

COMMUNITY OF CHRIST: A SCRIPTURAL JOURNEY TO
LGBT+ INCLUSION (1960s – PRESENT)

By
Parker Johnson
MAR, Graceland University, 2018

Parker Johnson
April 27, 2018
Revised, October 26, 2018
RELG5340

Community of Christ 2 – Capstone
Community of Christ: A Scriptural Journey to LGBT+ Inclusion (1960s – Present)

It is no secret that Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [RLDS])¹ has evolved missionally, theologically, scripturally, and doctrinally. This is made evident in comparing the early church's relationship with the Book of Mormon to that of present-day Community of Christ, having recently sold the original Book of Mormon printer's manuscript to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in 2017 for \$35 million USD.² While Community of Christ leadership has assured membership that the sale of this artifact in no way signifies a shift away from the Book of Mormon and that it "remains one of the church's three books of scripture," the transaction does, however, indicate a church culture seeking detachment from relics and one that embraces contextual awareness surrounding the denomination's history, scripture, and theology.³

Arguably, this shift was set into motion from the earliest institutional memory known to the Latter Day Restoration Movement: the grove experience in Palmyra, New York. Joseph Smith, Jr. sought answers to questions surrounding the interpretation of scripture, baptism, and salvation; he subsequently knelt in a grove and asked God for guidance.⁴ Each of us has an opportunity to follow this same rhythm of enlightenment in our own experiences with the

¹ For consistency, the RLDS church will be referred to as Community of Christ for the remainder of the paper.

² <https://www.cofchrist.org/Common/Cms/documents/QA-Printer-Manuscript-Sale.pdf>

³ "Scripture in Community of Christ," Community of Christ, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.cofchrist.org/scripture-in-community-of-christ>.

⁴ Mark Albert Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Independence, MO: Community of Christ, Seminary Press, 2013), p. 49-50.

Divine. To seek answers is not inherently bad; rather, it can be spirit-filling, even life-giving in some instances. The culture of seeking in one's own time and place set apart by Joseph Smith, Jr., however, took time to present itself in the form of scripture, theology, and doctrine. Major indicators of this culture being lived out can be traced between the 1960s to present with the inclusion of women in the priesthood, open communion,⁵ and the inclusion of members of the LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, etc.) Community in the priesthood in certain nations.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to explore the scriptural basis from which Community of Christ derived its transition towards LGBT+ inclusion, with a special focus on the 1960s to present.

Background

In 2010, Community of Christ received Prophet/President Stephen Veazey's words of counsel and approved Section 164. In it, President Veazey describes a church that "must develop cultural awareness and sensitivity to distinguish between issues that should be addressed by the World Conference and those that are best resolved nationally or in other ways."⁷ Thus began conversations on the topic of LGBT+ inclusion in Community of Christ as a cultural issue, one that should be decided by a national conference. Conferences around the world have been organized to promote more inclusive policies for members of the LGBT+ Community. To date, at least six nations⁸ have approved policy changes to be presented to the First Presidency for review, but how did we get here?

⁵ Mark Albert Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946-2015*, vol. 3, 3 vols. (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016), p. 438.

⁶ "USA INTERIM POLICY FOR RECOGNIZING SAME-GENDER MARRIAGES, CIVIL UNIONS, AND LEGAL RELATIONSHIPS," proceedings of Community of Christ: USA National Conference, Independence.

⁷ Doctrine and Covenants, Location 7176-7178.

⁸ *Australia, British Isles, Canada, The Netherlands, Norway, and the United States*

Numerous factors are to be considered when looking back on Community of Christ's road to inclusion, including policy, theology, scripture, and history (precedent). As a church steeped in the teachings of the Restoration Movement, it is easy to see how inclusivity could be perceived by some as a deviation from the original mandate of the church: to restore the church of Jesus Christ in its fullness on the earth. Any departure from the "original gospel" would be problematic in that the church would be bending to the social order rather than staying true to the Word of God.

Policy as a Window

In 1961, the Standing High Council adopted a memorandum entitled, "Homosexuality and Other Sexual Perversions."⁹ That document informed all church policy, scriptural interpretation, and teachings on the subject until 1982, when Community of Christ published the "Standing High Council Statement on Homosexuality," citing five new guidelines to be "noted by administrative officials in carrying out the teachings of the church and performing ministry involving cases of homosexuality."¹⁰ These guidelines noted the complexity of the issue, yet upheld a rigid position on homosexuality. What effectively functioned as a new worldwide policy on the topic of homosexuality, this document was the result of a 1978 committee known as the "Human Sexuality Committee" as well as the "Task Force on Human Sexuality" (1980) which explored "the area of human sexuality and recommended to the First Presidency ways in which the church can be ministerially responsible and responsive in this aspect of human life."¹¹ It seems such work was undertaken in an attempt to match similar due diligence executed by other denominations. The 1982 statement explains:

⁹ William D. Russell and D. Michael Quinn, *Homosexual Saints: The Community of Christ Experience* (Ann Arbor, MI: John Whitmer Books, 2008), 245-248.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Other denominational bodies, through special task forces and in their legislative assemblies, have in recent years attempted to address this pressing problem which exists among many of their members, families, and friends. The church feels under obligation today to restate its position on homosexuality for the guidance of administrative officials, and out of a genuine concern that a responsible, reconciling ministry be developed in relation to this difficult problem.¹²

Going so far as to note that the church “feels under obligation [...] to restate its position,” the introductory paragraphs indicate a church willing to acknowledge the importance and complexity of the issue; yet, at the same time feeling immense pressure to *restate* its position does not signify any sort of growth, change, or interest in learning about human sexuality even after the two committees in question had completed their research and presented their findings. Strangely enough, the report that follows contradicts this way of thinking numerous times by recognizing the limitations of scripture, the importance of context, and the worth of all persons.

Taking into consideration the biological, societal, scriptural, and cultural complexities that the issue of human sexuality presents, the committee ultimately lands on a more literal interpretation of scripture as the guiding principle on the topic with the caveat that such an understanding is a product of time and place. The document stresses the importance of the authority of scripture while upholding the importance of contextualizing scripture in the here and now: “While the basic witness of scripture holds true for all time, virtually all aspects of humankind’s relationship with God, including sexuality, are related to the cultural norms and traditions of the times.”¹³ This excerpt, however, reads as more of an admission that anything outside of heteronormativity is the product of cultural norms and traditions rather than biology. To quote Dr. Susan David, a Harvard Medical School psychologist, “upholding rigidity in the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

face of complexity is toxic.”¹⁴ The church remained rigid on its stance on homosexuality, while opening the door to further discussion.

Scripture as a Window

The findings of the 1982 Standing High Council report coincide with the three criteria of sacred texts outlined by John Hayes and Carl Holladay for all religious groups. First, “scripture possesses an authority for individuals or groups that exceeds normal conditions.” Second, “Scriptures occupy an official position in the life of the groups that regard them as authoritative.” Lastly, “Scriptures are understood to embody a truer reflection of reality than other writings.”¹⁵ Therefore, resting on the assurances provided to us through the scriptures is a natural landing strip for any issue facing the church. While this is certainly true for nearly all religious groups around the world, what makes Community of Christ unique is its own relationship to Scripture. Hayes and Holladay state, “[...] the manner in which the communities have understood and interpreted their Scriptures becomes a decisive influence in how they are assessed.”¹⁶ A culture of seeking will continue to move the church to new areas of understanding.

Former Prophet/President W. Wallace Smith gave the following words of counsel at the March 11, 1964, World Conference, which later became Section 147:7:

I am further permitted to say by the Spirit: Instruction which has been given in former years is applicable in principle to the needs of today and should be so regarded by those who are seeking ways to accomplish the will of their heavenly Father. But the demands of a growing church require that these principles shall be evaluated and subjected to further interpretation. This requisite has always been present. In meeting it under the guidance of my spirit, my servants have learned the intent of these principles more truly.¹⁷

¹⁴ Susan David, "The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage," TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, November 2017, accessed April 24, 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage.

¹⁵ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginners Handbook* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 11.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Community of Christ, *Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House), Locations 6157-6161. Kindle Edition.

Such revelation made room for further discussion on the topic, as seen in a series of six articles published to the *Herald* between March - August 1981. Barbara Higdon penned an article entitled, “A Scriptural Approach to Human Sexuality,” referencing this very scripture:

Human sexuality in our day raises significant questions for the church. As members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints we are obligated to ask how God is speaking to our time about human sexual relationships. We can respond to these questions by addressing the issue humbly, yet scripturally, intelligently, faithfully, and affirmatively. An honest and open examination, in faith, ought to lead to our being blessed with the development of a theology of sexuality which is dynamic and capable of providing new insight and interpretation relative to changing cultures and times (Doctrine and Covenants 147:7).¹⁸

More so than simply making room for further discussion, it appears that Doctrine and Covenants 147:7 actually *granted permission* (in a new, modern phrasing) for members and leaders alike to theologize, contextualize, challenge, and seek anew the truths of our past in our own time and place precisely *because* we are Community of Christ. W. Wallace Smith was not directly speaking to issues of human sexuality in Doctrine and Covenants 147; rather, his words of counsel were helping Community of Christ to be transformed into a culture steeped in the tradition of sharing our sacred stories on all subjects in the hopes that these experiences might further shape us into the Zion community we challenge ourselves to become.

Several major building-blocks on the topic of inclusion from which later Doctrine and Covenants sections, *Herald* articles, Community of Christ’s Statement on Scripture, as well as the Mission Initiatives and Enduring Principles were inspired include Doctrine and Covenants Section 16:3, (“Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God...”),¹⁹ Section 28:9a, (“all things unto me are spiritual...”),²⁰ Section 85:4a, (“The spirit and the body is the soul...”),²¹

¹⁸ Barbara Higdon, "A Scriptural Approach to Human Sexuality," *Saints Herald*, March 1, 1981.

¹⁹ Doctrine and Covenants, Location 683.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Location 1223.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Location 3504-3505.

and Section 90:5e, (“Spirit and element inseparably connected receiveth a fullness of joy.”).²²

With these tenants as the primary lens for Community of Christ members over the years, it was arguably only a matter of time until the inclusion of the LGBT+ Community could be argued scripturally.

Present-day Community of Christ’s Statement on Scripture, Affirmation Four explains, “Scripture’s authority is derived from the model of Christ, who came to be a servant (Mark 10:45). Therefore, the authority of scripture is not the authority to oppress, control, or dominate. If Jesus came to serve, how much more should the books that point to him be treated as a servant of the saving purposes of God.”²³ A mindset of liberation – not oppression, freedom – not control, and (theocratic) democracy – not domination, has informed and even guided the church’s ongoing understanding of sacred texts as we seek to wrestle with the oftentimes uncomfortable task of hermeneutics.

History as a Window

Community of Christ’s rich history plays a major role in the denomination’s journey to inclusiveness. Born out of the Second Great Awakening, the church preached a very Americentric approach to salvation, ethics, community-building, and Zion, but as the years have gone by the church has reached a certain critical mass with regards to globalization. Community of Christ publishes its membership enrollment in the World Conference Bulletin. Reviewing records from the 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002 World Conferences puts the dramatic increase in international membership into perspective:

²² Ibid., Location 3834-3835.

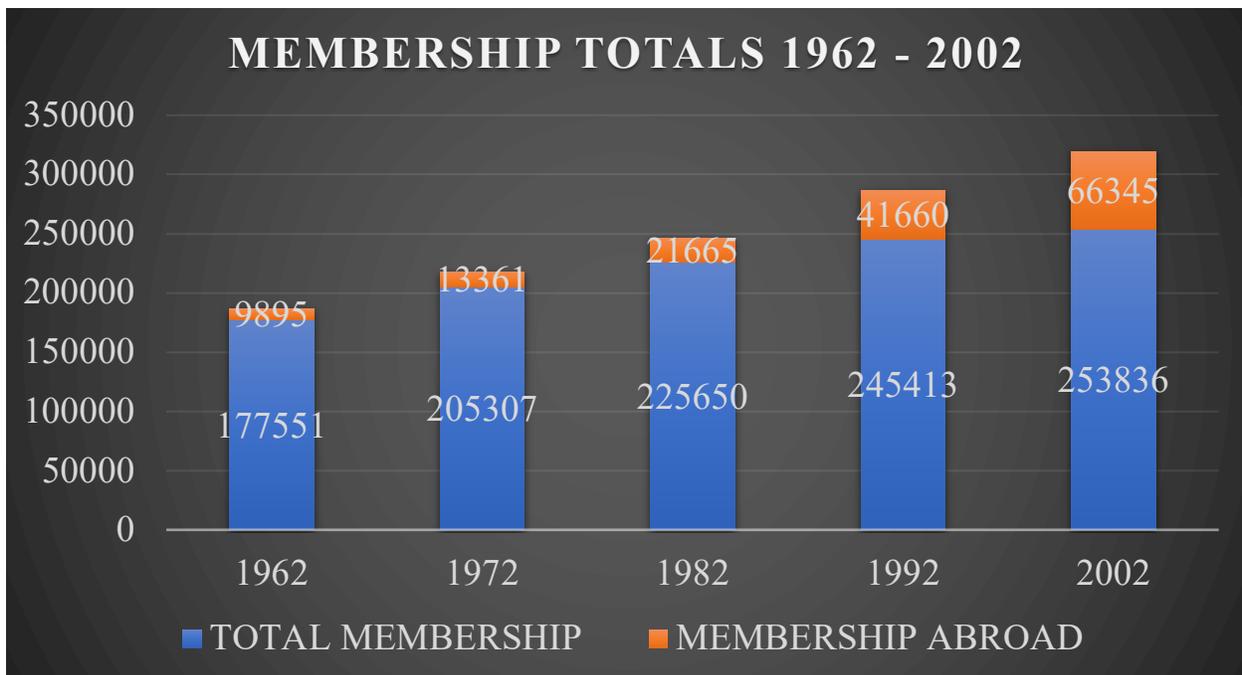
²³ "Scripture in Community of Christ," Community of Christ, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.cofchrist.org/scripture-in-community-of-christ>.

Table 1. Community of Christ Membership Totals 1962 – 2002.²⁴

CONFERENCE BULLETIN YEAR	MEMBERSHIP ENROLLMENT	ENROLLMENT ABROAD
1962	177551	9895
1972	205307	13361
1982	225650	21665
1992	245413	41660
2002	253836	66345
% increase 1962-1972	16%	35%
% increase 1972-1982	10%	62%
% increase 1982-1992	9%	92%
% increase 1992-2002	3%	59%

Source: Data adapted from 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002 RLDS World Conference Bulletins, Community of Christ Archives, accessed April 25, 2018.

Figure 2. Community of Christ Membership Totals 1962 – 2002.



Source: Data adapted from 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002 RLDS World Conference Bulletins, Community of Christ Archives, accessed April 25, 2018.

²⁴ Note: Community of Christ does not classify Canada as “abroad.” It is therefore not included in the “membership abroad” category of either Table 1 or Figure 1.

In 1960, membership enrollment abroad was slightly under 10,000 persons concentrated in nine countries, accounting for just 6% of the overall membership of the global church. The vast majority of Community of Christ enjoyed a Western lifestyle, with only a small portion living outside of North America. Just twenty years later, the 1980s saw a sharp rise in membership abroad, with a 92% increase over the previous decade after extremely successful growth in areas like Africa, French Polynesia, Haiti, and India. At the time of the 1972 World Conference, Community of Christ had an official presence in twenty-two countries, a 144% increase over the statistics presented at the 1960 World Conference. Between 1960 – 2002, Community of Christ experienced an overall global membership growth rate of 43%. If we look at strictly membership abroad, however, we see that Community of Christ, outside of North America, saw an increase of 570% during that same time period. Comparing the rates of change for domestic²⁵ and abroad membership, we see a widening gap. Between 1960 and 1972, domestic church membership grew by 16% whereas membership abroad grew by 35%. The next decade, domestic membership fell six points to 10% while membership abroad grew by 62% over the previous decade. As of 2002, domestic membership growth had fallen to just 3% while membership abroad saw a 59% rise in enrollment.

Considerable growth was achieved abroad by missionaries overseas; however, as the data indicates, membership across North America has fallen – or at least stagnated – in the last fifty years. I present this information not as a critique of international missionary work, but rather as a key indicator for what Dr. Mark Scherer refers to as “the era of worldwide community,” in his third volume of *The Journey of a People* series.²⁶ A truly worldwide community, rich in diversity

²⁵ Note: Domestic, according to Community of Christ statistics, includes the United States and Canada.

²⁶ Mark Albert Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946-2015* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016).

and thought, observes that, “[i]nstruction which has been given in former years is applicable in principle to the needs of today and should be regarded by those who are seeking ways to accomplish the will of their heavenly Father. But the demands of a growing church require that these principles shall be evaluated and subjected to further interpretation.”²⁷ Former Prophet/President W. Wallace Smith’s words of counsel provide membership with a better understanding of how to approach scripture through a principle-based lens of cultural sensitivity, mission, and empathy. Such a mindset would impact both domestic and international mission as well as the conversation surrounding human sexuality and gender identity. Continued counsel in Section 148 provides a framework for a more de-centralized administrative church structure that would perhaps allow the spirit to breathe more freely across the world:

10a. To more fully effect the unity of my church, the Presidency and Council of Twelve should be associated more closely in their mutual endeavors. The members of the Council of Twelve are commended for their desire to work diligently to accomplish my purposes.

10b. They should continue to exercise their calling as the “second presidency” in harmony with their primary responsibility in new fields. As such second presidency, the council should share with the First Presidency in reviewing and determining policies of church administration, but at the same time should recognize that the burden of the care of the church is laid upon him who is called to preside over the high priesthood of the church and on those who are called to be his counselors.

10c. As the members of the Council of Twelve withdraw from detailed administration in organized areas, responsibility to carry on the work in stakes and regions will fall more heavily upon those who have been chosen for this purpose. Their work is necessary and they should be honored in their places, each working with each to perfect my kingdom.

10d. Thus freed from detailed administrative duties, the Council of Twelve can give more attention to their primary work of pushing the work into new fields at home and abroad. To this the Council should give major attention even though some apostles may be assigned to general supervision of the work in organized areas and to church-wide functions.

10e. In this manner the power of the testimonies of those who are called as special witnesses in my church will add spiritual depth and meaning to my work, both in

²⁷ Doctrine and Covenants, Location 6158-6160.

reviewing and determining principles and procedures in spiritual and temporal realms and in redemptive evangelism at home and abroad.²⁸

It is evident that, in experiencing much international expansion in a relatively short time period, the church was naturally moving towards an exploration of diverse expressions of Christ's love and peace in real and tangible ways, this time in *all* areas of the world and *all* walks of life. W. Wallace Smith's words were opening Community of Christ to new forms of ministry at the local level, encouraging the time, talents, and ministry of other gifted ministers outside of the predominantly white, heteronormative, male, Midwestern American leadership that historically occupied the Council of Twelve. By inviting more perspectives, theologies, and beliefs to the table, Community of Christ was entering a new era that soon-to-be Prophet/President Grant McMurray formally describes as "the process of becoming a prophetic people."²⁹ Now all were to be considered prophetic equals in Community of Christ, and all were to respect the prophetic qualities in one other. Cultural sensitivity for a worldwide church paved the way for principle-based discourse on the topic of human sexuality and gender identity.

More Recent Factors

Community of Christ, in recent years, has solidified its calling to become a prophetic people of seekers. Doctrine and Covenants Section 163:7b-d states:

b. 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.

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.

²⁸ Ibid., Location 6213-6227.

²⁹ Ibid., Location 6940-6941.

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.³⁰

We can see a further detachment from relics in this passage, noting a special acknowledgement to the power of the source of all scripture and tradition, encouraging us to use the Divine as the “ultimate standard.”³¹ By removing the burden of scriptural literalism, Community of Christ has been empowered to discern through a lens of Christ-like love and compassion, not through time-bound texts. With yet another major cultural shift behind the church, Community of Christ wrestled with what it meant to be divinely led sans static distinctives. In 2010, the church receives Doctrine and Covenants Section 164, this time on the topic of oneness, unity in diversity, and variety of human types:

3 a. More fully embody your oneness and equality in Jesus Christ. Oneness and equality in Christ are realized through the waters of baptism, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and sustained through the sacrament of Communion. Embrace the full meaning of these sacraments and be spiritually joined in Christ as never before.

b. However, it is not right to profess oneness and equality in Christ through sacramental covenants and then to deny them by word or action. Such behavior wounds Christ’s body and denies what is resolved eternally in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

c. You do not fully understand many interrelated processes of human creation. Through its wonderful complexity, creation produces diversity and order.

d. Be not consumed with concern about variety in human types and characteristics as you see them. Be passionately concerned about forming inclusive communities of love, oneness, and equality that reveal divine nature.

e. Oneness and equality in Christ do not mean uniformity. They mean Unity in Diversity and relating in Christ-like love to the circumstances of others as if they were one’s own. They also mean full opportunity for people to experience human worth and related rights, including expressing God-given giftedness in the church and society.

³⁰ Ibid., Location 7062-7069.

³¹ Ibid.

4 a. Regarding priesthood, God calls whomever God calls from among committed disciples, according to their gifts, to serve and reach all humankind.³²

We are seeing a total shift in focus as we follow Doctrine and Covenants Sections 147 to 165. What follows is a scriptural record and timeline of a faith tradition in the midst of transformation. With Doctrine and Covenants 147, Community of Christ embarked on a steady, intentional journey of cultural awareness, shedding old ways of engaging scripture, policy, and Americentrism. A burgeoning international membership has taught us what it means to embrace diversity in all its facets, a skillset Community of Christ would not have learned otherwise. The church has since blossomed into a community focused on upholding unity, the power of diversity, and the rejection of scriptural literalism.

Conclusion

Moving from a church culture obsessed with conformity to one of empathy and equity has not been an easy journey. Following the same divine path set before us by Joseph Smith, Jr., Community of Christ continues to seek wisdom, understanding, and self-awareness in our own time and space. As outlined in this paper, the church did not simply approve LGBT+ inclusive policies with a single stroke of a pen; rather, methodical, inspired, and intentional steps were taken, under the leadership of numerous prophet/presidents, that paved the way for a greater understanding of scripture, human varieties, and tradition. Action was required on the part of faithful members to step up, speak out, and organize, and difficult conversations were required.

Much thanks should be attributed to a growing international membership for its contributions, for their presence has resulted in the overall betterment of the church. The lens through which present-day Community of Christ members and leadership interpret scripture can

³² "Doctrine and Covenants Section 165," Community of Christ, accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.cofchrist.org/doctrine-and-covenants-section-165>.

be credited to hundreds of thousands of past and present members, near and far, and the diverse life experiences, skills, gifts, and worldview through which they engage the Divine, teaching us new and meaningful ways in which to extend the offering of connection in our own present time and place.

Bibliography

- Community of Christ. *Doctrine and Covenants*. Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2015. Kindle Edition.
- David, Susan. "The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage." TED: Ideas worth Spreading. November 2017. Accessed April 24, 2018. https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage
- "Department of Statistics." In *World Conference Bulletin*. World Conference 1962, Independence, MO.
- "Department of Statistics." In *World Conference Bulletin*. World Conference 1972, Independence, MO.
- "Department of Statistics." In *World Conference Bulletin*. World Conference 1982, Independence, MO.
- "Department of Statistics." In *World Conference Bulletin*. World Conference 1992, Independence, MO.
- "Department of Statistics." In *World Conference Bulletin*. World Conference 2002, Independence, MO.
- "Doctrine and Covenants Section 165." Community of Christ. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.cofchrist.org/doctrine-and-covenants-section-165>.
- Higdon, Barbara. "A Scriptural Approach to Human Sexuality." *Saints Herald*, March 1, 1981, 25.
- Hayes, John H., and Carl R. Holladay. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginners Handbook*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Russell, William D., and D. Michael Quinn. *Homosexual Saints: The Community of Christ Experience*. Ann Arbor, MI: John Whitmer Books, 2008.
- "Sale of Printer's Manuscript: Questions and Answers." Sale of Printer's Manuscript: Questions and Answers. Accessed April 26, 2018. <https://www.cofchrist.org/Common/Cms/documents/QA-Printer-Manuscript-Sale.pdf>.
- Scherer, Mark Albert. *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. Independence, MO: Community of Christ, Seminary Press, 2013.
- Scherer, Mark Albert. *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946-2015*. Vol. 3. 3 vols. Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016.

"Scripture in Community of Christ." Community of Christ. Accessed April 23, 2018.
<https://www.cofchrist.org/scripture-in-community-of-christ>.

"USA INTERIM POLICY FOR RECOGNIZING SAME-GENDER MARRIAGES, CIVIL UNIONS, AND LEGAL RELATIONSHIPS." Proceedings of Community of Christ: USA National Conference, Independence.