

1-1-2000

Christ Church: A New Beginning in Tuscon, Arizona

Dan Rhodes

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rhodes, Dan (2000) "Christ Church: A New Beginning in Tuscon, Arizona," *Leaven*: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 12.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss4/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.

CHRIST CHURCH: A New Beginning in Tucson, Arizona

Three Streams in the Desert, One Church in the Foothills: A proposal for planting a new church

BY DAN RHODES

Growing up in the Churches of Christ, I often found myself struggling with our history of contradictions. While we stressed the importance of unity, we were most known for isolation and division. Moreover, the Churches of Christ had in fact sprung from division in a movement that was trying to bring unity to a wider group of competing Protestant churches on the rugged American frontier. The remaining branch of the movement also divided, into Independents and Disciples, and some Disciples have further polarized into "renewal" and "non-renewal" camps. It has long distressed me that, for all our emphasis on unity, I have witnessed very little unity and bridge building either in the Stone-Campbell movement as a whole or in my particular stream of the tradition.

Consequently, I am very encouraged by the ongoing mission of the World Convention

of Churches of Christ, various presentations that have encouraged us to "come to the table," and recent meetings in Cincinnati and Indianapolis that have sought to restore dialogue among the three streams of the movement. Perhaps as dialogue continues, churches across the spectrum may begin to acknowledge each other by cooperating in real and meaningful local ministry.

Concurrent with the renewed interest in dialogue, an actual plan for visible unity is being attempted in Tucson, Arizona. An ad hoc group of representatives from the three streams of the Stone-Campbell movement has been meeting to discuss cooperating to begin a new congregation. Specifically, the stated objective is this:

Utilizing individuals from churches having a common heritage in the Stone-Campbell movement, plant a church in an area of Tucson that is not heavily

churched and which has no representation from our heritage, reaching out into the community and growing a church of committed, serving, and worshiping Christians.

Idea

The call for unity is divine. The actualization of unity requires the involvement of humans interacting over time, interpreting God's will through their experiences. This particular idea has been intriguing to me for some time. In 1999 the idea became a possibility, and it is now becoming a reality.

In looking back to ascertain what brought me to this point, I can see that both the hand of God and the wisdom and foolishness of his people have contributed to my journey! At age eight, having grown up in a non-instrumental tradition, I was faced with the dilemma of a piano when attending Vacation Bible School at the

Christian Church in our small Oklahoma town. The dilemma became more pronounced when I returned home and was asked by my parents if I had participated in the singing. Both my answer and their reaction seem to have been prophetic of what is now transpiring in my religious experience. The purpose of this article is to describe the proposal for this new beginning and the recent history that preceded it. Standing behind it is the belief that the idea of a unified, cooperative approach to doing church is from God.

History

In retrospect, I believe that the Spirit led a small group of disenfranchised Church of Christ people to the door of a Disciples congregation in 1994. With little money, little organization, and little time, we secured a place to meet. What eventually became Desert Oasis Community Church of Christ met for the first time on May 15, 1994, under the rubric of "Christians Together: Free in Christ, Praising God" in the facilities of Capilla del Sol Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The worship program was reproduced on the copy machine at an Independent congregation, Pantano Christian. That Sunday afternoon service was a cappella and was attended not only by those Church of Christ pilgrims but also by a few well-wishers, the minister of an instrumental Church of Christ, and the minister of our host church.

The Disciples minister not only welcomed us with open

arms, but he was excited, even fascinated, by our being there and by what might develop. We were soon sharing much more than facilities. We preached for each other as needed. Our educational programs became a combined effort. From time to time we assembled together for worship, sharing in special services and musical presentations. Both congregations learned and benefited from each other.

Transition

Desert Oasis served a very necessary purpose in the lives of several families. However, ac-

**Our rhetoric has
been laced with
"unity," yet we
have not been
whole; we have
not been a
healing witness
in our world.**

knowledging that we had not grown as we had hoped, we concluded that we were not very "marketable." We were small, predominately a cappella, and identity challenged (which was the only downside of the association with our host church). Moreover, the northwest part of Tucson, where we were meeting, is relatively well churchied; that is, the ratio of churches to popu-

lation is greater than in other areas of the city. We found ourselves needing to exist apart from our host, yet needing to be together with other Christians. We became a church in transition, meeting temporarily in facilities closer to our targeted area.

Through all this, I kept hearing Jesus' prayer for believers—"That they may all be one." Theologically, unity must be more than "live and let live." Our rhetoric has been laced with "unity," yet we have not been whole; we have not been a healing witness in our world. Finally, I personally came to the point of feeling that confession was necessary: I am sorry for the division, the separation, the ostracizing, and the ignoring of God's people, especially those of us from a common heritage, who have professed common goals. I have shared this confession as I have communicated with church leaders and former colleagues in the academic arena in all three streams of our heritage.

From coast to coast there has been an overwhelming affirmation to proceed with a plan to effect some unity among those of us with a common heritage. Heritage, not history! We have a wonderful heritage of strong biblical, intellectual, ideal, and even radical aspects. Unfortunately, we also have a history—baggage. Over the years, our ideal of unity became overshadowed by our call to get "back to the Bible"—to be "right." For some, being "right" (however idiosyncratically defined) was more important than being

righteous or staying together. But somehow, dividing to be “right” seems to be wrong.

What if we were together? Some have asked, “Is your goal to unify all these churches?” That is somewhat beyond our plan or our capabilities. However, who knows what God may do with willing hearts? A friend and Disciples pastor remarked, “You’re trying to restore the Restoration movement.” But that is not the objective. The objective is to put back together, in one place and time, people from all three strands of our movement. If this encourages further dialogue that leads to cooperation and unity on a larger scale, all the better.

Meeting Together

Based on proximity to the targeted area, representatives from two Churches of Christ, two Independent Christian Churches, and two Disciples congregations were invited to a May 1999 meeting, hosted by Desert Oasis Community Church of Christ, for a presentation of the rationale of our efforts. At a subsequent meeting, the group asked me to produce a position paper that would clarify the objective and outline a preliminary description of the proposed church. My task was to project a possibility.

In early July, each member of the committee received a copy of the position paper, which included a vision and rationale statement for the message, mission, and ministry of the new congregation. The paper served

also to delineate some of the logistics, isolate some potential problem areas, and articulate some of the specifics that would be involved in launching and maintaining this venture.

Following the distribution of the position paper, subsequent conversations concerning this adventure have served to clarify some issues and concerns and to outline appropriate ways of communicating the plan and determining interest among the members of the various congregations.

Location

Even prior to the formulation of the specifics of the plan, the area was defined. A map that highlighted the targeted area was a focal point at the first meeting. The location of each existing congregation in Tucson, color coded to indicate the segment of our heritage to which it belonged, was clearly marked. Eight churches were located within the targeted area (approximately 55 square miles), although most were on the periphery and none were from the Stone-Campbell heritage.

Approximately 80,000 people live in this predominantly upper-middle-class area. Statistics derived from Stone-Campbell congregations revealed that there are 281 family units from these churches residing in the area. The proposal identified an optimal location for the new church (physical facility) near the center of the area. Other acceptable locations, along with possible

locations for an initial, temporary meeting place, were listed as well. For churches considering participation in this cooperative effort, however, projecting the shape of the new church was an even greater concern than location.

Shaping the Church

The church will be shaped from the great principles of our heritage: respect for and attention to scripture, freedom in Christ, and the unity of all believers. “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” We are “Christians only, but not the only Christians.” We will be Christians, disciples of Christ, in a church of Christ.

Organization

By heritage, nature, and necessity, the church will be autonomous. As a combined, unity effort, the church will not be solely “one of our [segment’s] churches.” We will seek fellowship with, and hope to be acknowledged and supported by, all segments. Those who have made a personal profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and have been baptized will be recognized as members.

Aspects of congregational, presbyterian, and pastoral models will be used in designing the leadership structure. With a strong pastoral presence and a shepherding mode, the congregation will select representatives as a leadership group. These will be selected on the basis of their spiritual maturity, leadership

ability, and desire to serve. The leaders will not be viewed primarily as decision makers. Each decision will be made at the level appropriate for that decision. The leaders will facilitate in translating the vision of the church into the logistics of ministry.

This adventure will necessitate the actualization of the priesthood of all believers. Involvement, participation, ministries, and leadership will be determined by the individual members' spiritual gifts and interests rather than some preconceived structure. The church may cooperate with other groups in efforts of evangelism, benevolence, and education. Nationally, this may include such entities as a board of missions and Manna International. Locally, cooperative ventures may include such endeavors as Habitat for Humanity and CrossSTREETS.

Name

For a heritage that has historically made claims of being undenominational or nondenominational, we always seem to have given considerable attention to naming. Obviously, we are only a part of Christendom. Acknowledging that we are denominated, however, does not ipso facto endorse denominational structure as the most beneficial or efficient way of organizing the church. Denominational structure may, in fact, advertise the divided state of Christianity more than accentuating that a church is a part of a united whole.

A group or individual church is neither valid nor invalid

because of the description that is employed, that is, the sign over the door. Since we come as members of the Christian Church, Churches of Christ, and Disciples of Christ, attention has been given to those designations. However, our attempts at some conflation of those names have not been satisfactory. At this point, the designation *CHRIST CHURCH in the Foothills* will be employed. Other viable possibilities include CHRIST CHURCH—Foothills; CHRIST CHURCH; Christ Community Church—Foothills; Community Christian Church; and Desert Oasis Community Church.

Worship

The primary function of the church is to glorify God. Most visibly, worship will be public, positive praise in a corporate assembly on the Lord's day. Worship will include praise, prayer, involvement in God's word, and fellowship in giving and in the Lord's Supper each Sunday.

Worship style might be described as eclectic or varied. At times it will be more contemporary; at other times, more traditional. At times it will be fully congregational; at other times, predominantly focused on a praise team, a choir, or an individual presentation. The worship components will be chosen as they fit the overall theme of a particular service. The amount of time devoted to hymns, special music, a sermon, and so forth may vary from week to week.

We acknowledge that God

can be glorified as we sing a cappella and/or with accompaniment. The conflict concerning instrumental music is viewed as unfortunate, unnecessary, and perhaps the medium for reflecting other, deeper emotional, sectional, and political rifts between churches. The use of instrumentation may facilitate worship. Some hymns and contemporary Christian music need instrumentation. Some music, however, is better presented in the classical style appropriate for the chapel—a cappella. Those who plan and execute the worship will make an appropriate determination. Thus in a single service or perhaps a series of services, both traditions will be affirmed.

From Idea to Reality

We are now in the process of transitioning from idea to reality. We are taking these steps carefully and patiently. On the one hand, we may use Jesus' phraseology—we must "launch out into the deep" and "have faith the size of a mustard seed." On the other hand, we are not suggesting simply that "if we build it, they will come." We do believe that if we come together, we can plant an effective church. We may not always make the best choices. However, we will enhance and empower each other as we place ourselves under the lordship of Jesus, yield ourselves to the will of God, and allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit.

As this article goes to press, we are in the process of disseminating information to the mem-

bers of the individual congregations whose representatives have been involved in the discussions. Individuals may participate on various levels. Hopefully, all Christians will make a commitment to pray for this effort. Likewise, congregations may participate on one or more levels: prayer, planning, program and budget, fellowship and support system, and identification of potential charter members. Charter members may be individuals from our heritage who have a particular interest in participating in this new church planting, individuals from our heritage who live in the targeted area, or individuals who were formerly active in a church but now float or no longer attend at all.

Regardless of how wonderful and needed this new church may be, we will not encourage individuals to be a part of the effort unless they feel this is the right course of action. No one should be coerced or pressured; church leaders should not feel threatened by our existence. Once established, our focus will be not on existing congregations but on the unchurched of the community.

The whole process of communication is taking different forms in different churches. Informing and inviting members of the two

Christian Churches was initiated by meeting with the elders and ministerial staff. Following public affirmation and printed announcements, interested individuals will be invited to an informational meeting at each church. In one of the Disciples congregations, discussions with interested persons followed a special Sunday worship in which I participated, and in which the sermon was delivered by a minister from an Independent Christian Church.

Desert Oasis Community Church of Christ has been at the forefront of this effort, praying and working to become a core part of the new church planting. As the idea and plan became clarified – and before the May 1999 meeting – I met with each family unit and shared the vision. Unfortunately, communication and involvement within the other two Churches of Christ has been limited to those who are sharing the plan privately with interested individuals. Following the intracongregational meetings, the next major step in planting the new church will be to assemble all interested persons to pray, share ideas, mesh lives, and determine levels of commitment/participation.

These thoughts and projections regarding the beginning of

the new church are subject to modification both before the church is planted and during the formative stages. The church will not be a duplication of any one church from which its members are drawn or the culmination of any one person's ideas. The planting of this church will be the realization of a dream. While it began as my personal dream, it has become a dream owned, interpreted, and modified by the other participants, as well.

Ultimately, the shape of the church will reflect the wishes of its members as they interpret scripture and make appropriate application in our time and situation. Since the *kerygma* of the early church was focused on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, we would do well to be a "cruciform" church.

I believe that Christians who have so much in common in their heritage can come together to love one another, to help those in need, and to share the gospel. Doing this successfully will be a great witness to our heritage, our community, and the larger world.

DAN RHODES has served as a minister and educator among Churches of Christ. His current identity is best described by what he has written.