

Walking into the Heart of the Questions: An Interview with W. Grant McMurray

Note: Gregory A. Prince, a member of Dialogue's board of editors, conducted an interview with W. Grant McMurray, who served as president of Community of Christ (1996–2004), on February 22, 2010, at the Prince home in Potomac, Maryland. Both the historic name of the Church (the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1860–2001) and the current name (Community of Christ, 2001–present) are used according to the period under discussion in this interview. Following are a few excerpts from the interview. The full interview is available online at dialoguejournal.com/2011/walking-into-questions.

Greg: I'd like to start by talking about the Community of Christ (and its predecessor, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) in the early twentieth century. My recollection is that your faith tradition, like mine, went for a long time mostly holding onto traditions and not worrying too much about substantive change. Is that an adequate way of putting it? If you go back to 1860, you have basically a century where holding the line was primary?

Grant: I think that's fair to say. For Community of Christ—or the other names that have been used for it, but we'll just use that name as representative of the entire period of time—the formative identity of the movement was built around two principles. One was an opposition to the practice of polygamy, which was a key identity element of the LDS Church in the West for most of the nineteenth century; and the second principle was a support for lineal succession as the proper mode of succession for the Church. There were various other modes—seven or eight of them—that can be documented historically as being expressed at some point by Joseph Smith Jr. Of course, the Mormon Church in the West accepted the

mode of succession through senior leaders in the Council of Twelve Apostles.

But at the time of the dispersion of the various elements of the Church following the assassination of Joseph Smith Jr., Joseph Smith III, the eldest son, was eleven years old, and there was not any realistic expectation that he could serve in that way. And so the branches that stayed in the Midwest, rather than following Brigham Young to the West, believed that a successor would come from the Smith family. There were various elements involved in calculating who that might be. It wasn't always necessarily thought to be the eldest son. But over the years, between the death of Joseph in 1844 and the formal organization of the Church that would subsequently be named Community of Christ, those sixteen years, the branches remained in the Midwest as independent branches looking for a leader to emerge. There were a number of claimants to leadership, but most of those branches were looking for a lineal successor.

As Joseph III grew into manhood, there came to be an expectation that he would be the one who would come forward. There was quite a process of exploring that possibility with him before he eventually, in 1860, took leadership of the Church. About four years prior to that, there had begun to be a more formal coalescing of some of those branches under the leadership of Jason Briggs and Zenos Gurley in particular.

But in 1860, Joseph Smith III came to a conference of hopeful would-be members, called as he said, "of a power not my own," to accept the leadership of the Church and to begin a term of office that lasted for fifty-four years, an amazing period of time.

During those fifty-four years, from 1860 until his death in 1914, I think it would be fair to say that the Community of Christ was experiencing something of an identity crisis. It seemed to mark the movement's history to follow the ways in which the Church was trying to define itself. I sometimes refer to it with appreciation for the word *anomie*, which means an uncertain sense of self. I think as you look back—I'm not sure they would have necessarily described themselves in that way—it would appear clear that there was a search for really defining who the Church was. For many of those years, that definition—that identity—was laid over and against the Mormon Church: trying to define how we

are different, how we are legitimate, how we are authentic, how we are accepted in the larger community. Whereas the Church in Utah had the experience of drawing away from the larger national experience and finding its own voice as pretty well an indigenous church, strong in the developing stages of the movement out in the West, it began over time to become somewhat controversial. That controversy was generated particularly by political efforts to resist the national ideology that opposed polygamy as a principle of life for any denomination. So there was a conflict about that in the West.

I think, as that conflict grew nationally, the Reorganized Church made stronger and stronger efforts to establish itself as the legitimate extension of the Latter Day Saint movement founded by Joseph Smith Jr. Opposition to polygamy became very important in those years, in particular, as the RLDS Church developed its identity.

So it was a search, I believe, for some real clarity as to what the Church actually stood for. I think that same search brought us into the present time. Some of the more contemporary things that have been accomplished over the last two or three decades still carried with them an effort on the part of the Community of Christ to explain, first to itself, and then to others, who it really was, what its focus was, and what its core ministry and identity in the world were.

Greg: Is it fair to say that, in that first century, you had a few core principles, and most of the effort was to refine those? That you weren't doing quantum leaps from here to there?

Grant: I think, to be honest, there was a sense of the historical rootedness of the movement: a belief in the prophetic leadership of Joseph Smith, a kind of not-thoughtfully-examined relationship with those founding principles, but just an appreciation of them. Given the understandings that were available during that time, in terms of documents and historical explorations, not much was readily available. So there was this comfort level of being a "True Church." The masthead of the *Saint's Herald*, the Church magazine in the nineteenth century, carried at one point a little banner that said, "All Truth." That was the purpose of the magazine and of the Church—to exemplify, to embrace, to embody truth. I think that,

over the years, we have come to a somewhat more humble understanding of our faith, as perhaps not necessarily embodying all truth in its purity. But there was a sense in this small church—and I experienced it as a child, being the only kid in my school who was a member of that church that had a long and funny name. Here I was, living in the midst of a community where hardly anybody even knew anything about our church, where there was just a little building on a nearby street where our church was established; and yet somehow, as a kid, I needed to deal with the fact that we understood ourselves to be the One True Church—not just vis-à-vis the Mormons, but vis-à-vis all other expressions of Christianity.

And so, much of that identity formation in those early years came around defining how we were different from everybody else—especially the Mormons, but not limited to the Mormons; also how we were different from the mainstream Christian denominations. It seemed we did that in large part because it seemed that was what people wanted to know: “How are you different? What distinguishes you?”

Moving into the twentieth century, I think the Church had found a comfortable way of defining itself as a traditional embrace of the founding experiences of the early Church, a clear position, even into the twentieth century, of rejecting any notion that Joseph Smith might have been involved in polygamy, and living comfortably with the prophetic leadership of the Church being connected to the Smith family.

As we moved into the post-war period in the 1950s, in American culture it was a time when a lot of people were in the pews. Churches were active, and people felt comfortable with their faith and their relationships with other churches, as well as having strong commitments to their own faith communities.

Greg: In the pews because of the war?

Grant: I think that the post-war economic boom was accompanied by efforts to normalize things. There wasn't a lot of deep questioning and exploration, certainly not among the people in the pews. People were just comfortable. People went to church just because it was what people did. Many of them who were there were less-than-frequent participants, and there was not a lot of challenging of faith.

Those were my growing-up years. That was the Church I learned as a young man. I was interested; I was pretty inquisitive; but I was sort of satisfied by knowing that smart people, writing on behalf of the RLDS Church, were supporting that principle of “this is the One True Church.” I would think to myself, “If they think that, then surely it must be true.”

But then the 1960s came. In the 1960s there was kind of a cultural revolution: opposition to the Vietnam War, the development of the civil rights movement, the status of women in society—all of these kinds of things were questions. Institutions were challenged, and churches did not escape that challenge. People who were questioning authority in terms of government, politics, business, and universities were also questioning authority in terms of Church life and theological dispositions of people. Our Church got caught up in that as well.

President Wallace B. Smith was ordained as president of the Church in 1978. It was in 1984 that he brought to the Church what we call Section 156 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which had two primary messages. The first would be that the time had come to begin to ordain women to the priesthood. Heretofore, only men had been called to the priesthood. There had been some efforts during the preceding years, now and then, where pastors felt a conviction that a certain woman had ministerial capacity and had a calling; they would actually pass recommendations up the line. That was actually referenced in President Smith’s statement, something like: “These calls have been submitted from time to time, and have been awaiting further decision, and now is the time to move forward in that direction.”

This was a *huge* step, a very big issue. In the very same document, there was also a call to begin to build the temple. RLDS members—Community of Christ people—always believed that we were called to build a temple in Independence, but in our polity, in our particular Church, nobody had any idea what a temple would be. What would we do with it?

Greg: But you had a pretty good idea what it *wouldn’t* be, and that was what we did?

Grant: That’s right. We knew that it wouldn’t be what the Mormons had. It wouldn’t have secret or private rituals, sealings, en-

dowments, and all of those things. They had never been part of the Community of Christ since its formation in 1860. So the call to build the temple came there, and then came what I believe was transformational language. In that document it said, “The temple shall be dedicated to the pursuit of peace” (D&C 154). That became, I think, one of the most important statements appearing in any of the canonical literature of the Community of Christ.

Little did I know that, in the years to follow, the temple would be built, but it would become *my* responsibility, as Church president, to say, “Now that we have built this temple, with its strange design of a spiral to the heavens, this is what it means to be a people who build a defiant building like that, and declare themselves to be dedicated to the pursuit of peace.”

Greg: Is that transition still happening?

Grant: Sure, and I think it will continue always to be one of those dynamic things that keeps redefining us, forcing us to look again and again at what this means. As issues in the world change, as issues come upon us, how do we confront those? What is our position as a Church, or as a disciple of Christ? It’s important to stay current on how the Church speaks to the culture and the society. Otherwise, we have no worth. There is no point to the Church if we don’t have something to say to our own time. That needs to be alive.

The full interview, with more discussion about the ordination of women and other instances of the process of change in response to revelation in the Community of Christ, and more of President McMurray’s personal recollections of his service as Church president, is available online at dialoguejournal.com/2011/walking-into-questions.