

A Movement for Wholeness in a Fragmented World¹

A fervent ecumenical ideology, an aversion to sectarianism, a focus on New Testament teachings, and a belief in congregational autonomy - these are the cornerstones of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As a leader in the quest for Christian unity, the Disciples have a long history of social and political activism rooted in a passion for justice. However, in keeping with a fundamental precept of self-rule, individual Disciples congregations, and churchgoers, determine the focus, level, and nature of their community involvement and outreach efforts. In the local Round Rock Disciples of Christ congregation, social activism is at the forefront of the church's mission of Embracing Our Neighbors with Christ-like Love (Round Rock, Who We Are web) and closely parallels denominational activities. Identifiable political involvement among Round Rock Disciples is more difficult to pinpoint, in contrast to the denomination's outspoken stances on numerous issues.

History of the Disciples of Christ

What began as two separate nondenominational movements in the early 19th century would eventually amass a membership and influence strong enough to join the ranks of the Seven Sisters of Mainline Protestantism.² (Lantzer, p. 31). In the early 1800s, two ministers, Thomas Campbell in Pennsylvania and Barton Stone in Kentucky, were at odds with the rigid denominationalism and resulting divisiveness prevalent throughout American religious practices. (Christian Church, History). Both Presbyterians, Campbell and Stone withdrew from their respective churches and established new religious movements with an ecumenical ideology. Of particular importance to both the Campbell and Stone Movements was sharing the Lord's Supper (Communion) with all who believed Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior. In 1832, Stone's "Christians" and Campbell's "Disciples of Christ" merged to form the Restoration Movement³ to achieve Christian unity through a return to the New Testament church. (Foundation). A Biblical, yet non-sectarian, name for the new denomination was essential to Stone and Campbell, thus

¹ Excerpt from the Disciples Identity statement - We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. (Christian Church Our Identity).

² The Seven Sisters also include the Congregational Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the American Baptist Convention. The Disciples of Christ is the youngest of the Seven Sisters. (Lantzer p. 10).

³ The movement is also referred to as the American Restoration Movement or the Stone-Campbell Movement.

both movement names were combined giving rise to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). (Foundation).

During the first half of the 19th century, the Disciples were the fastest growing denomination in the United States especially in the frontier regions of the Midwest and upper South. By 1860, Disciples membership had grown to 192,000 making the denomination the sixth largest in the country. Because Disciples congregations were concentrated in border states with moderate leadership, the denomination was one of the few to survive the Civil War largely intact. (Infobase).

However, during the last half of the 19th century, ideological difference over the use of musical instruments, the role of missionary societies, and application of Biblical teachings to everyday life would split the Disciples. In 1906, the more conservative non-instrumental Bible literalists left the more liberal and inclusive Disciples and formed the Churches of Christ. (Foundation). The liberal/conservative struggle within the Disciples continued during the first half of the 20th century and was fueled in part over the status of the denomination's journal, the *Christian Century*, as the leading voice of liberal American Protestantism. (Foundation). Additional ideological differences emerged over acceptance of new, more liberal theological trends, Darwinism, and biblical criticism and culminated with Disciples 1968 reorganization. (Foundation). The switch from an organization favoring congregationalism to a regional/national configuration similar to other mainline Protestant denominations resulted in roughly 3,000 fundamentalist congregations withdrawing from the Disciples to form the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. (Christian Church, History)

Declining membership has plagued the Disciples, and many other mainline Protestant churches, since the late 1960s.⁴ According to data from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), Disciples membership climbed steadily from 1925,⁵ peaking at 1,9433,599 in 1958. (Association). Membership dropped significantly after the 1968 reorganization with the Disciples losing over 430,000 members between 1967 and 1969. Disciples membership dropped

⁴ Past and current famous Disciples include three US Presidents (James A. Garfield, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan) actors Frances McDormand and John Stamos and Kentucky Fried Chicken's "Colonel Sanders". (Round Rock, Who We Are).

⁵ 1925 is the first year data is available.

from 1,444,465 in 1969 to 639,551 in 2010⁶ – a decline of roughly 44%. (See Appendix A for a chart illustrating Disciples membership between 1925 and 2010). However, in 2001 the denomination adopted Four Priorities of the Church to guide the Disciples during the first two decades of the 21st century. A goal of forming 1000 new congregations by 2020 was one of the Four Priorities. (Christian Church, Four). ARDA data indicates 286 new Disciples congregations were formed between 2000 and 2010 – an 8.6% increase. However, according to ARDA data, Disciples adherents (full members, their children, and others who regularly attend services) declined by 22.8% during the same period. (Association). Membership data published in the Disciples 2018 Yearbook and Directory reports 411,140 members in the US and Canada with 60% classified as active. (Office of General Minister, p.776).

Structure of the Disciples of Christ

A regional/national structure was implemented with the Disciples 1968 reorganization and formalized in *The Design*. Considered a blueprint for the management of Disciples business affairs, *The Design* outlines the relationship between members, congregations, regions, and the denomination by providing oversight and guidance at the regional and national levels while maintaining congregational autonomy. (2017 General Assembly, Items 1-4). Spanish, French, and Korean translations of *The Design* are available on the Disciples website.

As the primary manifestation of Disciples faith, congregations share the denomination's mission of witness and service by conducting baptisms, administering the Lord's Supper, tending to the spiritual needs of members, working for reconciliation across racial and ethnic lines, and promoting unity among all Christians through ecumenical endeavors. (2017 General Assembly, Items 10 – 12). Regional ministries within the Disciples are based on the New Testament teachings of Apostle Paul. By making congregations aware of needs beyond the local level, the 32 Regional ministries throughout the United States and Canada are fulfilling Apostle Paul's desire for congregational uniqueness yet union with other congregations in a shared mission to serve God. (2017 General Assembly, Item 19). Regions develop new forms of ministries in mission, witness, and service with an emphasis on ecumenicalism through working with other religions in area. (2017 General Assembly, Item 23). Both congregations and regions are self-

⁶ 2010 is the most recent year ARDA data is available.

governing and establish their organizational structure, budget and financial policies, own and control their property, and determine how they will undertake denominational missions, priorities, and initiatives. (2017 General Assembly, Items 11 & 30). Financial support for Disciples programs beyond the local level is left to the discretion of individual members and congregations. (2017 General Assembly, Item 13).

Denominational leadership in the Disciples is vested in the General Assembly, the General Board, and the General Minister and President (GMP). (2017 General Assembly, Items 41, 50 & 54). The General Assembly meets biennially in odd numbered years and is composed of Disciples ministers and representatives elected by congregations and regions. (2107 General Assembly, Items 38 & 42). Officers of the General Assembly include both salaried (the GMP, a Secretary, and a Treasurer) and non-salaried (four Moderators and a Parliamentarian) positions. (2017 General Assembly, Items 48-49). Voting privileges at General Assembly is limited to congregational and regional representatives and ministers. (2017 General Assembly, Item 32). Responsibilities of the General Assembly include election of the GMP, General Board and other officers, establishment of Disciples financial support and procedures, determination of the church's ecumenical relationships, and scrutinization of racial justice and inclusion initiatives. (2017 General Assembly, Item 41).

During the period between General Assemblies, the General Board oversees the business affairs of the Disciples. (2017 General Assembly, Item 54). The General Board is composed of Disciples laymen, laywomen, and ministers elected by the General Assembly, regional and General Ministries representatives and numerous *ex officio* members including the GMP. (2017 General Assembly, Item 54). General Board responsibilities include overseeing church financial matters, establishing procedures for church work and witness, reviewing and evaluating Disciples programs, and determining the denominations' vision. (2017 General Assembly, Item 54).

As general pastor and president of the Disciples, the GMP provides both spiritual and executive leadership. As general pastor of the Disciples, the GMP provides guidance during times of crisis, ensures focus on maintaining clarity of denominational identity and mission, acts as an ecumenical representative and serves as a reminder of the wholeness of the church. (2017 General Assembly, Item 51). Executive GMP duties include overseeing Disciples missions and

serving as the primary church spokesperson. (2017 General Assembly, Item 52). In 2005, the Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins was elected GMP, the first woman to head a mainline Protestant denomination.⁷ (Foundation). The Rev. Watkins was re-elected to a second six-year term in 2011, the maximum number of terms permitted under *The Design*. At the 2017 General Assembly, an African-American woman, the Rev. Teresa Hord Owens, was elected as GMP of the Disciples. (Christian Church, Rev Owens).

In keeping with the Disciples pro-reconciliation / anti-racist priority, *The Design* was revised in 2017 to eliminate racist language to help ensure the church institution exists to serve all individuals. (Christian Church, Recommendations). Based on the recommendation of a church Task Force on Eliminating Racist Language from Governing Documents, the responsibilities of congregations and regions were expanded to include working for reconciliation across racial and ethnic lines. Regional representatives to the General Assembly now include men and women of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds as well as young adults and youth under 18 years of age. General Assembly moderators will now be from varying races and ethnicities. (Christian Church, Recommendations, p. 4).

The 2017 revision of *The Design* was not the only recent Disciples effort to diversify denominational resources. The Chalice Hymnal was updated in 1995 to more accurately reflect to diversity of Disciples membership and congregations. Hymns now include those reflecting African American, Hispanic, and Asian ethnic traditions. Both Spanish and English versions of 21 hymns are now included in the Chalice Hymnal. (Christian Church, Chalice Hymnal).

Social and Political Concerns of the Disciples of Christ

As a faith founded as a protest movement against denominational exclusiveness and divisiveness, the Disciples have a long history as proponents of Christian unity, social justice, and inclusion. (Disciples of Christ Historical Society). Through ecumenical partnerships with a wide range of Christian, social service, and humanitarian organizations the Disciples work either directly or indirectly with virtually every recognized Christian and a few non-Christian religion

⁷ The Rev. Dr. Watkins also holds another “first” distinction for a woman. In 2009, the Rev. Dr. Watkins delivered the sermon at the National Prayer Service the morning following Barack Obama’s inauguration as the 44th US President, the first woman to do so. (Watkins, p. 1).

in the world.⁸ Despite their declining numbers, Disciples reach and impact a huge portion of the global population.

In 1910, the Disciples established the first denominational organization in the world, the Council on Christian Unity (CCU), devoted to achieving Christian unity. (Disciples of Christ Historical Society). Through CCU lead intercessory prayer, conferences, and reconciling publications, the Disciples have an on-going dialogue with the Roman Catholic church with the goal of realizing a full visible unity in Christ. (Council, Disciples-Roman and History). Another CCU program has opened a dialogue between the three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement⁹ to heal rifts, foster understanding, and nurture trust.¹⁰ (Council, Stone Campbell Dialogue). Many ecumenical Christian organizations partner with the CCU in various interfaith engagements to promote unity, peace, and justice. (Council, Ecumenical Partners). The Disciples were also instrumental in forming many other ecumenical organizations to promote Christian unity including, but not limited to, the Federal Council of Churches, World Council of Churches and the Consultation on Church Union (now known as Churches Uniting in Christ). (Infobase).

Today's Disciples perform their mission of witness and service to the world through several denominational ministries, many of which have ecumenical partnership or ties to other Christian organizations. (See Appendix B for a graphical representation of Disciples partnerships). A wide variety of service and witness opportunities are available to Disciples. (Christian Church, General Ministries). Opportunities for advocacy, faith formation, and congregational transformation are available through Disciples Home Missions, Disciples Women, and Disciples Men. Health and social service related ministry is handled by the National Benevolent Association. Through their financial contributions during the Week of Compassion, Disciples support worldwide humanitarian needs including assistance to victims of natural disasters. Disciples wanting to work with undergraduate college and ministerial students

⁸ The full extent of the Disciples ecumenical relationships was not verified by researching the members of each partner. However, a quick glance at websites of the numerous partners, found the names of most well-known Christian and non-Christian religions as well as many of the lesser-knowns with the possible exception of the Druids, Pagans and Rastafarians.)

⁹ The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

¹⁰ The World Convention is another Stone-Campbell unification effort. The World Convention periodically organizes a gathering of Stone-Campbell churches from around the world to build sense of fellowship, common purpose, encouragement between churches and pray for Christian unity. (World Convention).

can lend their services to the Higher Education and Leadership Ministries.¹¹ (Higher Education). Participation in the Green Chalice/Blessed Tomorrow ministry affords Disciples an opportunity to care for God's creation by working to reduce pollution and becoming carbon neutral.¹² (ecoAmerica). Specialized ministries exist to serve the needs of Hispanic, African-American, and Northern American Pacific/Asian Disciples congregations. Opportunities to address racism are provided through the Reconciliation Ministry. (Reconciliation). The Refugee and Immigration Ministry enables Disciples to assist with refugee resettlement, minister to immigrants and advocate on behalf of both groups.¹³ Participation in each ministry means Disciples will encounter numerous political messages on a wide range of topics such as immigration, racism, social and environmental justice, hunger, poverty, and education. The Disciples website is full of what could be considered political messages on the pages devoted to the denomination's various ministries.

The Disciples of Christ in Round Rock, Texas

The Round Rock Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (RRCC) formed in 1983 and is the only Disciples church in the city and one of only three in Williamson County. (Round Rock, Who We Are). RRCC is one of 376 congregations in the Disciples' Southwest Region. (2017 General Assembly, p. 491). With congregations throughout the entire states of Texas and New Mexico and Oklahoma panhandle, the Southwest Region is the largest geographic expression of the church within the denomination. Southwest Region congregations are further subdivided into areas with Round Rock being part of the Bluebonnet/Lower Rio Grande Valley area that includes 64 churches in Central and South Texas. RRCC joins 15 congregations in the Austin metropolitan area comprising the Capital Cluster within the Bluebonnet/LRGV area. (Christian Church, Southwest).

A small but devoted congregation, RRCC has 160 members with an average weekly attendance of 85. (2017 General Assembly, p. 491). With 53% of its membership attending

¹¹ The Disciples have full or partial affiliation with 15 colleges and university throughout the US including two in Texas - Texas Christian University in Fort Worth and Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins (a predominately Black liberal arts institution). (Higher Education).

¹² Blessed Tomorrow partners include the non-Christian Islamic Society of North America and U.S. Baha'i Office of Public Affairs. (ecoAmerica).

¹³ This is not an exhaustive discussion on all Disciples ministries but includes those most directly germane to the political activities of the denomination.

worship service regularly, RRCC far surpasses the denomination-wide rate of 34%. (2017 General Assembly, p. 776). Members of the Southwest Region have a slightly higher attendance rate of 40% but still below that of the Round Rock congregation. (2017 General Assembly, pp. 774-775). With a per capita giving amount of \$2,604.08, the Round Rock congregation also surpasses both the Disciples-wide and Southwest Region figures of \$1,533.08 and \$1,984.38 respectfully. (2017 General Assembly, pp. 491 & 774-776).

Located on what was then inexpensive property initially on the outskirts of Round Rock, the RRCC is now surrounded by a predominantly middle-class residential neighborhood. As the first occupants in the area, the RRCC was afforded the somewhat unusual benefit of naming the street leading to the church Chalice Way in recognition of the Disciple logo. (Round Rock, Who We Are). A large metal chalice prominently located at the church's main entrance makes the RRCC easily recognizable as a Disciples congregation and signifies the importance of Communion in denominational doctrine. A cross of Saint Andrew on the chalice indicates the importance of each person's ministry, evangelism, and the Disciples Presbyterian ancestry.¹⁴ (Christian Church, Story).

RRCC facilities – a sanctuary, fellowship hall/gymnasium, kitchen, and numerous classrooms and offices – have a feel that is both calming and comforting and greatly enhanced by the warm, welcoming attitude of all members. The sanctuary can seat 120 and is equipped with audio/visual equipment for projection of hymnal lyrics, announcements, and other visual aids during the hour-long Sunday morning worship service. A large cross, over the baptistry, is the focal point of the chancel. Traditional Christian banners with most depicting a cross, adorn sanctuary walls while small stained-glass chalices are in each window.

Two other congregations rent a portion of RRCC's mortgage-free facilities each week, an indication of the Disciple traditions of congregational property control and ecumenicalism. A Spanish speaking Seventh Day Adventist congregation can be found at RRCC all day Saturday and Tuesday evening. Worshipers of the Ministerio Internacional Manantial de Vida congregation, a Spanish speaking Central American Pentecostal group, occupy RRCC facilities

¹⁴ The Round Rock church's logo is also a chalice with the cup surrounded by the congregation's three-pronged strategy of Worship, Serve, and Grow.

every Sunday evening. (Maxted). A YMCA associated volleyball team has leased the church's fellowship hall/gymnasium several evenings a week for several years.

RRCC Structure

Congregational self-rule, shared between laity and clergy, has been a fundamental Disciple belief since the denomination's beginnings. (Disciples Historical Society). Governance at RRCC follows the Disciples norm and is handled through a member-elected Guiding Board¹⁵ and Elders. The Guiding Board is composed of nine church members who serve as either moderator, vice moderator, treasurer, trustee, elder representative or in an at-large capacity. Women currently hold three Guiding Board positions including moderator. Nine elders are elected to serve staggered terms with three seats up for re-election each year. Two-thirds of RRCC Elders, including the chair, are women. Other member-elected positions include assistant treasurer, financial secretary, assistant financial secretary, and two additional trustees. Elder emerita and emeritus are also considered part of the RRCC's leadership team. (Round Rock, 2019). Church committees include, but are not limited to, Vision Advisory, Building, and Pastoral Relations.

RRCC leadership is responsible for a wide-range of church business including facility maintenance, missions and strategies, finances, and composing the congregation's vision and inclusion statements. The Round Rock inclusion statement was recently revised and reflects the Disciples priority to become a pro-reconciling / anti-racist church. (Maxted). In addition to being prominently displayed in the church's welcome center, the new inclusion statement is included in weekly newsletters and will be on the church's website in the near future. The complete inclusion statement, which did not require any approval beyond the congregation's Guiding Board, (Foundation) is below:

Here at Round Rock Christian Church we welcome and celebrate diversity! Inclusion is rooted in our understanding of God, the Creator who made all humanity in God's own image. Just as Jesus loved all humanity, our congregation and our denomination – The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – welcome the breadth of human life into membership and ministry. Our Lord's all-encompassing love challenges us today to confront our own prejudices and manifest inclusion in our congregations and personal lives. (Maxted).

¹⁵ RRCC's male pastor is an *ex officio* member of the Guiding Board.

While not specifically mentioned in the inclusion statement, all believers – be they RRCC members are not – are welcome to participate in weekly Communion. The Disciple tradition of Lay Elders, instead of the ordained minister, sharing the Lord’s Supper with worshipers is observed in the Round Rock congregation. (Foundation).

RRCC Social and Political Concerns

Though small in numbers, the Round Rock congregation is involved in an impressive number of community, societal, and care giving programs. Several initiatives serve the needs of RRCC members. Shut in services assist homebound members in a number of manners including serving the Lord’s Supper. Meals to the Ill provides food to members during times of sickness or medical treatment. The Handcrafters Ministry makes baby blankets, prayer shawls, and lap robes for those in need, including non-members. (Round Rock, Serve). RRCC landscaping is handled by a dedicated group of male congregants. Laity trained as Stephen Ministers provide confidential, individual Christian care to anyone experiencing a crisis or going through a difficult time. (Round Rock, Weekly).

Several RRCC programs benefit neighborhood schools. An annual school supply drive supports neighborhood students and teachers at Union Hill Elementary School and Hopewell Middle School. Teacher appreciation breakfasts are served to Union Hill staff. Members adopt a school child and provide gifts during the Christmas season. (Round Rock, Serve). Through RRCC individual member monetary donations, Hopewell middle schoolers are rewarded for good behavior and academic improvement with \$5 gift cards. (Round Rock, Weekly). RRCC Literary Partners work with Union Hill 2nd graders to improve the students’ reading skills. (Maxted). By collecting Box Tops for Education, members aid Union Hill in purchasing school items. (Round Rock, Weekly).

Neighborhood outreach efforts include RRCC’s biggest annual event – Trunk & Treat on Halloween. Live music, food, and games accompany trick or treating in a safe, family-oriented environment. An outdoor Easter sunrise service is followed by an egg hunt open to all. Breakfast with Santa offers neighborhood children an opportunity to share their Christmas wish lists. (Round Rock, Serve). RRCC members are encouraged to donate the food item of the month (or cash) to benefit a local food pantry. (Round Rock, Weekly).

Numerous RRCC member groups provide an environment for spiritual growth, bible and book study, prayer, and fellowship. Two women's book groups meet twice monthly to study Christian themed books. Prayer services are provided by the Caring Hearts group. Bridge players meet monthly for fellowship and a great card game. Fellowship luncheons are held monthly and hosted by various RRCC groups and ministries. A Sunday Lunch Bunch provides a time for fellowship at a local restaurant. Bible study, as well as other opportunities, are available to Disciples Women's Ministries members. Disciples Men's Ministries are also very active in a number of RRCC activities. (Round Rock, Grow).

While RRCC ministry and outreach efforts closely parallel those of the Disciples, overt political activity and messages are virtually impossible to discern, in sharp contrast to very vocal denominational level advocacy. Members seem to abide by an unspoken agreement to not discuss politics. Accordingly, members, the pastor, and visitors refrain from discussing the current US political climate, bashing either political party, or debating the virtues of a particular issue. There seems to be an implicit consensus among members that everyone has the intelligence to evaluate events in today's society and act in accord with their personal beliefs, interpretation of the bible, and church ideology.

After attending RRCC Sunday morning worship services for four consecutive weeks, congregational political activity, in my opinion, can best be described as a deep sense of civil religion. Some prayer requests in the weekly newsletter might be interpreted as political in nature but take a more civic minded tone. Asking members to pray for the development of an immigration policy for the US that is fair, just, and responsible is a general request. Worshipers are not encouraged to pray for, or against, a wall on the country's southern border, for example, but are rather left to their own devices to determine what is a fair, just, and responsible policy. Likewise, asking for prayers for the empowerment of national political leaders who will work to bring people together, not divide and erect borders is more civic minded than partisan. By not directing members to pray for a particular political party or leader, "politics" is effectively removed from the request with congregants again free to follow individual beliefs. Thus, the "political" message members receive is a subtle reminder our country is in trouble, in dire need of divine intervention, and those of us blessed enough to live here need to take prayerful action.

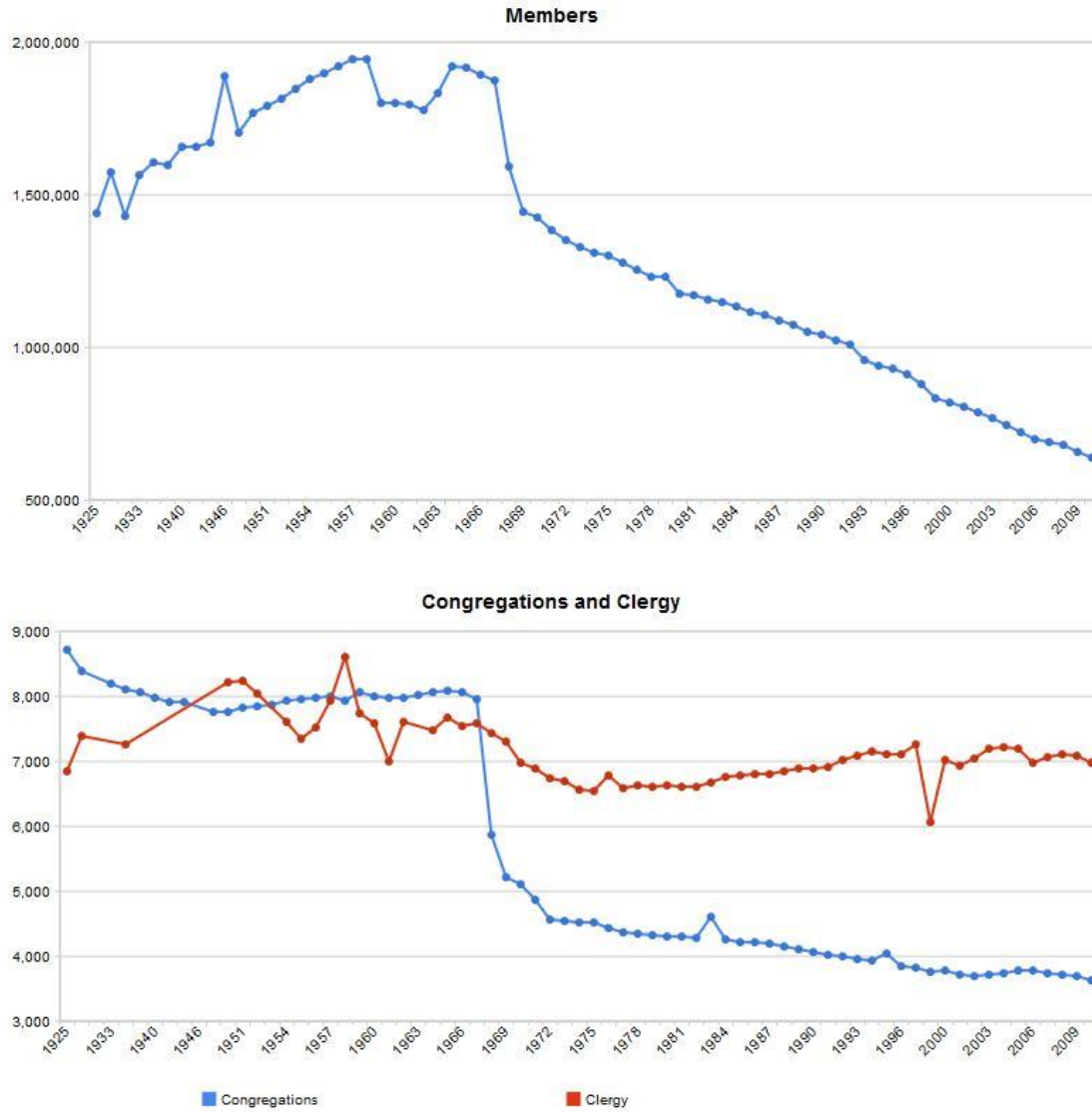
The presence of two flags in the RRCC sanctuary can be construed as further indication of the civil religion, and ecumenical, mindset of the congregation. An American flag serves to remind the congregation of the unity of the 50 states while the Christian flag represents all Christianity, not just the Disciples denomination. Displayed on a staff, the American flag is posted at the pastor's right as he faces the congregation from the chancel (or platform), in accordance with the US Flag code. (Flag) On the pastor's far left is a Christian flag representing all Christianity. It is interesting to note both flags contain the same colors although varying in symbolism. Red stripes in the American flag represent hardiness and valor and the blood of Christ in the Christian flag's cross. White symbolizes purity in both flags in addition to innocence in the American flag and forgiveness in the Christian flag. Vigilance, perseverance, and justice are exemplified in blue in the American flag. Heaven, truth, or baptism in water are embodied by the blue canton in the Christian flag. (Prayer)

Conclusion

With all the anger, hate-filled rhetoric, and divisive blaming prevalent in today's society, it is easy to focus only on the negative. We are seldom, it seems, told of our country's good people and their actions oftentimes taking place far from the media spotlight. By observing, interacting with, and studying the Round Rock Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) I was reminded that we are blessed to have wonderful citizens working for the betterment of our country and world. Explicit political activity, while prevalent on the denominational level of the Disciples of Christ, is not demonstrated by the worshipers at the Round Rock church. What is central to the culture of Round Rock Disciples is a strong sense of community, caring, and respect rooted in a devout faith in God. With the Disciples spreading Christ-like love, understanding, and support to create wholeness in our fragmented world, Round Rock, the US, and all God's creation will be better places.

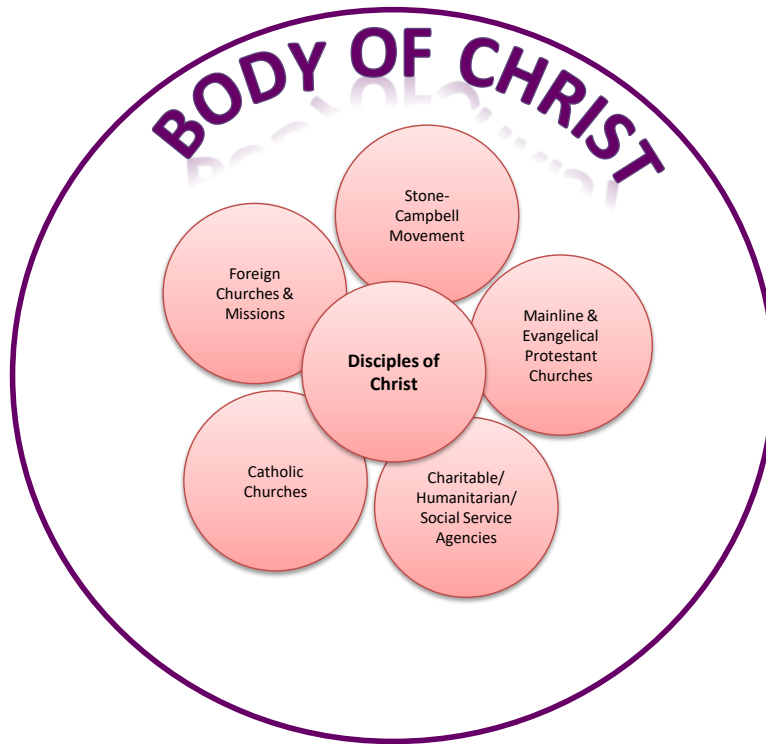
Appendix A

Graphical representation of Disciples membership between 1925 and 2010 (Association).



Appendix B

Disciples of Christ Ecumenical Efforts to Unite all Christian Religions as One in the Body of Christ



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