

Interview Shawn Fessler

Thu, 12/10 11:19AM • 42:11

SPEAKERS

Christopher Taylor, Shawn Fessler

Christopher Taylor 00:05

All right, well. So, Shawn, thanks for doing this again. Shawn Fessler is a colleague of mine and a good friend. We're going to talk a little bit about some of the experiences we've had with COVID-19, and faith and religion, and what kind of observations we've made. So the first question that I have for you today, Sean is, as far as like looking at the spread of COVID, in what ways do you feel like this has impacted the way that either you or different church leaders in your congregation reach out to, to your, to your particular ward, or your particular religious community?

Shawn Fessler 00:52

I think it's greatly impacted. Because with uh, you know, being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day-Saints, we're such a close knit community, and you rely a lot on the ward, and people within the ward, and you're serving and ministering and doing all those things. And when COVID happened, that community or sense of community was gone immediately, we were shut down. And, and I think that had a big impact on individuals who relied very heavily on that ward atmosphere. And so we, you know, you had to turn to, more to your social media things to, to your Facebook to reach out. And then I noticed also heading into that, with us, we were on Circles before the pandemic, within the gospel and the gospel app Circles. So we're in contact there, but I saw that really increase with people reaching out to people. And even some of the widows in our ward and widowers, they, where they didn't understand technology, and you couldn't go technically visit them, I know they felt isolated and really all alone during this time. And I think overall, church leaders have done really good by, you know, saying, hey, we're going to do the mask mandate there in July, when that was introduced, to try to stop the flow, you know, spread of this. But that's what I've seen. Go forward, now. All of a sudden, these social media tools going forward where it's doing better. We're able to attend church and feel comfortable going and being around people in the ward, it's on, it's on zoom, and on those various websites that you can get for the church that puts out there for social media. And we're in contact, and holding classes, social media wise, it's still there. But I still think there's a little bit of a disconnect from a community overall because of, because of COVID.

Christopher Taylor 03:24

Yeah, for sure. And it's nice that the church has been able to come up with a lot of these different kinds of social media platforms. Just kind of with your own experiences, do you feel like there's been any in particular that have been more effective just for you and your family?

Shawn Fessler 03:39

I, yes. I like the fact that I don't have to, with being at a school, I'm around it every single day, and that scares me. This whole thing, I've had many dreams of contracting it, and then giving it on to my family or to my grandpa and grandparents and even my in-laws. That's really freaked me out. So for me being able to stay home every week, or you know, on Sunday, and be able to watch and participate still in the same thing as I would if I was attending church, I think that has helped me out to stay connected. They have, the church has put out to say, hey, it's okay, if you want to stay home. You don't have to come to the building and and then that way, you don't have to face those people. Because there are some people in our ward, who are non-mask-wearers, they just, they're "Trump-ers" and they don't believe in COVID. And they have adamantly said that they're not going to wear a mask and you can't really turn them away. So I just, so rather than have to confront that or have to worry about that it's easier just to stay home.

Christopher Taylor 05:05

Yeah. And like with those, like with the government mandates with masks, do you feel like the church leadership within your own particular ward or in your stake, have they been struggling to try to like, you know, mitigate that issue or to try to mediate? You know, do they, do you feel like they're trying to talk to those people that refuse to wear masks? Or?

Shawn Fessler 05:31

Yes, I think they have, they reach out to them, and I think it's really a touchy situation. I know, he's talked to them, but hasn't like, come right out and said, Hey, you can't come to church, but you're making others feel very uncomfortable with you guys not wearing it. And then, even with the brother, and I think Elder Renlund came out just the other day with a strong, because he just got COVID him and his wife, and he came out with a really strong one that said, we really need to wear the mask, and then went back through and showed where the church, the church leaders have told us to, so I think it's still a very political thing, even in the church. I know that people are still, they still fight on their political side, and I see that, I think it's a hard thing for our church leaders, because you don't want to offend, and not have those people be offended and not come back to church. So it's a hard one. It's, it's, it's very hard, of putting it out there, but then again, people have that agency of choice. If they do it, if they follow it, if they don't, it's just like, you know, the other things we have or are told to do.

Christopher Taylor 07:02

Yeah. And that's, it's tough, because you see kind of this politicalization of something as simple as like wearing a mask. And you don't want it to create this tension. But it has, you know, in a lot of different churches, and a lot of the different people that I've interviewed. Do you see, has there been any other pushback from ward members about any other of their regulations? As far as you know, at first, when there was a time where we were actually all staying home or like having to sanitize or socially distance, have there been any other government regulations that have caused that same kind of tension?

Shawn Fessler 07:40

Well, I know. So my neighbors got four boys and a little girl, or three, three boys, sorry, three boys and a little girl. And they are very particular to let those kids play with other kids in the neighborhood. There's a little boy down the road, a big mask, you know, sanitized kind of thing, and they would only let them play with him outside, he couldn't, he wasn't allowed in the house. And then around the corner,

there's another family, and they're what I call the "Trumpers". They've got the flag out in front of their house and, you know, and the signs and everything, and they wouldn't, they didn't wear their masks to church. So my neighbor, when the kids came over to play, they, my neighbors have told their kids, you cannot play with them because they don't wear masks, and we don't want that here. So I've seen that way, you know that, that side of it, to where -and they normally- my neighbors are like the nicest people, they go out of their way to take care of people, feed kids that they meet, I mean, they're super, super nice, but this, my neighbor, Micah, she's, she's really anxious with this, and especially because they got a baby. So she's overprotective of it. So I've seen that in the next house from me, she has a little girl, and she plays outside a little bit, but not like she used to when this hit. So...

Christopher Taylor 09:30

Yeah, that's tough, you know, and especially because, like you said in the beginning, the ward community is really, I mean, the bulk of your actual community -your neighborhood, you know. What you see happen kind of in church is also reflected in the way that people treat each other, you know, in the neighborhood as well. And so it kind of spills over. It's not just kind of in the church and then you don't see it again, it's -you see it all the time. With some of those, kind of going back to the social media platforms, do you feel like any of these are going to be more long term because of certain success that they've had? Or maybe because the church has recognized, you know, if there's other circumstances where people can't make it to church, do you feel like this is going to be something that will become more than just a COVID phenomenon?

Shawn Fessler 10:25

Yes. I think this is like this idea where you can be home and engaged in a church, you can watch church, and, and you're watching it using the social media platform, and I have felt the spirit just as strong as attending church as I have at home. And so now once COVID's over and that, would I stay home and watch church? No, I would go just because of, you know, that's where I think sometimes you need to be, but I mean, for elderly, or handicapped, for, I think this has opened up the idea, and to get more people who maybe have those anxieties of coming together in groups, or things like that, I think it really has opened the ideas, and opened church leaders to say, Hey, we can, we can we get more people involved by using this platform. And not, and I mean, our numbers, because I'm, you know, I'm a ward clerk, our numbers are not too far off from where they were in attendance. Normally, I mean, our attendance is where we get about 54%. And we've been up to the highest 56, as low as 52%. So really, we haven't dropped off in attendance. So people are still, I mean, you always want more, but I think, you know, people are still using, we have more people on, on the broadcast, the church broadcasts, than do actually going to church right now. So I think it will, I think also opening up, I think Circles, we use Circles in our ward a lot, that platform of communicating, getting things out. I guess I don't know if it's, I don't have Facebook, so I don't know, you know, you send messages, people respond. And I saw some really good things from that side of it also, to keep people connected. So I think there's some really good things come about, as bad as COVID has been, I think there have been those positive things, like you said, the social media platforms, I don't think they're just going to go away. I think people will adapt to it. And they'll continue to use them.

Christopher Taylor 13:13

Yeah, there's certainly a lot of positives that's come out of it. As far as like, reaching out to people that were usually difficult in hearing from, or opening those channels for those that might not be able to come, or had a difficulty in coming. So those are some of the positive things. Have you noticed any, or are there any worries that you have about the negative consequences of having more of a social media style kind of church?

Shawn Fessler 13:41

Well, the one downside is I can think is people get complacent. That they -you aren't able to serve because, a lot with the church is just service, and right now you're not able to do that. So I think you get out of habit of doing it. I mean, still people are serving, but you're not as, so if you stay at home church, and then you have a calling where you're supposed to be at church, that would be a conflict. So I think that's -those are things we're going to deal with in the next year. And also, getting people if we do say, hey, we would like everybody to come back (outside of being sick or handicapped or something like that), to come back, I think that might be a negative impact for people to come back to church, for the trust issues and also just that they're out of habit of going to church, you know. Maybe they hit here or there on Zoom, or, hey, we're on a drive up the canyon, we can Zoom it on our phone and listen to it, but, you know, so I think if that all sudden you came in and said hey, no, you can't do this. That could be a negative impact. I know it's both been negative and positive -like on our missionary work. Missionary work is totally flipped on how we do missionary work right now. I think it's been negative because I think some, some kids, some young, you know, kids can't get out, they want to be active. And for them to be home just working the computer and talking to people and doing Zoom meets, have been a negative effect. But it also has been really good because they've been able to reach people where they wouldn't have been able to reach, but you have a different person to be able to sit on a Zoom call, as to out walking around, meeting people. So I think some of those issues are going to have to be worked out. But I think the missionary -with them able to do Zoom meetings in the wards is positive because we've done that with them, with Google meets and stuff like that with the missionaries, and, and talking with them to get equal. So that's a positive. And also then, like I said, a negative because I know some young men don't want to go out on a mission just to sit in a room and be on a computer.

Christopher Taylor 16:05

Yeah it's like if I'm gonna go, then I want to go be somewhere, be with people. And otherwise, it seems like you're at a call center.

Shawn Fessler 16:14

Yeah, yeah.

Christopher Taylor 16:16

So that's really interesting, and I would agree with a lot of what you said about the idea of like this complacency and worry. Has your -like you said -your the word clerk, has the bishopric or the ward leadership, have they mentioned anything about kind of in anticipation for that, what they hope to do? Is there going to be a way to ease people back in or, or have some lessons about, you know, the need to come back or, you know, if there's been any talk about that?

Shawn Fessler 16:46

Well, we talked. There hasn't been anything to like, when is the right time yet? Because I think the vaccination. We just had our bishopric meeting last night. And as we were discussing this, the vaccination coming out, we probably won't be, we'll stay on what we're doing probably till next September, possibly October, to once everybody's vaccinated and had the vaccine, you know, and so I mean, that was, our Bishop said, probably plan on the way we're doing everything right now, up until possibly October, or until the next General Conference that we'll be doing, the way we're doing now. So I think that's, but I know, that's exactly what you said, move forward, how and what to do. I think that'll be, some things'll come down through Conference and the Brethren, and I think they are definitely right now discussing that. But the laid out plan has not come yet, because they're still waiting to even think about it. The normal, the normal person who is not high risk or anything like that, what are they saying? They're saying to like July, that you would have your first dose? And then you got to wait 21 days after that to get the second dose? So you're well into possibly September or October.

Christopher Taylor 18:23

Yeah.

Shawn Fessler 18:25

That's at least our Bishop -we alluded to that last night.

Christopher Taylor 18:30

Do you know is that something that you've just heard, even among, like your neighbors and other kind of just regular members of the church? If they have expressed any kind of concern or concerns about kids being home and missing out on going to Primary or young men's activities or, or anything like that?

Shawn Fessler 18:47

I know. You bring up the Primary side, I know that that's an issue. Our primary president, she, she put together a little thing and had all the teachers run over, but yeah, it's that contact, put a little treat thing in a little basket together for the kids, you know, of course store bought stuff, and, they did that, but I think, you know, it's putting the responsibility back on the parents. And our church -for a long time -has been the one to be the teacher and then the parents were a lot of just the enforcers. Just kind of oh, yeah, remember that, oh, yeah, that's easy to do. And now we've flipped. Parents are the ones that need to teach the children. And the church is just to reinforce what the parents are teaching. And I think that's a dynamic that's really, we're going to see in the church going forward. That more family learn more of the gospel principles within the home, and not so much as just that, like you said, all community, everything you do goes through the church, because we don't have those activities to do anymore. But we're still doing them. Bishop Anderson, he's done it for the last four years, he calls it Bishop baskets. So he just takes names, we sit down as a ward council and write down names of people, whether they're just having a bad week or bad, whatever, you know, welfare needs, or just had a baby or something like that, and put 50 names of Ward members that you can think of, and then we take around a fruit basket to all of these ward members. And so that's something that he's done to keep that sense of community togetherness. But, outside of that, it's really difficult because, like I said, we were really close as a ward, we would do weekly, monthly activities down at the park during the summer, where you just come down. One time, we did a dessert or one time, we did you know, just not

a meal, but just just some appetizers and stuff. And we did it once a month and you just went down to the park and just socialized with people and the kids played at the park, and see with COVID all that's kind of ended, you know. All that in close, personal, interpersonal relationships that you had.

Christopher Taylor 21:36

Yeah, for sure. With those -like you mentioned, like the kids, whether they're like young kids or teenage kids, do you feel that this pandemic has affected like any particular age group harder than another one in terms of like their faith or their interactions with church or church engagement?

Shawn Fessler 21:56

I think where we've seen is the older kids, you know, your, your 14 to 18 year olds. I think they are the ones that are struggling with it. Now, that's just what I've seen, like their attendance for Sunday school and stuff isn't as high as what it has been in the past. Those meetings also, and to get them there, at that time, I think that's also an issue that those kids have. And I've seen that. I haven't been around a lot of the primary kids, I know from just from my neighbors, to see my neighbors, that they're, I mean, when you're a parent of younger kids, I would say it's easier to bring them together to have a quick little lesson. Rather than to say to the teenager who has schoolwork, a job, or sports or whatever is taking their time, to come together to say, Hey, we got to get together and learn this gospel principle or, you know, it's 10:30am, hey, get up, you got to go to priesthood on Zoom. I know that they're, I think, and also, the older kids, I think there's a real mental toll on them. Because they want to hang out with their friends and they want to -but part of them says, oh, nothing will happen, and the other part of them, they're like, oh, this could be scary, you know. So I know, even with school issues, tie over in school, because some parents are very strict, so when they come home, they stay at home, where other parents are letting kids go wherever they want. So I'm, you know, sometimes kids hear, oh, well, so and so's are doing it. So I know, that creates an issue. I would say the teenagers. But then again, I don't have young kids. I mean, that'd be the more adverse side of the young kids. But they're saying the younger ones through this, are seeing even mental health issues arising because their normal little structures are so different now. So...

Christopher Taylor 24:17

Yeah, for sure, you know, just like emotionally, and they've talked a lot about, you know, just depression and the anxiety that's kind of built up especially around little kids that don't quite understand the whole, you know, economics of, you know, possibly parents losing jobs or being stressed out about work, or anything like that has certainly taken a toll. For those kinds of people, and I would think especially among teenagers, you know, religion and faith can be such an anchor for them. With the church leadership in your particular ward, have you noticed, do they make any kind of special efforts to reach them and stress kind of the need for religion in times like this? Or are there any particular stories or lessons that they draw from, to try to promote faith in a time of trial like this?

Shawn Fessler 25:13

Yeah, our Bishop, he, again, I go back to that Circles thing -the app. He puts out something to the youth, he tries to do it three or four times a week, and reach out to them; he does an amazing job to get the kids. He's even to those kids where parents aren't in the best situation. He's tried to get out and create activities for those kids to be involved in. And faith promoting stories... I've seen just with our

kids, we have seen a difference. Some, like you said, grabbed a hold of the gospel, because of the time we're in and seeing some great strides. In noticing because I do the finance and help out sometimes with the money side of it, last night, I noticed that one of the young kids had paid his tithing, but also had paid a fast offering. And that, it's really one of those faith stories that here's a kid who has this that he's putting into the fast offerings when not necessarily does a teenager have to put into fast offerings, because that goes with his parents. But I thought, wow, that's pretty strong for him to do that. So I know there's those issues where faith is promoting; those kids are gravitating to the gospel, and hanging onto it, because that's something that's solid, and is not changing, it's still the same where everything else is chaotic, they can find the same peace there. I've noticed that with our youth, and our -again- I tie that back to the bishop. He is always in contact with the youth. And our other Bishopric leaders, they are always contacting the kids and, you know, through texts, through calls, through working through the presidents of the organizations, and they really rely heavily on those presidents. They go see this person, or go talk to this person, or how we talk to this person is this, you know, have you seen this person at school? So I think those activities are happening in our ward, that I've seen. From the youth, I think they're struggling, but I also think they're great, or they're grabbing hold of the gospel, the ones that are. You know what I mean? Like, the stronger ones are getting stronger, and the ones that are being left behind, they're trying to bring them along.

Christopher Taylor 28:19

Yeah, and that's tough to work with, with a dynamic where you have somewhere you see so much success, and then you've got others that are really struggling and what kind of message do you give or, you know, that there are such mixed feelings about the whole situation. I was just thinking as you were talking about that, I'm sure for families where the whole family is a part of the church that that makes it easier to jump on the meetings or to organize who's going to go watch priesthood versus, you know, primary or whatever it is. But have you noticed are there any issues with part-member families where maybe you've got youth that come from homes where they're the only member or where, you know, maybe their family is not as active as they are? And has that influenced them very much and trying to reach out to them?

Shawn Fessler 29:13

Yeah, we have a few really spotty that they are able to get on, especially younger. We had a younger young woman, she's probably, I want to say she's probably 13, and then she had a younger brother that was 11, that was just recently baptized before COVID hit. And I know it's really hard for them to get on weekly. Just for that reason- mom and dad are non-members, and they're out doing something and so because of the lack of devices, they miss out on something. That is a real concern for the bishop and the bishopric. And to reach out to those kids to make sure they get to their meetings. Even for the youth, to have their meetings, to get together for young men and young women activities, even the activities -some of them have been online, so not everybody can get onto that same point. So I have seen a drop-off there. That's one that the bishopric talked about, at length, exactly what you said there, again those kids that were a real issue.

Christopher Taylor 30:45

Yeah. With other difficulties related to COVID, with people being out of work, or temporarily struggling, do you feel like your church -what kind of efforts have been made to try to reach out and help those people that are, you know, maybe a need that have been out of work?

Shawn Fessler 31:10

You know, we've got a few families that we help, especially one family, the guy had a stroke. And so he's home, but he's in a bed, and he has nourished care and everything like that. So we take care of his family, on a monthly basis, and a lot is done there. What is really crazy is the need for welfare in our ward, because people aren't spending and going and doing as much, the people who have, have been giving more generously. So we're able to take care of more people. And we met the needs of our ward, which, a lot of times we have to rely on the state to bring money in and the church to bring money in to help, because we've gone over, you know, you just have to help them out. But we've been able to sustain our own effort, because of the generosity of the other members. It's actually been a really cool thing to see that dynamic. And to see people reaching out to people. We had a family, their son was on a mission. And he didn't get his endowments when he first left, and he's up in Washington. And they couldn't afford to pay the house payment and the plane ticket up to see their son, and we had a member of the ward step up and just pay their plane tickets for them so they could do that, because they said this is a once in a lifetime thing for you. So little tender mercies like that are going on. What you're seeing is that, hey, we have a need, and our members are stepping up and saying, hey, we'll take care of that need. Where last year, at this time, it wasn't the same. And also, our welfare needs are lower. I don't know how to explain it. We don't have as many families in need right now as we did even last year, at this time, because they're being taken care of by ward members. It's like the ward's taking care of the ward. It's really a cool dynamic. I can't explain it, I mean I can because of COVID, you know, you're not spending as much. You're not going out to the movies, you're not going on vacations, or only little vacations like whoa, let's go up to Park City for the weekend. So the more affluent people in our ward are giving very generously. You're seeing it and if there's a need, somebody needs something, we take care of it. We had a little family, the mom and two kids, And, you know, kids grow and the one kid, when he was baptized at nine, they bought him a suit. But he's outgrown his suit. And so we had some ward members step up and buy him and his sister some church clothes -got him a brand new suit. It's things like that that are going on. Yeah, the welfare needs are really being taken care of.

Christopher Taylor 34:55

That's really awesome. I never even thought about that. It hasn't come up in any of my other interviews, the idea that in part, because there are a lot of people that still have had stable jobs and income, they're not going to a lot of the recreational places, because a lot of it's shut down. So they have that extra money, and they're choosing to use that to support those that are in need, probably more so than they normally would have. That's really awesome.

Shawn Fessler 35:24

Yeah.

Christopher Taylor 35:25

And is that something or was that something promoted by the church? Or do you feel like this is more from the bottom up -they just kind of "saw a need, fill the need" attitude?

Shawn Fessler 35:35

I really think it's our community. Here in West Point, this area that I'm in, if there is something that they really need, we're very, very cool at putting down. When I lived in North Ogden, I didn't feel that same way. There wasn't that sense of community, it was kind of like you mind your own. If the bishop comes and tells you, you go do it. But since I've lived out here, even over in Clinton, it wasn't even as much as the area here in West Point. And I mean, when we lived in Clinton, same thing, you would help your neighbor, but not like this. I mean, if somebody's tearing down a tree, it's not unlikely that some three or four other members of the ward are jumping in and helping out for that. We had a non-member, his house flooded, about a year ago, and we had a ton of people show up to help, and he was like, "I can't believe this, I didn't know all of you lived around me, and would come to my house, just to help me out". And they were turning people away, because we had so many people just there to help, you know, to rip out carpet, get it down. So I think it's our area. I'm not saying it's not anywhere but I think maybe within the church as a whole I think there are probably other areas where the same thing happens, it's just not widely spread or talked about.

Christopher Taylor 37:23

That's really awesome. Does your Bishop, does he try to bring up those kinds of stories, just to demonstrate a faith promoting experience for the ward? Or do you feel like a lot of these are just kind of understood around the community just because it is so close knit?

Shawn Fessler 37:43

He keeps them pretty quiet. I mean, he's pretty humble as he does that. He knows the people who were involved in it, and knows that that's going on. I mean, you know, there are those who know that are doing it, and I really feel that people also, that the ward knows that if they did need help, that the Lord's there to help out.

Christopher Taylor 38:16

That's awesome, man. Hey, well just to wrap up our interview here, and I really again appreciate all your help with this, I think it'll be something fun, you know, in the future when people are studying the effects of COVID, to be able to look at archives like this and you can see what regular people like you and I think. But is there any kind of final idea or thought that you had that you wanted to share about your perceptions of faith and COVID that you wanted to touch on that we didn't get a chance to?

Shawn Fessler 38:48

I would say it's challenged my faith in the fact that I am horrified and have strong anxiety to be around it. This is the first time in my life I didn't want to teach school back in August. After our meeting, (you know that one meeting we had with the COVID where they told us everything that's going to take place), I seriously went back to my room and called my wife and said, "I don't want to teach anymore", it really freaked me out. And it was, you know, I had to really think about it... there's meaning to everything that we go through, and there's a process. I'm not saying the Lord sent COVID I think the Lord prepared us to be ready for this pandemic. And so it strengthened my faith to fall back on the normalcy of the church, to serve the church in general, to know that we have a prophet that was leading and guiding us before this pandemic hit, that he was preparing us before, long before this. And he also

has along the way given us ways to get through it. That has strengthened my faith. Yeah, I still have anxiety. But I know, this isn't the end. And there probably are more to come and more the closer, you know, the further we go closer to the end of your life, other things may happen. But I think it's strengthened my testimony of the gospel, because the principles of faith, hope, charity, are everlasting. And a pandemic can't stop those, you know, the work has gone forward. We've just had to adapt. And that has strengthened my testimony too, to see. I can sit in on a Zoom meeting and still feel the spirit of the Lord because the message is true. And it doesn't matter, it's true. And so that strengthened my testimony through this. I feel I'm a stronger member of the church through this and to see the workings of the structure of the church also, that's a big one too, how the church, brethren have organized, put us together, and every step of the way, you're not left in the cold. We've adapted and created something new to move forward, like the things we've talked about, the positivities, I think we talked about, and they count those things as positive, which well exceeded the negative of the pandemic.

Christopher Taylor 42:05

Yeah, that's awesome. Hey, thanks again so much, man.

Shawn Fessler 42:08

No problem.