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Stating the Obvious: A Look at Congregational Mission Statements

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Stating The Not So Obvious

A Look At Congregational Mission Statements

Several have pointed out in this issue of *Leaven* that questions of "brotherhood" identity are no longer easily answered. While once a sign above the door and a cornerstone that read "Established 33 A.D., this building erected in 1942" were enough to firmly establish the identity of a Church of Christ. Slogans that functioned as creedal non-creeds tripped off the tongue of every member able to count to five. The plea for non-denominational Christianity was sufficiently clear to provide the reason for existence for every congregation. Mission or identity statements were not needed, save perhaps for Leroy Brownlow's "Why I am a Member of the Church of Christ."

A sure sign that issues of identity in our tradition are up for grabs can be seen in the recent proliferation of congregational mission statements. Some are sufficiently short to place on the cover of the worship bulletin, or to embroider on a banner to hang in the church foyer. Others, however, are longer and are quite diverse in the types of commitments expressed. We have provided two that represent many of those we looked at for publication. The first is shorter and comes in language far different than the stock phrases of the past. The second is a longer, kinder, and gentler restatement of the themes that have woven themselves throughout our history. Other than the introduction just given, we offer them without comment for your consideration and reflection.

Decatur Church of Christ, Decatur Georgia Vision Statement

The Decatur Church of Christ desires to be a body of saints that:

- acknowledges God as the creator and center of our whole lives and Jesus as our Savior,
- is united in our love of God and one another,
- is concerned about justice, mercy and faithfulness, and deeply aware of our own shortcomings,
- is committed to knowing God and doing his will as expressed in God's word, the Bible,
- is committed to sharing the good news of God's love and mercy as expressed in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
- is sensitive and caring about others and responsive to both the physical and spiritual needs of those less fortunate than we,
- is diligent in following God's commandments yet careful not to convert personal preferences into "additional requirements,"
- accepts diversity of opinions within the body and recognizes the need to continue to expand our understanding of God's will,
- provides an opportunity for individual service and supports the efforts of every member who wants to be involved.

Who We Are and Why We Care

East County Church of Christ

(Adapted from a publication of the Western Hills Church of Christ, Temple Texas)

Perhaps you have heard of the church of Christ, or known people who attended worship services at the church of Christ. Maybe you have asked, "Who are these people? What, if anything, makes them different from the other churches around me?" You may even have heard someone say, "Oh, they are the folks who think they're the only ones going to heaven!" While this last statement is not true, there are unique characteristics about the church of Christ and its people that we would like for you to know. We hope you'll take the time to read on and discover what we do believe about the Bible, about God's will for humans, and about our life together as a community seeking to "**reflect the Lord's glory.**"

What we Believe

The God who created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1) also created humans in his image and gave them responsibility for the care and keeping of earth. God loved those whom he had created in his image and desired that they return his love by living according to his design. Beginning with the first man and women, however, humans sinned and fell short of God's intended design. The Bible is an account of God's activity in human affairs to bring people back into relationship with him. But God's people never are capable of keeping his commandments perfectly. Because sin so tainted God's people and impaired the relationship he originally desired, God culminated his plan to establish permanent relationship by becoming human himself.

We believe that Jesus of Nazareth is God having come in the flesh (John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:5-11) as God the Son. As Matthew states in his gospel account, Jesus was Emmanuel, a name which means "God with us." Jesus was born of a virgin; he lived a life free from sin and demonstrated in his life and ministry on earth what God intended from the beginning of creation for all humans. But God's plan was only partially fulfilled in the life of Jesus. His ultimate mission on earth was completed only when he was rejected and humiliated by his peers, suffering the death of a criminal by crucifixion on a cross. Jesus Christ then conquered evil and death itself, being raised on the third day after he died, and returning to God forty days later where he now reigns. There he is preparing an eternal dwelling place for all who have been called by God to be his children. At a time known only to God, Jesus will return at the end of earthly time and judge the

world. Those who believe in him will receive a heavenly reward. Those who have rejected him will be eternally lost.

We believe that in his death and resurrection, Jesus offered himself as a once-for-all sacrifice for the sinful condition of humanity. As part of his steadfast love and grace, God has now offered all humans the opportunity to receive pardon for sin and eternal relationship with him. That is the nature of salvation—freedom from the condemnation of our sins through faith in Jesus as God's Son and as Redeemer of humanity.

We believe that salvation is a free gift of God that humans can never merit by good deeds or any other human performance. By placing complete trust in what Jesus has done for us, we seek to submit once more to God's design for humans and we seek to make Jesus the role model for our lives. For Jesus to be our role model, and for us fully to receive the salvation he offers, we believe that we must participate in the cross event ourselves by dying to our sinful ways and living as Jesus lived. We, too, must symbolically die and be raised to new life in Christ Jesus. Scripture describes a gracious gift through which God enables us to experience that death, burial, and resurrection. That gift is baptism, the believer's immersion in water (Romans 6:1-6). We believe that all who have submitted by faith to the Cross of Christ through personal experience of that event in baptism receive the forgiveness of sins. At the same time, God places his Holy Spirit within them (Acts 2:38). Anyone thus identified with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is a Christian. Although we do not fully understand the operation of the Holy Spirit in our lives, by faith we believe that God's Spirit indwells us and guarantees our eternal inheritance as God's children (Ephesians 1:14). It is God's Spirit that creates unity among believers and makes us into the dwelling place of God—God's temple (Ephesians 2:11-22, 4:3; I Corinthians 3:16-17).

Thus, to become a Christian is to become a member of the community of believers on earth, God's church. The church is God's support group for his people as they seek to live as Jesus lived, in love and harmony with one another and with God's design for humanity. We believe that the church as God designed it has no color or race barriers, no economic or educational standards, but includes any and all in our world who have accepted God's gracious salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and participation in the Cross event.

Our Spirit of Restoration

God desires that all humans should be restored

to right relationship with him. A new human barrier to the process began in the early centuries after Jesus died, as more and more human additions and structures were added to the church and demanded of peoples' lives. We believe that through the centuries, Christian unity has been obstructed by human creeds and names and traditions. We are struggling as a community of believers to be *Christian Only*, to find our identity not in any denominational name or creed, but in Christ alone. We desire to make our lives and our worship as God-centered and God-glorifying as possible. We believe that Scripture alone can provide the guidelines for living such a lifestyle in our secular world. As we seek to apply the Bible to our own time, we believe that we must first understand what God intended for the original recipients of each text.

We understand that we have not yet perfectly restored God's design for the church or for humans in our individual walks with God. But by God's grace, we as God's children—God's community of believers here in Gresham are seeking every day to become more like Jesus and to share the good news of salvation with those who do not yet know God or his Son.

What's in a Name

Because we want to be *Christians Only*, we have no denominational ties or bureaucratic government as a church. Each congregation that wears the name "Church of Christ" shares a common allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior, and often there are close ties of fellowship between sister congregations. Each church is self-governed, however. Rather than having a head Pastor who is looked upon as the single leader of the church, our congregation has spiritual overseers that we identify as elders. These men seek to observe the Biblical pattern of church leadership described by Jesus: "...and whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43, 44). As the greatest servants, and as the spiritual shepherds (I Peter 5:1-4), the elders are responsible for the spiritual direction and welfare of the congregation. All others in the church are servants of one another, with some being assigned more specific responsibilities than others. Staff members such as the preaching minister or the family life minister or the youth minister all are servants of the community of believers and, like other members of the community, are under the oversight of the elders.

As a congregation we participate in God's worldwide mission to restore sinful people to God. Our ministries to the spiritual and physical needs of the

world around us take a variety of forms: supporting missionary endeavors, providing benevolent assistance, offering counseling services, operating the Tree of Knowledge Preschool, hosting a great variety of activities and classes. The list could go on, but you get the point. The family of God as East County seeks to be all that God wants us to be, and we want to offer God's love to all who wish to share in it with us. For the entire community of faith, each day is seen as a new gift from God, a new opportunity to glorify God and his Son by bringing the presence of God through his Holy Spirit to the world around us.

What You Can Expect

Usually when people think about church, they think about what goes on in the worship services on Sunday morning. As God's people, we believe that worship is not just a once-a-week service, but the offering of our daily lives, moment by moment, in praise to God (Romans 12:1-2, Hebrews 13:15-16). Our coming together, whenever we have the opportunity, is made meaningful because our praise becomes a shared experience of learning and spiritual growth. Such gatherings provide strength for living through the rest of the week. We want our assemblies to be encounters with God, as we praise him in song, as we read his word and are instructed through preaching, and as we humbly share our thoughts with God in prayer.

Visitors to our assemblies notice that our singing is without the accompaniment of any musical instruments. We do not use a piano or organ for two reasons: 1. We want our praise to God to be the voice of our hearts as much as the voice of our mouths, and so we emphasize the human participation of voices in song (Ephesians 5:19-20). In our Sunday morning assemblies, rather than being entertained by others, we want to edify one another. 2. As part of our concern to worship according to God's design, we recognize that musical instruments were not introduced into the Christian church until the 6th century AD. Other religious leaders through the centuries, such as John Calvin, John Wesley, and Charles Spurgeon have opposed instrumental music in the assembly because of its absence in the New Testament and early church. We believe that aesthetically and spiritually you will enjoy human voices without instrumental accompaniment.

A second distinction you may notice when you visit our assemblies is the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. Jesus himself instituted this memorial supper shortly before his death (Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:23-26). From the earliest days of the church, Christians have participated in this meal to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I

Corinthians 11:26). The bread and the cup symbolize the body and blood of Jesus given for us on the cross. To partake of the bread and the cup is to participate once more in the body and blood of our savior. Each time we eat and drink, we celebrate the salvation we have received through faith in Christ. As we share again his body and blood, we renew the commitments made in our own baptism. In the Supper, we also recognize our mutual commitments to one another as the body of Christ—the church—on earth now (I Corinthians 10:16-17). The Lord's Supper is thus a vital connecting link that continually reminds us of our identity in the Cross of Christ and our identity as the body of Christ on earth.

While each of our Sunday morning assemblies will characteristically include singing, prayer, the Lord's Supper, preaching, and the reading of Scripture, we have no set liturgy that is followed. Each week is a new assembly, a new encounter with God, a new participation with one another as community. While the "order of worship" may change or remain the same, we understand that beyond the individual acts of worship there is the activity of worship—rendering to God reverence and praise and awe for his steadfast love.

An Open Invitation

As already suggested, membership in this fellowship is determined first and foremost by one's faithful response to Jesus and participation with him in the cross. All such people are members of the Lord's church, and as such are welcome to be identified specifically with this body of believers to serve and worship God with us. We hope you will give us the opportunity to be ministers of God's presence and we offer our services to you in whatever way we may help. More than that, we hope that you will

examine your own life and decide to be God's child, accepting his gracious offer of salvation. We welcome the opportunity to share more of ourselves with you, and we want you to know who we are trying to become as a community of believers here in Gresham. Join us for worship, or come by our offices anytime during the week. We want to respond to you and your needs in whatever way we can. We pray that the following vision is one you will want to share.

A Prayer of Vision for East County

We pray that God will make of us what he wants us to be. May he grant us a vision of his church, the very Body of Christ, crucified then risen to be a living sacrifice. Giving God all love and God's love to all, we will be a priesthood of Christlike servants fully invested in the work of His Kingdom. Ours will be a rich and varied fellowship where diversity and unity uphold each other. As a people of the Book, we will be immersed in the Word as, each time we hear it, God speaks to us afresh. As a body of ministers, we will share the equipping and mutual support that enables us to reach out to each other and to a world in need of Christ. As a church on its knees, Spirit filled and led, we will look solely to God to define and empower our mission. As an assembly of worshippers, we will celebrate the divine presence in ways always God-glorifying and body-edifying. As a Family for families, we will support the home and enrich its relationships. Blind to human barriers that separate, responsive to persons in need, we will serve with gratitude as we are saved by grace. We pray that God will make us, indeed, a church of Christ!

Written by John O. York