I think our conceptualization of God which we always speak of and very humble terms cuz we recognize the limits of human language and understanding would be one that affirms God as Spirit, Light and Truth and Love. Now there are elements of that that can be integrated with what is emerging in some of the new physics understanding of the nature of reality that everything is energy and in relationship. So, we offer an understanding of God that is experienced in relationality with others in community. That's part of the reason for our name so I think it's a God that is not in combat with the findings of science but actually provides an opportunity for integration of knowledge and faith in a healthy and productive way. We also affirm a God who is a suffering God so we take

seriously the human reality of suffering in the world and God's intense involvement in that suffering so it's not so much a vertical theology as it is a horizontal theology of God if that makes sense? And not a physical God, a body, especially not a male physical bodied God.

Dehlin: So, someone who is like I'm not going to be behind a male God, probably not going to be behind an anthropomorphic God but I'm down with there being life and I'm down with the ability of some type of power or energy or force-

Veazey: A ground of all being, ultimate truth, the holy other who is not me, yeah.

Dehlin: All is one in some sense. All is part of this life and certainly love is a good thing so somebody's like that's as much as I can offer in terms of- that's as much of form as I can put to God. Anything else is- I just I can't go there cuz it's just too specific for something that's unknowable. If somebody just "that's as much as I can give it terms of God." Your responds would be what?

Veazey: You'll certainly find language, symbols, testimonies and understanding of that experience and people who share that perspective.

Dehlin: And would that person be viewed as inferior or lesser than in the community and you're not a real believer?

Veazey: Well, one of the phrases we use a lot is all truth and that we're always open to exploration, more understanding so it's the honest searching that is really valued in Community of Christ or in many parts of Community of Christ.

Dehlin: Okay. likewise, with Jesus. Jesus is under assault in some sense: did he really exist or not, is there a historical Jesus, and then even if there was a historical Jesus, which reasonable people hold different views on that, whether or not a real literal resurrection happened is sort of something people maybe aren't prepared to go that far. It's like some people might believe that, but who knows whether he really was resurrected or whether we will literally resurrect. What does what does Community of Christ have to offer in terms of sort of those questions or sensibilities or concerns?

Veazey: And when you're asking these questions, are you you're talking about what's more normative because one response is always going to be "there is a spectrum of belief in the church. All our valued. We view the church as a tent, a large tent." There are some boundaries out there, but people have to decide what their relationship is to the basic beliefs or affirmations of the church and there's freedom and space to do that but what's normative in the church is yes, there was historical Jesus. There's also the Christ of faith that began to be the understanding of the church as the church reflected on the life and ministry and the death and the resurrection of Jesus as it had been experienced in the community. Something happened that indicated that death was not the final word on the matter and the

church called that resurrection and you have the testimonies of people who say we saw, we heard that moves into a matter of faith then so you would have a spectrum of belief from resurrection as literal bodily resurrection-

Dehlin: On an individual basis?

Veazey: On an individual basis or for Jesus. Jesus's resurrection: a glorified body, a resurrected body that's different than the physical human body. The gospel witness "don't touch me!" you know that Jesus said. To those who see resurrection as a principal, that God is always bringing life and new life out of that which appears to be dead and lifeless and if that's the most important truth that comes out of those scripture passages and stories ever how you view them. So, throughout the church there would be a variety of beliefs and people would be respected with those beliefs. The boundary if somebody said basically "there was no Jesus, we're not going to reference Jesus, forget Jesus" that would be call me boundary. I mean when you're called Community of Christ obviously, you're focused in a certain direction.

Dehlin: What if somebody is saying I don't believe in God like I identify as an atheist and I tend to think Jesus may or may not have been historical, but I don't believe in a literal resurrection but I like the teachings of love so it's just sort of "I'm okay with believers. I'm not necessarily identifying as one, but I really love the teachings of Jesus and I like being in a community where those sorts of teachings are encouraged."

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Can that person be baptized?

Veazey: Yeah, that person could be baptized cuz we understand the conditions of repentance as being part of baptism but repentance is: are you searching, are you are you looking towards the truth or are you in rebellion so we tend to look to the possibilities in terms of a person's ongoing journey and we want to preserve those opportunities with them. Now in some specific congregations of the church, that might be viewed differently but in general I would say that individuals with that perspective would be welcome to participation. Wouldn't be preaching every Sunday because the community itself would have certain expectations in terms of what's proclaimed in terms of the public message or the public theology of the church.

Dehlin: I was listening to a podcast recently about the United Church of Canada and at least one female Pastor began identifying as atheist and is now under review by the church and her sort of ministry in jeopardy.

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Could someone who self-identifies as an agnostic or an atheist publicly become a pastor, do you think? And if a pastor began identifying as atheist or agnostic could that jeopardize their ministry, their office?

Veazey: I think honestly it could jeopardize it, but not out of any desire to be legalistic or to discipline but because of the expectations and shared beliefs of the faith community that person would not be selected or supported to be in a leadership role. They would still be welcomed and encouraged to be part of the fellowship and people would listen seriously to their questions and think about it and respond. I think the community itself would take a position on that as a faith community.

Dehlin: But not excommunicated?

Veazey: Not excommunicated.

Dehlin: Okay, what does it take to get excommunicated in Community of Christ?

Veazey: Well, officially it takes murder or second offense adultery.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: Or, unchristian conduct that is so blatant the person themselves has in effect removed themselves from the church. Now at this point I probably better check. Excommunication to us means a member not in good standing, not able to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Expulsion means removal of membership.

Dehlin: So, those former things were the grounds for expulsion?

Veazey: Those were some expressly stated grounds-

Dehlin: For expulsion?

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: But there would be a process.

Dehlin: Excommunication means can't take communion.

Veazey: Right.

Dehlin: Okay for you.

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Got it.

Veazey: -in the Community of Christ tradition.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: And that person can be reinstated so again the focus is always towards reconciliation of the person with the community and to be- it is very, very rare. It can be appealed all the way to the First Presidency but it's very, very rare.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: Hardly ever hear of it.

Dehlin: Okay. Really quickly, your position on the Bible? And there's a lot of modern historical criticism that's actually amassed for over a hundred years about: is the Bible really the Word of God? Is it just passed down through oral tradition? There are contradictions in the Bible. There are questions about its historicity as well. What does Community Christ have to say about the Bible and all the atrocities in the Old Testament?

Veazey: Yeah, wow. So, we're getting into the major topic.

Dehlin: Yeah.

Veazey: So, I can just respond at a certain level.

Dehlin: Sure.

Veazey: We have a statement on scripture that we distribute throughout the church and it has certain principles that we uphold and affirm and again then people have to decide where are they in relation to that principle.

Dehlin: And is this Doctrine and Covenants 163?

Veazey: Ah, no. The statement on scripture is in a resource called *Sharing in Community of Christ-*

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: -which contains various foundational statements about the beliefs and mission of the church and it's the primary reference for current church articulation of basic beliefs and the sacraments of the church and scripture and so forth.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: That statement affirms scripture as inspired, affirms the role of scripture as indispensable as long as it's faithfully or responsibly interpreted and that interpretation includes availing oneself to the scholarly information about historical context and meanings of the scripture as it was understood at the time, how it can be understood and applied today. We see scripture as a collection of books of many voices that recount human encounter with the Divine and the human response to that to describe the experience of encountering the Divine. We do not affirm scripture as literally infallible so we don't hold scripture as *the* words of God but within scripture you can find the Living Word of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All scripture falls under the lens of God's revelation in Jesus Christ so we would look at the Old Testament through the lens of Christ and the New Testament, The Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants because we believe that God's most decisive revelation was in Jesus Christ, a life. So, we don't equate the word of God with words, but the words point us to encounter with the word of God and the word of God is the livingness of God in creation, creating still and God's revelation in Jesus Christ and then how we continue to encounter that. So, indispensable. We would affirm it as inspired, indispensable, not literally inerrant or infallible in every detail, as a collection of books with many voices that have to be understood both in their historical context and then responsibly interpreted for application in life today and the Spirit helps us do that.

Dehlin: You'll have to forgive me for quoting your scripture, but I- you know, this is Doctrine and Covenants section 163 of Community of Christ scripture and it's amazing so this is verse 7. Is that how'd you say it? Section 163 verse 7b. Any idea when this was given, when this was made scripture? I'm looking if you're heading has like a year when It was-

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: I'm not going to put you on the spot to give a year, but I don't see a year here but decade approximate? Any idea?

Veazey: About 5 years ago.

Dehlin: About 5 years ago. Were you President-Prophet?

Veazey: Yeah, yeah.

Dehlin: Oh, this came out through you!

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: [Laughing] This guy is a Prophet, Seer and Revelator! Okay, here we go. It says:

7b. Scripture is not to be worshiped or idolized. Only God, the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies, is worthy of worship. God's nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, provides the ultimate standard by which any portion of scripture should be interpreted and applied.

That's beautiful.

c. It is not pleasing to God when any passage of scripture is used to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings. Much physical and emotional violence has been done to some of God's beloved children through the misuse of scripture. The church is called to confess and repent of such attitudes and practices.

d. Scripture, prophetic guidance, knowledge, and discernment in the faith community must walk hand in hand to reveal the true will of God. Follow this pathway, which is the way of the Living Christ, and you will discover more than sufficient light for the journey ahead.

Now that inspires me! Like that's amazing! It feels like a hot shower after a long day's work to read scripture that is informed by- I don't know if you'd characterize it this way but it's informed by modern or even progressive sensibilities and again I don't know if you're allergic to those adjectives but for me it's like: I like this! Like I don't know what I think about God or religion or Jesus but like that that is good. That is wholesome and noble and worthy and revealing and enlightening and inspiring and I'm thinking two things: I'm thinking holy moly like what was the beautiful thing that Joseph Smith [Jr.] revealed this notion of ongoing revelation.

Veazey: Uh-hm. [Yes]

Dehlin: Yay! But because the doctrine and theology he [Joseph Smith Jr.] was facing: children don't go to heaven if they died before 8 and you know animosity between churches, so much exclusivity like racism like yeah he moved the ball forward about how people talk about Christianity from my values standpoint and part of how he move forward is by saying "hey, not only can people receive personal revelation but churches and a prophet can receive modern revelation!"

Veazey: Uh-hm. [Yes]

Dehlin: And new light and knowledge like that's the whole selling point of the LDS missionary program and yet I don't know if we'd had like 1 or 2 sections added to the Doctrine and Covenants after Joseph [Smith Jr.] died and they were just- most of what was added was Declarations sort of undoing lame practices of the past: polygamy and racism, but where is the further light and knowledge added to the scriptures? So, that's my bias. But I'm going to ask you to respond to what I see is

the beautiful thing about what you're doing which is like there is there are new sections added to your Doctrine and Covenants sort of every decade. Every decade average of how many new sections, do you think?

Veazey: Several.

Dehlin: Several.

Veazey: Two, there are two.

Dehlin: Yeah, and they're beautiful! So how many sections, if you even have the number, how many sections have you been responsible for adding?

Veazey: [Sections] 163 and 164 which follows and currently I have shared some Words of Counsel with the church that will be considered at our World Conference coming up in June of 2016 for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants and now that I have my years straight that was in 2007.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: [Section] 163, yeah.

Dehlin: And you would describe [Section] 163 as generally about what?

Veazey: One of the challenges of speaking about revelation is finding the words but what it is about is a living God who is wanting us, the human creation, to be vulnerable to God's grace and to be transformed by it and whatever it is in our lives that causes us to put up resistance or shields or defensiveness to being touched and blessed by God's grace can stand in the way of what God really wants us to have and experience in our lives. I was fairly new as President of the church having been only ordained in 2005 but that- what became Section 163 became a powerful experience for me and my own understanding of God when I encountered that kind of love and light that I always believed in but became even more real through the experience of shaping words and speaking words that the church considered to be worthy of being included in the Doctrine and Covenants as part of the church's understanding of who God is. The one on the nature of scripture was particularly profound because- for me in my experience because it spoke to so many issues that people are in conflict about and they're hitting each other over the head with their Bibles assuming a particular way of reading the Bible and doing a lot of emotional and relational violence and allowing a lot of physical violence to occur and that's just not right and it became, I knew that, but it came very clear to me when God said "that's not right!" if I can use those terms.

Dehlin: When God said what's not right?

Veazey: To sure scripture that way.

Dehlin: Yeah, yeah.

Veazey: To dominate, oppress, do violence and so I- you know, you go back: slavery and how people used certain passages in the Bible out of context as a support for the institution of slavery and proved it from certain biblical text was wrong and misinformed. The oppression of women using certain texts especially Pauline text or from the Apostle Paul is a misunderstanding and a misuse of scripture that totally ignores historical context and other writings of Paul. So, yeah, if scripture is to speak to the nature of God and the Living Word then it should never be used in ways that are so contrary to our understanding of the nature of God and who Jesus is. We are the ones who have misunderstood and misapplied.

Dehlin: And so, and I wanted us this earlier but it's an okay time, I think. So if someone where to read the principal narrative of the Book of Mormon that says that God turned people skin dark because of their wickedness, how would you look at that? How would you justify it?

Veazey: Yeah. I've read various apologetics and justifications, but I think it's a scripture we need to understand in its historical context and set aside and move on with the broader witness of scripture as I understand it. The more I universal passages that that speak to truth across time and culture and I've been sad with some of my African-American friends and associates that those passages in the Book of Mormon have been a barrier to their relationship with God so when I have to choose, I moved to my interpretive lens which is God's revelation in Jesus Christ and interpret scripture through that and I'm able to sort things out.

Dehlin: So maybe that teaching- maybe it was prejudice on the part of the Nephites or maybe if it was something that they may be Joseph [Smith Jr.] as a product of his environment? Something other than really what God did?

Veazey: Right.

Dehlin: True?

Veazey: Yes.

Dehlin: So, God did not curse people with dark-skin in your belief?

Veazey: In my belief, no.

Dehlin: Okay, so the Book of Mormon gets that wrong! And that's okay because scripture doesn't have to be right all the time.

Veazey: And scientifically, there's a lot of evidence that we all descended from an African woman.

Dehlin: So, you're okay with evolution?

Veazey: Well we can get into quite a discussion of different schools of evolution but yeah they're certainly space in my understanding of how creation comes into being and unfolds that includes principles of that are described by evolutionary science but it you have to be careful totally identifying with certain schools of that because I believe there's a creative impulse that is a God that's involved in all of that.

Dehlin: But certainly not a 6,000 or 7,000-year-old earth?

Veazey: No.

Dehlin: And certainly not an Adam and Eve 6,000 years being the first humans?

Veazey: No that would be a literal understanding of scripture.

Dehlin: That's in your Doctrine and Covenants too, right?

Veazey: Yeah.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: But it reflects a type of scriptural literature that included stories about creation, so I need to look deeper in that story to understand the truth that's being communicated.

Dehlin: Okay, so at a higher level I think LDS folks are raised to think that sort of the prophet picks up a telephone and talks to God almost audibly that it's a very direct communication with very concrete language and for us that's it! The prophet talks to God and Jesus. They get that personal see Jesus, you know. Talk to God. "Oh, you want- and this is the revelation? Okay let me write that down. Okay, church here is the revelation!" You know, even though that's not happening a lot these days in theory that's supposed to be what we believe in. And it's a very direct thing and the Prophet is like the most righteous person maybe on the earth and again God's buddy. You know, co-managing God's children together in a very verbal and direct way. What is it like to be Prophet? Is it like that? Is it something different than that? Is there any of that going on?

Veazey: [Laughing] I'd say it's not like that. So, revelation, it's our belief, our understanding and our experience that God is self-revealing. So that's the core of the doctrine of revelation. That's an expression of love and desire for relationship with creation. Revelation from my experience and also my study but especially for my experience is encounter with the reality of God: Light, Truth, Love. At that point we begin to try to describe that we use our human language, we use symbols, we use stories, we use metaphors, we use poetry to try to explain that

and the Holy Spirit inspires that but it is not just being the recipient of nouns and verbs that you automatically write down on paper so that is my experience with revelation. It's a- I would describe it as a heightened sense of encounter with God and then using every fiber of one's being to communicate that with the help of the Holy Spirit but it is communicated in language through a human being in human culture and so we believe that the Holy Spirit helps others through those words to have the same encounter, so the written record of revelation is an attempt to describe the experience but in some ways it's always limited because human mind and human being has been involved in it. It's both has been my experience. My experience of revelation is: you don't schedule it, you don't turn it on and off, that your responsibility in this kind of role is to be prayerfully open, aware, observant and listening and overtime you have moments of encounter with God when certain truth, certain themes begin to emerge like this paragraph on scripture and then what I do is spend time with that to make sure it's not Steve and it's not just an expression of my emotion. It's not my agenda for the Church and if there is a persistent prompting overtime and then a piece at the core of one's being that frees you to proceed that's when I proceed with sharing such words with the church, with my testimony of the need to share these words at this time. In Community of Christ then the whole community becomes involved in mutual discernment at that point. I handed it to the church and say I trust the church and its capacity to come to understand what the status of these words should be and then after a time of prayer and discussion, there's very open discussion at our World Conference where people ask questions, they push back, they affirm-

Dehlin: Do they recommended edits?

Veazey: They can but edits don't happen in the integrity of the document itself.

Dehlin: So, by the time you submitted for consideration there's no editing?

Veazey: Not from the body but it's considered carefully and at any point I, as Prophet-President, could withdraw it or the conference could not approve it.

Dehlin: Has that ever happened? Something been withdrawn or something been rejected?

Veazey: The Prophet-President has been asked to take matters back to the Lord and bring some additional explanation and guidance but the original document as well as in additional council were eventually- were brought to the World Conference.

Dehlin: So, things have been added to based on questions but it came from the Prophet?

Veazey: Right. If the Conference were to not accept words of council for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants then the Prophet-President would decide what to do and most typically would be: Okay, the church wasn't ready. We need to spend some more time with this. There are questions that need to be answered so you stay in a fairly dynamic process or you could decide you were wrong and need to step out.

Dehlin: I perceive you and I perceive your church's approach was being one of a very large measure of humility and indeed you mentioned humility is one of the very first words you referenced when you were speaking about scripture and revelation I believe, if my memory is correct, and yet the idea of someone speaking for God or even attempting to discern God's will would be one that I think could easily cause someone to sort of shrink in out of a desire to not have any hubris to avoid hubris, to avoid arrogance, to avoiding the presumptiveness of really knowing God's will, right?

Veazey: Yes.

Dehlin: Do you resonate with any of those fears or concerns or hesitancies?

Veazey: I-

Dehlin: And how have you coped with them?

Veazey: Yeah, I struggle with that all the time in my humanness and in my understanding of God. I really struggle with that. I cannot deny that there have been times when I had been touched or inspired or blessed by something outside of me and so that's been there and that's through the grace of God. I also believe very strongly in the church's responsibility to journey with the Prophet-President in discerning the call of God. So there have been times as I've approached sharing documents with the church that the human part of Steve going: "What in the world am I doing?" and then with the nudges of the Spirit saying presented it and trust the Church and in it's discernment of the words so your role is to remind the Church of its prophetic responsibility and when it's a shared responsibility, it's not just one person speaking ex cathedra or infallibly or with all the authority so we would hold in relationship prophetic guidance and common consent. What we call common consent in the live of the church and that is it has to be affirmed, embraced, discerned by the church before it's included in the Doctrine and Covenants as authoritative and normative for the Church.

Dehlin: Is that majority rule? Like when do the vote on Section 163 is it just 51% yes then it's in?

Veazey: Well that would be in minimum.

Dehlin: Okay, but that's enough?

Veazey: That's enough however in our journey with what is really consent, we are experimenting at our World Conference with a different kind of process that would require a higher level of common consent of the delegates in order to make certain major decisions as a Church and so we're growing in our understanding

that sometimes 51% in the majority doesn't represent really the consent or the support of the whole Church.

Dehlin: Okay.

Veazey: But right now, that would that would be the minimum by the majority.

[End of Part 2 of 3]