

Common Consent: Being a Prophetic People

By Stephen M. Veazey, *president of the church*

As a prophetic people you are called, under the direction of the spiritual authorities and with the common consent of the people, to discern the divine will for your own time and in the places where you serve. You live in a world with new challenges, and that world will require new forms of ministry.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c

Recently in a Christian-education class a question emerged, “If we are called to be a prophetic people, then why do we need a prophet?” Of course, the inverse also could be asked: “If we have a prophet, then why do we need to be a prophetic people?”

It is awkward to offer perspective on these questions because of my role. However, I will suggest the answer doesn’t have to be one or the other. Section 162:2c states we need both functions to respond to God’s calling for the church.

A responsibility of the prophet-president is to remind the church regularly of its primary call to be prophetic. Being prophetic involves determining direction that most closely reflects the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Being prophetic by seeking more insight about God’s will is inherent in what it means to be a people of the Restoration.

History reveals it is hard for the church as a diverse body to be prophetic. The constant tendency is to settle for what is familiar rather than spiritually exploring what yet needs to be. From time to time prophetic leaders act to incite the church to embrace its prophetic responsibility.

This can occur in various ways. Presenting words of counsel to consider for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants is one way. At the 2016 World Conference a final version of the counsel given in 2013 will be presented for formal action.

Over the past three years the church has participated in various activities to discern God’s will about the words of counsel. We have engaged in President’s Addresses and question-and-answer sessions. Reunion and class resources have stimulated healthy dialogue. *Herald* articles have provided different perspectives. This kind of church-wide conversation is an example of being a prophetic people.

Being a prophetic people is not just about what we decide. How we listen “together” to each other and the Spirit’s voice also is important (Doctrine and Covenants 162:1–2).

An expanded common consent process was introduced at the last World Conference. After years of study, the Common Consent Advisory Team presented a process that goes beyond simple “majority rule.” (Read the report at: www.CofChrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/Common-Consent-Advisory-Team-Report.pdf).

The process involves deliberating a major “proposal.” This is done through steps that create opportunities for delegates to express a spectrum of views, ask questions, make recommendations, and indicate levels of support. Based on delegate feedback, a proposal may be refined to achieve broader common consent.

We will use the enhanced common consent process at the 2016 World Conference. The Presidency believes it will help us better “discern the divine will for your own time and in the places you serve” (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c).

The process requires a proposal that brings broad interest and various perspectives. As the Presidency, in consultation with the World Church Leadership Council, explored options, a decision was made to submit a proposal on “Mission, Tithing, and Priesthood Response.”

Common Consent Proposal

In May 2015, I made the following statement when speaking about mission and financial challenges:

As we continue to discern God's will we need more conversation about our understanding of tithing. World mission tithes are the largest income source for our world ministries budget.

The Presiding Bishopric introduced the principles of A Disciple's Generous Response in 2002. These principles include giving generously in equal amounts to local and world mission tithes. Through prophetic direction given in 2004 we are told:

You have been given the principles of generosity, rightly interpreted for a new time. These principles call every disciple to tithe faithfully in accordance with means and capacity.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:7c

I think if we had fully implemented these principles current shortfalls probably would not have occurred regardless of other income and expense pressures. This observation causes us to ask a vital question.

What does it mean that we approved prophetic counsel confirming the principles of A Disciple's Generous Response (Doctrine and Covenants 162:7) but have not fully accepted it as God's will for our lives? Initial assumptions aren't sufficient given the important spiritual principles involved. Something is amiss, and we need to talk more about it in the months ahead.

Considering the "Mission, Tithing, and Priesthood Response" proposal through an extensive common consent process will provide opportunity for us to "talk more about it."

Next Steps in Common Consent Process

The next steps in the common consent process are in the hands of field, mission center, and congregation leaders. It is important the church becomes aware of this proposal and that delegates are prepared to participate in the common consent process at Conference. With that in mind, the following steps are recommended:

1. Use all available communications tools to inform the church about the common consent proposal. (Copies of the proposal can be downloaded at **INSERT WEB ADDRESS** or requested from your mission center officers.)
2. Encourage prayerful reflection. Feedback to the First Presidency in the form of comments, questions, or suggestions is encouraged (*FP@CofChrist.org* or write to the First Presidency, 1001 W. Walnut St., Independence, MO 64050).
3. Organize delegate-preparation sessions to become familiar with the proposal by using the accompanying dialogue guide. Feedback to the Presidency from these sessions is encouraged.
4. Organize small or larger group dialogue in congregations and mission centers using the dialogue guide. Feedback to the Presidency from these talks is encouraged.

The Proposal

Mission, Tithing, and Priesthood Response

Submitted by the First Presidency and the Presiding Bishopric:

Whereas, it is imperative the mission of the church be funded more fully throughout the world to fulfill our calling; and

Whereas, achieving common consent of the people about the definition of tithing is vital so “people may come to provide more fully and joyfully for the great work to which all are called” (Doctrine and Covenants 154:5b); and

Whereas, priesthood members should teach and demonstrate the principles of A Disciple’s Generous Response; therefore

We propose, That this definition of tithing be endorsed by the World Conference:

Definition of Tithing to Support Mission

Tithing is offerings to support local, mission center, and worldwide church ministries. Tithing is a disciple’s generous response to God’s grace and generosity revealed in Jesus Christ. A disciple’s calling is to give according to true capacity as a witness of God’s generosity and as a spiritual practice that helps disciples grow in relationship to God.

Disciples strive first to share 10 percent or more of their annual income as tithing before saving and spending. We recognize that for some people, there is not enough annual income to meet basic living expenses. Then tithing is an offering of any amount or item desired, including offering one’s life in service to Christ and the church.

Tithing is given to local and worldwide church ministries in equal amounts. The concept of “community tithing” no longer is included in the church’s definition of tithing. Giving to church affiliates is a priority after tithing, not a substitute for tithing. Contributing to other charitable organizations that recognize the worth of people and are committed to bringing Christ’s ministry to them is highly encouraged as an expression of community-minded discipleship.

As understanding of God’s grace grows with true capacity to give through wise savings, responsible spending, and debt reduction, disciples make additional tithing contributions. This often includes contributions and estate gifts to church endowments that ensure one’s legacy as an ongoing generous contributor to Christ’s mission.

Furthermore, it is proposed that this definition of tithing be taught throughout the church and that emphasis be placed on the importance of all priesthood members demonstrating generosity as regular contributors to mission tithes (local, mission center, and world ministries) according to their true capacity.

Background of Proposal

At the 2002 World Conference the Presiding Bishopric introduced the six principles of A Disciple’s Generous Response. An expanded definition of tithing included mission tithes and community tithes. Feedback from the World Conference was received.

Over the following years as the church journeyed with the six principles of A Disciple's Generous Response, the Presiding Bishopric and First Presidency received additional feedback about confusion created by the tithing definition. As the Presiding Bishopric reflected on the feedback and prayerfully considered the words of counsel given at the 2013 World Conference, it determined additional clarification was needed.

In October 2014 a clarified definition of tithing was presented that included mission tithes and removed the concept of community tithes. This definition now will be considered through "due deliberation" with the goal of "full consent of the body" as called for in Doctrine and Covenants 154:5:

The Presiding Bishop and his counselors are encouraged to continue to seek ways of effecting a greater understanding of the meaning of stewardship or temporalities as a response to my grace and love so that the understanding of the principle may stir the hearts of the people as never before.

Redefinition of terms within the basic law of temporalities, for clarification and to meet the needs of a growing church, is in harmony with my will. However, let this be done with due deliberation and with full consent of the body after sufficient study and discussion, all to the end that the people may come to provide more fully and joyfully for the great work to which all are called.

Also at the 2013 World Conference the First Presidency introduced Covenant Principles of Faithful Priesthood. One principle emphasizes the importance of priesthood members modeling generosity as regular contributors to mission tithes (local, mission center, and world ministries) according to true capacity. Some have questioned this principle. So, review and World Conference action would clarify priesthood member expectations regarding mission support and tithing.

Discernment and Dialogue Guide

An important phase of common consent is prayerful reflection, study, and dialogue before World Conference. Below are spiritual-formation, study, and dialogue recommendations for individuals, small groups, congregations, and mission centers:

1. A spiritual practice for considering the proposal:

Begin by breathing deeply and becoming aware of the presence of God. Spend a few moments resting into God's deep love and peace.

Pray for interior freedom from any hidden or conscious agendas, attachments, or assumptions that may keep you from fully seeking God's desire. If any surface, you may choose to write them down so they are visible during your discernment.

Read through the proposal several times, slowly and prayerfully. Allow silence and space between each reading. Pay attention to the words or phrases that capture your attention. Where do you feel drawn to explore?

Take any insights or questions into prayer, again with the desire for interior freedom.

Invite the Spirit to dream in you God's desire for the future of the church and the world. Hold this proposal into the larger vision and pay attention to possible congruency or contrast.

Commit to returning to this practice regularly as you prepare for World Conference. Offer gratitude for God's continuing revelation and the privilege to participate.

Close this time of prayer by holding in your heart this global body of disciples and all who join in intentional preparation for this shared experience.

2. Read, talk about, and prayerfully reflect on the following sections of the Doctrine and Covenants: 42:8–10, 14; 64:5a, 72:1–4, 106:1a, 126:10, 129:8, 147:5, 153:9, 154:5, 162:7, 163:9. Consider using spiritual practices such as *Lectio Divina* or Dwelling in the Word.

3. Read the following paragraphs from the 2013 words of counsel:

Free the full capacity of Christ's mission through generosity that imitates God's generosity. Discover deep joy and life's meaning by promoting divine purposes on Earth. Listen to the testimonies of those who are responding and follow your soul's yearning to come home to God's grace and generosity.

Remember, a basic discipleship principle is growing Christ's mission through both local and world mission tithes according to true capacity. Giving to other worthwhile organizations, while an important part of A Disciple's Generous Response, follows world and local mission tithing and should not diminish or replace it. If a law is needed to focus and balance response, then let these tithing principles serve that purpose.

Tithing is a spiritual practice that demonstrates willingness to regularly offer every dimension of one's life to God. When defined by faith, love, and hopeful planning, including resolving indebtedness, capacity to respond becomes much greater than initially assumed.

- a. In your time as a church member, what tithing principles have you based your giving on? How do your giving practices compare to the Doctrine and Covenants sections and words of counsel cited above? What other scriptures or readings inform your understanding and practice of tithing?
- b. What is the relationship between tithing and spiritual formation? How is tithing a "spiritual practice"?
- c. Recommended regular spiritual practice: Each week, or month, as you consider your true capacity for generosity through tithing, enter into prayer using these questions and statements to guide you:
 - God, how do you desire to use these resources to bring your peaceable kingdom near?
 - What invitation for generosity are you placing on my heart this week or month?
 - God, grant me wisdom and courage to share what I have in ways that promote the well-being of the whole community, including me and my family.
 - God, may these offerings continue to form me into the likeness of Christ, whose presence is needed in a world yearning for peace.

- God, may I be freed from the attachments that keep me from offering my true capacity. Increase the desire for you in my soul, outweighing all other desires.
- d. Some have stated their preference for a definition of tithing based on previous practices that emphasized “a tenth of increase” given to the World Church as the standard. Others support “a tenth” of income and “first fruits giving” (giving tithing first before other spending) as the basic biblical definition. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these definitions in a worldwide church?
- e. What other definitions of tithing would you or your group recommend?
- f. What is the relationship between mission, tithing, and generosity?
- g. What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving through tithing:
 - As dictated by adherence to a law.
 - Through “faith, love, and hopeful planning” as a disciple’s response to the grace and generosity of God?
- h. Why should priesthood be expected to teach and demonstrate the principles of A Disciple’s Generous Response, including local and world mission tithes?