



# INLAND STREAM

INLAND WEST USA MISSION CENTER NEWS

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## What I Have Learned by JoAnn Fisher

I was tagged on Facebook recently, in a picture that was taken a little over twenty years ago. The picture was taken at the Temple in Independence, MO and was of me and my colleagues as we attended New Employee Orientation.

Now as I approach retirement on September 4, 2022, I have reflected on what has been accomplished (and more importantly), what I have learned during my years of employment with the Community of Christ... serving the Inland West Mission Center.

My career with the church has spanned some amazing developments in the world and in the church and I was fortunate to have had a front row seat to many.

Ellen DeGeneres said recently, "In 2001, the iPhone didn't exist. Social media didn't exist." During my tenure, we had our first black president and our first black female supreme court justice, and we had a worldwide pandemic. Some of the exciting developments in the church that have happened during my employment are the changing of the name of the church to Community of Christ, the vote for full inclusion of LGBTQ? Members at National Conferences and the emphasis on peace and justice (including the Enduring Principles and Mission Initiatives).

As I allow myself to flip through the "photographic memories" of my heart over the past 21 years, I see so many faces...YOUR faces. YOU are my people! I cherish times spent at camps, reunions, Mission Center as well as World and National Conferences. We have shared together at Discipleship NOW, and congregational worship. I have been invited into your homes and your hearts in times of joy and in times of deep sorrow. I have watched your children grow and some of them now have children of their own. And some of the faces I hold dear are no longer with us, but they are never forgotten.

I have learned so much from all of you. I have learned how to be more compassionate, patient, and to have courage. My life has been enhanced and informed by your stories and your truth. I have learned how to not only listen, but to hold sacred space for whatever needs to be said or felt. In doing this work, I have done my own inner work and found that I need the Holy Spirit to guide and support me. Because you deserve the best version of myself.



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## The SPEC Experience—Encourage Our Youth

John VanDerWalker

Here in the mission center office today Sandy Decker has been doing the time consuming and frustrating task of booking flights for the youth that will be attending Spectacular 2022. The behind the scenes work that takes place year around and intensifies at the start of the new year can be very time consuming and arduous. The many tasks include mailers that go out to youth and congregations encouraging people to think about SPEC, thinking about the possible participants and looking at our resources to make sure we can financially support the ministry.

As the days tick by there are reminders emailed out to register and reminders to make the initial payment to reserve a spot on the delegation. The coordination of flights and arrivals from the various airports around the mission center is a big enough job, then there is the coordination of our arrivals with the arrivals from the other mission centers in our Delegation. This is a huge task that is approached with efficiency and aplomb, at least on our end.

There is a great deal of moving parts to putting a SPEC delegation together and then getting them on the ground in Lamoni, Iowa. The leaders gather early in the year for a planning weekend which for our people involves travel to the west side of Washington and a few days away from home.

The point I am trying to make is that there is a lot of work and effort to make sure our youth that want to go to SPEC have a good experience. The youth have many of the obstacles removed by SPEC staff and parents so that they can have one of the most exciting and inspirational weeks of their lives.

Then they come home and land in the lap of a congregation.

Landing in the lap of the congregation is the point of this article.

When I was a youth, I was encouraged, in spite of my adolescence and ignorance to prepare myself for church service. I was told that someday I would be a member of the priesthood if I continued to live a life of faithful participation and commitment. Even though in those days it was only men who were being ordained I took this to be an important calling that required involvement and so I remained active and was engaged in ways that served the congregation with the skills and talents I had at the time. The key is that I was mentored into church service.

By best friend Ray had me go along as he took the sacrament of Healing Hands (Administration) to folks because there were not other elders who were as readily available. I would go along and offer a short prayer before Ray offered the sacrament. One of my mentors Burton encouraged me to learn, and involved me in learning opportunities as well as inviting me to accompany him to workshops and meetings. I attended men's retreats when I was a teenager, and sat in meetings of adults and listened to what was being said and I was allowed to share my thoughts. I was being mentored into leadership.

*(Continued on page 3)*

(Continued from page 1) - What I Have Learned

As this chapter of my life is ending, it comes with anticipation as well as appreciation for what has been and what will be.

What have learned over the past 21 years? Ministry is simply about relationships. It is that simple- it is that hard.

Working for the church I love and serving the people I love deeply has been the privilege of my life. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity.

(Continued from page 2) - SPEC

I did not take advantage of youth camps or really much of reunion during my youth because I was an agriculture laborer and that work happens in the summer, I began that work at age 14. But that absence of time with peers did not diminish my commitment to the church or to my congregation. The congregation was the community that nurtured me and I wanted, and was expected to give back when I was able.

We have nine youth attending SPEC this year and during that week they will explore what it means to be a disciple in the twenty-first century. They will come back to you full of new experiences, possibly new understandings and a lot of enthusiasm, it is important that congregations accept the gifts these youth will want to give. Get them involved in the adult stuff that is taking place in your congregation, begin to encourage them to think of themselves as leaders of the church, not the church that most of us have known, but the church that they imagine. These youth are a gift from God and we are called to be good stewards of that gift.

As you explore ways to include the youth in your ministries, may you be blessed with the gift of discernment and patience as you work with them and together you usher the Kingdom of God into the lives of people and your community in new ways.



# Inland West Mission Center 2022 Reunions



Join us as we come together after a long time apart!

**Red Cliffe Reunion**  
July 9 to July 14  
Red Cliffe Campground  
Huntsville, UT  
Guest Ministry:  
Stassi Cramm,  
Presiding Bishop,  
First Presidency Counselor  
Mission Center Staff:  
John VanDerWalker and  
JoAnn Fisher  
Director: Carla Long  
Contact: [clong@cofchrist.org](mailto:clong@cofchrist.org)

**Samish Island Reunion**  
July 2 to July 7  
Samish Island Campground  
Bow, WA  
Guest Ministry:  
Blake Smith,  
Chicago Mission Center President  
Mission Center Staff:  
John VanDerWalker,  
and Sandy Decker  
Director: Lisa Stecher  
Contact:  
[Irmasterspraisegod@gmail.com](mailto:Irmasterspraisegod@gmail.com)

Register now to help those planning each reunion at  
<https://form.jotform.com/220735367857163>.

## Reunion Guest Ministry

**Stassi D. Cramm** serves as a member of the First Presidency of Community of Christ and counselor to the president of the church. She also serves as the presiding bishop of the Presiding Bishopric, the highest financial council of the church.

Her past assignments include serving as a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles, a member of the Presiding Bishopric as a counselor to the presiding bishop, and the Southwest Pacific Region administrator and stewardship commissioner.

Stassi received a bachelor of science in general engineering from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, and a master of arts in organizational management from the University of Phoenix. She received a master of arts in religion from Graceland University and a PhD in organization and management from Capella University. Previous to full-time ministry for Community of Christ, Stassi was employed as a flight test engineer for the United States Air Force.

Stassi and her husband, Stephen currently live a tale of two cities: They have a home in Boston, MA near their new twin grandbabies and a home near the Temple in Independence, MO. Steve is semi-retired but stays busy providing engineering consulting to various organizations. They have two adult children and a son-in-law. Shannon, the oldest, and her husband Kevin live in Boston, MA. Kevin is a packaging engineer and Shannon is a surgical resident and research fellow at Massachusetts General and Boston Children's Hospitals. Spencer lives in Tokyo, Japan with his dog Emi and is a software development engineer.

## Connection of Community

by Leslie Dalton

Our congregation welcomes troubled souls on a weekly basis. We regularly have more visitors in attendance than members, and people often come hoping to find someone to listen and understand. I sometimes refer to what we do as “spiritual triage.” People walk through our doors feeling disconnected--broken, betrayed, rejected, and exhausted--by unattainable expectations of “perfection,” by the discovery that they have given years of their life to a religious organization that wasn't what they thought it was, from the knowledge that some will never accept them for who they are and who they love, or from years of demanding service that they realized wasn't bringing them closer to God.

We open our arms to these individuals and families for however long they choose to remain with us--for one week, months, or years. We try to provide them with the connection they need. Because we so frequently serve people in deep pain, it's sometimes a challenging call to ministry, but it almost always has rich rewards. If we can provide comfort for only one hour, if we can send someone away feeling a little less burdened or more hopeful, we feel happy to have been here.

Almost a century ago, Abraham Maslow proposed the theory that people are unable to grow unless a variety of needs are met. While this theory doesn't have a lot of scientific backing, it seems logical to believe that we will struggle to do much more than survive if we lack basic needs. Once our physical needs of food, shelter, clothing, safety, and security are met, our psychological needs of connection come next. We are hardwired to seek connection with other humans--with something outside ourselves. Many people feel this need fulfilled in their relationships with family and friends, and many others find additional connection in the communities where they live. Many of us feel an additional need for spiritual connection in order to continue to grow.

This need for connection is what led me to Community of Christ. When I felt completely disconnected from God and my faith community, the sense of missing something was always on my mind. I wandered for a while, looking at various churches and service-oriented groups, hopeful that I would find a spiritual home at some point. When I came to Community of Christ, the congregation here in Salt Lake City welcomed me by providing exactly the connection I needed. I found fellowship, joyful worship, and an invitation to meaningful ministry. My story was heard and honored. Although I realize it's not possible to disconnect with God, I wasn't ready to seek or experience that connection, and there was no pressure here for me to do so. I was introduced to new spiritual practices and ways of thinking about God that allowed me to expand my previous conceptions and make that gradual reconnection on my part gently and at my own pace.

I am profoundly grateful for God's grace that led me to a place where my spiritual needs are met so that I can grow into the person God needs me to be. As I become that person, I'm grateful that my congregation is able to reach out with loving hands to connect with and strengthen others on this challenging and exhilarating journey.

### Reunion Guest Ministry

**Blake Smith** was born and raised in Pensacola, FL. He is a lifetime member of Community of Christ. As the Church has grown in its understanding, altering its path to better align with God's calling, so has he. His motto has long been, “I may have to change my mind, but based on what I know now, this is what I believe.” It is a position that hopefully allows for God to continue to work with and through him.

Blake met his wife, Ellen, while traveling around the world with the group Up With People. They have been married now for 35 years and have two beautiful daughters. Blake and his family currently reside in the Chicagoland area where Blake serves as Mission Center President and Financial Officer for the Chicago USA Mission Center.

After getting his start in the restaurant business, Blake went to work fulltime for the church in 1993 where he has served, in addition to his current roles, as Youth Minister (Santa Fe Stake/Tri-Stake Mission Center), Youth Ministry Training Specialist (Forefront Ministries, Campus Minister (Graceland), MCP (EGLMC), and church planter. He received his MDiv in 2003 from Saint Paul School of Theology.

With the exceptions of woodworking and cooking, Blake enjoys everything outdoors (biking, hiking, fishing, boating, etc.), especially anything related to water. His favorite “getaway” is the beach, but he can also be happy with a mountain lake or stream... as long as there are family or friends with which to enjoy them.

## Connections and Relationships by Stassi Cramm, Presiding Bishop, First Presidency Counselor

If you Google the importance of healthy relationships, several ideas bubble up such as better health, support in difficult times, longer life, emotional stability, and better choices. The research supports Community of Christ belief that God created humans to be in relationship with one another forming healthy communities. In Community of Christ, we adopted this idea into one of our nine Enduring Principles: Blessings of Community.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is expressed best in community life where people become vulnerable to God's grace and each other.

True community includes compassion for and solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

True community upholds the worth of persons while providing a healthy alternative to self-centeredness, isolation, and conformity.

Sacred community provides nurture and growth opportunities for all people, especially those who cannot fully care for themselves.

We value our connections and share a strong sense of trust in and belonging with one another—even if we never have met.

Some disciples are called and ordained to particular priesthood responsibilities and ministries for the sake of the community, the congregation, and the world.

We are called to create communities of Christ's peace in our families and congregations and across villages, tribes, nations, and throughout creation. (<https://cofchrist.org/about-us/>)

In 2021, we learned our daughter and her husband were expecting twins. Then early in 2022, there were complications with the pregnancy. There were also other challenges adding to my growing stress. I got to the point where I felt like I just couldn't bear the burdens of it all. In my moment of need, I experienced the blessings of community in intense and tangible ways. I risked sharing with a few trusted friends what was happening in my life. It was awkward to be this vulnerable. I'm more comfortable providing pastoral care than receiving it. My "community" was wonderful at finding ways to provide support and encouragement. Through some very tough weeks, my "community" intentionally supported me by checking in and assuring me that no matter what happened, we would get through it.

My "community" reminded me of God's unconditional love and grace by embodying that in their actions and words. Today, my "community" is praying for our new grandbabies who were born premature but are doing great as they grow and gain strength. The last several months remind me of a truth that the people of Community of Christ taught me at an early age: As I journey through life, I have more peace and wholeness – even during difficult times – because of the blessings of community.

When I think about people who navigate life without a community to guide and support them, I am so sad. Everyone in the world has worth and should have the blessings of community. Reaching out to people and inviting them into relationship with us and the divine is not about growing the church – although that might happen. It is about healing the world bringing wholeness to others in hopes that God's vision of the Shalom can be more broadly experienced by everyone.

We are at an interesting stage with the threat of COVID-19 around the world. We are needing to learn how to live with it so we can foster healthy



communities and be present for each other. I know some are anxious to be together and others may be hesitant. As we journey into this summer, be patient with each other and remember to live these words:

Generously share the invitation, ministries, and sacraments through which people can encounter the Living Christ who heals and reconciles through redemptive relationships in sacred community. The restoring of persons to healthy or righteous relationships with God, others, themselves, and the earth is at the heart of the purpose of your journey as a people of faith. (Doctrine and Covenants 163:2b)

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### **An Opportunity to Invest by Blake Smith**

A little over a week ago, my phone rang. It wasn't the fact that it rang that was so surprising. Rather, it was that the name on the caller ID was someone I hadn't talked with in some time. I was excited to see the name come up and looked forward to whatever conversation ensued. That's the way it is with relationships that matter. Of course, it would be better if I always took the time to stay closely connected with those who have had an impact in my life, but having travelled to many areas around the world and having met folks from many walks of life and circumstances... many who touched my life in intentional ways, and some who touched my life without even knowing... the list has grown to an unmanageable size. Perhaps someone better at time management could balance life, work, family, and friends while also maintaining regular contact with everyone from the past, but I haven't been the best at doing it.

Luckily, there are just those relationships and connections that pick up right where they left off when the opportunity arises. This phone call came from one of those connections. It was a colleague and friend who has also worked for the church and knows the importance of the Blessings of Community. He called to tap into not only our connection, but also the connection that occurs naturally across cities, nations, and even continents between members and friends of Community of Christ.

As long as I can remember, I have heard stories of folks who traveled with their church directory ... finding comfort in "far away places," because there was a church or a family to whom they could reach out if they found themselves in need. College student studying far from home, military personnel stationed in various places around the world, casual vacationers looking to connect while "on the road." No where else, outside of natural families, have I heard of such immediate and strong connections with regards to church. Sure, anyone can find a church to attend if they look hard enough ... even a church of the same "denomination" as that in which they usually participate. However, few will find an instant sense of being home. That is a gift.

The call was to let me know that a couple, church members, were heading to the Chicago area to get specialized medical treatment for the husband. They would be far from home without connection (family or friends), and my friend wondered if there were anyone with whom I could put them in contact. Of course, there were plenty of people whose contact information I could have shared, but this one I decided to cover on my own.

So often, I get caught up in the administrative paperwork of the church and miss the opportunities for ministry. If not careful, I can get bogged down in the "business" of church and forget to foster relationships. In that moment, I was reminded of the rich blessing and importance of the relationships that had touched my life in my years growing up in the church and eventually working for the church. My life has literally been changed by chance encounters at worship services, witnessing weekends, conferences, reunions, visiting ministry (giving and receiving). And, this recent encounter with new friends has been like a long friendship re-kindled.

We are truly blessed to have such opportunities, both inside and outside the church. May we never be too busy to invest in relationships. I can't think of anything better in which to invest.

**Inland West USA Mission Center  
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Spokane Valley, WA 99206**

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**Mark Your Calendar!**  
**Inland West Mission Center Conference**  
**will be held on September 24-25, 2022 in**  
**Spokane Valley, WA.**

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