

## Churches of Christ drop isolationist view, work with other faiths

By Bob Smietana • THE TENNESSEAN • January 31, 2010 (<http://www.tennessean.com>)

When he was growing up, Doug Sanders learned there were two kinds of people in the world. Those who belonged to the a cappella [Churches of Christ](#), who were going to heaven. And those who didn't, were going to hell. "In the Church of Christ, we had all the answers," said Sanders, associate minister at [Otter Creek Church](#) in Brentwood. "And if we had the answers, that meant everyone else didn't. It's kind of embarrassing to admit it, but that's the way it was."

Since the late 1800s, Churches of Christ, one of Tennessee's largest faith groups, have believed their approach to church — singing without instruments in worship, interpreting the Bible literally, taking Communion weekly and banning women from church leadership — was God's way. That meant they kept mostly to themselves, shunned other Christians and did not participate in interfaith projects for the community.

In recent years, congregations like Otter Creek have adopted a more progressive view of their faith. They've added instruments to church services on Sunday nights and during the week. And they've begun cooperating with other faith groups, especially on charitable projects. Sanders and others say this approach is faithful to their traditions and to the Bible. But critics say churches like Otter Creek have replaced real Christianity with a watered-down version.

To understand what's happening in Churches of Christ, it helps to look at the Bible. That's what Thomas Campbell, his son, Alexander Campbell, and Barton Stone were doing in the 1800s, when they founded what's known as the Restoration Movement. The Campbells and Stone believed churches of their day had split into too many denominations. Those denominations bred hostility between Christians. So the Campbells and Stone wanted to go back to the Bible and create a simpler kind of church that could unite all denominations. Restoration congregations called themselves either Churches of Christ or simply Christian churches. Those early Churches of Christ followed what they believed was the New Testament model for churches. That meant observing Communion every week, baptizing adults by immersion and having no ordained clergy.

The new churches also were autonomous, with no denominational structure. Because the New Testament doesn't mention musical instruments, these new churches banned musical instruments from all worship services.

That remains true for most of the 258 Churches of Christ in the Nashville area. Statewide there are 1,443 congregations, with 166,302 members. Nationwide, there are 12,629 Churches of Christ with a total of 1,224,404 members

But churches disagree on why they sing a cappella. Some congregations do it because that's the way they've always done it. Others say that it remains the biblical model and that to use instruments in church is a sin. "We do it out of conviction. We are rock-solid believers in it. We believe it's the kind of worship God wants in the church," said Dan Chambers, pulpit minister at [Concord Road Church of Christ](#) in Brentwood, which draws about 400 people on Sundays. Because of that conviction, Chambers said that he's reluctant to work with people of other faiths. He doesn't want to be seen as endorsing theology that he does not agree with. "We are accused of being isolationists and to some extent that's a fair charge," he said. "It conveys a sense of arrogance to some, and we don't mean it that way. We just have very strong personal convictions."

### Church cooperates

For Otter Creek Church of Christ, that isolationist approach to ministry doesn't make sense anymore. Over the past two years, Sanders has worked with Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jews, Catholics and other local believers at [Tent City](#), the homeless camp not far from downtown. On a recent Saturday, Sanders and others members of Otter Creek were delivering some firewood to Tent City residents when a group of Seventh-day Adventists showed up. Sanders welcomed them, and said he was glad for their help. He believes that cooperating with other faiths, especially on charitable projects, makes sense.

## Churches split early

Differences of opinion have been common in the Restoration movement from the beginning, said Lee Camp, who teaches theology and ethics at Lipscomb University, a Church of Christ school. That's because Restoration movement founder Alexander Campbell started with good intentions but a faulty assumption, Camp said. "He assumed that one could simply read the Bible and everyone would come to the same conclusions," he said. "It wasn't quite so simple." Instead, followers of Stone and the Campbells began to split. Those in the north eventually formed two distinct groups — the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Most in the South became the Churches of Christ group.

Along the way, the nature of the movement changed as well. In the beginning, Restoration believers said they wanted to be "Christians only," Camp said, rather than joining a denomination. Eventually, however, they began to believe they were the only true Christians. Churches of Christ also became more moralistic. When Camp was growing up in Alabama, his church banned drinking and dancing, along with "sins" like wearing shorts and mixed bathing — girls and boys swimming together.

Wearing shorts was cause for damnation, Camp said. He recalled going on a youth group trip as a teen and passing a man wearing jogging shorts. "Our preacher said, 'He looks real nice in those shorts. They'll look real nice in hell,'" Camp said.

But Camp said that he's grateful for his Church of Christ upbringing and said that most people in the church practiced a kinder, gentler form of Christianity rather than the preacher's hellfire and brimstone. He sees congregations like Otter Creek as regaining something the Restoration movement lost. "We are rediscovering who we were in the 19th century," he said.

## Fourth stream in works

Glenn Carson, president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, said that congregations like Otter Creek are creating a fourth stream of the Restoration movement, distinct from Churches of Christ and other groups. One of the first so-called progressive congregations was [Woodmont Hills](#) in Nashville. Another is Richland Hills Church of Christ, near Fort Worth, Texas. "They are all larger, urban congregations, who are operating in a community church mode, rather than a Church of Christ mode," Carson said. "And they are in the process of opening up to other denominations." There's at least one danger in the progressive movement, Camp said. He's concerned congregations like Otter Creek could lose their distinctive nature. "We could just become plain vanilla evangelicals," he said. Instead, he'd like to see other Christian denominations learn from the Church of Christ, especially when it comes to weekly Communion. Other Protestants take the Lord's Supper far less often, sometimes once a month, sometimes quarterly. That means they are missing out on an important part of worship, he said. Critics fear that progressives may be giving up too much of their heritage. Chambers said that even though he's reluctant to cooperate with other faith groups, he doesn't criticize Churches of Christ that do.

When it comes to a cappella music and other traditions, however, he objects. "I am afraid that a few of our congregations have waved the white flag and are basically surrendering the whole Restoration idea," he said. "And I don't think most Churches of Christ have waved it. I don't think they are planning to. And we are not planning to do that."

Rubel Shelly, former minister at Woodmont Hills and now president of Rochester College in Michigan, believes Churches of Christ will have to adapt in the future or lose their effectiveness. "The notion that people in the 21st century are going to find their identity in a particular denomination is getting more and more unlikely," he said. "The issue increasingly is: Do you believe in God or not? And if you believe in God, do you believe in God as he is represented in Jesus or as he is present in Allah or in Buddhism? "If we ever had the luxury of being divided at every nuance of belief, we are losing it in this culture."