



Mourning the Kirtland Temple

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WE WANT TO BEGIN by acknowledging the sense of loss and grief experienced by many disciples in our community at the news that the World Church Leadership Council, which includes the presiding councils of the church, has sold many of our most treasured relics and sacred spaces, including the Kirtland Temple itself. This news came as a complete shock to me as to most all of you. When I tried to film a pastoral video reflecting my thoughts earlier this week, I was not able to say more than a few words before breaking down and sobbing uncontrollably for many more minutes than I can remember crying at any time in my life. I have been operating at that elevated level of grief all this week and I still have more to process.

Our faith has deep roots that extend thousands of years before Kirtland existed. And many of our spiritual predecessors have experienced loss of this magnitude and more. Ancient Israel relied on Biblical prophecies that the scepter would never fall from the house of David. And yet the Babylonians conquered Judah, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the Temple. Every tangible thing was lost: the ark of the covenant. The tablets of Moses. All gone. The sacred community continued even in exile. The sacred community grew despite the loss and exile.

We are in the middle of our 7 week-long series, experiencing the Easter story in the present. And I don't really think I need to issue a "spoiler alert" before I mention that in the weeks ahead, the Passion story includes a lot of pain and loss. When the disciples flee at Jesus' arrest, they have not understood what he has been telling them. And so, when Jesus is crucified, they are shocked, they are thrown into confusion. They experience terrible loss. They grieve. Having lost Jesus in the flesh, they feel that they have lost everything. But the sacred community continues.

The disciples remember Jesus' promise that he would always be with them, a promise we felt renewed last week when Linda Booth was here to reflect with us on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We shared that sacred moment and felt the living Christ among us.

The living Christ is among us now, in this sacred community — that is unbounded by the walls of any physical location, however beloved and holy. Like the disciples, many of us are feeling loss. We are in grief with all the forms and emotions that are associated with grief. Sadness, even anger. This is a time for us to acknowledge our grief. Like the first disciples who mourned the loss of Jesus, like ancient Israel who mourned the loss of the Temple, we are in mourning. But like them, this sacred community will continue to expand Beyond the Walls.

Let me in this moment acknowledge all of you, everyone joining today to make up this community. Hundreds of volunteers and contributors make this ministry possible so that thousands can share together each week. I am buoyed up; I am comforted by your presence; your ministry is a gift that is helping me through this time of grief. For this I thank you with all my heart. Our call to worship, Psalm 137, verses 1 through 6, is a lament, written by an Israelite poet in exile in Babylon, mourning the loss of the Temple.

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, — *if I forget you, O Kirtland* —
let my right hand wither!

⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem — *if I do not set Nauvoo* —
above my highest joy.

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion. Amen.

WE CHOSE AS A NAME for our church family *Community of Christ*, in part, because “community” is one of the things we are really good at and get right. It may be the only thing we are really good at and get right as a people. We experience this sacred community through another of our Enduring Principles: Unity in Diversity.

I have been privileged in my role here in Canada to facilitate alongside Apostle Art Smith our discernment sharing “All Voices.” Through our process, we identified broadly a dozen different core ways individuals share identity with the church (and there many more still!) Some related most to their individual congregation, whether it is located in a small town, a suburban, or an urban environment. Some experience their primary connection through online ministries like Beyond the Walls.



Church members attending a reunion at the Kirtland Temple in the early 20th Century.

For many, the primary focus of their church identity is found in our rich tradition of camping, reunions, and retreats. Some connect to the church through a sense of calling to promote invitation and inclusion and be part of an affirming community where all are welcome. Some find their identity with the church through experiencing sacraments and exploring spiritual practices. Many are absolutely committed to local activism: bringing God's heavenly commonwealth to their local communities by working to abolish poverty and promote peace. For others, the core of their church identity is the connection they experience as a truly global community, where they can be activists beyond borders.

There are many members of this church who are thrilled to be a part of it because of our openness to ongoing transformation, always seeking to blaze new trails of mission. And there are those who relate primarily to the church's institutional core: its sacred birthright and heritage, committed to stewardship in our time of an inheritance left by our predecessors that we feel called to pass on to our spiritual heirs.

I have not been experiencing the most profound sense of grief and loss that I have ever experienced in life due to anything as simple as the sale of a building. Many others in our community are in different stages of similarly profound levels of grief. But, yes, I also understand that when some of us on social media post things like, "it's just a building, get over it!" that this may also be a way of processing grief.

There is no one right way to be Community of Christ. And this is why we have all processed this week's loss differently. Depending on the center of gravity of your church identity, this week's news may not have been a big deal to you. Many seekers watching here alongside many lifelong members find the suffering felt by others in the community somewhat incomprehensible. I understand. There is no one right way to be Community of Christ.

I would like to ask us all to try our best this week to do more listening to each other. Give each member of our community time to process and grieve in their own way, walking with them and supporting them — the way so many of you have reached out to support me. Blessings of Community is one of the things we are really good at and get right as a people.

IN CLOSING, I would like to say I have devoted many years of my life to the study of our history and to sharing our sacred story. That is a core part of my church identity. I also serve as the 40th pastor of this congregation. For me, that includes a continual remembrance that I did not build this community, I am just a steward of it in this time. My office is in our heritage library, which continually brings to mind the spiritual inheritance with which I have been entrusted and the sacrifices of all the disciples who came before me. My mission has been to facilitate conditions for this community to be relevant in this time, to do my best to cultivate the garden, and when my time has passed to prepare the way for spiritual successors.

I have heard it said that in the rich world of the global north, no one is willing to donate tithing any more. That hardly anyone under the age of 65 tithes. That hasn't been my experience. In the decade that I have served as pastor and steward of this community, the number of households making donations has increased twelvefold from 21 in 2013 to 270 in 2023. (The majority of those donors last year are new to the church and are not even members!)

In my view, this happened because all of our operations expenditures have been directly tied to tangible resources (like our hymn library) and content (like our lecture series) that disciples and seekers understand as immediately valuable in their lives. Creating relevant content is core to our church's heritage. Among the first things the church did after its organization was to establish a newspaper in Independence, Missouri. Herald House Publishing used to be an enormous source of content connecting and nourishing the membership. Here in Toronto more than a century ago, on Sunday evenings the congregation rented out the largest theatres in the city (7,000 seats and more) and filled them by providing



The Doris Hillyard Memorial Library in the Heritage Room at Toronto Centre Place



John Hamer delivering the 2021 Christmas Eve sermon from the pulpits of the Kirtland Temple.

the engaging content of our theatre-preaching ministry. In the 1920s, the church established one of the first Christian radio stations and transmitted content listeners valued. In our time, Beyond the Walls has become the largest online ministry of any church in Canada [with currently 69,000 subscribers to the Centre Place YouTube channel] — second only to the channel of the Catholic church in Canada.

In 2013, we were primarily supporting a building and a small Sunday service for locals. Today we have a proliferation of active ministries facilitated by staff serving alongside many teams of volunteers: the Zoom meditation group, the prayer group, zoom discussion groups, the choir, the lecture group, and of course Beyond the Walls itself and our Late Edition communities. I think it is self-evidently clear that the model putting staff resources toward producing valuable content coupled with sacred stewardship of resources, produces results that people in the 21st century are eager to invest in.

I thank you for showing your trust in me and the Beyond the Walls team. As I said at the beginning of the service, the love of this community extending around the world drives me. Your ministry, everything you give has been my solace. I thank you with every ounce of my heart and soul.

JOHN HAMER serves as the 40th pastor of Community of Christ Toronto Congregation, which was first organized in 1836 (and subsequently reorganized in 1877 and 1891). A past president of the John Whitmer Historical Association, John has led and participated in numerous academic conferences, cultural symposia, hymn festivals, spiritual retreats, and pilgrimages at the Kirtland Temple over the past two decades. Among his many contributions to church history, John created the illustrations for *House of the Lord: The Story of Kirtland Temple*. John's great-great-great-great grandparents, Stephen and Nancy Winchester, helped build the Kirtland Temple in the 1830s.