

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): A Reformed North American Mainstream
Moderate Denomination

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The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a Reformed North American Mainstream Moderate Denomination. To grasp the history and identity of this denomination requires unpacking each of the terms in this one-sentence description.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a *Reformed* denomination. The Christian Church divided into Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism in the eleventh century. In the sixteenth century, Western Catholicism divided into several reforming traditions: Lutheran, Reformed, Radical, Catholic, and Anglican. The Reformed tradition is associated with Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, the Reformed churches of Germany and the Netherlands, the Presbyterians of Scotland and the English Puritans. This Reformed tradition has emphasized God's grace made known in Jesus Christ. It has also emphasized right belief and right order. Stressing right order, Reformed churches have successfully resisted government domination.

Reformed churches have not been as successful in maintaining unity. Differences regarding belief and order have frequently led to division. This is where the story of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) begins. Believing that God wills the unity of the church, Barton W. Stone, a fifth-generation American, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, immigrants from Northern Ireland, and Walter Scott, an immigrant from Scotland, decried the divisions they had experienced in their early nineteenth century Presbyterian churches. Having observed creeds and confessions used to divide the church, they refused

to accept as terms of fellowship statements of belief other than the simple confession that Jesus is the Christ. Believing that believer's immersion for the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and every Lord's Day celebration of the Lord's Supper for the spiritual up building of believers would further the renewal and unity of the church, they sought to restore these practices which they viewed as apostolic.

For Stone, the Campbells, and Scott, Christian unity was about more than a mere organizational union. It pointed to the very nature of the church which, in the words of Thomas Campbell, was "essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one"; it was the means by which the world would believe that the Father sent the Son and God would usher in Christ's earthly reign of peace and justice. Uniting their efforts in 1832, followers of Stone, the Campbells, and Scott (a close associate of the Campbells) formed what scholars now identify as the Stone-Campbell Movement. Stone, Thomas Campbell and Scott had preferred the name Christian, eschewing distinctive names for the "family" name found in Acts. Alexander Campbell had preferred the "more humble" name, Disciples (or learners) of Christ, to identify what he saw as a distinctive movement for the restoration and unity of the church. In the nineteenth century, congregations were referred to as Christian Church or Church of Christ, while the movement was often identified as the Disciples of Christ. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), along with two other groups, the Churches of Christ, and the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, is a contemporary North American expression of this movement. The fact that there is more than one contemporary North American community of the followers of Stone, the Campbells, and Scott, is a potent reminder of the challenges of seeking Christian unity!

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a *North American* denomination. North America has long been racially and culturally diverse. It has also long been characterized by white racism and the privileging of Anglo culture. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) participates in the racial and cultural diversity of North America, including in its membership European Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. It has also participated in white racism and the privileging of Anglo culture and, no doubt, continues to do so, despite efforts to become an anti-racist, pro-reconciling church.

The earliest congregations of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Barton Stone's Cane Ridge congregation, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell's Brush Run congregation, in western Pennsylvania, included both European American and African American members. A Colored Christian Church was organized in Midway, Kentucky in 1834—just two years after the union of followers of Stone, the Campbells, and Scott. Thus, African Americans have been part of this denomination from the very beginning.

In 1917, a general church African American ministry was formed: the National Christian Missionary Convention. This organization was a result of the determination of Preston Taylor, a former slave, who was minister of the Gay Street Christian Church in Nashville, Tennessee and a successful entrepreneur. The purpose of the National Christian Missionary Convention was to empower the witness of black Disciples as members of the whole church through a partnership with white Disciples that recognized black leadership in an era of blatant white supremacy and paternalism. For over a half-century, this convention, which provided for the participation and support of white

Disciples leaders, conducted annual gatherings in which participants received in-service training in Christian education and leadership, program information, and inspiration for fulfilling their mission as Disciples of Christ. During the year, convention leaders and staff visited congregations and helped to plan and promote regional events. Because of the partnership with white Disciples, white Disciples staff members were often involved in these events, as well.

In the late 1960s, the program and staff of the National Christian Missionary Society merged with other general Disciples organizations. The Administrative Secretary of the Convention became a staff associate of the General Minister and President and program staff members were integrated with the staff of Homeland Ministries (now known as Home Missions). At the same time, a new organization, the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was lodged in the Office of the General Minister and President. The purpose of Convocation, which conducts biennial assemblies that address issues relevant to African Americans and the mission of the whole church, is to further the realization of one church which, in the face of continuing racism, empowers the witness of all of its constituencies. In a denomination that numbers around 3,800 congregations with a total membership of about 700,000, the National Convocation embraces over 400 congregations and more than 60,000 Disciples of Christ.

Hispanics have been numbered among Disciples since the last years of the nineteenth century. Until recently, however, growth in the number of Hispanic Disciples has been slow. By 1969, there were only eighteen Hispanic and Bilingual congregations in all of the United States. Dominant culture Disciples had assumed that Hispanics in

North America would quickly assimilate to Anglo culture. Therefore, little effort had been made to develop Spanish language resources.

In 1969, Domingo Rodriguez became director of the Office of Programs and Services for Hispanic and Bilingual Congregations in Homeland Ministries. Rodriguez called a conference of Hispanic ministers which created a Committee on Guidelines for Strategy and Action. The Committee morphed into a board, then a conference, then another committee, and finally the Hispanic Caucus which, in 1980, developed the National Hispanic and Bilingual Fellowship of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which held its first Assembly in 1981. In the early 1990s, tensions between the emerging Hispanic leadership and Homeland Ministries led to the establishment in 1991 of a new general ministry called the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries that reports directly to the General Board. The Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries has three objectives: to provide programs and pastoral care to Hispanic leaders and congregations; to advise the different regional and general ministries of the church on Hispanic ministry; and to be an advocate for Hispanic Disciples. The National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries has oversight of more than 200 congregations with a membership of over 6,000 Disciples of Christ.

As with African American and Hispanic American Disciples, the growth of Asian American Disciples has been influenced by the attitudes and actions of members of the dominant North American culture. Late in the 19th century, the Disciples' Christian Woman's Board of Missions opened a mission to the Chinese in Portland, Oregon. It was enormously successful and a Chinese minister, Jeu Hawk, was called to lead the work. In 1907, the CWBM started another Chinese mission in San Francisco. Both

missions were closed in 1923 due to anti-Asian hostility reflected in the Chinese Exclusion Acts. In 1901, a small group of Japanese came into contact with the Christian Missionary Society of Southern California. By 1908, a Japanese Christian Church had been organized in Los Angeles. By 1942, the number of Japanese Christian churches had increased to nine, when all were closed with the internment of Japanese Americans. After their detention, former Japanese Christian church members founded West Adams Christian Church in Los Angeles. In sharp contrast to the Chinese and Japanese stories, Filipino Christian Church was founded in Los Angeles in 1933 and has had an uninterrupted ministry to this day!

A great wave of new immigrants from Asia to the United States began with the Immigration Acts of 1965. In 1976, Wilshire Korean Christian Church became the first Korean Disciples congregation. In July of 1978, the first consultation on Asian ministries was held in Indianapolis, through the efforts of Harold Johnson, evangelism executive of Homeland Ministries. The purpose was three-fold: to affirm the unique identify of Asian American Disciples; to raise the consciousness among Disciples of their presence; and to help Disciples attend to the needs of the growing Asian American population. Out of this consultation, the Fellowship of Asian American Disciples (FAAD) was organized. In good Disciples fashion, FAAD was renamed the American-Asian Disciples (AAD) a year later. At the 1979 General Assembly in St. Louis, AAD was formally acknowledged as a constituency. The first AAD convocation was held in October in 1980 in Indianapolis, with 16 Asians and 3 General staff participating. The group decided to hold biennial convocations on even years alternating with the General Assembly.

An October 1989 Homeland Ministries consultation on Asian ministries called for: developing ministerial leadership, establishing congregations, fostering Asian representation on boards of the church, and posting an Asian staff person within Homeland Ministries for American Asian ministries. Koreans were to be the initial target because of the rapid growth of Korean immigrants and the growth of Korean Christianity. The 1991 Tulsa General Assembly approved this initiative, directing Homeland Ministries to create a position exclusively focused on American Asian ministries. Geunhee Yu was called to the position. At the time, there were eight churches. In 1996, AAD was renamed the North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD) to be more inclusive. Today, there are 90 NAPAD churches, totaling more than 6,500 Disciples of Christ. Approximately 75% of the congregations are Korean. Others are Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Samoan.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a Reformed North American *Mainstream* denomination. Sociologists have defined Mainstream religious groups as those that “identify with and contribute to the definition of the society’s core values.”¹ Given this definition, the designation “mainstream” does not narrow the description of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) very much, as many American religious groups fall in this category. Greater definition is achieved by modifying Mainstream with the term *Moderate*.

Mainstream religious groups may be classified along a liberal to *moderate* to conservative spectrum according to religious, social, and political views. On the left is the Jewish community. Just to the right of the Jewish community are liberal Protestants,

¹ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 236.

identified as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the United Church of Christ. In the center are Catholics and *moderate* Protestants, identified as Methodists, Lutherans, Northern Baptists, the Reformed churches, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). To the right of center are Black Protestant Denominations. To their right are conservative Protestants, such as Southern Baptists, Church of Christ, Nazarenes, Assemblies of God, and Churches of God.²

Please note: For the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be classified as moderate does not mean that all Disciples hold moderate views on all religious, social, and political issues—views somewhere between liberal and conservative. On the contrary: In contrast to conservative churches where most members, or at least most of the leaders, might be assumed to hold the same position on an issue such as homosexuality, in the moderate churches, such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Methodists, you can expect to find at least two if not more positions significantly represented on this and every other controversial religious, social and political issue. In other words, differences of opinion among members of moderate churches can be notable!

Finally, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a Reformed North American Mainstream Moderate *Denomination*. Denominations are identified by their testimony, traditions, name, institutions, and relationships. With Christians everywhere, this church *testifies* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaims him Lord and Savior of the World. Our *traditions* of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ecumenical. While practicing believer's immersion, most congregations affirm the baptisms of other churches. The Lord's Table is open to all who follow Christ. Our *name* combines the

² Ibid, 223-228.

family name Christian with the distinctive term, Disciples of Christ, which points to our identity not as those who have attained to the fullness, but are yet learners. Our *institutions* are accountable to Christ. Our *relationships* as congregations, regions and general ministries affirm the unity of Christ's church. All of these markers point in one direction: to our fundamental commitment to the oneness of the church. At the heart of our life as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is what we identify in the Preamble to the *Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* as "God's covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another." Because of God's covenant with us, we are in covenant with all Christians. As Stone, the Campbells and Scott affirmed, Christian unity is what it means to be church; it is a means to the world's belief that the Father sent the Son and the ultimate coming of God's reign of peace and justice. In the words of the identity statement recently prepared by the Twenty-first Century Vision Team appointed by General Minister and President, Dr. Sharon Watkins, "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world."