

Church History

History & Tradition

AMERICAN RESTORATIONIST ROOTS

The Church of Christ Disciples of Christ began as an organized fellowship in America in the mid-1800s as a branch of the restoration movement. Restorationists sought to restore the church to New Testament teachings and practices by following the Bible as its rule and guide, dropping denominational contrivances such as creeds and non-Biblical rituals. In North Carolina the preaching of James O'Kelly, Barton Stone, Joseph Thomas (the White Pilgrim), and Thomas Campbell delivered the message of Discipleship to the Carolina coast and across to central North Carolina. Churches that came out of their evangelism were the forerunners of Disciple congregations among African American believers.

THE AIM AND PLEA

In 1809, Thomas Campbell, a Presbyterian minister, became displeased with the doctrines of both the Presbyterian and Baptist Church and decided that he would oversee a new congregation at Bush Run, Pennsylvania. He organized this Church of Christ on one principle, "Where the Scripture speaks, we speak; where the Scripture is silent, we are silent." From that statement came our Aim and Plea.

Congregation: We, the Disciples of Christ, wishing to be in complete accord and agreement with the doctrine of Christ, set forth the following principles, which have been the focus of the Church for more than a century.

Minister: General aim of the Church.

Congregation: Restoration of the New Testament teachings and practices.

Minister: Plea of the Church.

Congregation: No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible; no name but the Divine.

Minister: Where the Bible speaks, we speak.

Congregation: Where the Bible is silent, we are silent.

Minister: In essentials unity.

Congregation: In nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

The Aim and Plea of the Church of Christ is not a statement that seeks to define God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, for the Bible has adequately done this. It is a statement that clarifies and reminds all Disciples who we are. This petition is scripturally sound and should be studied and learned by all Disciples.

We, the Disciples of Christ,
This statement identifies us by name. "So shall ye be my Disciples" (John 15:8). Christ calls us His Disciples.

Wishing to be in complete accord

This refers to the unity of the Church on the matters of government as well as faith. The early Church was not divided. It was united in Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6). Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, condemned divisions in "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

And agreement with the doctrine of Christ,
The Church agrees on the principles and precepts that Christ left for all of His followers (Matthew 28:20, John 7:16).

Set forth the following principles which have been the focus of the Church for more than a century. We understand that the Church has a history of followers in between Apostolic times and the present day who lived and died to hold the light of Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Restoration of the New Testament teachings and practices.

As the New Testament Church moved through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and into modern times, heresies were introduced by evil gain seekers (1 Corinthians 11:19, 2 Peter 2:1).

The Church is first called to teach (Matthew 28:19) so that it may give insight to the blind and liberty to the captives (Luke 4:18-21, Mark 16:20).

No creed but Christ;

Creed comes from the Greek root credo (to believe). We do not accept human-inspired statements of belief regarding Christ. Christ is our only creed (Matthew 17:5, John 11:27, Acts 16:31).

No book but the Bible;

The Bible is the only rule of faith and direction that God left for the Church to follow (Isaiah 8:16, Matthew 4:4, Hebrews 4:12).

No name but the divine.

There is no other name by which one can be saved other than Jesus. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). Jesus Christ is divine, so His name is a divine name. We are to hear Him and His commandments (Matthew 17:5, Acts 4:12).

Where the Bible speaks, we speak.

We are to rely on what the Bible says instead of relying on what people's opinions are. The Church cannot shun any subject in the scripture because others may think it is controversial (Proverbs 30:56, Matthew 5:37, 2 Timothy 3:16).

Where the Bible is silent, we are silent.

For subjects that are not presented in the scriptures, we use the scripture as a reference, but our applications never blur the messages of any text (Deuteronomy 4:2, Revelation 22:8).

In essentials, unity;

In spiritual matters spoken of in the scriptures, the Church strives to be on one accord without wavering. With one voice we speak the gospel and the doctrine of Christ (Psalm 133:1-3, John 17:11, Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Peter 3:8).

In nonessentials, liberty;

For those things that are not Biblical priorities, we exercise wisdom or our own judgment, with diligent care and concern to work out our own salvation (Galatians 5:1-13; 1 Peter 2:16).

In all things, charity.

All works must be done in love (John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 4:8).

AFRICAN AMERICAN EVANGELISM IN NORTH CAROLINA AND BEYOND

Before Emancipation, a number of free African American Disciples convened to form churches. Uniontown Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ is the oldest documented church organized and run by African Americans. After the Civil War, three modes of evangelism worked to bring together the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ:

(1) Free African Americans east of the Tar River sought out free and freed Africans to begin churches;

(2) Freed slaves worked with Christian Church Disciples west of the Tar River to start congregations;
(3) African Americans on both sides of the Tar River evangelized the unchurched and African Americans from denominational churches to become members of the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ. The following table outlines key events in the 19th- and 20th-century chronicles of the Church.

RESTORATION COMES TO NORTH CAROLINA

1790 James O' Kelly of the newly formed Republican Methodists goes to N.C. to preach Discipleship.

1801 Cane Ridge revival begins Barton Stone's ministry for Christian union. Part of America's Second Great Awakening.

1813 Joseph Thomas begins his evangelistic ministry as the White Pilgrim, visiting central N.C.

1833 Thomas Campbell visits Edenton, Pantego, and Greenville, NC, for five months.

INDEPENDENT AFRICAN AMERICANS AND CHURCH RE-IDENTIFICATION

1849-1850 Eastern North Carolina

Reports of free African Americans in Uniontown (Free Union); slaves registered as Disciples. In Pantego Church of Christ and Pungo Chapel.

1854 Uniontown Church of Christ Disciples organized.

1870 African American Congregationalists, O'Kellyites, and members of the Christian Connection rename their four-year old communion the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference.

1873 Disciple elders from the Martin County Convention, including Elders Robert Esom Green, Alfred Pettiford, and Joseph Whitley, are listed in the Christian Annual report on the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference.

1874 African American Disciple elders leave the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference due to differences in doctrine and church order.

1868 West of the Tar River

Annual Conference of Disciples of Christ in N.C. votes to separate from black Disciples. Benevolent elders such as Dr. John J. Harper and Pastor, J. R. Winfield assist the new churches.

1869 African American Disciples submit funds to white Disciples to have their minutes printed.

1872 Alexander C. Hart and Joseph Henry Foy (white Disciples) sent by the Hookerton District to preach to African American Baptists in the west and to Stony Creek in October.

1872 First recorded meeting of African American Disciples Assembly minutes west of the Tar River at Stony Creek, in Lenoir County, organized by Elder Alfred Lovick, Sr., Elder Demas Hargett, and Elder Allen Chestnut.

1883 The Church Unites

In Oct., a letter sent by African American Disciples from the east coast of North Carolina to those in Bentonville (west of the Tar River) by Elder Robert Esom Green, urging a merger between the African American Disciples.

1886 Elder Robert E. Green of eastern N.C. goes west to attend the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Goldsboro-Raleigh Disciples at Vine Swamp Church, Lenoir County; Green was named Asst. Moderator over the session.

The 1886 Minutes read: That we shall incorporate ourselves to be known as the Eastern and Western North Carolina Disciples of Christ, and that we petition the [state] General Assembly of North Carolina to be incorporated as such.

1887 October, first official meeting of east and west Disciples of Christ (African American) at St. Mary's Church, Lake Comfort, Hyde County.

1892 Elder Alfred Offie Pettiford, pastor of Uniontown and Spring Green, dies, March 6.

1892 Western Assembly assembles at Bentonville, Johnston County, November 17.

1894 Establishment of a Women's Home Mission to build new churches and ministries.

1895 Elder William A. James writes for the Christian Disciples newspaper, The Watch-White Tower.

1898 Disciples collect pledges to build an institute in Pantego.

1902 Disciples purchase a printing press at South Mills, N.C., and publish a monthly publication called Signs of the Times, edited by H. F. Woodhouse.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND DOCTRINAL GROWTH AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

1904 The Eastern Virginia Assembly adds approx. 10 churches to the Church of Christ Assembly in North Carolina, led by Elder J. Tom Pettiford.

1909 Elder Edgar Stonewall Lapidoth Whitfield writes A Message to the Negro Disciples of Christ of Eastern North Carolina.

1910 Goldsboro Christian Institute opens Jan. 3, in Goldsboro, N.C. with 40 pupils. Elder Edgar Whitfield was the principal.

1910 General Assembly reorganized into two districts; Quadrennial Assembly instituted; the names Goldsboro-Raleigh and Washington-Norfolk Assemblies coined.

1913 Elder William A. James prints a defense of feet-washing as an ordinance of the church.

1914 First quadrennial General Assembly convened. Elder William A. James named Chief Elder of the General Assembly for life.

1922 Elder Charles R. D. Whitfield writes a combination history and theology, Brief History of the Negro Disciples of Christ.

1923 Chief Elder William A. James passes.

1926 Teacher J. H. Battle writes a historical and theological treatise, The Colored Disciples of Eastern North Carolina.

1931 Elder Clinton Whitfield begins publication of the Christian Reformer, which becomes in 1932 The Disciples' Herald, with Elder Oscar S. Lucas of the NEDA as editor.

NORTHERN AND INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION

1925 Elder Charles H. Cordon and Elder Oscar S. Lucas organize St. Peter's Church of Christ in Philadelphia.

1929 St. Mary Church of Christ organized in Brooklyn.

1932 Northeastern District Assembly Church of Christ, Composed of Disciples incorporated.

1940 Title of Chief Elder replaced by Bishop.

1944 Elder Charles R. D. Whitfield passes, July 17.

1948 The Union Assembly established under the leadership of Bishop W. M Hopson.

1954 Disciples resolve to use Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ in their official name.

1959 Elder William Joseph Barber completes research and thesis for The Disciple Assemblies of Eastern North Carolina, the Church's first critical history, published in 1966.

1961 First General Assembly held in the North Eastern District Assembly convened at Shiloh Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ. Resolutions and Bylaws Committee submits reconstituted regulations approved by the church.

1970 First edition of General Manual: The Disciples' Guide to Christian Living published, dealing with doctrine, ethics, and polity.

1972 Ministerial ordination for women confirmed as a General Assembly standard.

1977 Beryl Smith Garrett publishes A Disciple of Christ Church Manual on history and polity.

1987 From Glory to Glory, a book of systematic theology by Bishop William C. Gillams, published posthumously.

1988 All Souls Winning Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ in Liberia adds Nineteen churches. Mission in Guyana, South America begins.

1993 United Fellowship Assembly rejoins General Assembly.

1999 Eleven churches from Ghana join the Goldsboro-Raleigh District.

2000 Mission in Panama begins.

2005 Two-Thousand Disciples convene for their first convention in Togo, West Africa.