

A New Facility With an Old Foundation

The members of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Odessa owe a great debt of gratitude to the hundreds of women and men from around the local area and beyond who began a ministry of gospel witness which has lasted over 100 years.

The Restoration movement, championed by Presbyterians Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell and Methodist James O'Kelly began in the early 1800s. Its chief aim was to restore the Church to its original structure and function as in the days of the apostles.

Promoters believed that Christians were far too concerned about doctrine and church trappings and not concerned enough for the call by Jesus to make disciples of all nations. (Mt. 28:19-20)

Restorationists urged believers to search Scripture for direction. They taught that, while not the only Christians, they were Christians only. Denominationalism was thought then to be unnecessary and even harmful.

Influenced by his Baptist neighbors Campbell advocated a return to the practice of baptizing by immersion those old enough to consent to the gift of salvation. Christians, he argued, were all members of one Body through their baptism and therefore all who confessed Christ as savior were to be welcome at the table of the Lord regardless of denomination.

In 1832 followers of Campbell and Stone united their efforts into what would later be called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). By 1846 there were 196 congregations with 13,057 members in Missouri. Many of these churches were founded by farmers who diligently worked to gather a good harvest from two fields.

Their efforts are typified by this letter to Barton Stone from a farmer who preached

regularly at four churches:

Brother Stone: I have not been altogether idle. Since I have been here I will give you an account of the last year. On last Christmas day I constituted a church. Since that time I have constituted two others, and attended with Brother J.B. Thompson in constituting two more - making 5 in all. I have preached on an average five times a week; and have received into the church of Christ more than one hundred members, and have immersed 50: and in the same time I have cleared five acres of woodland, and raised 500 bushels of corn, with my own hands, and no other help than two little boys about 12 years old, and one horse. While I was gone abroad to preach, the plough must stand. Yet blessed be God, my health and spirits are good, and my family and spirits are good, and my family is healthy: and what is better than all, the good cause of the Master is prospering, and prospects look much brighter for the coming year, than they have for the past."

Such devotion and dedication to the gospel ministry by lay persons helped to harness the wild frontier spirit. For a time churches served as primary social and cultural centers. Revivals drew huge crowds. Churches formed as quickly towns (and sometimes preceded them).

On May 5, 1850 a Christian church was organized in the town of Greenton (north of present day Odessa). J.A. McHatton served as pastor with the 12 charter members who worshipped in a small brick building.



Barton W. Stone founded the Christian Church in Kentucky in 1804. It was his followers who came to Missouri and organized the first Christian Churches in the state.

Meanwhile, in Bates City, Christians began meeting in school buildings on what later was known as the Mary Kelly McQuerry Farm.

There is no record of these early Disciples having travelled to Lexington, Missouri in 1852 to hear the now famous orator and statesman Alexander Campbell. Mr. Campbell visited several new congregations along the Missouri River during the winter of that year including: Lexington, Waverly, and Dover. During his travels he raised several thousands of dollars for Bethany College in nearly every town at which he preached.

Christians organized a small congregation south of Odessa in the Mount Hope area and they later combined with Christians in Greenton to organize the First Christian Church of Odessa in 1880. The Bates City Christian Church was chartered with 75 members and Elder Henry pastored both the Odessa and the Bates City Christian Churches.

During this time activities in Christian churches centered around sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with persons who professed no faith. There was an exciting sense of urgency and a clarity of purpose.

First Christian Church erected and replaced 3 buildings before relocating at Third and Dryden Streets in 1893. By 1925 worship participation exceeded space and plans were drawn for the present sanctuary which was dedicated in 1926 at a total cost of \$40,000.

Theodore Bates donated the land on which still stands the first permanent meeting place of the Bates City Christian Church. No sooner had the frame been constructed than a strong wind knocked it down. The frame was immediately replaced and the completed structure was dedicated debt free in 1886.

As with most churches in North America evangelistic zeal eventually gave way to a focus on the spiritual development and nourishment of the members as congregational growth began to level off and local population became more settled and established. Periodic revivals renewed interest in evangelism and the records of both churches indicate that many were won to faith in Christ through these efforts.

The Christian Churches in both Odessa and Bates City enjoyed strong membership in active and vital congregations. They also added to the number of those ordained to pastor and preach.

Russell Harp, Edward Armstrong, Amy McHatton Armstrong Sondergard and Don Hutson - all members of the Bates City Christian Church

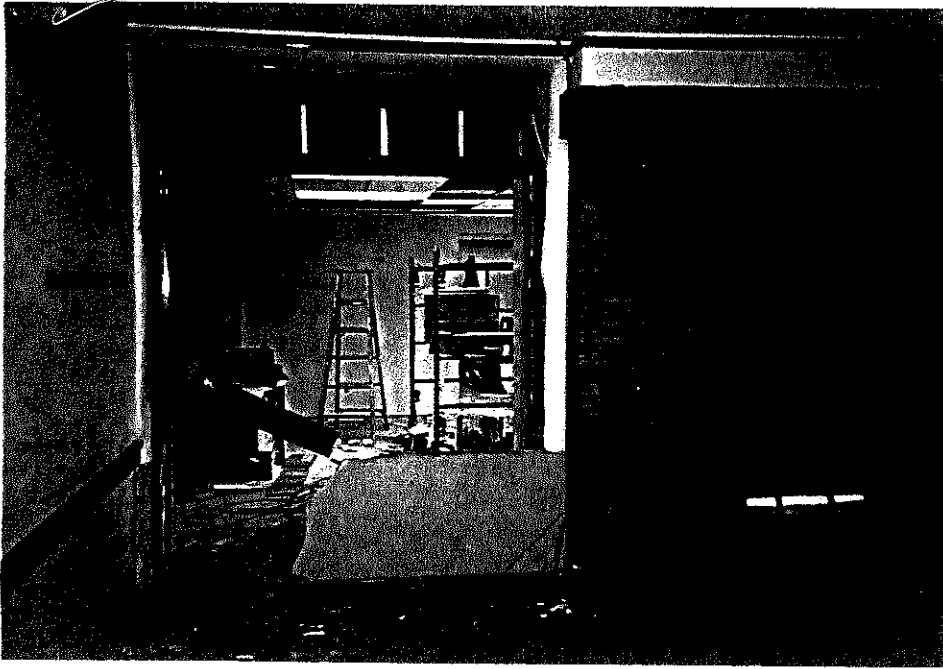


First Christian Church, 1893, 3rd and Dryden

- answered the call to pastoral ministry. Harold Taylor, a member of the Odessa Christian Church entered Johnson Bible College in 1934 and later served as this congregation's first missionary in China. Two other members of the church - David Todd and Bill Rose-Heim - were also ordained. *(Candice Brown is the most recent member to train for ministry. She is pursuing a Master of Divinity at St. Paul School of Theology and serves as Pastoral Intern of First Christian Church)*

While Europe began to fragment into armed camps in the late 1930s the Bates City Christian Church and the Bates City Methodist Church combined to form the Bates City Christian - Methodist Church. This union was the result of a tragic fire which destroyed the Bates City Methodist Church. Both congregations saw great benefit in joining their two rich traditions. The pulpit was filled alternately by Disciple and Methodist preachers. This arrangement lasted until 1983 when the Missouri West Conference of the United Methodist Church declined to provide a preacher.

By 1988 the membership of Bates City Christian Church had dwindled. Few young persons chose to remain in Bates City. It became impractical to maintain the sanctuary for the benefit of so few members who were nearing or at retirement age. With deep regret the members voted on January 31st to close the church.



1994 meets 1926 as the wall is removed between the parlor and the new narthex.

Former members of the Bates City Christian Church brought to First Christian Church of Odessa a rich legacy of 102 years of continuous ministry and some of its finest leadership. They also transferred ownership of stock given by the Bank of Odessa to their new church family. Proceeds from the sale of those stocks gave a much needed boost to a growing "elevator fund" that would provide the seed money for the recently completed building and renovation project.

In early 1990 E. L. Barker chaired a strategic planning committee which examined building and accessibility needs. It was determined that more space was required to accommodate present and future activities. The more immediate concern was accessibility. Entrance to the sanctuary and meeting rooms was difficult for aging members and persons in wheel chairs. The church, having long ago invested itself in ministries with youth, was considering new possibilities including an ecumenical program for afterschool youth activities.

In October 1991 the committee met with representatives from the Board of Church Extension - a unit of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which offers professional consultation to local churches considering renovating or building. It was decided to pursue a capital fund campaign to finance construction of a new addition to include an elevator, multi - purpose room, kitchen, restrooms, six classrooms and two offices. All new facilities and all access points between the existing and new facilities were to be made fully wheel chair accessible to accommodate any person with special needs.

John Donaldson chaired a successful capital fund campaign which achieved pledges of \$157,565.50 to be paid over three years. Amounts pledged far exceeded the goal. A building committee, led by Dick Crews and Ken Leuhrman began working in earnest to prepare the congregation for what would prove to be an exhilarating journey from vision to reality.