

The Christian - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ family of Churches

# Are We There Yet?

Lorraine & Lyndsay Jacobs

## Exploring Our Destiny: 4

The fourth in a series of World Convention papers published within *World Christian* exploring our destiny as a family of churches in our bicentennial era - the early 21st Century.  
(Fourth quarter, 2003)

Copies of the first three papers -  
*Ministerial Education in the Twenty First Century*  
(William Tabbernee),  
*Our Heritage At Its Best* (Leroy Garrett)  
and *The Message and Mission of Our Movement in the  
21st Century* (Gordon Stirling)  
are still available on request.



Lorraine & Lyndsay Jacobs are the Associate General Secretary and General Secretary of World Convention.

They are New Zealanders who have lived in Nashville, Tennessee, USA (the location of the World Convention office) since the beginning of 1993.

# Are We There Yet?

**Are we there yet? How far do we still have to go? These are familiar questions from children when they are travelling. They are appropriate questions for our movement too. We've been 'on the road' for two centuries. We knew where we were heading. Our dream was for an effective church. We understood that the church could witness to the gospel effectively only if it was united. We believed that unity could be achieved by returning to the New Testament intentions for the church.**

For the last twenty-five years we have been involved in the ministry of World Convention within the Churches of Christ - Christian - Disciples of Christ global family. Since 1993 we have served as the executive staff. Through that privileged experience we have gained a unique global understanding of our movement.

Growing up within our churches in New Zealand, we heard the emphasis that we were part of a movement, not a denomination. Our movement had a finite task. One slogan we often heard was that, 'We came into existence to go out of existence'.

Over the last few decades nobody has had a comprehensive worldwide knowledge of our movement. There is a huge amount we do not know. However, with our retirement at the end of 2004, this seems to be an important moment to share the discoveries and observations we do have about who we are today, and where we are going tomorrow.

Now is an appropriate time to be looking ahead. As the world moves into the twenty-first century, our global family moves into its third century. This is our bicentennial era, celebrating events such as the *Cane Ridge Revival* (1801), the *Dissolution of the Springfield Presbytery* (1804), the *Declaration and Address* (1809) and *The Handshake* (1832) of the Stone and Campbell movements.

And it is also clear that we are 'not there yet'. That also makes it 'map and compass' time.

You probably know the saying, that 'those without goals are bound to achieve them'. Unless we shape our third century (seeking God's presence and leading under the Lordship of Christ), our third century will most certainly shape us.

## Glancing Back

The pioneers in our movement were deeply concerned that the church of their time was not effective in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

They saw the division of the church, which had broken down even further in many cases into bitter sectarianism, as one of the major obstacles to the church's witness. A divided church could not, without hypocrisy, preach the gospel of reconciliation.

How could unity, they wondered - the unity which Christ prayed for 'that the world might believe' - be achieved?

This question led to their vision of a church united by restoring 'the ancient order of things' - returning to the New Testament to discover what the church was to be like. Surely, they felt, that would be a sound basis for all Christians to find their unity in Christ.

Unity became their polar star. Unity was not to be an end in itself but unity would guide the church to becoming the serving, witnessing, universal church of Jesus Christ.

In this transformed Christian community (which they at first hoped to achieve from within existing denominations), there would be 'unity in essentials, liberty in nonessentials and love in all things.'

In two hundred years much has been achieved. We have outlined the story in a short brochure entitled 'Our Story'. You can find the text reprinted at the end of this publication. It can also be downloaded from the World Convention web site.

Briefly, our first century was shaped by initial momentum. Indigenous Churches became firmly established in both the United Kingdom and the United States (where growth was very rapid), and the movement spread through migrants and missionaries to a dozen other countries.

The Twentieth Century was characterised by continued numerical growth. Much was achieved but the vision became fractured. A united church proved to be elusive. The movement which wanted to bring unity to the churches, but had already in the Nineteenth Century become another distinctive group, divided within itself.

## Looking Around

So where does that leave us at the beginning of our third century?

Today the Christian - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ family of churches around the world is bound by a common heritage, the Lordship of Christ and the desire to be the church that Christ established and envisaged.

Many of you will know that we are New Zealanders. In the South Pacific our churches still tend to see our movement as

a whole, despite its divided witness in many places. We know that in some areas and countries, people are more likely to see themselves as separated, even permanently, from others. Brothers and sisters have become, at best, cousins.

We asked ourselves in 1993 whether there were still characteristics that were common to us all. We found ten significant universal characteristics:

- A concern for **Christian unity**.
- A commitment to **mission and evangelism**.
- An emphasis on being a church that is true to the **New Testament**.
- The use of a **simple confession of faith**.
- The practice of **believer's baptism**.
- The **weekly celebration of communion**.
- A desire to be **known by Biblical names**.
- An emphasis on **congregational autonomy**.
- An understanding that **every member is involved in ministry**.
- An acceptance of the need for **diversity**.

It is important to recognise that this is a list of characteristics and not a statement of beliefs.

These ten characteristics (further explored on page 7) are common to us all although we may explain them a little differently. They are not characteristics that are exclusive to our movement. What is unique is the combination. As a family of churches, we understand that these characteristics together are vital in any contemporary expression of the Church of Jesus Christ.

We were further reassured about our belonging together when the USA *Stone-Campbell Dialogue*, referred to later in this paper, did draw up an *Affirmation of Faith*. What surprised the group most was how quickly they were able to draw up a statement they could all accept. Note that it is an *affirmation* of faith. It is most certainly not intended to be seen as a 'test' of faith. It reads:

As disciples of Jesus Christ,

We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him risen Lord and Savior of the world.

In Christ's name and by his grace we accept the mission to proclaim the gospel to all the world and live in loving service to all people.

We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in the covenant of love that binds us to God and one another.

Through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God.

By the gift of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.

At the table of the Lord, each week we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and presence of Christ and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Within the body of Christ we receive the gifts of ministry and accept the authoritative witness of scripture.

In bonds of Christian faith we yield ourselves to God and one another that we may serve the One whose kingdom has no end.

Blessing, glory and honor be to God forever. Amen.

Despite our divisions and differences we are together a unique global church family, a Christian World Commu-

ion, within the Church of Jesus Christ.

Because we're here today and it is clear we will be here tomorrow, we need to take a look at where we are and where we are going.

This is an important moment for all of us to discern current trends and examine the challenges that lie ahead.

### Seven Continuing Trends

It could easily be claimed that the past ten to fifteen years have been the most positive period in our story for perhaps a century. Here are seven positive, current trends we have observed. These are trends that are defining and shaping us already.

#### 1. Churches in more countries.

Through the 1990s our research revealed that our movement had spread from about twenty countries at the beginning of the twentieth century to no less than 165 in 2000. The second half of the 20th Century saw a determined effort to plant churches (or in some cases, to build partnerships) in as many countries as possible. When we came into office in 1993, it was commonly stated that we had congregations in seventy to ninety countries. It was a wonderful surprise to discover the total was double that. No longer are we involved largely in only Commonwealth countries and those countries where American influence has been strong. Even within countries, churches can be from a number of ethnic groups and often these groups are the fastest growing. Our movement is now multinational, multi-cultural and multilingual.

#### 2. The number of churches and members is growing rapidly.

Christian Churches/Churches of Christ had the goal of establishing 100 congregations in the Philippines in 2001 - their centennial year. That goal was far exceeded. The United Church of Christ in the Philippines, which Disciples joined, has grown to four times the size it was when it was established after World War II. Reports from India tell of new congregations every week. This story is common in many Asian and African countries. A cappella Churches of Christ estimated in 2002 that they had more than one million members in sub-Saharan Africa. Disciples in Puerto Rico doubled in membership and number of churches (fifty, to over 100) in the 1990s. Disciples in the USA, who have been declining in numbers, added more churches in 2001 and 2002 than they had since 'restructure' in 1968. Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have become the second fastest growing religious movement in the USA. We feel certain that on average at least fifteen (and perhaps considerably more) new congregations are established every week. Megachurches have become a phenomenon too. Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky reported an attendance of more than 32,000 over Easter 2003.

### **3. International Mission and Ministry is moving from a pattern of 'spokes' to 'webs'.**

Missionaries no longer move from a few western countries to the rest of the world. There is now a vast network or web of international ministry. We were told in Korea that graduates of the Korean Christian University in Seoul work in at least twenty other countries. Our churches in the small country of Vanuatu in the South Pacific, have missionaries in several other countries. Asian, African and Central/South American countries have begun sending missionaries to other countries and the old 'sending countries' now receive many missionaries. International short term mission teams from the traditionally 'sending' missionary countries, also often gain as much as they offer.

### **4. Churches are becoming more indigenous.**

We had not realised that although there are no less than 2500 missionaries working outside their own countries, indigenous people are providing their own church leadership and direction more and more. Far more missionaries now serve in a supporting role. At recent large Asian conventions we have attended there were few other Europeans. At one Korean Christian Convention, attended by a thousand people, we were the only Europeans present. Each country is developing in its unique way of being a faithful church too. It is tempting for each of us to define our movement in other countries from our own experience but we have learned not to transfer the generalisations we have learned in one place to another.

There are also separate indigenous movements forming in many countries that commonly seek to align with 'our' family when they discover the strong parallels in understanding.

### **5. Strong national and international networks of specialist ministries have evolved.**

These specialist ministries in areas such as communication (radio, television, film, CD's, printing, translation), education, medical care, prison ministry and relief. The first group (other than congregations) to welcome us to Nashville was World Christian Broadcasting, a ministry that prepares programs at its state-of-the-art studios in Nashville, for broadcast out of Alaska into Russia and China. TCM based in Vienna serves a thousand people every year in education for ministry in every country in eastern Europe. USA/Canadian *Disciples* relate directly to close to ninety countries. Good News Productions, based in Joplin, Missouri, USA works in over one hundred countries. The Christian Missionary Fellowship based in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA coordinates mission work in a dozen countries. Many nationally based ministries work in several countries. The number of people working in international ministries is very significant.

### **6. Relationships amongst the separated streams of our movement have improved.**

Much has happened in recent years to rebuild relationships amongst the three major streams of our movement in the

United States - a separation that has had impact, to some extent, in almost every country. A very long and growing list of examples could be given. A few will have to suffice.

- We discovered when we were planning for the 1996 World Convention in Calgary, Alberta, Canada that the movement in Western Canada had established an annual combined convention earlier in the 1990s. An a cappella Church of Christ, two Christian/Churches/Churches of Christ and a Disciples/United congregation together provided the backbone of the local arrangements for 'Calgary'.
- The bicentennial celebrations at Cane Ridge in 2001 were great 'all streams' occasions.
- Many Churches of Christ congregations have moved away from their previous quite sectarian positions and this trend continues strongly.
- Many local combined meetings have been held.
- In 1997 speakers at the a cappella Churches of Christ *Jubilee* and the *North American Christian Convention* exchanged and read letters of reconciliation which were enthusiastically and penitently received.
- A North American Restoration Forum (largely Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and a cappella Churches of Christ) has met every year since 1984. In 2002 a very successful forum was hosted in Lubbock, Texas, by all three streams of the movement there. The 2003 Forum in Johnson City, Tennessee had a very 'three stream' program.
- The *Stone-Campbell Encyclopedia*, being edited by three USA historians, one from each of the three USA streams of our movement, will be published in 2004.
- Many local and regional missionary meetings have been combined.
- The most significant single event must be the establishment of the USA Stone-Campbell Dialogue in 1999. These discussions amongst six leaders from each stream, with the objective of establishing positive and meaningful conversation and relationships, have resulted already in a shared confession of sin, a common statement of belief, insightful published papers on some key areas and the beginnings of a process of spreading this dialogue to the local situation.

### **7. World Convention has provided a stronger focus for family togetherness.**

During the last decade, World Convention has focused more strongly than ever on trying to build relationships with our churches in every country. Where the movement is involved in united churches, or represented by more than one stream, World Convention has sought to be equitable in its relationship with each. The aim has been to give all those within the Stone-Campbell family (more than 300 national manifestations) an 'every day' feeling of belonging to one another within a unique part of the whole church of Jesus Christ. This emphasis has received very broad acceptance from the churches. A much more cooperative and complimentary relationship has also been established with the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council. This council is made up of representatives of about twenty churches with varying forms of national cooperation or expression of being church together.

We believe that most people would see the above trends as very encouraging. To some readers they may appear to be rather general and even distant from the 'person in the pew'. But they are not. These are overall trends in the vital, exciting, daily witness and ministry of perhaps twelve million people in the Christian - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ family around the world, seeking to live their lives faithfully within the whole church of Jesus Christ.

### Five Family Challenges

The seven trends already outlined are amongst the things that are already shaping our movement, beginning its third century as part of Christ's church.

What else needs to happen? The suggestions that follow are our own. This is perhaps where we 'go off preaching and into meddling.' However these proposals arise from our love for our movement and its unique calling within the body of Christ. It is our prayer that they will be of value in stimulating us to be active together in shaping our destiny. Our movement was a radical reform movement two hundred years ago. We are challenged to live today in that radical reform tradition.

It needs to be understood that we must continue to be the church in many more ways than those outlined below. What follows are challenges for our movement as a whole.

#### 1. Together we need to know and tell our story - completely and honestly.

The indigenous Maori people of New Zealand have a saying: 'Tell me your story and I'll tell you who you are.' Understanding who we have been is vital to understanding who we are now, and who we should and will be. The good news that our witness has spread around the world, and that we have large numbers of first generation new members, means that many in our family today do not know their story. Division (effecting regions and countries differently) also means that the whole story is usually not known. Often the story is told selectively with a desire to distance ourselves from others. But what has happened, has happened. We need the liberation of being able to tell the whole story. We must be inclusive, not exclusive in telling that story. Each of us needs to be able to tell the story with no more judgement on others than we place on ourselves. You cannot recite any family history leaving some of the family out or, even worse, declaring they are not family. To move on with integrity, we need to be able to tell 'Our Story'. The full story.

#### 2. Together we need to continue rebuilding family relationships.

The first generation of our movement adopted the slogan, 'In essentials unity, in non essentials liberty and in all things love,' to describe relationships and priorities within the church. It would have been good if the slogan had been reversed, putting love first. We are challenged by

the gospel to give absolute priority to our relationships with others as we provide liberty in matters of opinion and seek to discern the essentials of our faith. Relationships are more important than correctness. Putting love first (the New Testament imperative) will enable us to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers. It will allow us to build unity in diversity. Some see unity-in-diversity as allowing a situation where 'anything goes' or where compromise is a way of life. It is very definitely not. Putting love first brings about a unity in which we see that others, living under the Lordship of Christ, understand their faithfulness in (perhaps radically) different ways. But we journey together.

Strained relationships are often the result of different interpretations of scripture. We need to accept that we do all interpret scripture (literally, contextually and so on) and that we need to share our understandings patiently and humbly. Unity, we have said, is our polar star. Finding a way to build up unity within our movement (and deal with 'issues' within the family) would be a huge gift to the whole church and the world. The world, dealing with hundreds of 'hot button' issues, is desperately seeking to learn how the whole human family can live harmoniously. We know how, but we need to show how.

As a first step we need to be able to name and lift up division for the sin that it is. The USA *Stone-Campbell Dialogue* was able to do that and invites us all to join in this *Confession of Sin*.

Division in the body of Christ is sin - contrary to Christ's will (John 17). As Christians, we who are members of Churches of Christ, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are part of a movement that was in its beginning given a special trust to promote the visible unity of Christ's church.

This movement, begun in the early nineteenth century by leaders like Barton W Stone and Alexander Campbell, has a great heritage of focusing on Christian unity.

Instead, we have been guilty of dividing the body of Christ in thought, word and deed. Many of us have fortified the spirit of division and have failed to do what we should have done to prevent or overcome division.

This betrayal of our trust has impoverished the whole church of Christ and weakened its mission.

We have deeply wounded one another through misrepresentation, suspicion, mistrust, and defamation.

We, therefore, participants in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, confess to God and to each other that we are guilty of the sin of division and of harboring and maintaining a spirit of division.

We now bring to God our brokenness and repent of the sin of division. We ask God for forgiveness. We ask God to heal us so that our Movement within Christ's church can more perfectly embody the unity to which we are called.

Assured of God's mercy and forgiveness, we pledge to move forward in the service of unity within this family of faith to benefit the whole church and the world.

Accepting the invitation to join in this confession (or something that performs the same task) is a vital step in shaping our future and fulfilling our destiny; a prerequisite to

rebuilding relationships.

### **3. Together we need to continue to be frustrated by the division of the whole church.**

The polar star helps us find our way on a journey. It is not in itself the objective our journey. In the same way our focusing on unity is a means to an end: becoming the church as it was intended to be. Lifting up the imperative of unity within the whole church has not been easy for our movement. At first we set out to do this within the church as it existed. Our hope and prayer was that we might be used in transforming the church - taking it from where it was, to what it ought to be. Instead we arrived at a separate existence. Since then some have sought simply to be the true church, some have endeavoured to be non-denominational and some have followed the path of trying to build relationships, or unite with, other church families. All have been seeking to be true to our heritage. All have experienced frustration. There is a considerable level of unity-fatigue and it is easy to learn to live with the divisions we have created in our own movement and grow comfortable with the divisions we sought to eliminate in the wider church. However, those divisions are outside the will of Christ and a barrier to being his true and effective church. We are called to reveal that, because of God's great love for us, we have a great love for each other. In saying this we are not advocating any particular form of unity. In the end the test will be in whether the 'world' can see that we belong together: 'How these Christians love one another.' We can be grateful that much of the past bitterness in relationships amongst denominations has disappeared but today's seeker is still faced with a dazzling array of churches (denominational and nondenominational) that are 'in competition', and every church family has gospel defying division within it. If unity is our polar star and we are not moving towards it, we are off course. We are avoiding being Christ's church.

### **4. Together we need to be committed to practising unity in our local congregations.**

The focus of our life together is the communion table. Here we order our lives with God and one another. Here (and only through the grace of God) we practise community - model the gospel. All are welcome. When we 'accept Christ' we not only become Christians; we also become his church. We are joined at the soul. The 'post modern' wants to feel rather than hear; the congregation centred around the communion table is the place where the gospel can be felt. Within the congregation we can bring 'big picture' unity down to something extremely close, easy to understand and practical.

However, in our movement, although we emphasise congregational autonomy, what we often practise is personal autonomy. If individuals don't like something, they leave; like minded groups move out to establish new congregations. Even when people stay together, relationships are often tense with 'worship wars', clashes of views and power struggles.

Our congregations need to be communities where we learn not only what it means to be a Christian but also what it means to be The Church. Finding the path to fellowship, understanding and common purpose in our congregations, is basic to finding it in the wider church. Can we become known as those who know how to practise unity (with a loving, accepting, inclusive Spirit) amongst themselves; where God can be seen in our life and actions? If we can, the church and even the wider world will be listening.

### **5. Together we need to strengthen our understanding of the universal church.**

There is a dichotomy within our movement which some have tried to address but which we need to resolve together. On one hand we have emphasised the autonomy of the local congregation; on the other, the universal nature (or given unity) of the church. When the local town or village was all there was, it hardly mattered. But today people we see as very different, living half a world away, can have a profound effect on our lives and even move in next door. In this twenty-first century we are learning fast that the human family is one interrelated global community. Parochialism is dead. The church has known that for almost two thousand years!

We have no argument with the understanding that the local congregation is church. However, it has also been our calling to emphasise that we are all a part of just one church, with one foundation. Every Christian and every Christian community is accountable within the body of Christ and it is essential to find means of expressing that now. We are not advocating structures or hierarchies but we do need to find appropriate ways of seeing our actions as individual Christians or congregations in a global context.

### **Finally ... or 'Moving Ahead'**

Seven continuing trends. Five challenges. There are certainly other trends and challenges and we would be thrilled receive your outline of those.

**How else do we respond?** Each of us, in different places, will respond in different ways. What is absolutely essential is that we do **all** respond - prayerfully and intentionally.

'Thinking globally', we must 'act locally' Each of us starting just where we are - but with a clear and 'together' sense of purpose and direction.

We challenge you to begin (if you haven't already) by embracing the global networking ministry of World Convention, which by its very existence reminds us that we are family - that we belong together. We must dispense entirely with any sense of 'them' and 'us'. Because of Christ, and for the sake of others, there is 'just us'.

On with our journey ... we're not there yet. We are always shaping our future - by what we do and what we don't do.

Let's be prayerfully intentional. Now.

# Who Are We ?

**The family of churches known as Christian Churches, Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ grew out of an early nineteenth century movement with origins in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Today there are congregations related to this Christian World Communion in no less than 165 countries. What are the ‘characteristics’ or ‘distinctives’ of this global family?**

Today in any Christian World Communion (global church family) there is considerable diversity in belief and practice. There are also many features of each family that are shared by the whole church of Jesus Christ. What follows is an attempt to create an overall but simple picture of who Churches of Christ\* are and so it needs to be read as a whole. It also needs to be read in the context that no attempt is being made to separate this family from the church of Christ universal but rather to describe its place within the whole church.

So what are the contemporary characteristics of Churches of Christ?

**It is possible to choose ten:**

- A concern for Christian unity.
- A commitment to mission and evangelism.
- An emphasis on being a church that is true to the New Testament
- The use of a simple confession of faith.
- The practice of believers’ baptism.
- The weekly celebration of communion.
- A desire to be known by Biblical names.
- An emphasis on congregational autonomy.
- An understanding that every member is involved in ministry.
- An acceptance of the need for diversity.

**1. A concern for Christian unity.** In the 1809 ‘Declaration’ and ‘Address’ Thomas Campbell wrote that the ‘Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one’. Another pioneer, Barton Stone, spoke of Christian unity being the ‘polar star’. The ‘Christian’ movement was a movement for unity within the fragmented and often hostile and competitive church environment of that time, but ultimately became a separate movement. Today there are different understandings of how Christian unity might be understood and achieved ranging from commitment to the ecumenical movement (itself changing), with some involved in dialogue and partnership with other church families, through a belief that there is already an underlying God-given unity despite apparent division, to those who feel that they have discovered what the church should be like and that unity will come through others recognising this and joining with them.

**2. A commitment to mission and evangelism.** Unity was never an end in itself. Its desirability came out of the understanding ‘that the world could be won only if the church became one’. Today that commitment is shown both by emphasising the need for personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and by a concern for peace and justice for all people. Many will balance these two emphases but often one will be

emphasised more than the other.

**3. An emphasis on being a church that is true to the New Testament.** Churches of Christ are ‘People of the Book’. They believed that unity could be achieved by ‘restoring’ the New Testament Church - stripping away the accumulation of traditions that had brought about division. The authority was the scriptures - not the church. Many still like to be referred to as the ‘Restoration Movement’; others believe there are difficulties in accepting that the New Testament provides a clear unified model for the church and believe that the church must also be open to God’s present word measured against the biblical revelation. All members of Churches of Christ would describe themselves as biblical but interpretation varies greatly.

**4. The use of a simple confession of faith.** From Matthew 16:16 came the cornerstone question for church membership: ‘Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ and accept him as your Lord and Saviour?’ Answering ‘yes’ to that question is all that is required for membership though many congregations have membership classes. This simple question avoided the use of creeds, some of which had been very divisive. Many in Churches of Christ today will not make any use of creeds; others will use them as a means of expressing faith - but not a test of faith.

**5. The practice of believer’s baptism.** Only people who have reached an age where they can make their own confession of faith are baptised. The mode of baptism is immersion. Many congregations will now accept into membership - by transfer - those who become church members through other traditions; other congregations are adamant that believer’s baptism is essential. Baptistries - for immersion - are features of worship facilities.

**6. The weekly celebration of communion.** Again believing that they follow the New Testament model, Churches of Christ celebrate communion or ‘The Lord’s Supper’ each Sunday. Of course, like many of the things which we follow because we feel they are part of the New Testament pattern, we also do them because of the huge value we find in them.

**7. A desire to be known by Biblical names.** Members of the emerging 19th Century movement wanted to be known only as ‘Christians’ or ‘Disciples of Christ’. Slogans such as ‘Christians only - but not the only Christians’ and ‘Biblical names for Biblical people’ captured this emphasis. Congregations use names such as Church (or Churches or church) of Christ, Christian Church or Christian Church (Disciples of

Christ). There are also congregations within uniting churches in many areas and countries.

**8. An emphasis on congregational autonomy.** Members of Churches of Christ live under the authority of Christ but this authority is seen as being worked out in the local congregation. For many this congregational autonomy is absolute; many others guard their autonomy jealously but have established ways of working together; many are organised in regions and/or nationally (recognising wider fellowship as manifestations of the church) but still with a considerable degree of congregational autonomy. Globally there is very limited organisation. Some countries that have nationally organised work cooperate through the ‘Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council’. The World Convention of Churches of Christ is a global fellowship which endeavours to build up fellowship, understanding and common purpose within the whole family.

**9. An understanding that every member is involved in ministry.** The ‘Priesthood of all Believers’ is a mark of all Churches of Christ. We speak of ‘mutual ministry’. Participation by lay people in all aspects of the church’s life is a notable feature. Lay people conduct the sacraments. Women and men are seen as equal by many parts of the family but others (although this is lessening) see distinct roles for men and women. There is an employed and trained ministry with recognition varying from a ‘paid member’ to an expectation of special leadership.

**10. Acceptance of the need for diversity.** ‘In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things love’ is the best known slogan in our family. Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have always allowed for diversity and much of that diversity has been enriching. Diversity also allows for the possibility of intolerance and division and that unfortunately has been part of our experience. This Christian family is left with the challenge of finding for itself the unity-in-diversity it seeks for the whole church of Jesus Christ.

\* The name *Churches of Christ* is used in this statement to include all those in the Christian - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ global family. This statement was prepared by Lorraine & Lyndsay Jacobs, General Secretaries of the World Convention (Christian Churches - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ) to help describe who we are today. It is in no way prescriptive or definitive. It is written in International English. Copying welcomed with this acknowledgement included.

# Our Story

## A brief history of the global family of Christian Churches, Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ

**The family of churches known around the world as Christian Churches, Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ began in the early part of the 19th Century - almost 200 years ago - in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America.**

It was a time when churches tended towards legalism, authoritarianism and exclusivity.

Our movement began with a passion for the unity of this rigid and divided church. There was deep conviction that unity could not be achieved without a thorough reformation of the church of those times and that through such reform the life, faith, order and effective witness of the 'New Testament' church could and should be restored.

The origins of this movement can be traced back to congregations formed in the second half of the 18th Century in the United Kingdom, some of which were amongst those that came together in the first 'cooperative' meeting of British Churches of Christ congregations in 1842. Early British leaders included William Jones and James Wallis but they owed much to other reformers of their times.

The movement in the United States focussed around two major leaders in particular - Barton W Stone and Alexander Campbell.

Barton Stone was a Presbyterian minister at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, from 1798 and the revival he organised there in 1801 is considered a significant milestone in the religious history of the USA. The experience was a major factor leading Stone to withdraw from the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky in 1803 and then in 1804 (reflecting the desire to be 'simply Christian') to dissolve the new Springfield Presbytery he had created and 'sink into union with the Body of Christ at large'. Effectively the 'Christian Church' of 'Christians only, but not the only Christians' with unity as its 'polar star' had been established.



**The meeting house at Cane Ridge**

At the time of the 1801 revival the Campbells were still in Ireland. Thomas Campbell, also a Presbyterian Minister, came to the United States in 1807. In 1809 because of what he saw as the scandal of Christian division he formed the Christian Association of Washington (PA) and published a classic document on Christian unity - 'The Declaration and Address'. The first of the thirteen proposals in this foundation document of the Christian Church includes the statement that the church is 'essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one' - which was to become one of our important slogans.

Alexander Campbell arrived in The United States two years after his father and quickly discovered that he shared his father's views. He became an advocate of these ideals and soon took the lead in the developing reform movement. Attempts to continue to work with the Presbyterians failed and the reformers reluctantly formed their congregation at Brush Run, Pennsylvania, into a separate church in 1811. An attempt to work with the Baptists over the next two decades also failed and by 1830 these 'Disciples' were a separate group.



**Alexander Campbell's study at Bethany**

In 1824 Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell met. Their movements came together in the famous handshake of 1832 and a period of definition and consolidation for this united movement followed. The first century was a time of significant growth and the Christian Church became the fifth largest church in the United States.

A fourth pioneer in the United States, Walter Scott made a unique contribution to the movement with his rational evangelistic emphasis. His 'five finger exercise' - faith, repentance, baptism, the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit - provided an order in which people could come to Christ and membership in His Church.

In 1847 Alexander Campbell visited the United Kingdom and was president of the Second Cooperative Meeting, affirming in person the links that had been developing across the Atlantic.

The movement wanted to use 'biblical names for biblical things'. In The United Kingdom 'Church of Christ' was the name used and churches in the Commonwealth still usually use this name. By the 1840s there were Churches of Christ in Australia, Canada and New Zealand and later in India, South Africa and (using current names) Malawi, Thailand, Zimbabwe and Vanuatu. By the time of their 1909 Centennial Convention, United States churches had established work in The Argentine, China, The (Belgian) Congo, Cuba, Hawaii, India, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, The Philippines, Puerto Rico and Tibet.

However by 1906, congregations currently

known in the United States as Churches of Christ (a cappella) had become a distinct group. Throughout the 20th Century they have operated quite separately but there is currently a strong movement to embrace the wider church again. In the decades from the 1920s to the 1960s in the United States a further division in the Christian Church occurred culminating in the more liberal and ecumenical group restructuring as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with those not wishing to be a part of this denomination remaining as 'independent' Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

A third indigenous 'restoration movement' also developed in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but by the late 1920s the communist revolution had effectively brought it to an end.

In the early 1980s in the United Kingdom the majority of our cooperative churches joined the United Reformed Church (Church of Christ-Congregational-Presbyterian) and most of the remainder formed the Fellowship of Churches of Christ. There is also a group of 'Old Path' (a cappella) churches.

In many other parts of the world some of our family have joined united churches - for example in India, Thailand, Jamaica, Japan, The Philippines and The Congo (Kinshasa). Ironically sections of our family have played a unique part in the ecumenical movement while others have remained apart from and even very critical of it.

In 1930 the first World Convention of Churches of Christ was held to provide our family with an appropriate way of sharing globally. The convention in Brighton, England, UK in 2004, is the sixteenth. There are now no less than 165 countries with congregations relating to our 19th Century heritage and there is a vast network of links within this family. World Convention provides a unique means of building fellowship, understanding and common purpose within this diverse Christian World Communion.

**We have dreamed of the church united in essentials, tolerant in non essentials and loving in all things - so that world might really believe and Christ's community might come.**

**That is still the challenge.**

Reprinting is encouraged but please include this footnote. Produced by World Convention (Christian - Churches of Christ - Disciples of Christ) and written using International English. The text can be downloaded at [www.worldconvention.org](http://www.worldconvention.org)