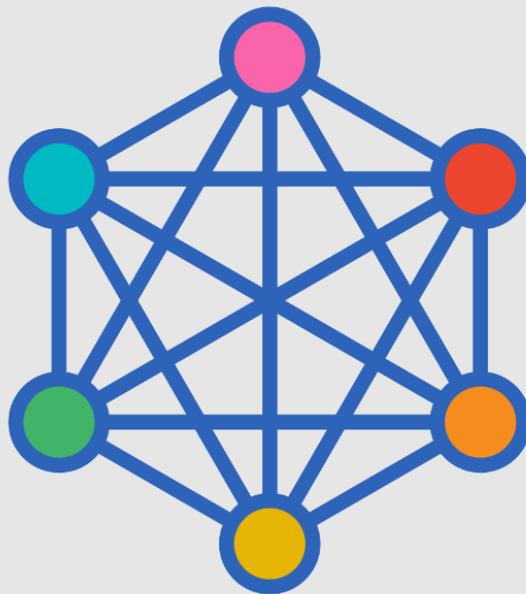


THE DECENTRALIZATION MOVEMENT



HEART OF
DISCERNMENT

"...The World Church needs to find ways of loosening its controls on its national and local jurisdictions and take joy in their accomplishments. If the church is not to be unduly restricted in its growth and in pursuing its mission, there must be more decentralizing of administration, more encouraging freedom of initiative on the part of the local jurisdictions to the body of Christ in their sphere of action. In a very real sense, the World Church should be not so much the director of all the parts as the enabler, inspirer, and strengthener of them. The church should be the fellowship of those who have set their hands in every nation to be the light of Christ in that culture, to help the new world be born. If this is to happen, the World Church must be willing to give freedom of action to its local jurisdictions..."

Apostle Clifford A. Cole
"The Cause of Zion: Today and Tomorrow"
September 1974 Saints Herald (Vol. 121-9: 561 & 570)

1. Introduction

In our quest of self-reflection and advancement, it is crucial for us to consciously and purposefully examine our limitations and deficiencies. While this undertaking may trigger resistance and dissent from those among us who are apathetic or satisfied with the current state of affairs, this is essential for our growth as a people. By sincerely recognizing and actively confronting our imperfections, we hold the power to rise above them and build a future that is more inclusive and enlightened.

Upon careful observation of our present community, a clear and compelling trend emerges across all the levels of our church: the complex interplay between our current centralization and our longing for decentralization. Over time, our strong dependence on World Church (also known as "IHQ" or "Independence") has unintentionally stifled and marginalized initiatives that operate outside of "official approval". As a result, today we are largely unprepared to embrace the journey towards decentralization. Nevertheless, compelled by pressing financial circumstances, World Church has hesitantly started shedding itself of costly centralized structures, programs, and assets that it has amassed over the years, and more localized jurisdictions are stepping in to fill that void.

Given these circumstances, we are called to envision anew the ways in which we express our faith as a unified body, as congregations, and as individuals. This pamphlet explores various manifestations of the decentralization movement and engages with them, with the hope of better equipping ourselves for our future.

2. Reduction of Paid Ministry

State of the Church

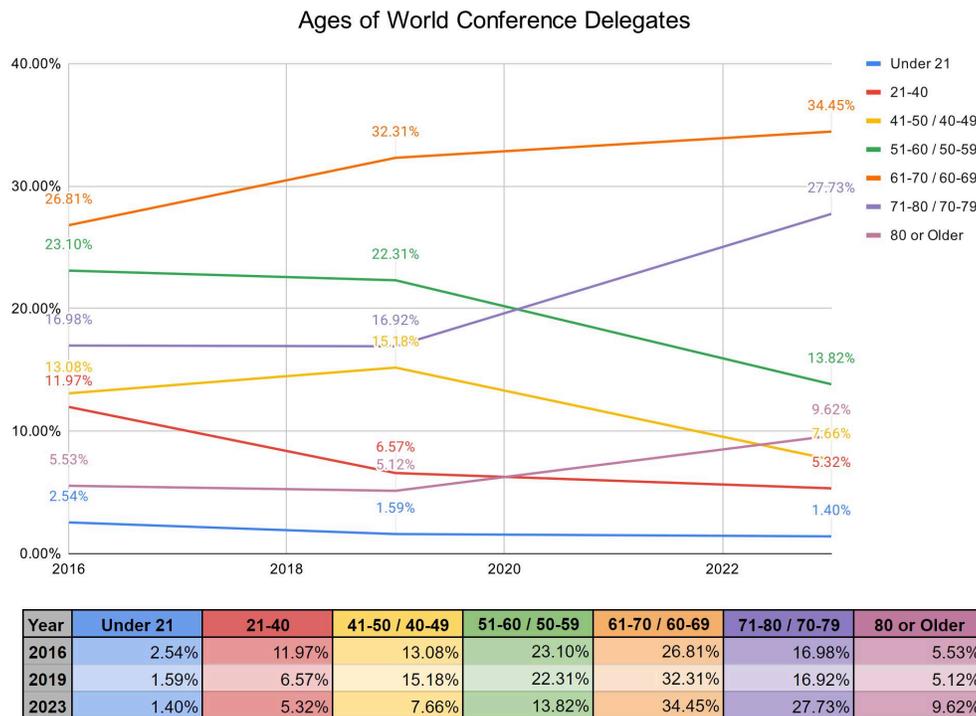
In our church we hold a deep appreciation for the power of volunteer ministry. However, we need to acknowledge the reality of paid positions within our ecclesiastical hierarchy, such as Mission Center Presidents. While we recognize and honor the dedication of many paid ministers, we must also confront and address the concerns that have come to our attention. We have encountered two notable cases involving paid Mission Center Presidents which warrant such attention.

The first case revolves around a Mission Center President who is expected to invest 40 hours per week into their responsibilities. Regrettably, it has come to the attention of many within the Mission Center that this individual consistently dedicates less than 10 hours per week to their duties. Instead, they prioritize personal leisure activities, adopting a semi-retired mindset. This situation has resulted in neglected obligations and unnecessary obstacles for ministers and other employees within their Mission Center. Despite widespread awareness of this issue, the Mission Center President continues to retain their employment.

The second case sheds light on why underperforming employees often remain employed. When this particular Mission Center President was initially hired, World Church failed to establish a clear employment contract that outlined expectations and consequences for failing to meet them. Consequently, when the decision was made to terminate this individual's employment, World Church found itself in violation of local labor laws. This misstep resulted in a successful lawsuit filed by the former Mission Center President for wrongful termination and a sizable settlement. This incident has greatly impacted World Church's approach to employment, leading to the adoption of a more passive stance of waiting for underperforming high-ranking employees to resign or retire rather than taking proactive measures like termination. While this cautious approach is intended to mitigate further costly legal risks, it has overlooked the urgent need to address underperformance and the detrimental impact it has on the overall mission of the church.

Future of the Church

The truth of our current circumstance is that the church as a whole is swiftly aging. This realization became particularly evident during the [2019](#) and [2023](#) World Conferences. In 2019 less than 25% of the delegates were under the age of 50 and in 2023 that number was less than 15%. Conversely, in 2019 70% fell within the age range of 51-80 and that number jumped to over 75% in 2023. It is widely acknowledged that the older generations have been the primary financial supporters of the church. Consequently, the church is poised to lose half of its income from tithing as these generations pass away.



To effectively navigate the path that lies ahead, World Church has embraced a strategic approach centered around the gradual replacement of retiring and resigning employees with volunteer ministers. This metamorphosis has already commenced within numerous Mission Centers across the globe, where a single paid Mission Center President has been succeeded by a team of volunteer presidents. It is anticipated that this trajectory will not only persist in this particular area, but will also expand into other aspects of church life.

Given these developments, it is crucial for the church, and thus World Church, to recognize that employees may no longer be the most effective or even the best people to fulfill our collective mission. As we forge ahead it becomes increasingly imperative to empower the volunteer members of the church who possess a genuine desire to serve in roles traditionally associated with paid ministry. By nurturing this sense of empowerment, we can better align ourselves with the goals we strive to achieve.

3. Ecclesiastical Autonomy

State of the Church

Throughout our history there has been a noticeable lack of permissiveness of localized beliefs, largely due to the Supreme Directional Control exerted by the First Presidency. This centralization of power to dictate morality and theology for all nations and cultures has understandably created tensions and dissatisfaction among our members. This was especially evident during the 1960s and 1970s when the leaked [Position and Presidential Papers](#) came to the forefront.

A critical turning point occurred in 1984 with the canonization of [D&C 156](#), which clarified that women could hold the priesthood. However, this revelation faced fervent opposition from conservative and fundamentalist factions within the church. Despite their attempts to remove this revelation from scriptures, their efforts were fruitless. In many cases, their ongoing activism resulted in disciplinary actions and even excommunication. As a consequence, a significant percentage of the church, with estimates ranging from 20% to 50%, formally and informally, chose to leave. Many of these dissenting members opted to reorganize their congregations into autonomous "Restoration Branches", although they were not permitted to retain their congregational buildings.

Eventually, an unofficial compromise was reached to accommodate the conservative and fundamentalist factions that chose to stay. This compromise allowed them to refrain from calling and ordaining women to the priesthood or allowing women with the priesthood to serve in official priesthood capacities. This arrangement, which persists to this day, has led to certain redundancies in the church. For example, there are two congregations in St. George, Utah which is odd for such a small town. The reason for these twin congregations is due to their differing stances on the ordination of women and queer folks.

While the recognition of women's equality in the priesthood was undoubtedly a positive step, the reaction to D&C 156 had a traumatic impact on the church and its members. This response played a significant role in shaping the church's approach to subsequent revelations and further progress as a people. For instance, [the 2010 World Conference](#) became a platform for extensive dialogue on queer topics, with the super-majority of resolutions focusing on inclusion and sacramental access, including ordination to the priesthood. During these discussions, a wide spectrum of perspectives emerged, with some advocating for greater inclusivity and others expressing reservations. After extensive debate, another compromise was reached on April 14th, 2010. This compromise, now enshrined as [D&C 164](#), endowed individual nations within the church a significant degree of ecclesiastical autonomy. Under this framework, the church was permitted to determine its own stance on queer inclusion through the convening of "National Conferences".

However, the development and implementation of clear procedures for these National Conferences faced significant delays and [were not released until two years later in 2012](#). In 2013, many nations within the church took interim steps to recognize the rights of queer members, while the First Presidency clarified that the church's default policy toward queer individuals remained exclusive. The original plan aimed to transition these interim national policies into official ones within a two-year timeframe. Unfortunately, due to a miscommunication between the First Presidency and the Council of Twelve regarding the specifics of this finalizing procedure, the deadline was missed, and the process as a whole was neglected by World Church.

Despite the dedicated efforts of queer advocates who spent five years pushing for progress at various levels of our ecclesiastical hierarchy, no substantial changes were achieved. It took [a petition bearing 500 signatures](#) to compel the First Presidency to publicly address the issue [in a public letter](#). In this communication, the First Presidency clarified that the responsibility for revising the interim policies rested with the Council of Twelve, and after revision, the policies would be submitted to the First Presidency for final approval. Only on [December 22nd, 2022](#), twelve years after D&C 164 was canonized, were the first official queer rights established in the church in the United States. With this, a complete precedent for National Conferences was *finally* achieved. Nevertheless, at present, regular National Conferences have yet to be implemented, the process for calling a National Conference remains unclear, and the future of National Conferences in general remains uncertain.

Future of the Church

As we contemplate the future of our church, we should also draw upon the wisdom of the past. In "The Journey of a People, Vol. 2", page 439, Mark Scherer touched on the presidencies of Joseph Smith III and Fred M. Smith in a way that holds great relevance for our present time:

“... Joseph III assigned apostles to geographic regions and gave them far-reaching authority to run their fields as they felt appropriate. With the passing of fifty years, this method of administration, in [Frederick Madison Smith's] opinion, had resulted in inconsistent policy between apostles, and a strong sense of individualism. Joseph III's administrative policy resembled a confederacy of fourteen different churches: each member of the Council of Twelve reigned over their own church in his assigned area... while the first presidency assumed control over the General Church.”

While Fred M. became notorious for his controversial "Supreme Directional Control", it is possible that Steve Veazey's lasting legacy may inadvertently involve a reversal of this controversy. Veazey has permitted and already taken steps to re-empower apostles and the nations under their care. Looking ahead, we may witness a great variation in conservative and progressive stances and theology within our church. This then prompts us to ponder a crucial question: Can we and World Church foster an environment that enables these diverse factions to peacefully coexist?

Furthermore, we can anticipate a continued trend toward increased ecclesiastical autonomy. In the past, only nations have possessed the authority to enact legislation with broad implications for entire classes of people. However, as mentioned before, the future of such national legislative processes remains uncertain. On the other hand, Mission Centers and congregations already engage in regular meetings that include legislative aspects. The compromise forged during the schismatic crisis holds the potential to further expand, endowing these lower polity levels even more ecclesiastical freedom.

It is also worth noting that the current polity system may not endure much longer. [World Conference #1323](#) has introduced the possibility of jurisdictional units that transcend geographic and national boundaries. In an era where religion is increasingly digitalized, our church may undergo a comprehensive restructuring. Theoretically, Mission Centers could evolve into voluntary associations of congregations from around the world who are bound together by shared values, interests, and goals.

4. Legal Autonomy

State of the Church

The existing legal structure of the church in the United States recognizes World Church as a distinct legal entity, while congregations and Mission Centers are mere appendages of World Church. This power dynamic grants World Church significant control over congregations and Mission Centers, including ownership of their resources and facilities.

This lack of legal autonomy became particularly evident during the 1980s during the events surrounding the Buckner congregation. Tensions escalated between this conservative congregation and World Church following the canonization of D&C 156. When their pastor refused to comply with the demands of World Church, World Church responded by stripping him of his priesthood. However, the Buckner congregation refused to recognize the validity of this action. The apostle in charge then resorted to heavy-handed measures, namely by changing the locks on their building, erecting barriers, and posting notices essentially barring the congregation from their own church. Faced with such blatant interference, the Buckner congregation made the decision to incorporate themselves as a legally autonomous entity in an effort to protect themselves from World Church. By taking this significant step, they joined forces with other congregations, collectively known as the "Restoration Branches", who sought to assert and maintain their independence.

More recently, the Salt Lake City congregation faced its own set of challenges in the early 2020s. When a member of their pastoral team came out as polyamorous, she became the target of discrimination by World Church. In response, the congregation rallied behind her by staging protests, demanding a meeting with their apostle to reverse the discriminatory treatment, and even contemplated issuing a policy that directly contradicted the First Presidency's discriminatory [February Policy](#)". These actions provoked their apostle to threaten to disorganize the community and lock them out of their building. Under mounting pressure, the Salt Lake City congregation considered independent incorporation as a strategic means to protect their autonomy and ensure their ability to live out their inclusive values.

Over the course of more than three decades, both progressive and conservative members of the church have voiced their concerns regarding World Church overstepping its bounds and infringing upon congregational autonomy. The struggle to embody the gospel in culturally relevant ways continues to be a sore and contentious topic.

Future of the Church

In contrast to the legal model of the church in the United States, where the church is one singular legal entity controlled by World Church, the church in Canada provides us with an intriguing example of how legal autonomy can flourish within our community. In Canada, [the church as a whole](#), [Mission Centers](#), and [individual congregations](#) all exist as distinct legal entities. This unique and innovative arrangement grants each level of polity sole stewardship over their resources and facilities. Additionally, such autonomy allows for an environment where Faithful Disagreement can truly thrive and where power dynamics are more equal, unlike what the Buckner congregation faced.

The successful implementation of this autonomous legal structure has sparked inspiration among Mission Centers and congregations worldwide, prompting them to explore how they too might achieve a similar level of legal autonomy. The congregations and Mission Centers may even find themselves in positions to purchase their building from World Church which is eager to divest itself of continuing financial burdens. World Church leaders have even hesitantly expressed tentative support for this transition, as indicated by [Steve Veazey's statement on October 3rd, 2022](#):

“growing legal complexities related to transferring money internationally and evolving national employment laws, require that some church business functions be decentralized. To achieve this, flexibility is needed in church organization and funding in various parts of the world. More flexibility and decentralization are aspects of our metamorphosis. In some areas, this will require national or multi-national organizations for church administration in the nation(s) and mission centers they serve.”

As our church continues to adapt to an ever-changing world, the pursuit of greater autonomy has emerged as a recurring theme. Through decentralization, local congregations and Mission Centers are not only becoming genuine stewards of their own stewardships, but they are also being empowered to live out the gospel in ways that make sense for their own cultural contexts. Embracing legal autonomy, as exemplified by the church in Canada and the potential for global adoption of its model, signifies the dawn of a new era in which power dynamics within our community undergo a significant shift and enables our church to be more inclusive, flexible, and responsive.

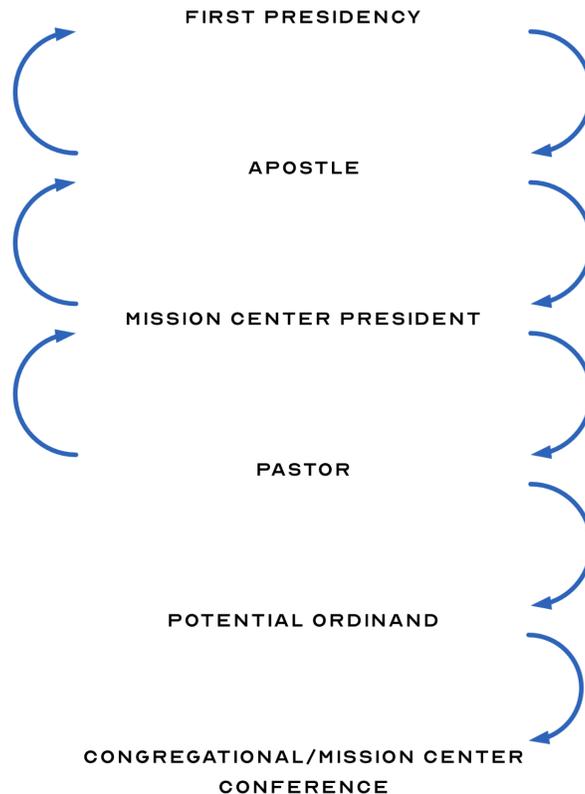
5. Priesthood Autonomy

State of the Church

The procedure for ordination is understood to be relatively straightforward and is found in World Conference Resolutions #988, #1051, as well as the [“Priesthood Process”](#) section on the church’s policy repository, “Our Ministry Tools”.

In short, for aaronic priesthood or office of elder, the pastor initiates a recommendation for ordination, who seeks the approval of the Mission Center president, who seeks the approval of their Apostle, who seeks the approval of the First Presidency. It is only at this point that the pastor may present the priesthood call to the potential ordinand. After this their call must be accepted by a Congregational or Mission Center Conference.

TRADITIONAL ORDINATION PROCESS

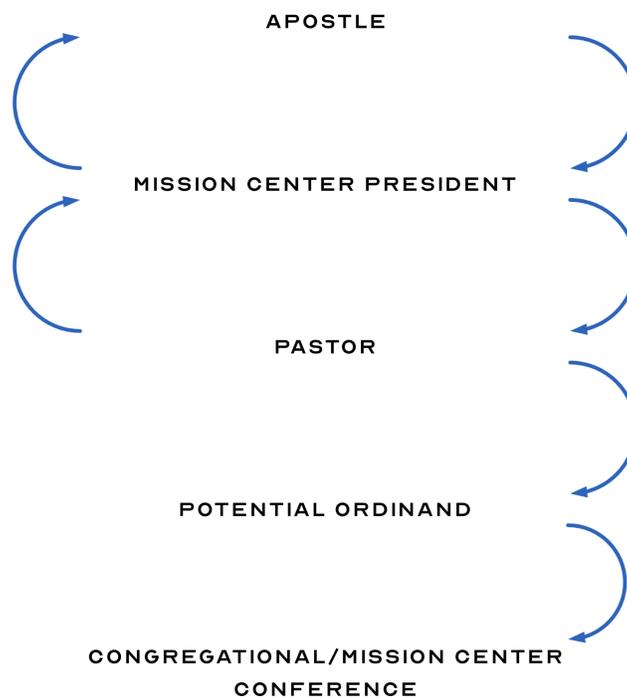


Future of the Church

As the church continues to decentralize, it seems nearly inevitable that the formal priesthood calling system will also become more decentralized. The traditional method relied upon the church being a fairly localized church where everyone at least knew of each other. However, as a global church this is no longer the case nor a possibility. Having priesthood calls go through so many rounds of approval no longer makes sense, as many people in the World Church do not know the people being called.

That said, there are areas in the church where there are already exceptions to the traditional ordination process. For example, in the United Kingdom the First Presidency's approval is not necessary for ordination for aaronic priesthood or the office of elder.

MODERN ORDINATION PROCESS



Having priesthood calls handled exclusively on a national, Mission Center, or congregational level would give the church at these levels greater flexibility to define what they expect of the priesthood that is serving within those areas. [World Conference Resolution #1327](#) is indicative of this change taking place right before our eyes, as it decentralizes power away from the First Presidency and into the Council of Twelve. In areas where this priesthood ordination system is already employed they have already expressed relief from the bureaucracy that World Church can often be.

6. Digitalization

State of the Church

During the early 2010s, a group of visionary youth known as "[Community Place+](#)" embarked on an exploration of merging theology with technology, making them one of the first digital congregations within Community of Christ. These theological pioneers dared to reimagine the concept of a congregation, even celebrating communion through online video. Their trailblazing efforts garnered attention and momentum. However, their innovative approach faced a setback when their apostle had reservations about deviating from traditional practices. At the time, established norms did not endorse performing communion in this way, which led to Community Place+'s forced discontinuation of the practice. This discouraged many in Community Place+, who spiritually ventured elsewhere due to the apostle's insistence in adhering to outdated guidelines.

Yet, this setback marked a turning point, inspiring other congregations to venture into the realm of digital services. "Beyond the Walls," founded in 2017, swiftly emerged as a flagship congregation within our church. It stands out for its trilingual Sunday worship services, a choir sharing harmonious recordings with the entire church, and a collection of over 100 scholarly lectures spanning diverse subjects. Notably, Beyond the Walls took a bold step by formally notifying the World Church about their intent to administer the sacrament of communion in the way that Community Place+ developed. This proactive move prompted the World Church to develop [comprehensive guidelines](#) enabling the broader church community to partake in this sacrament via video.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a global challenge that compelled us to adapt to a life of physical separation. Congregations and individuals already attuned to the digital landscape demonstrated remarkable resilience compared to those who had not yet adapted. Recognizing the enduring significance of digital engagement in sacramental ministry, the leaders of the World Church acknowledged the necessity to formalize its role. Consequently, they issued more extensive directives, illustrating how [other sacraments can also be meaningfully conducted over video platforms](#).

From the ashes of these transformative shifts catalyzed by the pandemic, a pivotal moment arrived in 2023 with the passing of [World Conference Resolution #1322](#). This landmark resolution explicitly endorsed the utilization of electronic platforms for all official gatherings. By embracing this resolution, our church underscored its intention to harness technology as a tool in our shared spiritual journey.

Future of the Church

The path forward beckons us to reimagine the very structure that governs our ecclesiastical journey. The groundbreaking [World Conference Resolution #1323](#) has flung wide the doors for a potential overhaul of how our church is structured. Embracing this change could entail a robust integration of digital elements, infusing new vitality into our communal endeavors.

In this digital evolution, our interactions have the potential to transcend the limitations of geography. Our collective journey could take us to a place where geographic location no longer defines our congregational identities. Instead, we might witness the emergence of communities united by shared passions and pursuits. For example, one congregation could be dedicated to in-depth exploration of Restoration theology, while another thrives by studying and living out liberation theology. Both belong to a virtual Mission Center which transcends conventional physical limitations.

When anticipating the coming decades, we must accept and confront the reality of dwindling tithe contributions. This challenge compels us to chart a course for the church's survival. Clinging resolutely to physical sanctuaries might inadvertently seal the fate of our community. Yet, by adapting to and evolving toward a digital frontier, we stand a chance not only to survive but to flourish.

Additionally, we must be mindful and wise about where we are giving our time, energy, and money. There are some jurisdictions of the church that are more wise stewards than others, and we should be selective and purposeful with where we choose to support to ensure the vitality of the church. Conversely, by supporting bad stewards we hasten the church's death.

7. Conclusion

Hesitancy

The Decentralization Movement represents a departure from the familiar and embarking on a voyage of uncertainty. We do not know what our church will look like as we undertake this shift, and we do not know how or if we will all continue journeying together. We do not know what functions people like the President of the church will serve moving forward. Many of us do not know how to take responsibility for our own communities or how to lead them.

These anxieties are felt at every level of the church, and no one has clear answers except God.

Boldly Venture

When looking to our future, we often find solace in the wisdom we have immortalized within our scriptures. The Doctrine and Covenants in particular contains pertinent wisdom, such as:

- “Be respectful of tradition. Do not fail to listen attentively to the telling of the sacred story, for the story of scripture and of faith empowers and illuminates. But neither be captive to time-bound formulas and procedures. Remember that instruction given in former years is applicable in principle and must be measured against the needs of a growing church...” (161:5)
- “As a prophetic people you are called ... 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. ...” (162:2C)
- “...Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church. ...” (162:2D)
- “... The spirit of the Restoration is not locked in one moment of time, but is instead the call to every generation to witness to essential truths in its own language and form. Let the Spirit breathe.” (162:2E)

Additionally, in [2022 Steve Veazey said warned us](#) that:

“The world is changing. Old forms are crumbling. New possibilities are emerging. We live between “What was” and “What will be”. We need faith, curiosity, openness, and boldness. God is challenging assumptions, shaking up structures, disrupting routines, and making connections.”

The future is coming, and we should take measures to be prepared for it. It seems as if the Divine is encouraging us to decentralize and give new life to our church in new ways. As a prophetic people we should not only be willing to boldly venture into the unknown, but eager to dive into it.