

CHRISTIAN STANDARD

+ THE LOOKOUT



the church report

CHURCH PLANTING + TOMORROW'S LEADERS + UNITY

FROM THE PUBLISHER



THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT TODAY

Where is the Restoration Movement today and why do I even need to know this? Well, if you don't know where you came from, how can you know who you are and where you are? And if you don't know that, how can you know where you're going?

The churches of the Restoration Movement came into existence during what is known as the Second Great Awakening, when revival swept across young America. At the time, all churches were denominational . . . Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Congregational, etc. Those denominations required firm adherence to their rules and creeds, but America had just left English rule for independence, and that same desire for freedom saturated the church. The churches that we identify with were at the epicenter of this.

Biblically, we were born out of Jesus' prayer in John 17. Truth, unity, and evangelism were the three pillars in that prayer:

Truth. Jesus prayed that his followers would be sanctified, or set apart, by the truth. He identified that truth in John 17:17 when he said, "Your word is truth."

Unity. Jesus prayed that we would all be brought into complete unity and be one, just as Jesus and the Father are one.

Evangelism. Jesus prayed that the world would know that the Father sent him and would believe in him.

Truth was seen neither as a creed or confession; rather, the entire New Testament was seen as Truth. Unity meant that the walls of division, denominationalism, and sectarianism needed to be erased by agreeing on God's Word exclusively, not on some human interpretation of it. Evangelism meant that the world needed to have that truth delivered to them in unity so that they could hear and respond to the gospel.

So, how have we done at that?

Well, for starters, we were the first nondenominational church in America. That was a big deal then and it's even a bigger deal now! What Barton Stone started in 1801 with the Cane Ridge Revival is now the largest non-Catholic religious movement in America, larger than any denomination! Nondenominational churches have moved from

just over 2 percent of Americans 50 years ago to 13 percent now! Political scientist, statistician, and author Ryan Burge gives five reasons for this:

1. Nondenominational churches are more evangelistic.
2. They invest more into reaching into their communities.
3. They tend not to invest in issues of conflict or division.
4. They don't carry the "name baggage" of denominational churches.
5. They tend to be newer churches with fewer traditions.

Burge's analysis sounds a lot like what the Restoration Movement set out to accomplish in the first place.

We are a movement of churches that believe all church authority is local. This is how all nondenominational churches are now, but it was an innovation of the Restoration Movement. Each church has its own local eldership that determines where it stands on biblical issues; this means there is a great deal of diversity in our churches over debatable issues.

We are committed to the authority of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. This is why we baptize how and when we do. This is why we take Communion weekly. This is why we have a plurality of elders. This is why we make no distinction between clergy and laity. We do Bible things in Bible ways and call them by Bible names. Many nondenominational churches are now committed to these very same things.

We are committed to unity. That unity finds its foundation in God's Word as our only rule of faith and practice. We don't agree on every understanding or interpretation of biblical truth, but we will always fight for (instead of against) relationship because we are stronger together. We are seeing unprecedented unity forming between ourselves and noninstrumental Churches of Christ, African American Churches of Christ, the Disciple Renewal Movement, and the International Churches of Christ. I would have never known about Marshall Keeble, Fred Gray, or the role we played in the Civil Rights Movement without that unity. We build bridges . . . we don't burn them!

We are committed to evangelism. We have always been gospel-centered and preaching-centered. By holding the tension between the infallible truth of God's Word and the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as we preach and share the gospel, the world will know and respond to who Jesus is.

The two most influential founders of this movement were Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell. Stone's journey started when he heard a sermon that God loved everyone, not just those whom the church said God predestined to be loved. That was his defining moment and led to the Cane Ridge Revival early in the Second Great Awakening. Campbell's journey started when he had to show a Communion token in order to receive Communion at church. If the minister of the church didn't think you were worthy, you couldn't have a token. Campbell had a token, but as he went forward to receive Communion and saw that others could not, he threw his token into the collection plate and walked out a "free man in Christ." He went on to write much of what this movement understands and believes in.

Between 1998 and 2018, while denominational churches were cratering in attendance, our largest churches (churches of more than 1,000 in 1998) grew and reproduced 3.6 times! Even more thrilling is that those same churches baptized 3.52 times more people in that same period! Our numerical growth was almost identical to our evangelism! That is nothing short of spectacular!

On the whole, the churches in our movement have recovered strongly from the devastation of COVID. Most of our churches have regained the momentum that was lost. Our church extension funds lead the way with managing financial assets in the most God-honoring way. Together, they are the largest of all extension funds in America. We have three great conferences that target unique and critical concerns of our movement: SpireConference (growth and innovation), Renew.org's Gathering (discipleship and theology), and the International Conference On Missions (world missions). We are currently reinventing our educational processes to raise up the sharpest leaders for our movement's future.

There are so many stories I could tell you . . . but wait—*Christian Standard* has been doing that for 158 years! We encourage you not only to take advantage of subscribing to *Christian Standard*, but also to promote it to your congregations. As a nonprofit ministry, we welcome support from individuals and churches. ■



Jerry Harris is publisher of *Christian Standard Media* and teaching pastor at The Crossing, a multisite church located in three states across the Midwest.

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📘 /jerrydharris

CHRISTIAN STANDARD

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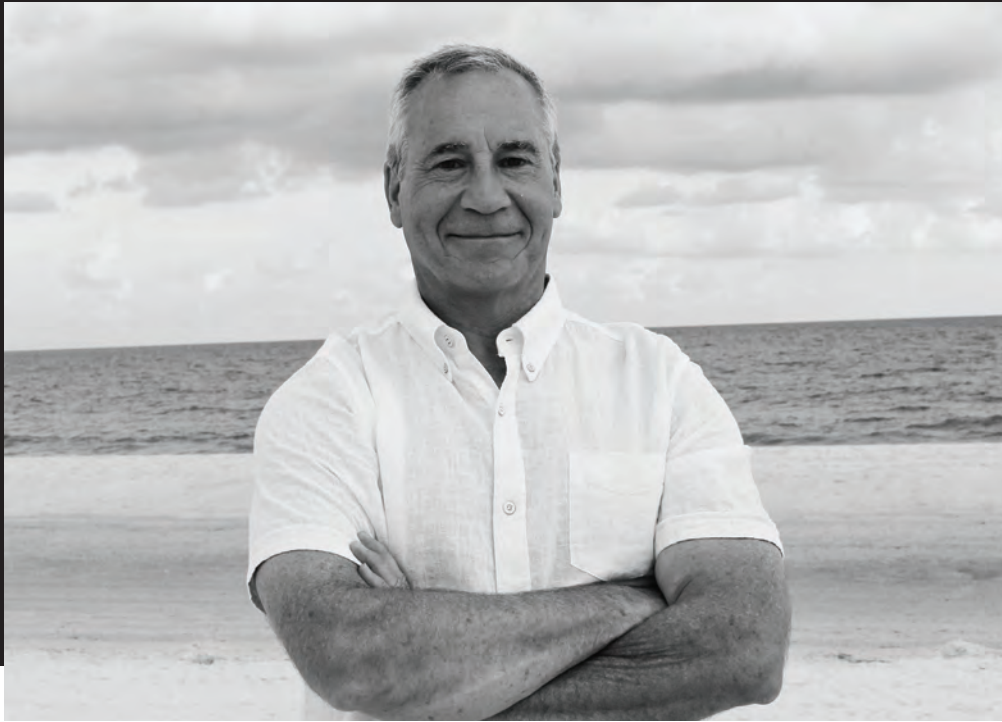
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TO PROVIDE SPACE IN
THIS ISSUE FOR OUR
FULL CHURCH REPORT
AND ITS ACCOMPANYING
MATERIALS, SEVERAL
OF OUR REGULAR PRINT
COLUMNS WILL BE
AVAILABLE ONLINE ONLY.
THESE COLUMNS WILL BE
POSTED THROUGHOUT THE
MONTHS OF MAY AND JUNE.

FROM THE EDITOR



THANKS, JIM!

On May 31, *Christian Standard's* managing editor, **Jim Nieman**, will retire from the position he has held for the past 26 years. In that time Jim has provided a measure of editorial direction, wisdom, excellence, and camaraderie that can't effectively be put into words.

Jim is a consummate editor. A master of the English language, his familiarity with the rules of style, usage, and grammar have made *Christian Standard* not only practical and helpful, but readable.

I asked some of Jim's coworkers and colleagues to share their thoughts on Jim's retirement.

Christian Standard Publisher **Jerry Harris** responded,

When I assumed responsibilities as publisher for *Christian Standard*, I really had no idea what that would actually mean. Having Jim Nieman there really made the difference. Jim had worked for Standard Publishing for decades and had a deep understanding of so many of the systems

and procedures, that I had little to worry about. Through the years, he has been patient with me and operated as a true team player as managing editor. His background as a newspaper journalist gave him great instincts for our news division and two weekly newsletters. He has been foundational to the continuing ministry and excellence of *Christian Standard* and will be missed greatly, but we are excited that his retirement will give more opportunity for him to be with family.

Dave Faust, who writes The Lookout Bible Lesson Application and serves as contributing editor for *Christian Standard*, wrote,

Much of a managing editor's work takes place behind the scenes—assisting writers, editing articles, and collecting news stories—but Jim Nieman deserves public appreciation for his quarter-century of steady stewardship in his work with *Christian*

Standard. He has performed his duties as managing editor with professional excellence and godly wisdom.

I asked freelance journalist **Chris Moon**, who worked closely with Jim for many years to provide feature articles and news items for *Christian Standard*, to share his perspective.

Jim is a great editor. He's got wonderful journalistic skills, and he pairs that with a true compassion for the church. It's one thing to report the news, but it's something special to be able to do that with an eye on the ultimate subject of our reporting, which is the bride of Christ. Ultimately, we are here to encourage and build up the church. Jim never lost sight of this.

Jim is a detailed guy. He's great at surveying the news for good story leads. Whenever he assigns a story to me, he does it with precision and care. Sometimes, he'll do half the reporting for me! He'll include links to related stories, contact information, and a detailed description of how he might approach the story. Yes, his emails sometimes are on the long side, but I appreciate that. And then Jim will end the whole thing with a line like, "But use your best instincts. I trust you." That's what good editors do. And Jim has been one of the best.

It also seemed appropriate that we hear Jim's own words as he enters retirement. So I asked him to respond to a few questions.

When did you begin your work with *Christian Standard*?

My first day with *Christian Standard* was February 23, 1998. I remember that mainly because *Christian Standard's* news editor back then, Ruth Davis, would remind me of it every year. One of her daughters was born on the same day. Ruth and I worked together for several years.

Can you share one or two highlights of your time with the magazine?

When I came to Standard Publishing, I arrived with a journalism degree and a background in newspapers. Sure, I

grew up in one of our churches, but everyone at *Standard* seemed to have degrees from Christian colleges. Many had been working at *Standard* for 30-plus years. It was somewhat intimidating. *Did I really belong?* But my first boss, editor Sam Stone—and everyone else, for that matter—definitely made me feel welcome.

I recognized I was hired for my editing abilities and not my Bible knowledge. I still sometimes tell people that *Standard* hired me *despite* my background.

During my second year, Sam asked me to write the main article for a special-run brochure we produced called "Jesus, His Church, and You." I wrote the article in a couple of days, and I was pleasantly surprised that Sam not only liked it, but he edited it with a light hand. After it was printed, several people in the office complimented me on the article. It helped me feel like I belonged.

Another highlight in that regard is when Mark Taylor, about a year into serving as editor, asked me to do first edits of all articles. He showed a lot of trust in me. I've continued to fulfill that duty for about 20 years.

In recent years, it's kind of funny—and a little sad—that I've become the magazine's longest-serving employee. Also, over time, I've become the magazine's de facto historian.

What have you most appreciated about your work with CS?

Over the years, I've really enjoyed getting to know co-workers I see or interact with every day, as well as our readers and people who help us produce the magazine.

My bosses have all been great and godly influences—Sam Stone, Mark Taylor, Mike Mack, and Shawn McMullen. I also learned a lot from and developed friendships among people in the editorial department, among other designers, and even among our off-site printing liaisons.

Even though the magazine's circulation has faced challenges, I appreciate that when we ask someone to write for us, they are inclined to say yes. And even if they can't, they are always very gracious and supportive of our work.

Our writers and our subscribers almost to a person are always very encouraging and appreciative. They've been a pleasure to work with and serve. That's been quite a contrast from taking angry phone calls when I worked as a city editor at a daily newspaper.

Is there anything you would like to say to CS readers as you make this transition?

I've tried to keep God and our readers constantly in mind throughout my career with *Christian Standard*, whether in my writing, editing, or website work. *What will help our readers as I write this, edit this, assign this, design this, and post this?* When I think of our readers, I often picture my grandmother, who would pick up a copy of the magazine every Sunday at her church in Frankfort, Kentucky. I never want to disappoint anyone.

What do you plan to do in retirement?

Ruth Davis used to describe the pressure of producing a periodical as “relentless.” She was right. It will be good to get out from under those deadlines . . . the very real feeling that there's always some aspect of this job and ministry that I could be working on. It's a feeling that has only intensified during the past seven years of working remotely.

My wife, Mary, and I have been married for almost 35 years. We want to travel more, and visit our two children, who now live hundreds of miles away . . . and our first grandchild.

I started some writing projects almost 20 years ago that I feel compelled to revisit. Maybe I'll start a blog—America needs more of those, right? I also like to read, go on daily walks with my wife, and run a few times a week. I don't have it all mapped out, but I'm looking forward to it!

Jim, you have blessed our editorial team, thousands upon thousands of readers, and the legacy of *Christian Standard* in remarkable ways. We'll miss your presence and guidance, and we'll always be grateful for your ministry. ■



WELCOME, RICK!

On June 3, **Dr. Rick Cherok** will assume the role of managing editor for *Christian Standard*. Rick comes to us with an extensive background in academia, Christian publishing, and Restoration Movement history. As founder and executive director of Celtic Christian Mission, Rick brings to the post a passion for global evangelism as well.

To help us welcome Rick to the *Christian Standard* team, I asked his soon-to-be colleagues to share their thoughts about his arrival.

Publisher **Jerry Harris** observed,

I never cease to be amazed at how God has provided for this ministry. He provided Shawn McMullen after the unexpected passing of Mike Mack, and now, with the retirement of Jim Nieman, he has provided Rick Cherok as our new managing editor. Rick comes with a wealth of experience, not only in editing and writing, but with two bachelor's degrees in biblical studies, two master's degrees in education and history, and a PhD in history. He has been a professor at Cincinnati Christian University and Ozark Christian College, also teaching at Hope International University and Mid-South Christian College. He has been an editor at College Press Publishing and has been senior minister at multiple churches in our movement. To me, this means that he sees ministry from both a professor's and practitioner's point of view. He is widely published and committed to world missions. I am excited to welcome Rick into this ministry and to learn from him!

Contributing Editor **Dave Faust** noted,

While we will miss Jim, I can't think of anyone better qualified to succeed him than Rick Cherok, with his decades of experience as a college professor, missions enthusiast, editor, and preacher. Rick understands our movement's history and values, and he is a friend to the church and its leaders. I am glad to add my voice to the chorus of friends saying, "Thanks, Jim, for your faithful service," and "Welcome, Rick, to the ministry of *Christian Standard*!"

I doubt you'll find anyone among our churches who loves and appreciates the Restoration Movement more than Rick. His experience and skill set will be an invaluable addition to our ministry.

Welcome, Rick! We look forward to serving Christ and his church with you for many years to come. ■

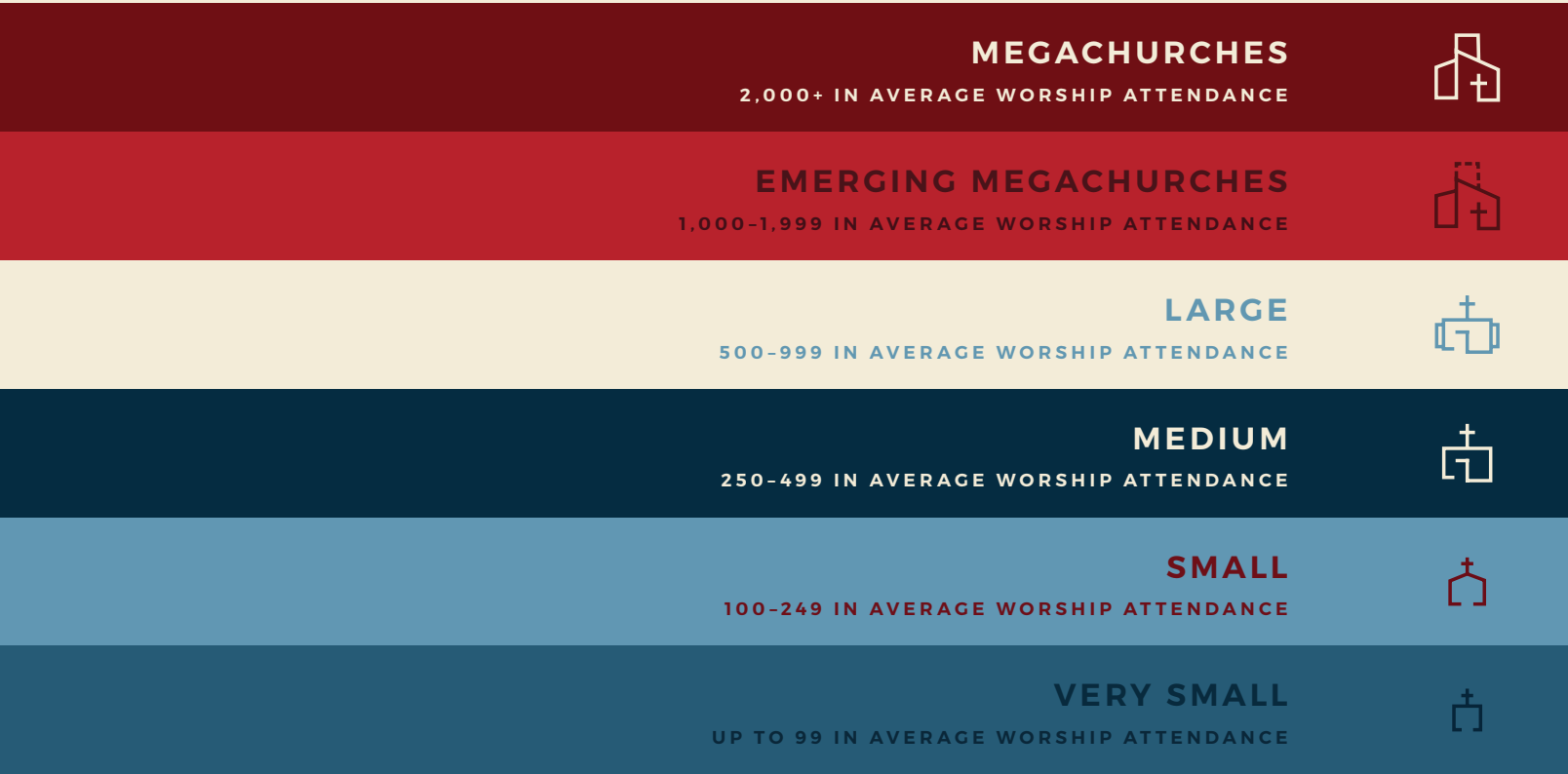


 @shawn.a.mcmullen

 /shawn.a.mcmullen



2023 church report



THE *CHRISTIAN STANDARD*
CHURCH REPORT
for Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ

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2023

THE NEW NORMAL?

By Kent Fillinger

The term “new normal” first appeared during the 2008 financial crisis. It refers to the dramatic economic, cultural, and social transformations that caused instability and social unrest, impacting collective perceptions and individual lifestyles. This term was used again during the COVID-19 pandemic to point out how it transformed essential aspects of human life and church practices.

The pandemic caused some churches to refocus or redefine their ministry practices. It caused some Christians to reshape their spiritual habits and practices. Four years removed now from the pandemic’s onset, our annual church survey helps to shine a light on where we stand as a movement of churches.

This year, 314 churches ranging in size from 10 to almost 50,000 in weekly attendance completed our annual survey by sharing 2023 data; we collected standard information like attendance, baptisms, and giving to note emerging trends and to provide insights into the spiritual practices of believers.

SMALL GROUPS, SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES & SERVING WITH YOUR GIFTS

Past surveys asked churches to identify the methods they use for adult discipleship or spiritual formation, but for the first time, we asked churches to approximate the percentage of adult regular attendees who are connected with a small group of people for Bible study.

Overall, churches estimated that 44 percent of their adult regular attendees are connected to a small-group Bible study. Emerging megachurches (average weekly worship attendance of 1,000 to 1,999) led the way with an estimated 53 percent connected to a group Bible study, while very small churches (99 or fewer in weekly attendance) reported the smallest percentage, 37 percent. The overall responses from individual churches ranged from 3 percent to 88 percent.

By comparison, a September 2022 Lifeway Research study titled “Church Health Indicators in Protestant Churches” reported that same percentage, 44 percent, of current weekend worship attendees were involved in a small group, Sunday school, or similar group. This was a decline from 49 percent in average small group attendance in 2010.

Another new question we asked: ***Approximately, what percentage of your adult regular attendees would you say are pursuing spiritual habits that are helping them to model their life after Jesus?***

The churches responded by saying that over half (52 percent) of their adult regular attendees were pursuing spiritual habits to help them model their life after Jesus. Medium size churches (averaging 250 to 499 weekly) reported the highest percentage of attendees pursuing such habits, 55 percent, while megachurches (2,000 or more

weekly) listed the smallest percentage, just under 50 percent. Responses from individual churches ranged from 10 percent to 95 percent.

We also asked churches to identify ***approximately what percentage of your adult regular attendees are using their spiritual gifts to serve on a regular basis?***

Overall, the churches said 43 percent of their adult attendees were regularly serving and using their spiritual gifts. Megachurches reported the greatest use of gifts and participation by serving, 45 percent, and large churches (averaging 500 to 999) listed the lowest, 40 percent. Responses from individual churches ranged from 10 percent to 90 percent.

The 2022 Lifeway Research study reported 42 percent of adults in Protestant churches volunteer regularly.

For the first time in almost two decades, we asked several questions related to Bible reading, Bible engagement, and biblical literacy to assess how church leaders viewed the habits and practices of their congregations.

Very small churches (averaging 99 or fewer worshippers) had the highest percentage of weekly in-person attendees, 89 percent, followed by medium size churches (averaging 250 to 499 weekly), 85 percent. Megachurches had the smallest percentage of total in-person attendees, 59 percent.

BIBLE READING HABITS

We asked, “In the past year, for your adult regular attendees, approximately what percentage would say their Bible reading has ‘stayed the same,’ ‘increased,’ or ‘decreased?’”

Churches estimated the amount of time spent reading the Bible “stayed the same” for more than half (54 percent) of their adult regular attendees last year. It was estimated that Bible reading “increased” for 34 percent of church members and “decreased” for 12 percent.

By comparison, the American Bible Society’s 2023 State of the Bible report found that only about 14 percent of Americans said they increased their Bible use in the past year. The same study showed that only 25 percent of the population reads the Bible weekly on their own, apart from a church service. Among denominational groupings, however, evangelicals lead the way with more than half (53 percent) using the Bible weekly.

More than half of Americans (52 percent) said they wished they used the Bible more, and nearly three in four Americans (71 percent) said they are curious about the Bible and/or Jesus.

So, *what keeps people from connecting with the Bible?* The State of the Bible survey asked people to identify two significant frustrations from among nine possibilities. The frustrations chosen most were: “I never seem to have enough time to use it” (26 percent), “I don’t know where to start” (17 percent), “I don’t feel that excited about using it” (15 percent), and “I find the language difficult to relate to” (15 percent).

THREE CATEGORIES OF BIBLE ENGAGEMENT

The State of the Bible survey uses three categories to describe people’s relationship to and involvement with the Bible. We adopted their categories and asked our churches to approximate what percentage of their adult regular attendees fit each of the following categories:

- ***Scripture Engaged***—*The Bible impacts their daily lives, helps guide their relationships with God and others, and they regularly read, listen to, and engage with the Bible.*
- ***Movable Middle***—*These people range from those who sporadically interact with the Bible on the low end, to those who periodically open the Bible as a source of spiritual insight and wisdom.*
- ***Bible Disengaged***: *People in this category interact infrequently with the Bible, and it has minimal influence in their lives. “Bible Disengaged” people rarely seek out the Bible, and tend to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.*

The 2023 State of the Bible report said 18 percent of Americans classified themselves as “Scripture Engaged,” down from 28 percent in 2020 (from a survey completed before the pandemic).

By comparison, 45 percent of the churches overall in our survey said their regular adult attendees were “Scripture Engaged.” Over half (53 percent) of the very small churches classified their congregation as “Scripture Engaged,” which was the highest percentage for any of the church size categories.

The State of the Bible report listed 29 percent of Americans as part of the “Moveable Middle” category, which increased from 26 percent in 2020. The churches in our survey surmised that 35 percent of their regular adult attendees were in the “Moveable Middle.” Emerging megachurches said that 38 percent of their adults were in the “Moveable Middle,” which was the highest percentage noted.

Finally, the State of the Bible report noted that over half (53 percent) of Americans qualify as “Bible Disengaged.” Sadly, this percentage has increased from 46 percent in 2020. But our survey participants estimated that only one in five (20 percent) of their regular adult attendees fit the “Bible

Disengaged” category. Large churches reported the largest percentage of “Bible Disengaged” attendees, with 24 percent.

The top three motivations cited for reading the Bible in the State of the Bible survey were: “It brings me closer to God” (47 percent), “I need wisdom for making life decisions” (20 percent), and “I need comfort” (15 percent).

HOW DO CHURCHES ENCOURAGE BIBLE READING?

Our survey asked churches to identify which methods they use to encourage their congregations to read the Bible on their own. The top two responses were by providing reminders to read the Bible in sermons (94 percent) and by providing free Bibles to those needing one (85 percent). Just over three-fourths of the churches (77 percent) said they provide Bible reading plans (print, digital, or online) to their congregation. And the least used methods for promoting Bible reading were through providing reminders by email, e-newsletters, or print newsletters (60 percent) and by putting reminders on the church’s or ministry staff’s social media platforms (54 percent).

HOW BIBLICALLY LITERATE IS YOUR CHURCH?

Our survey asked churches to estimate what percentage of their adult regular attendees would qualify as being “biblically literate” using this definition: “Biblical literacy is the ability to rightly read and understand the Bible using the proper tools of study to become better acquainted with its essential nature and content and then apply discerned meaning to life. It involves a person’s ability to read the Bible with enough understanding to explain its basic meaning.”

Just over half (51 percent) of the churches responding said their adult regular attendees were biblically literate. Individual church responses ranged from 10 percent to 95 percent. Very small churches reported the highest percentage of biblically literate attendees with 57 percent. Emerging megachurches noted the lowest percentage of biblically literate attendees with 48 percent.

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR CHURCH HAS A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW?

We also asked, “Approximately what percentage of your adult regular attendees would you say have a ‘biblical worldview’ using the following definition?: ‘A biblical worldview is a view of the world which seeks to answer

life’s biggest questions from the teachings of the Bible, with a special focus on the gospel storyline.’”

Overall, the churches estimated that 57 percent of their congregants had a “biblical worldview.” Once again, very small churches led the way with 64 percent and emerging megachurches reported the lowest percentage with 52 percent.

These findings are especially interesting considering the 2023 American Worldview Inventory conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, which found that only 4 percent of Americans have a biblical worldview, down from 6 percent in 2020.

Churches we surveyed were asked to respond with “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “uncertain,” “agree,” or “strongly agree” to the following statements about their church. Listed below are the overall percentages of churches that responded with either “agree” or “strongly agree.” For each of the statements, the larger the church, the more likely the responses were “agree” or “strongly agree.”

OUR CHURCH . . .	OVERALL % OF CHURCHES THAT AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED
ENCOURAGES AND HELPS PEOPLE TO DEVELOP PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES.	96%
HELPS PEOPLE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW TO LIVE OUT THEIR FAITH MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY.	95%
REGULARLY STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL MATURITY.	94%
BELIEVES THAT AS THE CULTURAL CONTEXT AROUND US CHANGES, NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH MUST BE CONSIDERED.	87%
CHALLENGES PEOPLE TO BUILD SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE NON-CHRISTIANS.	85%
KEEPS UP WITH THE CHANGING NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITY.	71%
IS INNOVATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL IN SERVING NON-CHRISTIANS OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH.	64%

BAPTISMS BOUNCE BACK

Last year, I noted in “The *Christian Standard* Church Report for 2022: A Year of Transition” that the average number of baptisms per church increased by 7 percent in 2022 compared with the year prior, but it was still 28 percent lower than the pre-pandemic numbers in 2019. I suggested,

The number of baptisms doesn’t correspond to the strong growth rates recorded over the last one to three years. An optimist might argue we are on the verge of a surge in baptisms as new attendees continue to hear the gospel in these churches. But a pessimist might counter that attendance growth possibly was driven by transfers, as people decided to leave their former church during or after the pandemic. Perhaps it’s a combination of the two.

The good news for now is there was a strong resurgence in the number of baptisms in 2023, which eclipsed the 2019 pre-pandemic numbers in almost every way. In 2019, the 439 reporting churches recorded 32,139 baptisms, for an average of 73 baptisms per church. This past year, the 314 churches baptized 28,657—an average of 91 per church—a 25 percent increase from 2019.

The overall baptism ratio (number of baptisms per 100 people in average worship attendance) was 6.5, a 20 percent increase over 2019, when it was 5.4.

It’s impossible to discern if 2023 was an anomaly or if the tide is turning and stronger baptism numbers will continue.

ATTENDANCE & GROWTH

Overall, 79 percent of the churches grew last year, while the remaining 21 percent declined in attendance. Among emerging megachurches, 92 percent of them grew, which was the highest percentage in our survey, while very small churches had the smallest percentage of growing churches, 64 percent.

Emerging megachurches grew an average of 25.2 percent last year, which was the best growth rate for any of the six categories of churches. Small churches (averaging 100 to 249 weekly) had the slowest growth rate at 8.5 percent in 2023. Overall, churches averaged 13 percent growth last year, which tied the growth rate from 2022.

Online worship attendance continued to shrink. In 2022, online attendance represented 28 percent of the total average worship attendance. That percentage slipped to 23 percent in 2023, as more people continued to return for in-person worship services. In 2022, 9 percent of the churches reported an online attendance greater than their in-person attendance. But, last year, that number dropped to 4 percent. Also worth noting, three-fourths (76 percent) of the churches surveyed reported online attendance figures.

Overall average in-person attendance grew by 8 percent last year when compared with 2022. Megachurches saw the biggest increase with 20 percent more in-person attendees on average in 2023. ■

I will share a deep dive into the financial health of our churches in the July/August issue.

// GROWTH		// VERY SMALL	// SMALL
	AVERAGE IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE IN-PERSON ONLY WORSHIP	49 68 CHURCHES	137 74 CHURCHES
	AVERAGE COMBINED ATTENDANCE IN-PERSON AND ONLINE WORSHIP	55 68 CHURCHES	162 74 CHURCHES
	ATTENDANCE THAT GREW VS. DECLINED % OF CHURCHES THAT GREW LAST YEAR % OF CHURCHES THAT DECLINED LAST YEAR	64% 36%	80% 20%
	TOTAL ATTENDANCE GROWTH RATES	9.0%	8.5%
// BAPTISM		67.3% FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF TYRONE, TYRONE, GA	56.5% CHURCH OF CHRIST GREATER NEW ORLEANS, ST. BERNARD, LA
	TOP 3 FASTEST-GROWING CHURCHES	42.9% NORTH BALTIMORE CHURCH OF CHRIST, NORTH BALTIMORE, OH	38.2% OAK PARK CHRISTIAN CHURCH, GROVER BEACH, CA
		39.1% MT BETHEL CHRISTIAN CHURCH, LIMESTONE, TN	36.1% FAITH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, NEW PHILADELPHIA, OH
	BAPTISMS CATEGORIZED BY TOTAL ATTENDANCE	241 PEOPLE AVERAGE 4 PER CHURCH	840 PEOPLE AVERAGE 11 PER CHURCH
	BAPTISM RATIOS BASED ON BAPTISMS PER 100 IN AVERAGE WEEKLY WORSHIP ATTENDANCE	6.2	7.1
// FUN FACTS		30.8 GREENWOOD CHRISTIAN CHURCH, GREENWOOD, MO	31.5 CROSS CULTURE CHURCH, AURORA, CO
	TOP BAPTISM RATIOS	24.0 NORTH BALTIMORE CHURCH OF CHRIST, NORTH BALTIMORE, OH	23.8 EMMAUS CHURCH, BURLINGTON, ON, CANADA
		23.1 PEELED OAK CHRISTIAN CHURCH, OWINGSVILLE, KY	20.0 REAL LIFE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BEND, OR
	AVERAGE START DATE OF CHURCHES	1927	1942

// MEDIUM

// LARGE

// EMERGING MEGA

// MEGA

320

54 CHURCHES

591

38 CHURCHES

1,088

43 CHURCHES

4,499

37 CHURCHES

370

54 CHURCHES

712

38 CHURCHES

1,430

43 CHURCHES

6,424

37 CHURCHES

73%

27%

85%

15%

92%

8%

81%

19%

11.6%

14.4%

25.2%

12.0%

106%

CORNERSTONE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, LINCOLN, NE

63.6%

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
WARSAW, IN

347.3%

FORTVILLE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, FORTVILLE, IN

44.0%

PANTANO CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
TUCSON, AZ

52.1%

VENTURE CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
KATY, TX

43.8%

NORWIN CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
NORTH HUNTINGDON, PA

73.6%

HILL CITY CHURCH,
BOISE, ID

30.3%

PARKVIEW CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, ORLAND PARK, IL

30.3%

NOVESTA CHURCH OF CHRIST,
CASS CITY, MI

31.3%

NEW HOPE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, ROANOKE, VA

63.9%

THE HILLS CHURCH,
EVANSVILLE, IN

29.6%

REDEMPTION CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, JASPER, IN

1,187 PEOPLE

AVERAGE 22 PER CHURCH

1,450 PEOPLE

AVERAGE 38 PER CHURCH

3,721 PEOPLE

AVERAGE 87 PER CHURCH

21,218 PEOPLE

AVERAGE 537 PER CHURCH

5.9

5.4

6.0

8.2

21.2

POTOMAC VALLEY CHURCH,
DUMFRIES, VA

15.4

CHRIST'S CHURCH—FORT WAYNE,
FORT WAYNE, IN

13.5

THE CHURCH AT MT. GILEAD,
MOORESVILLE, IN

14.9

JOURNEY CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
APOPKA, FL

19.5

FIRST CHRISTIAN
CHURCH,
MONTICELLO, KY

10.7

CURRENT:
A CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
KATY, TX

10.8

VICTORY CHRISTIAN
CHURCH,
FRANKLIN, IN

14.4

COMPASS CHRISTIAN
CHURCH,
CHANDLER, AZ

11.8

NORTHFIELD CHURCH
OF CHRIST, FORT DODGE, IA

9.0

CROSSPOINT CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, CAPE CORAL, FL

10.8

WHITewater CROSSING
CHRISTIAN CHURCH, CLEVELAND, OH

14.4

VALLEY REAL LIFE,
GREENACRES, WA

1942

1944

1947

1965

	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	Christ's Church of the Valley	39,869	7,516	5,681
2	Southeast Christian Church	26,239	15,440	4,029
3	Eastside Christian Church	6,784	6,156	794
4	The Crossing Church	6,642	4,041	731
5	Compassion Christian Church	7,397	2,819	730
6	Compass Christian Church	5,025	3,754	644
7	Real Life Ministries	6,300	1,600	586
8	2 42 Community Church	5,092	2,337	381
9	The Crossing, a Christian Church	4,719	2,667	768
10	Owensboro Christian Church	2,044	4,352	146
11	Eagle Christian Church	4,208	1,089	240
12	Pantano Christian Church	2,764	2,517	690
13	Parkview Christian Church	5,030		611
14	Community Christian Church	2,166	2,262	369
15	West Side Christian Church	2,895	1,513	272
16	Northside Christian Church	3,256	1,632	382
17	Compass Christian Church	2,598	1,200	546
18	Central Christian Church	2,248	1,523	160
19	New Day Christian Church	2,248	1,045	382
20	Northeast Christian Church	2,148	1,025	61
21	Harvester Christian Church	2,353	656	240
22	Salty Church	1,787	1,125	248
23	Journey Christian Church	2,081	672	411
24	Summit Christian Church	1,936	789	299
25	Hope City Church	1,805	656	117
26	First Church	1,486	950	122
27	StoneBridge Christian Church	1,760	669	218
28	Crossroads Christian Church	1,472	929	112
29	Valley Real Life	2,041	341	344
30	Generations Christian Church	1,547	750	213
31	Redemption Christian Church	2,246	50	254
32	Legacy Christian Church	1,897	386	160
33	Ekklesia Christian Church	1,373	894	243
34	Greenford Christian Church	1,748	484	73
35	Forum Christian Church	1,654	547	62
36	Westbrook Christian Church	1,377	675	75
37	Eastside Christian Church	1,809	243	245
38	River Christian Church	1,445	557	223

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Peoria	AZ	Ashley Wooldridge	ccv.church	1982
Louisville	KY	Kyle Idleman	secc.org	1962
Anaheim	CA	Gene Appel	eastside.com	1962
Quincy	IL	Clayton Hentzel	thecrossing.net	1959
Savannah	GA	Cam Huxford	compassionchristian.com	1964
Colleyville	TX	Drew Sherman	compass.church	1966
Post Falls	ID	Jim Putman	reallifeministries.com	1998
Brighton	MI	Tony Johnson	242community.com	2005
Las Vegas	NV	Shane Philip	thecrossinglv.com	2000
Owensboro	KY	Scott Kenworthy	owensboro.cc	1953
Eagle	ID	Steve Crane	eaglechristianchurch.com	1995
Tucson	AZ	Trevor DeVage	pantano.church	1963
Orland Park	IL	Ted Max	parkviewchurch.com	1951
Ft. Lauderdale	FL	Scott Eynon	communitycc.com	1957
Springfield	IL	Eddie Lowen	wschurch.org	1901
New Albany	IN		mynorthside.com	1970
Chandler	AZ	Brian Jobe	compassaz.church	1925
Mount Vernon	IL	Jon Henninger	centralnow.com	1853
Port Charlotte	FL	Rusty Russell	ndcchurch.com	1959
Louisville	KY	Tyler McKenzie	necchurch.org	1977
St. Charles	MO	Nikomas Perez	harvester.cc	1981
Ormond Beach	FL	Robbie O'Brien	salty.org	2005
Apopka	FL	Dustin Aagaard	journeychristian.com	1969
Sparks	NV	Bryan Smith	summitnv.org	1998
Joplin	MO	Cody Walker	hopeforjoplin.city	2014
Owasso	OK	Chad Broaddus	firstchurchok.com	1907
Omaha	NE	Mark Chitwood	sb.church	1908
Newburgh	IN	Phil Heller	cccgo.com	1968
Greenacres	WA	Dan Shields	vrl.church	2003
Trinity	FL	Johnny Scott	generationscc.com	1974
Jasper	IN	Darrel Land	redemptionin.com	2000
Overland Park	KS		lcc.org	1969
Conway	SC	Matthew Wilson	ekkchurch.com	2014
Greenford	OH	Sean Kelly	greenfordchristian.org	1830
Columbia	MO	Bradley Williams	forumchristian.org	1954
Bolingbrook	IL	Mont Mitchell	westbrook.church	1996
Jeffersonville	IN	Dave Hastings	discovereastside.com	1962
Fleming Island	FL	Nathan Freeman	riverchristian.church	2015



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	First Christian Church	1,360	556	108
2	Mosaic Christian Church	1,470	442	101
3	Boones Creek Christian Church	1,079	808	54
4	Riverlawn Christian Church	1,256	594	60
5	First Church of Christ	1,813		52
6	The Church at Mt. Gilead	1,276	496	240
7	Sherwood Oaks Christian Church	1,574	219	67
8	Worthington Christian Church	1,207	523	85
9	First Christian Church	1,292	400	131
10	White Flag Christian Church	1,297	341	140
11	Cornerstone Christian Church	1,264	352	143
12	University Christian Church	1,214	388	161
13	Broadway Christian Church	1,370	200	33
14	Active Church	1,169	400	146
15	QuadCity Christian Church	1,353	188	102
16	Suncrest Christian Church	1,170	365	78
17	The Hills Church	1,025	450	112
18	Pinedale Christian Church	1,068	384	54
19	Victory Christian Church	807	633	155
20	The Village Christian Church	881	533	80
21	Fortville Christian Church	1,267	142	28
22	Southern Hills: the Church at City Station	1,268	127	89
23	First Christian Church	872	504	22
24	River Hills Christian Church	881	483	77
25	The Refinery Christian Church	997	360	99
26	Northside Christian Church	1,100	239	63
27	Kissimmee Christian Church	777	547	85
28	Shelby Christian Church	1,125	198	133
29	Fairmount Christian Church	955	333	34
30	Northside Christian Church	1,042	216	69
31	Whitewater Crossing Christian Church	901	351	135
32	Vail Christian Church	1,093	156	39
33	Mount Carmel Christian Church	827	412	89
34	ONE Church	1,156	80	88
35	Second Church of Christ	1,231		110
36	Madison Park Christian Church	904	253	20
37	White Oak Christian Church	950	200	77
38	Hill City Church	713	400	58
39	Northview Christian Church	742	349	80
40	Cross The Line Church	645	416	48
41	First Christian Church	799	238	38
42	New Life Christian Church	737	300	76
43	East 91st Street Christian Church	870	155	62

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Canton	OH	Jimmy McCloud	firstchristian.com	1865
Elkridge	MD	Jonathan Moynihan	mosaicchristian.org	2008
Johnson City	TN	Ben Cole	boonecreekcc.org	1825
Wichita	KS	Jeff Isaacs	riverlawn.org	1956
Burlington	KY	Darin Mirante	firstchurch.me	1964
Mooreville	IN	Jeff Faull	mgchurch.org	1835
Bloomington	IN	Shawn Green	socc.org	1962
Columbus	OH	Jay Scott	worthingtoncc.org	1975
Jacksonville	IL	Shane Allen	1c.church	1967
St. Louis	MO	Paul Wingfield	whiteflag.church	1969
Shiloh	IL	Chris Vandelinde	onecornerstone.org	1906
Manhattan	KS	Barry Park	university.church	1969
Mesa	AZ	John Klundt	bccmesa.com	1979
Yucaipa	CA	Mike Frisch	activechurches.com	1960
Prescott	AZ	Jason Price	quadcitey.church	1922
Saint John	IN	Greg Lee	suncrest.org	1994
Evansville	IN	Darryl Marin	hillschurch.online	2019
Winston-Salem	NC	Matthew Sink	pinedale.church	1913
Franklin	IN	Josh Cadwell	victorycc.life	1928
Minooka	IL	Nate Ferguson	thevillagechristianchurch.com	2004
Fortville	IN	Rob Rigsbee	fortvillechristian.com	1871
Carrollton	GA	Shannon Lovelady	sohillsc.com	1998
Fort Myers	FL	Matt Summers	fccfm.org	1923
Loveland	OH	Matt Cameron	riverhillsc.com	1997
Goodyear	AZ	Chad Goucher	therefinerycc.com	2008
Springfield	MO	Wayne Bushnell	northsidechristianchurch.net	1970
Kissimmee	FL	James C. Book	kissimmeechristianchurch.org	1879
Shelbyville	KY	Dave Hamlin	shelbychristian.org	1968
Mechanicsville	VA	Rick Raines	fairmountcc.org	1903
Warrensburg	MO	Sid Tiller	nccburg.com	1964
Cleves	OH	Jess Adkins (interim)	whitewatercrossing.org	1916
Vail	AZ	Ben Pitney	vailchristian.com	2006
Cincinnati	OH	John "Didi" Bacon	mountcarmel.cc	1968
Fayetteville	GA	Blake Bergstrom	beonechurch.com	1998
Danville	IL	Greg Taylor & Kiley Garrison	secondchurch.com	1899
Quincy	IL	Tyler Myers	madisonparkchurch.com	1896
Cincinnati	OH	Nathan Hinkle	thewocc.com	1830
Boise	ID	Josh Branham	hillcityboise.org	2018
Danville	IN	Nathan Rector	northview.church	1968
Lincoln	NE	Austin Bazil	crosssthechurch.com	2013
Johnson City	TN	Ethan Magness	fcc-jc.org	1871
Chantilly	VA	Brett Andrews	newlife.church	1993
Indianapolis	IN	Rick Grover	e91church.com	1924



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	First Christian Church	849	130	54
2	Gateway Christian Church	932	25	30
3	Current—A Christian Church	892	36	99
4	Fern Creek Christian Church	924		76
5	Crosspoint Christian Church	777	141	83
6	Valley View Christian Church	651	255	21
7	Franklin Christian Church	353	385	24
8	Fairway Christian Church	760	92	20
9	First Christian Church	818		62
10	First Christian Church	730	80	35
11	Clifton Christian Church	636	153	39
12	Daily Church	478	307	50
13	Corinth Christian Church	760		45
14	Impact Christian Church	603	155	61
15	Highline Christian Church	650	100	25
16	The Journey Church	517	221	26
17	Oakwood Christian Church	673	64	37
18	New Hope Christian Church	468	261	28
19	Crestview Christian Church	615	97	33
20	Belmont Christian Church	591	117	28
21	Lincoln Christian Church	506	187	23
22	Tri-Village Christian Church	613	78	25
23	Greenville First Christian Church	635	38	25
24	Galilee Christian Church	600	40	42
25	Norwin Christian Church	500	140	33
26	West Valley Christian Church	429	206	21
27	Orrville Christian Church	472	156	29
28	Highland Church of Christ	575	40	37
29	Indian Hills Christian Church	482	121	21
30	Harpeth Christian Church	585		39
31	Spencer Christian Church	516	44	42
32	Bridges Christian Church	434	125	25
33	Meridian Point Church	545		23
34	Moses Lake Christian Church	400	140	18
35	Creekside Christian Fellowship	440	90	21
36	Hillsboro Church of Christ	344	162	33
37	First Christian Church	374	130	40
38	Christ's Church—Fort Wayne	322	179	77

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Elizabethtown	KY	Stuart Jones	fccetown.com	1877
St. Albans	WV	Dave Stauffer	gatewaychurch.net	1956
Katy	TX	Darren Walter	currentchristian.org	1985
Louisville	KY	Craig Grammer	ferncreekcc.org	1966
Cape Coral	FL	Matt Swearingen	crosspointcape.com	2006
Littleton	CO	Phillip Holland	valleyviewcc.com	1957
Franklin	TN	David Welsh	fcctn.org	1986
The Villages	FL	William Gastfiel	fairwaycc.org	1999
Norfolk	NE	Tim DeFor	fcnorfolk.org	1894
Malvern	OH	Kenny Thomas	fccmonline.org	1870
Clifton	CO	Roger Ferguson	cliftonchristianchurch.com	1910
Woodhaven	MI	Matt Thisse	dailychurch.com	1940
Loganville	GA	Adam Turner	corinth.cc	1861
Woodland Park	CO	Scott Park	impactcc.net	1998
Burien	WA	Tim Knight	highlinechristian.org	1945
Springfield	VA	Chad Simpkins	thejourneynova.org	1974
Enid	OK	Eric Keller	oakwood.church	1978
Roanoke	VA	Seth Bryant	newhoperoanoke.com	1950
Manhattan	KS	Devin Wendt	crestviewchristian.org	1958
Christiansburg	VA	James Terry	belmontchristian.org	1946
Lincoln	IL	Ron Otto	lincolnchristianchurch.org	1853
Pataskala	OH	Paul Snoddy	tri-village.org	1961
Greenville	IL	Tyson Graber	greenvillefcc.org	1878
Jefferson	GA	Nick Vipperman	galilee.org	1853
North Huntingdon	PA	Jeff Terpstra	norwinchristianchurch.com	1961
West Hills	CA	Rob Denton	wvcch.org	1976
Orrville	OH	John Mulpas	orrville.church	1902
Robinson	IL	Shane Bopp	hccrobinson.com	1959
Danville	KY	Jim Cooper	ihccdanneville.org	1961
Franklin	TN	Bobby Harrington	harpethcc.com	1998
Fisherville	KY	Ashton Stewart	spencerchristian.org	1997
Russell	KY	Tom Lawson	bridgeschristianchurch.org	1921
Falcon	CO	Barry Zimmerman	mycorecommunity.com	2007
Moses Lake	WA	John Roberts	mlcc.us	1989
Needville	TX	Greg Garcia	creeksidefellowship.org	2004
Hillsboro	OH	Brad Clouse	hillsborochurch.net	1887
Warsaw	IN	Matthew Rogers	fccwarsaw.com	1851
Fort Wayne	IN	Jason Kemerly	fwcc.cc	1969



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	Verde Valley Christian Church	498		14
2	University Christian Church	215	280	6
3	First Christian Church	494		12
4	Connect Christian Church	471	20	28
5	Discovery Christian Church	450	35	31
6	Timber Lake Christian Church	408	68	18
7	Rise Christian Church	450	18	40
8	Delaware Christian Church	432	30	22
9	Northpointe Community Church	427	30	26
10	First Christian Church	417	25	27
11	Thrive Christian Church	348	90	28
12	Kalkaska Church of Christ	335	100	27
13	Novesta Church of Christ	380	50	32
14	Greencastle Christian Church	339	86	17
15	Northeast Christian Church	344	75	11
16	Southwest Church	415		31
17	Jefferson Christian Church	413		25
18	First Christian Church of Scottsburg	410		18
19	Potomac Valley Church	306	100	86
20	Discover Christian Church	265	50	13
21	First Christian Church	400		18
22	Central Christian Church	352	44	14
23	Towne South Church of Christ	393		42
24	New Life Christian Church	372	20	27
25	Venture Christian Church	321	70	43
26	Georgetown Church of Christ	390		25
27	First Christian Church	350	40	76
28	Fairfield Church of Christ	375		12
29	Mount Tabor Christian Church	320	55	15
30	Park Plaza Christian Church	328	40	9
31	Woodland Heights Christian Church	343	15	28
32	Real Life Ministries Treasure Valley	298	60	26
33	Bailey Christian Church	314	43	12
34	South Lansing Christian Church	278	76	6
35	Amazing Grace Christian Church	278	51	9
36	The Body of Christ Christian Church	70	250	8
37	Hilliard Church of Christ	252	65	27
38	Northfield Church of Christ	290	16	36
39	First Christian Church	264	31	31
40	Tonganoxie Christian Church	246	48	19
41	Crosspoint Christian Church	290		30
42	Corner House Christian Church	98	192	4
43	Brady Lane Church	215	74	11
44	Huron Christian Church	275	10	20
45	Milford Christian Church	255	35	10
46	First Christian Church of the Beaches	253	31	17
47	CenterPointe Christian Church	270	12	19
48	Nelson Christian Church	233	45	26
49	Cornerstone Christian Church	127	149	7
50	Taylorville Christian Church	275		15
51	Lanier Christian Church	238	30	9
52	Avalon Church of Christ	238	28	3
53	Sebastian Christian Church	253		13
54	Lakeside Christian Church	200	50	8

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Cottonwood	AZ	Jim Hammond	vvcc.online	
Muncie	IN	Steve Huddleston	universitychristianchurch.com	1924
Columbus	IN	Steve Yeaton	fccoc.org	1855
Concord	NC	James Kuhl	connectchristianchurch.org	1984
Mars	PA	Matthew Mehaffey	discoverypgh.com	2003
Moberly	MO	Daniel Goehringer	tlcc.church	1952
Newark	OH	Steve Harley	risechristian.church	1964
Delaware	OH	Sam Rosa	dccwired.org	1979
DeWitt	MI	Rick Ruble	northpointecc.org	1840
Miami	OK	Brandon Fletcher	fccmiamiok.com	1894
Westfield	IN	Graham Richards	atthrive.com	2017
Kalkaska	MI	Andy Bratton	kccwired.com	1888
Cass City	MI	Brad Speirs	novestachurch.org	1871
Greencastle	IN	John Tischer	greencastlecc.org	1967
Grand Junction	CO	Seth Thomas	northeastchristian.org	1955
Springboro	OH	Roger Hendricks	southwestchurch.org	1997
Rural Hall	NC	Steve Cook	jeffersonchurch.life	1877
Scottsburg	IN	Matthew Craig	scottsburg.church	1874
Dumfries	VA	Will Archer	potomacvalleychurch.com	2007
Dublin	OH	Steve Murphy	discovercc.org	1961
Scottsburg	IN	Matthew Craig	scottsburg.church	1874
Portales	NM	Don Thomas	centralwired.org	1910
Elizabeth City	NC	Brad Giffin	tscc.com	1988
Winchester	VA	Kraig Bishop	newlife-christian.org	1993
Katy	TX	Nathan Boldt	venturekaty.com	2019
Georgetown	OH	Jason Galley	gtown.cc	1823
Monticello	KY	Joseph Tipton	firstchristianmonticello.com	1831
Fairfield	OH	Brian Schreiber	werfcc.com	1963
Salem	IN	Tony Mendizabal	mtcchurch.org	1840
Joplin	MO	Mark Scott		1961
Crawfordsville	IN	Timothy Lueking	whcc.us	1964
Meridian	ID	Justin Jordan	reallifetv.church	2008
Bailey	MI	Daren Penwell	baileychristianchurch.com	1879
Lansing	MI	Wally Lowman	seekstudyserve.org	1952
Grove City	OH	Tom Alexander	myagcc.org	1956
Cincinnati	OH	Jason Harris	bocc513.com	2005
Hilliard	OH	Jeremy Klein	hcchrist.org	1956
Fort Dodge	IA	Dale Harlow	northfieldchurch.org	1987
Huber Heights	OH	Rob Sweeney	fcchh.org	1972
Tonganoxie	KS	Steve Howell	tongiecc.org	1872
Conyers	GA	Curt Zehner	xpt.cc	1963
Hubbard	OH	David T. Coxson	cornerhousecc.org	1828
Lafayette	IN	Jeff Keller	bradylanechurch.org	1965
Huron	SD	Al Wager	huronchristianchurch.com	1910
Milford	OH	Todd Jefferson	milfordchurch.org	
Neptune Beach	FL	Nathan Loewen	fc2b.org	1945
Lexington	KY	Brian Bolton	mycpointe.com	2004
Bardstown	KY	Mark Jones	nelsonchristianchurch.com	1983
Lincoln	NE	Steven Stolle	corstonech.org	1988
Taylorville	IL	James C. Jones	taylorvillechristian.com	1964
Gainesville	GA	David K. Simpson	lanierchristianchurch.com	1974
Virginia Beach	VA		avalonchurch.com	
Sebastian	FL	Todd Thomas	sebastian.church	1983
Lakeside	CA	Marshall Masser	lakesidechristian.org	1984



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	Town & Country Christian Church	248		17
2	Oak Park Christian Church	139	117	2
3	WestWay Christian Church	213	32	8
4	South Fork Christian Church	210	35	15
5	Faith Christian Church	170	75	6
6	North Point Christian Church	230		5
7	Ridgeview Christian Church	212	13	21
8	Orleans Christian Church	183	50	43
9	First Christian Church	172	49	12
10	Myrtle Point First Christian Church	156	64	24
11	Glendale Christian Church	182	254	11
12	Anthony Christian Church	214		23
13	Cherokee Hills Christian Church	173	37	8
14	CrossPointe Church	138	69	10
15	Highland Christian Church	120	80	18
16	Filipino-American Christian Church	100	100	5
17	Boulevard Christian Church	198	11	12
18	Christview Christian Church	197		12
19	First Christian Church of Grove	175	20	8
20	LeRoy Christian Church	180	14	12
21	First Church of Christ	188	5	11
22	Campbellsville Christian Church	190		3
23	Western Hills Church of Christ	186		13
24	Reclaim Christian Church	180	6	13
25	Claypool Hill Church of Christ	167	18	10
26	Bluff Creek Christian Church	163	22	11
27	Church of Christ Greater New Orleans	55	125	31
28	Jarvisburg Church of Christ	141	35	8
29	Catawissa Christian Church	130	45	13
30	Castle Rock Christian Church	172		12
31	Southwest Christian Church	169		9
32	Lane Christian Church	125	43	5
33	Linn Community Christian Church	150	15	15
34	Cross Culture Church	135	30	52
35	First Christian Church of Seminole	145	15	8
36	Ben Hill Christian Church	50	110	2
37	Garden Way Church	129	30	9
38	Tollesboro Christian Church	158		13
39	Southeast Christian Church	152		26
40	Shasta Way Christian Church	150		15
41	Bainbridge Church of Christ	100	50	11
42	Compassion Christian Church	135	12	10
43	Northside Christian Church	121	26	8
44	Nashville Christian Church	126	20	6
45	New Hope Christian Church	99	42	15
46	Cross Bridge Christian Church	85	60	22
47	Cornerstone Christian Church	132	7	10
48	North Industry Christian Church	129	30	3
49	Lakeshore Christian Church	108	30	4
50	Oakland Church of Christ	124	12	10
51	Ocala Christian Church	135		16
52	Defiance Christian Church	135		10
53	Allensburg Church of Christ	120	12	12
54	Madison Church of Christ	125	5	5
55	Emmaus Church	105	25	31
56	Adventure Christian Church	101	22	3
57	New Brighton Christian Church	83	40	1

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Topeka	KS	David Heffren	cccchurch.org	1963
Grover Beach	CA	Mike Gunderson	oakparkchristian.org	1986
Scottsbluff	NE	John Mulholland	westwaychurch.com	1950
Verona	KY	Bob Hightchew	sfckky.org	1844
New Philadelphia	OH	Larry Sams	fccnp.org	1997
Spearfish	SD	Matt Branum	northpointcc.net	2004
Rolla	MO	Adam Bloch	ridgecc.com	1950
Orleans	IN	Tom Bostic	orleanschristianchurch.org	1867
Albuquerque	NM	Brady Bryce	firstabq.org	1903
Myrtle Point	OR	Lloyd Pounds	mpfcc.org	1905
Glendale	KY	Adam Hale	glendalecc.org	1891
Anthony	KS	Ron Eden	anthonychristianchurch.com	1882
Oklahoma City	OK	Jerad Joslin	cherokeehillscs.com	1963
Mansfield	MA	Trey Faull	xpchurch.org	1994
Highland	KS	David Welch	highlandchristchurch.com	1897
Seattle	WA	Rodel Reyes	faccseattle.org	1996
Sylvania	OH	Scot Gorsuch	boulevardchurch.com	1941
Winchester	KY	Dylan Bjorklund	christviewchristian.org	1985
Grove	OK	Casey Kleeman	fccgrove.org	1896
LeRoy	IL	Jeff Mayfield	leroychristianchurch.org	1888
Atlantic	IA	Colt Doherty	fccatlantic.com	1970
Campbellsville	KY	Justin Dewell	cvillechristian.org	
Cincinnati	OH	Dan Lang	thewhcc.com	
Ansonia	CT	Breandan McTighe	reclaimcc.com	1968
Cedar Bluff	VA	Bob Smith	claypoolhillchurchofchrist.com	1981
Greenwood	IN	Jeremy Towne	bluffcreek.org	1827
St. Bernard	LA	David Green	keepitrealmistry.com	2021
Jarvisburg	NC	Ron Lawrence	jarvisburgchurch.com	1893
Catawissa	PA	Mike Spagnuolo	catawissachristianchurch.com	2011
Castle Rock	WA	John Leffler	cr-cc.org	1853
Ocala	FL	John Scott	swchristianchurch.com	2005
Lane	IL	Jim Kilson	lanechurch.org	1850
Linn	MO	Tim Mitchell	linnccc.org	1975
Aurora	CO	Michael Winakur	greatneighbors.net	2016
Seminole	FL	Andy Msaon	fccseminole.org	1972
Atlanta	GA	Walter Poole	benhillcc.org	1952
Eugene	OR	Rob Carney	gardenway.net	1952
Tollesboro	KY	Rex McKinniss	tollesborochristian.org	1860
Salt Lake City	UT	Mike Packer	southeast.cc	1962
Klamath Falls	OR	L. Cory Lemke	shastawaychristianchurch.com	1965
Bainbridge	OH	Dennis Wheeler	bewry1950.wixsite.com/bcoc	1950
Delaware	OH	Al Perry	compassiondelaware.org	2016
Kansas City	MO	Jeremy Eubanks	northsidechristian.org	1961
Nashville	IN	Andrew Cullen	nccin.org	1888
Nokomis	FL	Guthrie Veech	nhccnokomis.com	1996
Dalzell	SC	Timothy Brown		1998
Jackson	MI	Devin Robertson	jacksoncornerstone.org	1919
Canton	OH	Ed Barnes	nicconline.com	1880
St. Joseph	MI	Jim Matthews	lakeshorechristian.org	1956
Oakland	OR	Mike Andrews	oaklandcc.net	1889
Ocala	FL	Roger Wright	ocalachristianchurch.com	2007
Defiance	OH	Michael Hasselbring	defiancechristian.org	1950
Lynchburg	OH	Bob Stevens	allensburgchurch.com	1932
Brooklyn	IA	Joel Nielsen	madisonchurchofchrist.net	1880
Burlington	ON	Jim Tune	emmauschurch.ca	2020
Bourbonnais	IL	Andrew Hamilton	oneadventure.org	2003
New Brighton	MN	Ron Hanson	nbcc.cc	1958



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
58	Bridge Christian Church	120		
59	LaPrairie United Church	98	21	8
60	Catalyst Church	118		7
61	Kenwood Heights Christian Church	118		2
62	MC3 Church	107	10	4
63	Croton Church of Christ	115		5
64	Sheldon Church of Christ	104	11	10
65	Fayetteville Christian Church	110	4	2
66	Parksville Christian Church	38	75	5
67	Movement Christian Church	91	20	12
68	The Harbour Christian Church	90	20	12
69	Farmdale Church of Christ	84	20	3
70	Erie Christian Church	102		6
71	Elevate Christian Church	95	6	2
72	Borderview Christian church	90	10	10
73	Real Life Christian Church	90	10	20
74	Issaquah Christian Church	75	25	4

	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
1	Northview Christian Church	87	8	12
2	First Church of Christ	85	8	8
3	First Church of Christ	90		6
4	First Christian Church	75	15	9
5	McElroy Road Church of Christ	85	4	3
6	Kingman Christian Church	85	3	4
7	Licking Christian Church	76	13	16
8	Eastland Christian Church	87		10
9	First Christian Church of Tyrone	87		2
10	DeWitt Christian Church	78	8	0
11	Central Church of Christ	80	5	8
12	Dora Christian Church	52	32	3
13	Pleasant Grove Church of Christ	83		4
14	Lyndon Christian Church	58	25	5
15	Creeside Christian Church	80	2	1
16	Clarksburg Christian Church	80		4
17	Emerge Church	77		15
18	Ripley Church of Christ	76		
19	Central Christian Church	59	17	4
20	Cumberland Christian Church	57	15	3
21	Spearsville Church of Christ	14	45	2
22	Peeled Oak Christian Church	65		15
23	Bethany Church of Christ	63		5
24	Hiseville Christian Church	62		
25	Rockwell City Church of Christ	58	4	2
26	Christian Church of Riverton	43	19	5
27	Milford Church of Christ	60		5
28	Moscow Christian Church	60		3
29	Summit Christian Church	48	12	



LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Dubuque	IA		bridgeontheweb.org	2001
Sparland	IL	Jamie Kent	churchontheprairie.com	1844
Greensboro	NC	Scott Haulter	catalystchurch.org	2009
Louisville	KY	Randy Beard	kenwoodheights.com	1969
Lilburn	GA	Art Stansberry	mc3.life	1904
Croton	OH	Terry Erwin	crotonchurch.com	1850
Sheldon	WI	Jeremy Allard	sheldonchurch.com	1922
Fayetteville	GA	Andrew Higle	fayettevillechristian.org	1971
Parksville	KY	Frank Preston	parksvillechristianchurch.yolasite.com	1798
Knightdale	NC	Bobby Wallace	movementchristianchurch.com	2017
Saint John	NB	Braden Jones	theharbourcc.ca	1896
Barboursville	WV	Jason Thomas	farmdalechurch.com	1957
Erie	IL	Nathan Bright	eriechristianchurch.com	1870
Lexington	KY	Robert Harlamert	elevatelex.church	2021
Elizabethton	TN	Scott Fisher	borderview.org	1871
Bend	OR	Jacob Burke	reallifebend.org	2001
Issaquah	WA	Aaron Bauer	issaquah.cc	1974

LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Coldwater	MI	Jeffrey Bream	northviewchristian.net	1969
Caldwell	OH	Brent DeWees		1919
Cherokee	IA	David Hall	cherokeefcc.com	
Maryville	TN	Gary Henline	fccmaryville.com	1955
Mansfield	OH	Dean Jackson	mcelroyroad.org	1960
Kingman	AZ	Brian Van Dyke	kingmanchristianchurch.snappages.site	
Licking	MO	Richard W. "Rick" Mosher	lickingchristian.org	1981
Columbus	OH	William McCubbin	eastlandchristianchurch.com	1966
Tyrone	GA	Dan Roberts	fcctyrone.com	1900
DeWitt	MI	Rick Stacy	dewittcc.org	1968
Portsmouth	OH	Thayer Wallace	central-church.life	1912
Lagro	IN	Mark W Wisniewski	dorachristianchurch.weebly.com	1871
Mt. Gilead	OH	Jack Kegley	pgchurchofchrist.org	1969
Louisville	KY	Evan Hardwick	lyndonchristian.org	1954
Columbus	OH	Eric Fillingner	creeksidechristian.info	1991
Clarksburg	IN	Jerran Jackson		1831
Fortville	IN	Curt Edmondson	emerge317.church	2020
Ripley	WV	Keenan Goosman	ripleychurchofchrist.com	1968
Granite City	IL	Derrell Brame	ccc-gc.org	1901
Cumberland	IN	Tom Scott	cumberlandchristianchurch.us	1956
Morgantown	IN	G. Michael Goodwin		1882
Owingsville	KY	Bill Teegarden	peeledoakchristianchurch.com	1923
Kettering	OH	Damon F. Reid	bcckettering.com	1953
Hiseville	KY	Jim Seabolt		1930
Rockwell City	IA	Dillon Brandt	rockwellcitychurch.org	
Riverton	WY	Scott Muller	ccriverton.com	1957
Centerburg	OH	Larry Hiles	milfordchurchofchrist.org	1856
Milroy	IN	Bruce Pierce	moscowchristianchurch.com	1895
Akron	OH	Sean Plank	summitchristian.org	1920



	CHURCH	IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE	ONLINE ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS
30	Uby Christian Church	56		6
31	Blue Springs Christian Church	55		1
32	Brooks Christian Church	55		4
33	Community Christian Church	55		1
34	First Christian Church of Crown Point	55		3
35	Laurel Avenue Church of Christ	55		10
36	Lester Road Christian Church	55		2
37	Cozad Church of Christ	45	10	4
38	Early Chapel Christian Church	48	6	2
39	Cave City Christian Church	52		2
40	Lockland Christian Church	40	12	1
41	North Baltimore Church of Christ	50		12
42	Prairie Creek Christian Church	50		2
43	Highmore Church of Christ	40	10	3
44	Blachleyville Church of Christ	30	20	
45	Vevay Church of Christ	48		8
46	Berry Christian Chruch	45		2
47	Midlands Christian Church	40		
48	Warsaw Christian Church	40		1
49	Cedar Ridge Church of Christ	35	5	3
50	Fort Madison Christian Church	34	4	3
51	Hamersville Church of Christ	35		1
52	Seaman Church of Christ	33	2	
53	Venice Church of Christ	17	15	
54	Mt. Bethel Christian Church	32		
55	First Christian Church	30		2
56	New Oak Christian Church	25	2	
57	Louisville Christian Church	25		2
58	Orion Christian Church	22	2	5
59	Harbor Christian Church	23		1
60	Everyday Fellowship	12	10	
61	First Christian Church	19	3	2
62	Leitchfield Christian Church	18		
63	New Hope Christian Church	18		
64	Central Christian Church	13	2	
65	First Christian Church	15		
66	Greenwood Christian Church	13		4
67	Mountain Life Ministries	11		
68	New Hope Community Church	10		

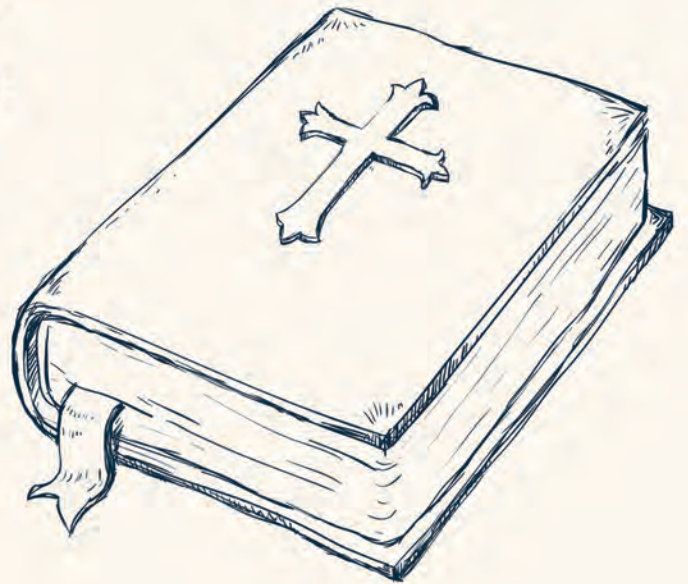


LOCATION		LEAD MINISTER	WEBSITE	YEAR STARTED
Ubly	MI	Austin Keller	ublychristianchurch.org	2018
Elizabethton	TN	Wes McElravy		1893
Brooks	GA	Gordon Dampier	brookschristian.org	1910
Galion	OH	Daniel Turner	community-christian.com	1897
Crown Point	IN	Dave Maddack	firstchristiancp.org	1915
Chesapeake	VA	Kirk Dice	lacconline.com	1932
Fairburn	GA	Tony Sullivan		1952
Cozad	NE	David B. Haynes		1886
Earlham	IA	Gale Juhl		1875
Cave City	KY	Keith Robinson	cavecitychristian.org	1867
Cincinnati	OH	Don Stowell	locklandchristian.org	1933
North Baltimore	OH	Bill Cook		1897
Vinton	IA	Randy Nash	prairiecreekchristianchurch.com	1865
Highmore	SD	Jeffry McKean	highmorechurchofchrist.org	1879
Wooster	OH	Dan Kirtlan		1890
Vevay	IN	Shawn McMullen	vevaychurch.org	1862
Berry	KY	Chris Hopper	berrychristianchurch.org	
Lexington	SC	Tim Brokaw	midlandschristian.org	1995
Warsaw	MO	Richard Bowman	warsawchristian.com	1847
Renton	WA	Joel Osborn	cedarridgechurchofchrist.org	1980
Fort Madison	IA	Mike McHugh	formadchurch@hotmail.com	1983
Hamersville	OH	David Hennig	hamersvillechurchofchrist.com	1860
Seaman	OH	Kyle Dickerson	seamanchurchofchrist.com	
Los Angeles	CA	Ethan Longhenry	venicechurchofchrist.org	1939
Limestone	TN	Palma Bennett	mtbethelcc.ddns.net	1842
Bridgeport	IL	Marvin Leighty		1861
Sioux Falls	SD	Pat Short		1963
Louisville	TN	Davon Huss	louisvillechristiantn.org	1978
Orion	IL	Kyle Harris	orionchristianchurch.org	1968
Ogden	UT	Dennis M. Whisler	harborchristianogden.com	2013
Florissant	MO	Douglas Lay	everydayfellowship.org	2015
Beebe	AR	Phillip Sterling	fccofbeebe.org	1872
Leitchfield	KY	Lee Schroerlucke		1871
Creston	OH	C. Ermal Allen	newhopechristian.faith	2005
Toledo	OH	Dennis Nagy		1872
Ellensburg	WA	Don Green	fccellensburg.com	1886
Greenwood	MO	R. Wayne Lowry	greenwoodchristianchurch.org	1869
Idaho City	ID	Brent Adamson		2003
Arlington	WA	Steve Schertzinger		1999

LET GOD SPEAK

Restoring the Practice of the Public
Reading of Scripture

By Randy Frazee



It was the greatest revival in Israel's history.

In 2 Kings 22 a little boy named Josiah, 8 years old, became king of Judah during the period of the Divided Kingdom. Imagine that. I thought becoming a lead pastor at the age of 28 was a stretch and possibly a bit irresponsible. However, of the 40 kings who reigned during the time Judah and Israel were divided, Josiah was one of only five “who did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” Never underestimate the spiritual capacity of a kid.

When Josiah was 26, he sent a scribe to the temple to withdraw money to pay the construction workers for the cost of goods and repair work. While he was there, the priest came out and said, “Uh, while we were digging around in the storage room, we found this book.” It was the Book of the Law!

THE BIBLE GOT LOST IN THE TEMPLE!

The scribe went back to King Josiah and said, “The priest gave me this book they found in the temple.” The dude truly didn’t know what it was. At the king’s request, the scribe started reading the book to the king. Upon hearing what the book said, the king tore his clothes as a sign of mourning and penitence; he then brought the words of God to the people, and it led to the greatest revival in Israel’s history.

The core lesson here:

WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE LET GOD SPEAK, LIVES ARE CHANGED.

About 650 years before Josiah made this courageous move, Moses knew this axiom of transformation and made appropriate provisions before he died (good leaders do such things). It’s recorded in the last chapter in Deuteronomy. Moses knew the children of Israel likely would hedge on their faith to God once he was gone, so he laid down a law that every seven years the people should gather—the men, women, and children—and read through the Law from beginning to end.

Of course, the people didn’t follow the pattern and things did not go well for Israel. Fast-forward to the end of the Old Testament. Israel was at rock bottom. They had just returned home from years of exile. They were beaten down, tired, humiliated, and vulnerable to the surrounding nations. This is when Ezra stood up, at the request of the people, and publicly read the whole Book of the Law from morning to night. It had been 150 years since the last time they experienced what Moses established. They did it for seven days straight. Once again, revival broke out.

WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE LET GOD SPEAK, LIVES ARE CHANGED.

This *pattern* of the public reading of Scripture carried on into the New Testament, and this matters to Restoration people.

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13).

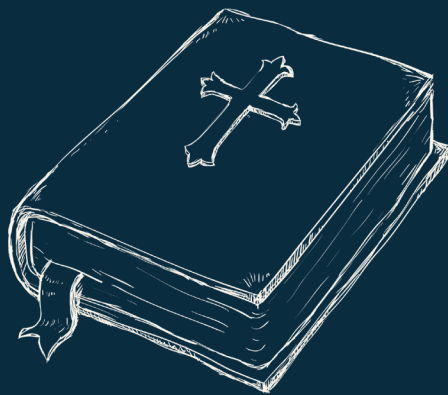
The liturgy of the first-century church involved the reading of actual Scriptures. They would read the entire letter in their public worship gatherings. In his book *Reading Romans Backwards*, Scot McKnight proposes that Phoebe not only delivered Paul’s letter to the Romans, but she read it in dramatic fashion according to how Paul wanted it read. Reading the entire letter in one setting would take 70 minutes. With this simple strategy, the leaders spread the gospel and grew the church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth as Jesus commissioned them (Acts 1:8) in just 29 short years. What was going on here?

WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE LET GOD SPEAK, LIVES ARE CHANGED.

The research proves this.

During my time as a teaching pastor with Willow Creek Community Church, I was responsible for overseeing the Reveal survey at the church. Reveal is the largest body of research we have that asks the congregant what is catalyzing their spiritual growth and how the church is doing at helping them take next steps.

Here are the two greatest global learnings from the study:



**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE
AVERAGE AMERICAN FAMILY OWNS
FOUR BIBLES, AND YET 41 PERCENT OF
THEM CONFESS TO NEVER READING IT.**

1. Bible engagement is the No. 1 catalyst for spiritual growth, with no close second.

No matter where people are on the spiritual continuum—from Explorers to the Christ-centered—this is what moves everyone forward in their next step spiritually.

The second great global learning is . . .

2. The No. 1 thing people want from their churches is to help them understand the Bible.

The No. 1 thing people *need* and the No. 1 thing people *want* are the same. Very seldom in history do both of these things collide. I was born at night . . . but not last night. A good pastor would put most of his eggs in this strategic basket—get people into the Word!

Where are we today?

Fast-forward to today. I think it is possible that . . .

We have lost the Bible in the church . . . but not in the same way it was lost in the temple storage closet. In my opinion, there has been a grave imbalance between the public reading of Scripture and our preaching and teaching. Paul told us that preaching and teaching are good and necessary, but we all would agree, I think, that we preachers have hogged all the time with our preaching and teaching. I think we all would agree that our people need a healthy diet of pure Scripture, not just our words about Scripture.

The Bible calls the Scripture food.

“Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth” (Ezekiel 3:3).

Jeremiah said God’s words filled his heart with joy and delight (Jeremiah 15:16), yet most of our people are not “eating the Word.” They are malnourished; some are starving.

Research shows that the average American family owns four Bibles, and yet 41 percent of them confess to *never* reading it. Here is what Gallup concluded after a nationwide study:

The churches in America face no greater challenge than overcoming biblical illiteracy, and the prospects for doing so are formidable because the stark fact is, many Christians don’t know what they believe or why. Our faith is not rooted in Scripture. We revere the Bible but don’t read it. Some observers maintain that the Bible has not in any profound way penetrated our culture.

We have a serious Bible literacy problem in our churches that has left them ill-equipped to handle the assault on the truth coming from every possible angle in our current culture. And this is happening on our watch.

Where do we go from here?

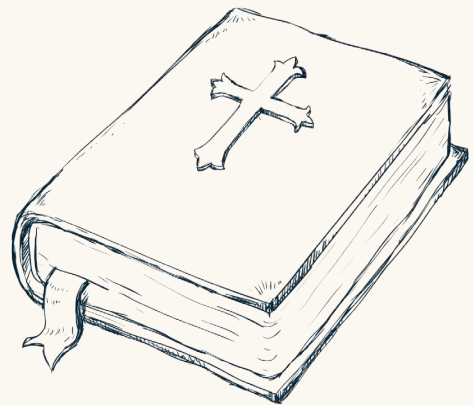
Wall Street analyst Bill Hwang, who deeply loves God’s Word and dines on it all the time, presented a proposal to me. “With the 40 minutes you have to share the message with your church each week, how about you give the Creator of the universe 20 minutes to speak, and you take the other 20 minutes? Hwang’s suggestion was a bit jarring, and yet it was so obvious. It seems too radical. I certainly haven’t gotten there yet, but I’m moving in that direction.

It is not that our people don’t want more Bible. Research tells us that most people, not just the people who sit in church, have “reading through the Bible” on their bucket list. So, right up there with “climbing Mount Everest” and “jumping out of an airplane,” people say they want to “read through the entire Bible” before they “kick the bucket.” Many people find the first two goals more accessible than the last.

The strategy for many churches at the beginning of each new year is to encourage their members to read through the Bible on their own. I have found this solo adventure to be for the few “Green Beret” believers in our churches. Simply inviting the masses to try harder is a nonstarter for most people; plus, it buries them in a pile of guilt.

Here is a solution that is not only biblical but simple, sustainable, reproducible, and downright effective. (This strategy should be music to the ears of people in the Restoration tribe.) Ready for it?

**WHEN GOD'S
PEOPLE LET GOD
SPEAK, LIVES ARE
CHANGED.**



RESTORE THE PRACTICE OF THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE.

Yep, let's try what worked in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Let's try what produced great revivals and unprecedented transformation in people's lives.

Here is the secret sauce: *Listening* to the Bible in *community*, *regularly*, as you work through the *entire Bible*—not just your favorite passages.

While I think we need more public reading of Scripture in our worship services, the likely place to gain the most traction is in small groups. My neighborhood group is doing this with great success.

While you can simply get people together and read the Scriptures out loud, I think the best strategy is to use a high-quality, dramatized recording of the Bible. The best one I have found is via the free “Public Reading of Scripture” app. (Take a screen shot of the QR code in the sidebar and download it now.)

There are several listening plans imbedded into the app. Select the one that works for you. Some groups choose to listen once a week for 45 minutes or 60 minutes. No preparation, just show up and take in God's Word together. My group gets together once a week and listens for 20 minutes, and then each person has committed to listen to 20 minutes of Scripture daily on their own for the other six days. It takes 98 hours to read through the entire Bible in English.

Our group will get through the entire Bible, together, in one year. Bucket list—check. The app even has a tracker so you can monitor your progress. Every time I mark off a chapter as read, my brain experiences a hit of dopamine that makes me feel quite happy.

But best of all, people are hearing God speak directly to them—not just our favorite passages, but the whole counsel of God. Could it be that this simple solution could spark the kind of revivals and spiritual movements like we saw in the Old and New Testament? Why should we expect this?

When God's people let God speak, lives are changed. ■

GIVE IT A TRY

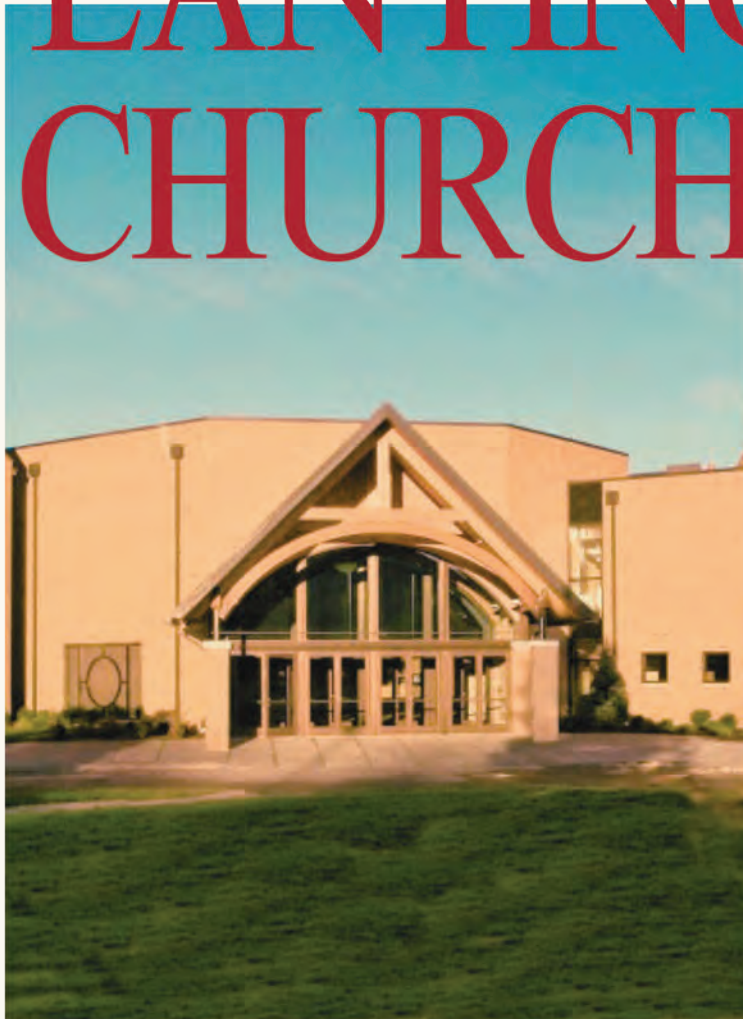
After downloading the “Public Reading of Scripture” app, invite some people over and give it a try. Cast the Scriptures to the TV monitor or just listen without any visuals . . . and away you go. Here is a collection of Scriptures you can listen to in 30 minutes:

- Psalm 1 (1 minute)
- Ezekiel 1-3 (17 minutes)
- John 6 (10 minutes)
- Psalm 2 (2 minutes)
- Total = 30 minutes of listening



Randy Frazee is the lead teaching pastor of Westside Family Church in Kansas City. He is the author of 15 books and the architect of The Story and Believe Bible Engagement campaigns.

A CHURCH- PLANTING CHURCH



The Legacy and Impact of
EAST 91 STREET CHRISTIAN CHURCH

By Derek Dickinson

My wife and I planted Journey Christian Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, back in 2004 with the crucial partnership of East 91 Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. I smile when I recall returning to E91 for their church planter weekend years ago.

I was nervous; E91 is a sizable church, and I was not used to speaking to such a large audience. I shared a short update on our work in Alaska to this Midwestern congregation that invested more than \$100,000 in our project. After speaking, I asked my two young sons, who had been in the audience, “Did I do OK?” My son Jack said, “Dad, you were so fat on the huge screen!” I responded defensively, “Well, the camera adds 15 pounds.” My oldest son, Joe, said, “Dad, how many cameras were on you?” Ouch. Unfortunately, my large size is apparent, no matter the camera angle. In a (somewhat) similar way, E91’s church-planting impact and legacy have been large and have added to the Restoration Movement’s tremendous growth.

THE ORIGIN STORY

E91 was growing rapidly in the early 1980s; the parking lot filled to overflowing each weekend and it was becoming a problem. Solutions were sought. To that end, three men from E91 attended a conference that emphasized church planting at Fuller Theological Seminary. They came home excited. In 1984, the elders approved the goals of building a larger sanctuary and planting 20 churches in 20 years. According to Dr. Tom Alley (former E91 staff member), the church accomplished that church-planting goal in 17 years. David Faust, the senior pastor at that time, then promoted the goal of planting 65 new churches, and E91 has since reached that remarkable goal. As of this writing, E91 has played a key role in 75 church plants spread across North America!

A KINGDOM MINDSET

The first takeaway of this story is **E91 has a bold kingdom mindset**. Lost people matter to God, and lost people matter to E91. As a church, they have chosen to look beyond themselves. They have chosen to pray, give, serve, and sacrifice so that people they may never meet in this life have a better opportunity to know Jesus Christ.

Most of the people who come to Christ through E91 plants will never attend the mother church’s campus or even know the role E91 played in establishing their faith family. An early goal was to have more people worshipping in these church plants than at E91 herself. This goal was reached after about 12 plants.

Author Francis Chan once asked, “Shouldn’t all our decisions be based upon what is going to have the greatest impact for God’s kingdom?” E91 is a church that strives to put their resources into answering that question with a resounding yes! The financial resources E91 has invested in church planting over the years is staggering. Most of those 75 church plants received around \$100,000 to get started.

George Johnson, former executive director of the Evergreen Network church-planting organization (formerly known as the Christian Evangelistic Association), estimates that E91 invested about \$2 million into planting in the Pacific Northwest alone! To become a church-planting



E91 HAS PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN
75 CHURCH PLANTS SPREAD
ACROSS NORTH AMERICA.

church requires a sacrificial commitment to a greater kingdom vision. But those resources have resulted in changed lives.

As one example, consider the 745 baptisms at Churchill Meadows Christian Church in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, from 2001 to 2016, the years that Jim Tune, the planter, served there. Churchill Meadows is an incredibly large church for Canada. In addition, E91 is willing to plant in difficult places, whether it is Mormon Utah, the Pacific Northwest, or the two most recent plants—Reunion Church, aka the “Manhattan Project,” in New York City and The House church in Ferguson, Missouri, a city with a history of racial unrest. Part of that bold mindset is knowledge that in heaven people from every tribe and nation will be together.

Several who were at the opening of Churchill Meadows describe it as something like a United Nations meeting, there was such diversity. The planter of the church in Ferguson says that when he invited an African American neighbor to the church, she responded, “I’ve never worshipped with white people; not sure I can do that.” But after attending, she became heavily involved in the church; and beyond that, her husband—who had never gone to church with her—now attends regularly and their family fills a whole row.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The second takeaway of this story is the **sheer difficulty of church planting**. Even with all the resources and assistance that E91 puts into their daughter churches, E91 lists seven of their plants as having closed. As a church planter, I can attest to the difficulty of starting a new congregation. I worked another full-time job during my first seven years with Journey. Much of that time, I worked as a crisis call counselor; so, six nights a week (midnight to 8 a.m.), I tried to persuade depressed people not to commit suicide. The only normal night’s sleep I got was overnight Saturday so I could be “fresh” to preach on Sundays.

For our first 12 years, Journey met in the Regal Cinemas; we had to haul our equipment in and out each Sunday. That wasn’t onerous in the summer, but in minus 40-degree winter weather, it was a brutal chore. I remember many times praying, “Lord, surely there are some lost people in Maui who need my help.”

ENCOURAGING INNOVATION

Third, **E91 values and encourages innovative church planters**. E91 planters are offered resources, guidance, and support, but they are given a great deal of freedom to do the job. Planters are entrepreneurial leaders who like to experiment. Rick Grover, E91 senior pastor and a church planter in Louisiana 22 years ago, emphasizes the need to let planters explore different paths to reach new generations.

Being a “spiritual entrepreneur” can be lonely work, and E91 has always emphasized the relational side of ministry. Many church planters in the Pacific Northwest tell stories of the care and support of Jim and Leslie Penhollow. Jim has passed away, but he served E91 for years promoting church planting in the region.

When I spoke to longtime E91 church planters, several talked about the blessing of E91’s church-planting weekend. One weekend a year they would bring all the planters back for a few days to celebrate their accomplishments. It was inspiring to look across the massive auditorium and see banners representing all the places E91 had planted, and it was greatly encouraging when the congregation gave the planters a standing ovation.

At other times, E91 offered retreats to refresh the planters and their wives. A current example of planter care comes from Russel Rader in New York City, who talks about David Faust’s visits. Rader says, “It’s the simple things, like David bringing our team donuts.” Small touches of kindness mean a great deal. But sometimes E91’s care for planters is astounding. Years ago, the leach field beneath our mobile home froze because of negative 50-degree temperatures. We had no place to go. E91 sent us \$10,000 to help us buy a house . . . the home we still live in today.



EVERY CHURCH
SHOULD THINK
BEYOND ITSELF AND
JOIN THE CHURCH-
PLANTING MOVEMENT.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Fourth, **E91 values partnership.** Church planter Russel Rader said, “Church plants are like NAS-CAR, with all the partner’s stickers on the church.” I identified with this; many churches put substantial resources—some over \$100,000—into our Alaskan church plant. These churches sent multiple mission teams to help us. In the early days, E91 planted alone, but the value of partnership was discovered and emphasized early on.

E91 became a facilitator for other churches to get involved. Honestly, when a planter told other churches that E91 was involved, it heightened their chances of getting help from other congregations. A faith community that was just starting to invest in church planting often would have one of their people serve on a management team of an E91 church plant to gain experience. This provided training and a great place for relationships to grow.

E91 has worked with multiple church-planting organizations, such as Evergreen Network, Orchard Group, and Stadia. E91 works to ensure each partnership is about more than money. For example, E91 senior pastor Rick Grover serves on the management team of the Ferguson, Missouri, church plant. E91 sent teams to help serve the community there; most recently they went and made gift baskets for teachers in a local school to help sow connection with the new church.

Tom Alley describes taking teams to serve in the new churches on opening days and other times. These trips are important ways to connect the E91 church body to the work of church planting. Prayer initiatives have also powerfully connected the congregation to the often-distant work of starting new faith communities.

GENERATIONAL CHURCH PLANTING

Fifth, **E91 strives to plant church-planting churches.** The goal is not to plant one church but to create a church-planting movement. In Pennsylvania, when Toney Salva served with Discovery

Church, they were able to take the money left to E91 by a closing church and turn it into multiple new sites and new church plants, five entities in all.

Dave Woods of Park Chapel Christian Church created a church that has consistently supported church planting since it started in 1986 in Greenfield, Indiana. It currently is a church of 750 to 800 people. We at Journey were beneficiaries of Park Chapel’s generosity toward church planting in our early days.

In the Pacific Northwest, E91 planted Common Ground Christian Church (Maple Valley, Washington). Common Ground partnered with E91 to plant Dallas Church (Dallas, Oregon). Later, Common Ground partnered with Dallas and Journey (my church) to plant Corvallis Church (in Oregon). Still later, Corvallis and Dallas planted The Branch Christian Church (Vancouver, Washington), which then planted Generations Church (Vancouver, Washington). E91 not only has daughter churches but granddaughter and great-granddaughter churches. My church, Journey, through its partnership with the Evergreen Network, has had a small hand in planting 30 churches in the Pacific Northwest.

CONTINUING IMPACT

I recently baptized a young African American soldier. He connected to Journey through our volunteer prison chaplain. Upon leaving jail, the young man came to church and plugged in. Two of our older men have begun discipling him. Last Sunday, he brought his son to church for the first time. We are now looking at the possibility of generational change. He is one of many examples of a person who this side of heaven will never fully understand E91’s contribution to his salvation and new life. Heaven rejoices. Every church should think beyond itself and join the church-planting movement that E91 has so faithfully championed. ■

This year, **Derek Dickinson** celebrates his 20th year as pastor of Journey Christian Church in Fairbanks, Alaska.

A large crowd of young people, mostly teenagers and young adults, are gathered in what appears to be a church or a large hall. They are all singing with their mouths open and many have their hands raised in the air, some with fingers spread, in a gesture of praise or worship. The lighting is warm and focused on the crowd, with a slightly blurred background showing more people and possibly a stage area. The overall mood is one of joyful participation and spiritual fervor.

RAISING UP TOMMORROW'S

LEADERS

CHRIST IN YOUTH'S VISION

FOR RECRUITING, NURTURING,
AND SUPPORTING THE NEXT
GENERATION OF KINGDOM WORKERS

By Jayson French with Eric Epperson

I loved the church before I knew who Jesus was. My family didn't go to church. We weren't churchgoing types. But then we met the people who made up my local church and they won us over. Getting to know those people led us to know Jesus. They made my parents feel at home, disciplined me, and eventually helped me hear the call to vocational ministry. To be honest, I see my work today as a continuation of their work.

Who did you love before you knew who Jesus was? Whose impact on your life led you to Christ? It'd be worth your time to thank them today if possible. And when you're done sending them a text or email, I'd ask you to consider who will carry on your work after you're gone. You don't have to check the calendar to know you are closer to retirement than ever.

Have you given much thought about who will follow in your footsteps? If this concerns you, you're not alone. The concern for the future generation of church leaders is widespread. In 2023, *Christianity Today* reported that 1 in 4 pastors plans to retire by 2030. Additionally, in 2022, only 16 percent of Protestant pastors are under 40, with 52 being the average age of a pastor in the United States. As we see more and more Boomers retire, and Gen Xers preparing to retire, the church faces an immense shortage of pastors. A Barna survey revealed that 75 percent of pastors find it increasingly difficult to discover mature, young Christians interested in becoming pastors.

Wait. Did Barna say, "It's becoming harder to find mature, young Christians who want to become pastors?" I disagree. I see them every summer. Approximately 1,600 young individuals stand up each summer at CIY events and dedicate their lives to vocational ministry. The students aren't the issue; we adults are. We owe those students, and the future church, our best effort to find a solution.

Our role at Christ In Youth is to serve the church. Like Paul wrote in Philippians 1:3-5, "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel" (author's paraphrase). We create moments that stir a desire to do kingdom work. Sometimes, that kingdom work plays out in the school cafeteria, but sometimes it meshes with a career path.

But at CIY, we see a disconnect between the approximately 1,600 young people who make decisions every summer and the number who follow through. Intentional pastors raise the next generation of church leaders, but often the voices of

young people are competing in a noisy space. Think about the amount of attention young people get from teachers and coaches when it comes to career prep. There are admissions tests and internships, co-ops, and career days. There are unrelenting expectations and pressure on our students. It's not that the call to vocational ministry wasn't real, it's just that no one helped a young person put wheels on it.

For the last couple of years, this issue has been at the forefront of our hearts at CIY. So many times, at a church or CIY event, people want to know what CIY is doing to call the next generation of pastors. We began to pray through this issue and conducted some research to listen to students who went to CIY events in recent years. We surveyed more than 400 people (all of whom graduated high school between 1992 and 2023) who made vocational ministry decisions at CIY events. The research showed that of those who made decisions to go into ministry at CIY events, 63 percent of them are still actively taking steps to fulfill that decision.

We asked former CIY attendees who are pursuing ministry today, what their church did that helped them the most. We gave them a list and asked them to check all that apply. The leading responses were "believed in me" (66 percent), "let me start serving" (47 percent), and "mentored me for ministry" (46 percent). The data indicates that empowering relationships and opportunities to serve are monumental catalysts for launching pastors. And the good news is that those are things that every church can offer.

We have a generation of young people who are attending our events who are looking for Christianity to be about something more than attendance. This generation is the most interactive in history. They want to create, not just observe. They desire to contribute, not merely consume. The attractional model doesn't interest them; they seek an activation model.

Starting this summer, we will begin a multiyear process to ensure that every decision made at a CIY event is a resourced decision. This means every student will leave their CIY event with a plan. This initiative will arm them with the necessary tools to engage with pastors, parents, and others. As we focus on preparing students for the journey ahead, I encourage you, as a church leader, to reflect on four characteristics of leaders who nurture and support the leaders of tomorrow.



SHARE LEADERSHIP.

LET STUDENTS HANDLE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA,
PRODUCTION, PRESCHOOL MINISTRY.

LEADERS WHO CARE (ENOUGH TO TRACK THE DATA)

In my many experiences with thoughtful leaders, one principle stands out: If it matters, we measure it. We have attendance projections, campaign goals, and program benchmarks. We track downloads and recruit volunteers. But I once asked a pastor how many students they sent into ministry last year, and he couldn't provide an answer. This lack of awareness is a crisis, so I'd like to share one goal and one opportunity with your church's leadership.

First the goal. I encourage your leadership team to make praying for harvest workers a part of every meeting of elders. I encourage you to set a tangible number you measure of how many vocational ministry leaders you'd like to see your church produce every year. I'd like you to become the biggest champions of your youth ministry and lavishly reward the results you'd like to see.

Now the opportunity. CIY is investing time, energy, and money into creating resources for students who will make ministry commitments. I invite you to work with us through using these resources in your ministry and/or underwriting their creation. We would be honored to have a conversation with your missions committee about how we can work together to equip 1,600 young people every year to follow through with what God has called them to do.

LEADERS WHO SHARE (MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES TODAY)

After 14 years working in the church and 22 years at CIY, my perspective on the need for vocational ministers continues to increase. CIY is dedicated to serving the church because we believe God reaches the world through her. However, we're concerned we're measuring the wrong things.

Churches should be places of worship and learning. At a recent roundtable, church leaders told us that meaningful service opportunities were the No. 1 way they kept teens engaged in pursuing vocational ministry. This is why Mike Branton at Sun Valley Community Church (Gilbert, Arizona) actively tracks how many of his students serve each week. That percentage is a tangible marker for determining ongoing discipleship.

This is why Daniel Rankin at Crossings Community (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), and his youth ministry staff, meet monthly with a group of students who made ministry commitments. The cohort goes through a curriculum and meets with various church leaders, but they also work toward leading out in a service in some way. As a result, nearly half of the high schoolers in the program spend at least one year at Bible college.

It's why at Southeast Christian Church (Louisville, Kentucky), Ben Cross and Cathy Cook have launched a ministry called Prepare. They work with students who have made a commitment to vocational ministry to keep them on track and help resource their decision.

Share leadership. Let students handle your social media, production, preschool ministry. Quality is crucial, but if a student can do something half as well as you, empower them. This is about return on investment. If a young person plays a vital role in your church, you have a leader for decades. Invest in young leaders, ensuring that the impact continues long after your retirement.

LET'S ASK.

LET'S COMMIT TO PRAYERFULLY ASKING JESUS
TO RAISE UP WORKERS FROM OUR CHURCHES.



LEADERS WHO BEAR (THE BURDEN OF HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE GROW)

Your youth pastor can't do it alone. From my days as a teenager, I can still remember the senior pastors who attended church camp. I call on lead pastors and executive pastors to rekindle this tradition. It's time to get the sleeping bag down from the attic. I think you should go to camp next summer. And don't just drop in, go all-in. Ride the bus, lead a small group, play 9-Square until your Hokus give out. It's not about adding a registration or checking on the youth pastor—it's about being present when the lightbulb goes off for a student.

My friend Darrel Land at Redemption Christian Church (Jasper, Indiana) is a senior pastor, and he attends a CIY event with their student ministry every summer. He could be doing lots of other things, but he wouldn't miss it. It's too much of an investment opportunity to miss, he'd say. Summer camp and CIY events are usually the start of big things. This is your invitation to the ground level. The data tells us that someone "believing in" a student is the most powerful thing in the process. Imagine if that person was a lead pastor. That kind of encouragement is unstoppable.

Commit to viewing your youth ministry as a platform to send out the next generation of missionaries and church planters (and not just a program to attract people). These young individuals are your legacy, your Timothies. They are your way to reach people for generations to come. And they will do it if you tell them that you believe they can.

LEADERS WHO ARE THERE (RECRUITMENT + RETENTION)

Recruit, but retain.

While I remain firmly convinced of an impending pastoral crisis, I believe there is more than one way to solve the problem. Recruiting new pastors is important, but so is retaining those we've already called.

Can we close some of the back doors on pastors leaving vocational ministry? I believe we've all seen the social media posts of those who are stepping away from located ministry to pursue other career paths. There are a host of reasons why they have left: church hurt, burnout, financial struggles, and lack of support, to name just a few. Others of those truly felt called to leave, and that could be the right decision.


However, what if a pastor we've already raised up in our local churches continued to receive our encouragement and support long after ordination? What if we created a culture where the elders regularly prayed over them? What if they knew they had a place to turn when ministry got difficult? What if elderships and executive leaderships had written plans of ongoing care and provided consistent follow-up for the pastors they sent out?

There are tangible things we can do as a church to close the back door for some of the pastors who are considering leaving. Develop a list of the people who consider your church their home. Call them, write to them, pray for them, pay for counseling when needed, check on their families, and celebrate them publicly when they come home. Make retention a priority of your leadership. Be there when you hear things are good and (especially) when you hear things are difficult. Paul often spoke of being encouraged by the church when he was in hardship. How can we model that same spirit?

In this pivotal moment for the church, let's embrace the vital mission of inspiring, mentoring, empowering, and encouraging people for vocational ministry. As stewards of our faith, let's do what Jesus tells us in Matthew 9:38—let's ask. Let's commit to prayerfully asking Jesus to raise up workers from our churches. Then let's be diligent to care for the crop. It's time we actively invest in them, ensuring the enduring vibrancy and relevancy of the church for generations to come. ■

Jayson French serves as president of Christ In Youth.

Eric Epperson serves as vice president of story with Christ In Youth.



RAISING THE STRONGEST GENERATION

The Youth Worldview Ministry of Connection Pointe Christian Church

By Zach Breitenbach and Trey Shigley

Among Americans who consistently attended church in their teen years, nearly two out of three will stop attending between the ages of 18 and 29, according to Barna Group research. Among the reasons: Young people are often not encouraged to ask tough questions, admit when they have doubts, and discover what it means to integrate their faith into every part of their world. Having space to think critically and consider how their faith informs all aspects of their lives is vital as teens go through a crucial time of struggling to make sense of their identity and their place in life, Barna reported separately (in “Generation Z—The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation”).

Spiritual growth is simply not on the radar of many teens today, as they are less likely to say faith is core to their identity, Barna shared in that latter report. While career success is a big priority for the vast majority of Gen Zers (those born 1997 to 2012), only 16 percent seek to be spiritually mature. Additionally, negative views of church are far more widespread among this generation. As examples, 53 percent of churchgoing teens think the church rejects science, 42 percent view church members as hypocritical, and 32 percent say the church isn’t a safe place to express doubts.

LAUNCHING A WORLDVIEW MINISTRY

As worldview ministers with Connection Pointe Christian Church (Brownsburg, Indiana), it is our passion and calling to reverse these alarming trends. It is also a key component in the vision of our lead pastor, John S. Dickerson. Connection Pointe (CP) is a growing church with multiple locations and more than 8,000 members attending in person and online. Since coming to CP in November 2017, Dickerson’s vision has been to “raise the strongest generation.” A significant part of carrying out this vision was his goal of launching a “Worldview Ministry” (see sidebar) when he came on board.

CP has invested heavily in helping young people know and love God, integrate God’s Word into their daily lives, find their identity in Christ, and experience deep and meaningful friendships in church. Our prayer is that this generation will outdo us in transforming the world for Jesus.

Clearly, the orientation of one’s heart and mind concerning the big questions of life will shape the way one lives and the choices one makes. If a teen has a robust Christian worldview (i.e., believes the truths revealed in Scripture about these big questions, loves God, and is committed to living out these truths), then remaining close to God as a young adult is exceedingly likely. So, at CP, we strive to help students form a Christian worldview. We want to strengthen the faith of young people by helping them to see every facet of life (including the core of their own identity) according to the Bible.

Jesus says the greatest command is to love God with our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The second greatest is to love others as ourselves (Mark 12:28-30). This sums up what it means to have a Christian worldview. Gaining knowledge and believing the right things as we love God with our mind is critical, but it isn’t enough. We must love God with our entire being, including: our soul (our will, desires, and inner “self”); our heart (feelings, emotions, and attitudes); and all the strength of our physical body (what we say and do).

In the summer of 2022, Dickerson’s vision of launching an entire multifaceted ministry devoted to this aim of developing a comprehensive Christian worldview in the next generation became a reality when CP hired us (Zach and Trey) as Youth Worldview co-directors.

We believe God has providentially placed us together in this ministry. Both of us have experience working with young people; Zach’s experience and teaching abilities skew more toward academia (on up to seminary), while Trey’s have been more focused on the church setting.



**WHAT IS A
WORLDVIEW?**

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

A *worldview* is basically one's view of the world . . . of reality. It's how one answers the big questions of life, and it guides how one lives. It can be described as a story that one assumes to be true and to which one's heart and mind are committed—a story that makes sense of how life works (kind of like the way a box top to a jigsaw puzzle helps one to make sense of all the pieces). One's worldview may not be entirely true or consistent, and it may not be carefully (or even consciously) thought out in every respect. But it includes key assumptions about the big-picture story of life and how one should relate to the world. Some examples:

- *Origin: Where did the universe and humans come from? Was everything created by God? Has the physical universe existed forever without any creator or purpose? Is everything part of the oneness of all things (as in Buddhism or Hinduism)?*
- *Conflict and resolution: What's wrong with the world, and how can it be fixed? Is sin against a holy God the problem, and is Jesus our only hope? Is religion the problem, and is technology humanity's savior? Is death the ultimate—and unconquerable—foe?*
- *Morality: How should we live? Is there really a moral law rooted in God that we all will be held accountable for following? Does each person have his or her own morality? Is our sense that there's an objective morality merely an illusion that we evolved to help us survive?*
- *Conclusion: How do we end up? Is history going somewhere meaningful? Will we just stop existing when we die? Will we be reincarnated? Is there a heaven and hell?*

KEY ASPECTS

We are continually developing and refining our strategy, but here are several major components of CP's Worldview Ministry.

We are developing curriculum to address key worldview topics for youth in grades 6 through 12. (In the future, we intend to expand it to younger kids as well as adults.) We are targeting their heads and their hearts, while seeking to increase their desire to live out their faith actively. These lessons start with foundational topics for the younger grades and build upon each other as they go.

For example, sixth-graders learn about the concept of a worldview, the biblical worldview story, how we can know there is objective truth, and the core beliefs of Christianity. In the older grades, students learn more about Christian doctrine, spiritual disciplines, thinking biblically about important moral issues in our culture, why one should want to be a Christian, evidence that Christianity is true, the beliefs of major religions and worldviews, and much more.

The curriculum is taught in the spring, summer, and fall, and it offers highlights of a Christian school education, grounding students in Christian beliefs, evidence that Christianity is true, and how to live out their faith.

Other significant initiatives include:

- Conversations with youth and parents. We love to coach parents and students in a one-on-one or group environment on topics that are important to them so that both are strengthened in their biblical worldview.
- “Lunch and Learns” for youth, parents, grandparents, and adults of the congregation. These after-church events involve eating lunch while listening to an interactive worldview lesson that facilitates conversations between youth and adults about important worldview topics.
- An annual “College and Career Fair” prepares students and their parents to make choices about their future through a spiritual lens. Representatives from a variety of Christian schools and Christian campus groups are present to interact with students at the fair. We also host a dinner presentation for parents of high school students.

**ONLY 16 PERCENT OF
GEN ZERS SEEK TO BE
SPIRITUALLY MATURE.**



- We are developing a student leadership program for high school students who want to go deeper in their walk with the Lord and become better equipped to share their faith.
- We are developing outreach trips for youth and young adults that include street ministry, serving in local communities, and opportunities to serve internationally.
- We're developing a website that will offer training resources for parents, youth, and other churches and organizations. It will include PowerPoint lessons, teaching notes, student notes, podcasts, and lesson audio.
- Second, aim to go beyond basic Bible lessons. Help your students grasp the fundamentals of the Christian faith and compare them to beliefs commonly held in other worldviews. Give them reasons to trust the validity of the Christian faith, help them understand why Christianity is true, why we should love God and want Christianity to be true, and how we should live out our Christian faith in a challenging culture.
- Third, foster an environment where youth are encouraged to express doubts and ask honest questions. Give them opportunities to submit questions anonymously and in person. Provide honest answers. It's OK to research answers before answering the students' questions; this shows that you take their questions seriously and don't pretend to know everything.

EQUIPPING CHURCHES

Ultimately, CP's vision for its Worldview Ministry is to equip churches near and far as we reverse the trend that sees two-thirds of young people walking away from the faith. Our dream is that God will use it to light a fire within the next generation. As our culture becomes increasingly secular, we want to equip the church at large to thrive and be a life-giving and faith-grounding place for generations to come.

Not only do we intend to refine and give away our curriculum and materials to other churches, we want to partner with churches to help them construct their own Worldview Ministry. Our prayer is that this ministry will flourish and blaze the trail for other churches.

But what if your church is not able to hire a full-time worldview ministry director? There is still much you can do to equip the next generation. Here are a few recommendations:

- First, invest in training your youth pastor and others on your church staff in worldview and apologetics. While we would be glad to provide lesson material useful for teaching to youth and parents, having a well-equipped and specially trained youth leader or staff member on hand to answer tough questions would be extremely helpful. So, invest in having a youth pastor or staff member take courses in these areas, or at least do some significant study on your own.

- Fourth, look for ways to equip parents to disciple and train their kids. Train parents and prepare them to discuss important topics with their kids.
- Finally, don't merely target the heads (mind/intellect) of your youth; target the hearts and feet as well. Help them to see why they should love Jesus and make him their greatest priority. Create opportunities for them to serve others and live out their faith in practical ways.

These are just a few suggestions. May God bless you and your congregation in raising the strongest generation. We're all in this together! ■

Zach Breitenbach and **Trey Shigley** serve as co-directors of the Youth Worldview ministry at Connection Pointe Christian Church in Brownsburg, Indiana.

Breitenbach holds a PhD in theology and Christian apologetics and has teaching experience at the high school, undergraduate, and seminary levels. His materials on worldview, Christian apologetics, ethics, world religions, and theology have been used in Christian high schools, camps, churches, and the apologetics ministry, Room For Doubt.

Shigley is an experienced youth minister and a gifted communicator with a passion for discipling teens and their parents and raising a generation that is on fire for the Lord. He serves as a bridge merging the Worldview Ministry with the existing middle school and high school ministries at Connection Pointe.



REUNITING

MOVEMENT

Reuniting Our

OUR MOVEMENT



BY VICTOR KNOWLES

In 1962, captured American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was exchanged for Russian spy Rudolf Abel in Berlin. The event was made into the 2015 historical movie *Bridge of Spies*. In 1962, Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points in an NBA game, a record that still stands. In the same year, Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* received 11 Oscar nominations, Marilyn Monroe was found dead of "acute barbiturate poisoning," and the Cuban Missile Crisis captured the attention of Americans and the world. It was also in 1962 that Standard Publishing in Cincinnati, Ohio, produced what I believe is the definitive book on the history of the Restoration Movement: *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* by James DeForest Murch. This was the textbook for my Restoration History class when I was a junior in Bible college, and I devoured every word.

In his Introduction, Murch wrote, "I see the Restoration movement as a part of the plan of God to preserve and perpetuate 'the faith which was once delivered unto the saints' in its purity and power, and visibly to restore the one body in Christ." But then he added a word of warning: "I believe that unless the movement remains true to the principles and purposes which brought it into being, it has no reason to exist." I believe both of his astute assessments are still true today.

Murch defined the three streams of the Restoration Movement in the 1960s as "leftist" (the Disciples of Christ—at that time known as Christian Churches, Disciples of Christ), "centrists" (Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ), and "rightist" (Churches of Christ, a cappella). Today those descriptive terms seem mostly political, but there were valid reasons why Murch used those terms back in 1962.

Fast-forward from 1962 to 2022. Matt Proctor, president of Ozark Christian College, Joplin, Missouri, wrote an article, "Can Our Churches Continue to Grow and Bear Fruit?" which appeared in the July/August 2022 issue of *Christian Standard*. After restating the purpose of the Restoration Movement in America, Proctor pinpointed three important emphases in a

mere eight words: "Christian unity under biblical authority for evangelistic mission." But then he wrote, "Ironically, this unity movement split into three fellowships, each focusing on one of the three original emphases: The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on Christian unity, the a cappella Churches of Christ on biblical authority, and the Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ on evangelistic mission." But perhaps even that three-fold description is not as cut and dried as it might seem some 60 years after 1962. The two latter groups are very mission-minded and are strong on biblical authority. And there are tributaries in the three separated streams of the movement who still hold to all three original emphases, albeit some more successfully than others.

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

Despite our history of division, the question remains: "Is it still possible to honor our Lord's prayer for unity and thus carry out his Great Commission?" I would answer, yes, because "with God, all things are possible." But as Murch warned, "Unless the movement remains true to the principles and purposes which brought it into existence, it has no reason to exist." Even in 1962, Murch was particularly hard on the Disciples of Christ, now known as The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a full-fledged, ultra-liberal denomination since 1968, whose drift into liberal theology and practice has in recent years turned into a disastrous tidal wave. As a result, their numerical condition has been described as "cataclysmic" and "dismal" (see Dateline, *One Body*, Winter 2024). Membership of nearly 2 million in 1967 dropped to 277,864—with attendance of 89,894—in 2022, according to *The Roys Report* (September 15, 2023). Another sad sign of the Disciples' decline is this announcement in the Winter 2023 *Cane Ridge Bulletin*: "Regrettably, we will not hold a Cane Ridge Day in 2024 due to dropping attendance numbers and difficulty in finding volunteers and speakers."

The background is a solid red color. Overlaid on this are several thin, white, curved lines that flow from the left side towards the right, creating a sense of movement and depth. These lines are more concentrated around the text, framing it subtly.

WITH
unity is possible
GOD

DISCIPLE HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP

Disciple Heritage Fellowship, a conservative renewal movement that originated within The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has been trending in the opposite direction, however. Since starting in 1985, DHF has grown their network to more than 150 churches and 170 ministers, according to Rick Grace, the fellowship's church liaison. "We have heard from an increasing number of congregations new to the DHF orbit," Grace wrote in an October 2023 letter. "Many are still part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Most want help in trying to navigate being a theologically conservative church in an increasingly liberal denomination." (For more information on Disciple Heritage Fellowship, write DHF, 3350 N. MacArthur Road, Decatur, IL 62526, call (217) 875-3350, or go to www.disciple-heritage.org.)

CHURCHES OF CHRIST

Many readers of *Christian Standard* are probably familiar with the Churches of Christ (a cappella). In 1906 they parted company with the Disciples of Christ and formed a "separate and distinct" fellowship that was noted in the 1907 U.S. Census. At that time, the Churches of Christ had 2,649 congregations, comprised of 159,650 "adherents." Churches of Christ peaked in 1990 with 13,1174 congregations and 1,284,056 adherents. However, Tim Woodruff and Stan Granberg wrote in a recent report ("A Case Study of Growth and Decline: The Churches of Christ: 2006-2016") that by 2050 Churches of Christ will be about one-third the number of churches and adherents they had in 1985.

One reason it is hard to track the numbers with precision is because *Churches of Christ in the United States*, compiled by Carl Royster and published by 21st Century Christian in Nashville, Tennessee, has not produced a directory since 2018. In an email from Carl (November 3, 2023), he explained: "The pandemic cancelled production plans for the 2021 edition. We are continuing to experience the lingering post-pandemic effects, and the recovery process continues to be slow. However, we are hoping to resume data collection efforts soon with the goal of having a 2024 edition released during the latter part of next year." The directory is normally

published every three years. Data from the 2018 directory lists 11,875 congregations with total attendance at 1,092,182. But that was a drop from 12,300 congregations in 2015.

"Overall, the status of Churches of Christ in the United States has declined by 6.3 percent in congregations and 9.6 percent in adherents," Royster said. And that was before the COVID years. Attendance at the median-sized Churches of Christ congregation is 55, according to the latest figures.

In 2018, the Churches of Christ had 30 congregations averaging more than 1,000 in attendance. The largest was The Hills Church in North Richland Hills, Texas, which averaged 4,658. Well-known speaker Rich Atchley preaches at this satellite church. Atchley has been a key player in efforts to reunite brethren from both sides of the keyboard; he has appeared as a guest speaker at events like the North American Christian Convention and many Bible college programs of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. On the 100th anniversary of the 1906 separation, Atchley and Bob Russell teamed up to write *Together Again: Restoring Unity in Christ after a Century of Separation*.

Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, recently hosted an event that should be encouraging to all who are interested in Jesus' prayer for unity. Harding shared on Facebook: "We were honored to host more than 40 ministers from churches of Christ and independent Christian churches around the country on our campus [December 5-6, 2023]. They came together to discuss discipleship in an increasingly secular world. Join us in prayer for them as they work to expand the kingdom by continuing to love God and love people."

Calvin Warpula, one of the co-planners and participants in the Restoration Forum, responded: "I praise God for these brothers now working toward the same goals we had in the Restoration Forum for seeking greater understanding and discovering ways we could fulfill Jesus' prayer for unity. I admire Harding University for hosting this event. We need more of this type of dialogue and discussion on a local level throughout our country. Let us all love God more by loving our brethren and seeking peace and unity based on the apostles' message."

PRAY FOR

UNITY



CHRISTIAN CHURCHES & CHURCHES OF CHRIST

I believe the majority of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are still endeavoring to “remain true to the principles and purposes” which brought them into being as a fellowship separate from the Disciples of Christ when they formed the North American Christian Convention in 1926-1927. Some historians date that separation as 1955, when the first *Directory of the Ministry* was published, while others put it as late as 1968, when thousands of congregations asked to be removed from the Disciples Yearbook.

The May/June 2023 *Christian Standard* included an annual growth report of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ for 2022. The reported growth rate was 12.8 percent. More than 70,000 baptisms were reported and overall giving continued a three-year growth trend, with 77 percent of churches reporting that their income met or exceeded the previous fiscal year budget. The report (compiled by Kent Fillinger, president of 3-STRANDS Consulting) breaks down congregations into six groups: *Megachurches* (2,000-plus in weekly attendance), *emerging megachurches* (1,000–1999), *large churches* (500–999), *medium churches* (250–499), *small churches* (100–249), and *very small churches* (99 or fewer). Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, reported 2,074 baptisms.

Matt Proctor believes one of the reasons for the success of the 4 C's fellowship is “at our best, the Independent Christian Churches have also been *interdependent*.” He asked, “How did all this happen in a group with no denominational structure? He answered, “Because a leader saw a need. In our *independent* fellowship that leader had freedom to act, and in our *interdependent* fellowship, that leader had the relationships to tap. Someone knew someone else, they all called each other, and

they gathered in like-minded churches around a kingdom work. *Together*, ministry flourished.” He points to ministries like Christian camps, Bible colleges, Good News Productions International, Christ In Youth, and The Solomon Foundation.

The Solomon Foundation, a nonprofit financial organization, is known far and wide for helping churches in Restoration Movement circles to grow, including a number of Black Churches of Christ (a cappella). (For more information go to thesolomonfoundation.org or call (855) 873-5873.)

For 14 years I was invited by Dr. Jerry Rushford to act as a liaison between the 4 C's Fellowship and the Churches of Christ (a cappella) by teaching workshops at the annual Pepperdine Bible Lectures (now known as Harbor) at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. In one of those speeches, I listed 101 things that we were doing together that we would never have thought possible in the “Cold War” years. In another speech, I listed 25 things I've learned in 25 years of unity meetings between the two groups. One of those things: “None of us pray enough for unity.” Rubel Shelly said, “If Jesus prayed for the unity of all who would believe in him through the apostles' message (John 17:20-26), how dare we do not pray for it as well?”

Together, on our knees, we will find the answer to the question: “Is it still possible to honor our Lord's prayer for unity and thus carry out his Great Commission?” ■

Victor Knowles is founder and president of Peace on Earth on Ministries, in Joplin, Missouri. He has edited *One Body Magazine* since 1984 and is the author of 32 books, including *Together in Christ: More Than a Dream* (College Press/Leafwood Publishing). www.poeministries.org

Now More than Ever, Christian Colleges Matter

By Frank Weller



We need stronger Restoration Movement colleges, now more than ever. Here are three reasons this is true.

THE MINISTRY PIPELINE

First, Restoration Movement churches face a looming ministerial crisis, with one in four lead ministers expected to retire by 2030. There are not nearly enough students in the pipeline to fill the number of expected empty pulpits.

In 2022 *Christian Standard* reported that Restoration Movement colleges had experienced a decade of decline in the number of ministry graduates. According to the article, “The 482 graduates from the 2019-20 school year are the fewest they’ve produced in any of the past 20 years—down 41 percent from their high-water mark in 2006-07.”

The same magazine issue stated that 60 percent of the lead ministers in our churches are over

the age of 50. The result? Three of every five churches will need to conduct a search for a new lead minister in the next 20 years.

Churches and parachurch organizations are taking this challenge seriously. Christ In Youth recently launched their Vocational Ministry Project. CIY has formed a coalition of Bible college presidents and church leaders to engage the 30,000 students expected to make commitments to be “kingdom workers” at their conferences over the next 10 years. They want to nurture those young people who are making commitments by partnering with Christian colleges to communicate options for studying vocational ministry.

“Calling and equipping the next generation of ministry professionals is one of the most pressing needs for the church in our time,” said Sean Martin, CIY’s senior development officer. “Addressing it will require intentionality, innovation, and collaboration among a diverse range of stakeholders.”

Great Lakes Christian College's Equipping Kingdom Workers Now initiative is one example of that collaboration. Backed by funding from Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, GLCC contacted the 550 students who made commitments to serve in ministry at CIY events last summer and offered them the opportunity to enroll in the college's seven-week Introduction to Biblical Interpretation online class for less than one-third the normal cost.

According to Greg Stauffer, GLCC's vice president of enrollment, "By connecting with students who make kingdom worker commitments soon after they make those pledges, we hope to solidify their decisions and get them into the ministry pipeline before they graduate high school." Twenty high school students enrolled in the first course offered in this program.

Our Bible colleges were begun as ministry-training institutions. Partnerships like CIY's Vocational Ministry Project and GLCC's Equipping Kingdom Workers Now initiative reflect those roots and demonstrate a commitment to training the next generation of preachers, youth ministers, missionaries, and worship leaders.

THE EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE TO GROWING SECULARISM

Second, we need strong Restoration Movement colleges because Christian students need institutions of higher education that will foster faith instead of destroying it.

The growing secularism our grandparents saw gathering on the horizon is now a cultural hurricane. Christians are mocked at public universities and even at many private institutions that were founded in faith.

Students who leave the nurture of home and church to attend university frequently find their faith under attack. Exploring difficult questions is expected of students who go on to higher education. These days, however, deconstruction of

faith has been normalized. Students' faith is torn down but rarely rebuilt, leading many young believers to feel hopeless and confused.

We need Christian institutions of higher education where students can ask difficult questions. We need Christ-centered colleges where students can express doubts without being mocked. We need colleges where students can experience community and be disciplined by those who have deconstructed, and then reconstructed, a biblical and defensible faith.

We need colleges that are "awake," but not "woke." The contrast between "awake colleges" and "woke colleges" is sharp.

Woke universities reject objective truth in favor of subjective cultural norms. They whitewash sinful behavior in the name of inclusion.

Awake colleges, by contrast, understand and engage the culture without capitulating to it. Awake colleges celebrate diversity without fueling division. They focus on education instead of indoctrination. They train students *how* to think instead of telling them *what* to think.

Some church leaders mistake awake colleges for woke colleges. They grieve the loss of the world in which they grew up. They grieve the rejection of values and virtues that even many nonbelievers once shared with the church. In their grief, these church leaders sometimes criticize professors and institutions that encourage students to intentionally engage the post-Christian world. They become suspicious when higher education explores ideas that are contrary to Scripture, even when the purpose is to expose those lies to their students.

In some instances, that suspicion is well-founded. Mission drift is the Achilles' heel of higher education. Some institutions have drifted from their biblical and missional roots. But merely engaging culture does not necessarily equal mission drift. We need strong Restoration Movement colleges that prepare students to be in the world but not of the world.

Adding Christ-centered programs for students who want to take their faith into the marketplace is not a repeat of past failings when colleges and universities became unmoored from their Christian roots.

Rather, it is leaning into the mission to prepare students to be servant leaders in every context: in church, at work, and at home.

THE MISSION IN THE MARKETPLACE

The third reason we need strong Christian colleges is to equip the church to take the message of Christ into the marketplace.

In 2021, Gallup released a study that showed, for the first time in 80 years, most Americans no longer attended church.

Question: How will the church reach those lost people? Answer: By going to them.

The college I serve, GLCC, has embraced this missional challenge by adding “marketplace ministry” programs to the vocational ministry programs that have been a staple since our founding nearly 75 years ago.

We’re not alone in doing so.

Many Restoration Movement colleges, to the dismay of some in our fellowship of churches, added so-called “secular majors.” Pundits cite such moves as evidence of mission creep. Ironically, some of the loudest complaints come from those who teach within our “priesthood of all believers” . . . from the same people who proclaim, “every member is a minister.”

At our college, we believe in the priesthood of all believers and that every member is a minister. We prepare graduates to set up outposts of the kingdom of God where they work. Our marketplace ministry students earn a minimum of 24 credit hours in Bible and theology. They are disciplined by our faculty. We tell these students, “Any college can teach you *how* to do business (or communicate, or counsel). We teach you *why*.” We want our graduates to be the people coworkers go to when they need prayer. We want our graduates to be their workplaces’ ethical and spiritual thermostats.

Adding Christ-centered programs for students who want to take their faith into the marketplace is not a repeat of past failings when colleges and universities became unmoored from their Christian roots. Rather, it is leaning into the mission to prepare students to be servant leaders in every context: in church, at work, and at home.

REVERSING THE TREND

According to data from the Higher Ed Dive website, 91 private colleges in the United States have closed or merged with another institution since 2016. The list includes Restoration Movement colleges like Crossroads College, Cincinnati Christian University, Nebraska Christian College, Ohio Valley University, and St. Louis Christian College. Johnson University’s Florida campus will close after this spring semester. So, too, will Lincoln Christian University. In our region of Michigan, four faith-based colleges unrelated to the Restoration Movement have announced their closure since January 2023.

With the number of high school graduates in America expected to plummet in 2025, colleges are facing formidable demographic challenges. While larger universities add amenities like coffee shops in dorms and pet-friendly residences, Restoration Movement colleges struggle to compete for students while keeping down the cost of educating them.

More Restoration Movement colleges will likely close.

Some people have suggested that that is as it should be.

But I disagree. Reaching lost people is too important. Preparing the next generation of servant leaders who devote their lives to vocational and marketplace ministry is too important.

Strengthening Restoration Movement colleges will happen only when churches and individuals financially resource our schools and encourage their students to prioritize attending Restoration Movement colleges and universities. ■

Dr. Frank Weller serves as president of Great Lakes Christian College, Lansing, Michigan.

BAPTISM:

THE HEALING PLUNGE INTO JESUS' PLEA FOR UNITY

BY JOHN HAMPTON

Imagine this scenario. It's November 10, 2024, the Sunday following the nastiest, messiest, costliest presidential election in American history. After all the divisive social media posts, the outpouring of outrage from politically partisan members of our churches, and the awkward mixture of glee and gloom in the room, depending on which candidate one supported, what in the world is a preacher supposed to say or do on *that* Sunday?

How about having an All-In Baptism Sunday?

That's precisely what we did at Journey Christian Church in Apopka, Florida, after the 2020 election. The

emotional weight and physical exhaustion, not to mention the spiritual dynamics of congregations divided on almost everything at that time in history, cannot be overstated. Like every other church leader at the time, I was worn down from dealing with a constant stream of COVID-contentious congregants. Then, to top the year off, a presidential election, which is always a tense season, but in 2020, it bordered on lunacy that went from bad to worse to atrocious in the days that followed.

What could I do as a local church pastor to exalt Christ, proclaim gospel truths, and heal hardened and hurting hearts? *I decided to invite people to go all-in for Jesus by going all-under in Christian baptism.*

A PRAYER FOR UNITY

I used two primary texts as the basis of my sermon that day. The first was John 17, Jesus' powerful and prayerful plea for unity among his followers just before going to the cross. Verse 11 says: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

At the very end, when Jesus' hour to be glorified had come, the Lord was most concerned about his followers' unity and their oneness. We know this because of what he knew and said in the coming verses. He knew the world would change as long as his followers were bound together in his name and mission. But if they ever became divided and splintered, things would get uglier and more chaotic than they could imagine. History has repeatedly proved him right.

In a few verses, Jesus looked beyond his original followers and extended the parameters of his plea for the rest of us. Jesus said,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (vv. 20-21).

The phrase "all of them" in the first-century world meant the Jew and Gentile, the rich and poor, the slaves and free, male and female, military leaders and soldiers, tax-gatherers and those from whom the taxes were gathered, the educated and the uneducated. . . *all of them*.

"All of them" in the 21st century means Republicans and Democrats, Independents and the indecisive, Libertarians and librarians, the Black and Brown and White and Beige, married, single, privileged and not so privileged, white collar, blue collar or no collar—in other words, *all of us*. And what did Jesus pray for all of us?

"I pray . . . that all of them may be *one*."

Which sounds impossible in our dangerously divided world. And yet Jesus was convinced, as unbelievable as it sounds, that this was absolutely imperative. This was not an add-on for Jesus. This was not, "Wouldn't it be nice if they all just got along?" No, this was mission-critical for Jesus.

But unity doesn't come naturally to us. That's because we know only what we know, and we were raised by who we were raised by and around, and we all have different life experiences. And we tend to run to our little corners politically, relationally, culturally, and in every way, right?

Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner challenged us with this profound statement:

When we are born into the world, there is simultaneously a world born into us. We are immersed into cultural contexts that affect our innermost beings, shaping what we know, how we think, what we take for granted, and what we struggle to accept. We naturally assume that "what is" is what was meant to be.

In other words, unless we understand the power the past exerts on who we are in the present, we will inevitably replicate those patterns in relationships within and beyond the church.

But the gospel tells us that Jesus' church is bigger than the family you were raised in. Jesus' church is bigger than the territorial thinking and regional mindsets of where we were raised at. Jesus' church is bigger than the national parties and nationalistic priorities we are so quick to rally around. Jesus' church is way bigger than what you and I think it is!

Jesus envisions a church that will be so diverse and international, and have so many continents, cultures, and colors represented in it that the most important thing they can do is to remain one in him.

In John 17, Jesus told us why unity in him is so important to him:

"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv. 22-23).

The purpose of Jesus' prayer for unity will shock insider-focused church members who demand that their agendas be respected and their ways be protected. The reason he prayed for oneness doesn't have anything to do *with* us. He prayed for oneness because of what he wanted to do *through* us.

Essentially, he said, "The reason I want them to be one is so that the *world*"—not the people inside the church, but that the people *outside* the church . . . the ones who drive by our buildings and roll their eyes or maybe say something not so nice about us under their breath—"so that the *world* may believe that you sent me. So that when they see the overwhelming unity despite the obvious diversity within the church, they may actually conclude and be convinced that you have sent me."

WHEN WE ARE BAPTIZED,

*WE ARE CALLED OUT OF OUR OLD IDENTITIES,
AWAY FROM EMBEDDED CULTURAL CATEGORIES,
AND INVITED TO EMBRACE SOMETHING RADICALLY NEW.*

Jesus said our unity isn't a let's-all-play-nice add-on to the gospel. It is mission critical. Jesus prayed that we will practice such *unity* in the body of Christ that people will believe in the *identity* of Christ. Jesus prayed that people will believe that God actually loves them *because* they see our love for each other. People will be *won* to Christ when they see that his disciples are *one* in Christ.

Bottom line: *Our unity preaches!* And not only that. Our unity preaches louder than our doctrines, louder than our slogans, louder than our mission or vision statements or our programs, louder than our bumper stickers, wristbands, and our social media hashtags. And *nothing preaches unity quite like baptism.*

A RESPONSE THAT UNITES

The second text I used on that post-election Sunday in 2020 was written by Paul, who knew a thing or two about protecting unity among diverse and divisive people.

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were *baptized into Christ* have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:26-28, emphasis mine).

I love how Rick Atchley summed up Paul's monumental statement:

Baptism is the church's public rebuke of racism—*no longer Jew nor Gentile*; it's our public repudiation of classism—*there's no longer slave nor free*; it's our public rejection of sexism—*there's no male or female*; and it's our public renunciation of any form of sectarianism—*for you are all one in Christ*.

Baptism into Christ changes our primary identity and ultimate allegiance, and every time a follower of Jesus sees a baptism, it should also remind us of that. One of

Paul's anchoring analogies for contrasting the deadening life under law and the liberating life under grace in his masterpiece letter to the Romans is what took place at our baptism. "Don't you know what happened then?" he repeatedly asked.

Likewise, we should remember that when we are baptized, we are called out of our old identities, away from embedded cultural categories, and invited to embrace something radically new. Something so new that it cannot be conflated, confused, or co-opted by any agenda other than the intended agenda of its founder. And his agenda is not to save America but to save Americans . . . and Mexicans, Australians, Ecuadorians, and Ethiopians . . .

I concluded the message that Sunday in November 2020 by saying something like this:

"The future of the universal, eternal, triumphant church of Jesus Christ does not depend on the outcome of an election in a country that's only been around for 244 years! The hope of the world is not based on who we put in the White House but on who we put on the cross. The future of the church was determined 2,000 years ago when the King of kings and Lord of lords rose triumphantly over the grave and declared, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!' (Revelation 1:8).

"Why in the world would we ever opt for anything less than that? Why would we, as followers of an eternal King, allow ourselves to be divided by temporary political systems, political leaders, and political platforms? Why would we ever let lesser kings and lesser things divide us?"

And then, on that post-election Sunday four years ago, 35 people were baptized into Christ. Not much was said about the outcome of the election. More was said about the outlook of the elect. May that be true for 2024 and every year until our King returns. ■

John Hampton is pastor emeritus of Journey Christian Church in Apopka, Florida, senior advisor at D Vaughan Consulting, and program director for the Christian Church Leadership Network.

SPONSORED BY



INVESTING IN A MOVEMENT AND A FUTURE

By Jerry Harris

It's easy to take something for granted, especially when it seems as if it's always been there. But if you've ever had to fight to save something, you tend to view it much differently. These statements can apply to many things, including the Restoration Movement. As mentioned in this issue's "From the Publisher" column, the Restoration Movement gave birth to the nondenominational church in America, now the largest group of Protestant churches in our nation.

If you've ever had to navigate the rough waters of denominationalism, you would more personally recognize the importance of the incredible blessing that is the Restoration Movement. Denominations frequently own the church property, hold the retirement and health insurance of ministers, and expect a portion of church income to support their denominational offices and vision. And when the denominational decision-makers decide to change their stance on any substantial cultural issue, the church is required to toe the denominational line.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

News websites these days are filled with stories of churches seeking to disconnect from their denominations for this very reason, and it can be a difficult undertaking . . . in fact, it can be quite painful. People within Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ tend to take for granted that the church building and property we occupy is our own, that our ministers are provided for through our tithes and offerings, and that our leadership consists of local people we know and trust. These leaders have the same passion for the community that we have. That isn't always the case for denominational churches.

Nondenominational churches have the freedom to choose their own teaching materials, hire their own staff, and expand or do business as they see fit without seeking the approval of some distant hierarchy.

But with that freedom comes heightened responsibility, and churches and church leaders can feel alone, disconnected, or isolated. At these times, being independent can present a challenge. It's at times like these we need to feel the fellowship, connection, and encouragement of other churches and ministry organizations in our movement. We can network through conferences like Spire, ICOM, and Renew.org. We can partner with and support missionaries through our various mission organizations. We can send our students to incredible colleges and universities for training and ministry placement, and we can enjoy abundant resources for teaching and growing in the local church through our publishing partners. There are lots of entities out there to help no matter what challenge or obstacle may be in front of us.

The Solomon Foundation is here to help, too, because we are absolutely committed to this movement. We are a church extension fund that takes the resources of our investors and uses them to empower Restoration Movement churches to get to the next level, all while providing our investors a great return on their investment, both financially and for the kingdom.

Since our founding, The Solomon Foundation has been the fastest-growing extension fund in the history of such funds, and we attribute that growth to the blessings and grace that flow from our heavenly Father! We now manage over \$1.1 billion in assets from people just like you who enjoy a great return on their investment while fueling incredible kingdom growth. With these monies, we've removed obstacles for so many churches, helping them to get to the next level. We've played a key financial role in helping them to experience their hopes and dreams for their community or region. We've come alongside Bible colleges, Christian universities, and mission works to accomplish these same things.

REBUILDING BRIDGES

We've worked to rebuild bridges between the various streams of our movement that had been burned down. The goal is to bring us back into fellowship with one another in love. These initiatives have helped to overcome racial barriers and past hurts to pave a road to a more hopeful future. The Solomon Foundation took the burden of responsibility to save *Christian Standard* from being consigned to history. By saving the now 158-year-old magazine, we preserved our movement's history, and enabled the print and online editions to continue to provide a conduit of communication about every aspect of our churches and ministries by reporting their stories. Christians today and in the future need to know what this movement has done and what it stands for. The staff of *Christian Standard* works to achieve this.

There is nothing more important to The Solomon Foundation than honoring God and taking Jesus Christ to a lost world . . . those are our first and second core values! That's why we celebrate attendance growth and tens of thousands of baptisms that our loans have helped to make possible, because we know that the true bottom line isn't financial, it's people!

While nearly every denomination is declining, some of them severely, the fellowship of Restoration Movement churches and the greater group of nondenominational churches is surging outward to a lost world and downward to future generations. It is sharing the transformational power of what it means to have an intimate personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Solomon Foundation is proud to play a key role in this effort through the gifts with which God has blessed us, so that we might be a blessing to others. We are bullish on the trajectory of this movement as we experience together the harvest only God can provide! Check us out at thesolomonfoundation.org. ■

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MOTIVATE
BY DAVID FAUST



FINDING THE BEAUTY IN A SUNSET:
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM ORGANIZATIONS THAT NO LONGER EXIST

Singer Dan Hicks recorded a country song with a funny title: “How Can I Miss You When You Won’t Go Away?” It’s no laughing matter, though, when treasured Restoration Movement institutions go away.

I miss them.

For two years in the 1970s I attended a small Bible college in upstate New York called New York Christian Institute. Our classes met in a church building, and because there were no dormitories, students rented rooms in old motels nearby. NYCI lasted about a decade before financial limitations forced the college to shut its doors. Today, my wife and I remain grateful for the lessons we learned, the professors who taught us, the lifetime friends we made, and the donors whose generosity made it possible for us to study at NYCI. God used a school that no longer exists to shape our lives and ministries.

AN UNFAMILIAR LANDSCAPE

In recent years, I have witnessed a lot of changes in my little corner of God’s kingdom. I enjoy serving alongside bright, energetic, next-generation leaders, but I miss the seasoned wisdom of Wayne Smith, Ben Merold, and other trusted leaders who have retired or died. My spiritual eyes are adjusting to an unfamiliar landscape as colleges and conventions that once were prominent features of the Restoration Movement respond to the winds of change.

This is personal for me. I devoted 20 years (8 as a full-time professor and 12 as president) to Cincinnati Christian University, which closed its doors in 2019. I served as president of the 2006 North American Christian Convention, and that annual gathering has morphed into a new ministry called Spire. I became editor of *Christian Standard’s* sister publication, *The Lookout*, in 1996. At the time, *The Lookout’s* weekly print editions had over

100,000 paid subscribers. Reader preferences have changed significantly, though, and today a high school stands on the site where Standard Publishing's magazines, children's literature, and Bible study books were printed for decades.

Leading a ministry today is like steering a car through a rainstorm in the dark. It can be done, but it's stressful. Once-thriving congregations and parachurch organizations have closed their doors or are struggling to survive. Some closures are predictable and perhaps inevitable, but they don't happen without pain. And we can't help but wonder: Might some of them have been avoidable?

What can we learn from Restoration Movement organizations that no longer exist? How should we respond when beloved institutions close their doors? Here are some ideas I can contribute to the dialogue.

LESSONS I AM LEARNING

It's OK to grieve. It's normal to feel sad when you lose something you loved. If you care deeply about a congregation, college, or mission, it's not surprising if you experience disappointment and anger when it downsizes, merges with another ministry, or shuts down altogether. Grief is a natural response to loss.

It's important to be grateful. While acknowledging the losses, we should treasure our memories and celebrate past victories. It's better to be thankful for what was accomplished than to be bitter about what was left undone. Just because an organization no longer exists doesn't mean its labor was in vain. Discontinued colleges continue to bear fruit when their graduates serve the Lord and use what they learned.

It's wise to analyze what led to an organization's demise. Did moral failure, mission drift, doctrinal unfaithfulness, or other spiritual problems weaken it from within? Did leadership errors cause the ministry's demise? (All of us have made our share of mistakes.) Did board members and executive leaders make financial miscalculations or misread the shifting cultural landscape? Were they in denial about the dangers? Were they too slow (or too quick) to change their approach? Did they change things that should have been left alone?

We should resist the temptation to jump to unwarranted conclusions. In some cases, the reasons for an organization's demise are clear-cut and unmistakable.

However, the problems are often harder to decipher than a casual observer may realize. Looking from the outside in, it's easy to make quick judgments; but today's churches, parachurch ministries, and nonprofits are navigating their way through a storm of complex spiritual dynamics, market trends, demographic changes, political minefields, and economic pressures. We should extend grace and pray for those who must make tough decisions.

We should be humble. The closure of beloved institutions reminds us to be vigilant in our stewardship and to guard against arrogance. The Bible cautions, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12). It's possible that, for reasons unclear to us, an organization may simply run its course as the Lord begins to lead in a different direction. We must do our best, but God didn't go on vacation and put us in charge of the universe.

It's vital to have an eternal perspective and keep moving forward in faith. The Lord is unchanging. His Word remains true. The ideals of our movement (the lordship of Christ, biblical truth, Christian unity, and effective evangelism) have not changed.

The kingdom of God will go on forever, and the gates of hell will not prevail against the church; but human organizations (even really good ones) have limited life spans. While 501(c)(3) organizations come and go, Psalm 50:1 reminds us, "The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets." Without God in the picture, I suppose you could see sunrises and sunsets as little more than natural phenomena: sunlight reflecting from dust and clouds. But by faith, we see beauty not only when a new day dawns but also when it comes to an end—leading to the dawn of another new day tomorrow.

God's ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). His faithfulness will never fade, and his promises will never fail. While we drive through the storm, we should trust the Lord with the journey and let him handle the steering wheel. ■

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