

Discovering the Disciples

Key People

Caroline Neville Pearre is one Disciple woman who played a prominent role in our history. Disciples had formed the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849 to fund missionaries around domestically and around the world, which Walter Scott (a prominent Disciple evangelist) and Alexander Campbell had argued should be a priority. Campbell wrote “We shall, therefore, regard it as a fixed fact, that the Church of Jesus Christ is in her nature, spirit and position, necessarily and institutionally a missionary institution.” Missionaries to Jerusalem (the Barclays), Liberia (an African American man, Alexander Cross) had mixed results. Soon, funding had run out and by 1870 Disciples had no global missionaries. Congregations were reluctant to support the idea of organizations beyond local congregations and funding for the American Christian Missionary Society was extremely low.

Caroline Neville Pearre (top right) felt led to address this problem and led a group of women from nine different states to establish the Christian Women’s Board of Missions. At its first meeting in 1874, the Board took an offering of \$430. By 1900, receipts totaled more than \$106,000. The group sent its first missionary to Jamaica in 1876 and sent four to India in 1882. Despite their success in filling the missional void, there was still cultural pressure and some within the church rejected the idea of women taking public leadership roles. Today, women play a prominent role in the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Disciples Women is an active organization providing resources to local congregations and doing mission work in the US and abroad. Covenant’s own Marilyn Williams recently served as its president.

Sarah Lue Bostick (bottom right) was among the first African-American woman ordained to ministry by the Disciples movement, in the late 19th century. She worked across Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma for the Christian Women’s Board of Missions for 40 years. Her collection of mission literature, acquired throughout her work, is preserved by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. She and her husband Mancil Mathis Bostick founded the Mt. Sinai Christian Church in North Little Rock, AR, where she was a member until her death in 1948.

The Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins was elected General Minister and President of the Christian



Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA and Canada at the 2005 General Assembly held in Portland, Oregon. Rev. Dr. Watkins is the first woman to serve as the head of a major American denomination. Prior to becoming GMP, she served as a Global Missionary in Zaire, worked at Phillips University, and served congregations in Indiana and Oklahoma. She was invited by President Barack Obama to be the preacher at the inaugural prayer service in 2009, the first woman to preach at that service. She also served on the White House Advisory Council for the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Her second term as GMP will end in 2017 and a new General Minister and President will be elected at the General Assembly held in Indianapolis. Rev. Dr. Watkins has helped to increase the profile of Disciples in the US as “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.”



Structure of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Though what is now a major Protestant denomination began as a congregationalist movement pushing back against church hierarchy, there is a larger structure beyond local congregations with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These are referred to as the three “manifestations” of the church and while they operate at national, regional and local levels, there is no hierarchy. The General church includes the Office of the General Minister and President, as well as agencies like the Christian Church Foundation, Church Extension, Disciples Home Missions, Week of Compassion, Division of Overseas Ministries/Global Ministries, the National Convocation, North American Pacific/Asian Disciples, the National Benevolent Association, the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Higher Education and Leadership Ministries, and the Pension Fund.

The regional church helps to connect local congregations for ministry and mission, supports and sustains camp and conference ministries, and provides support for local congregations in the search and call process for the purpose of calling a pastor.

The local church maintains autonomy in who it chooses as its minister and the length of their service to the congregation, and in decisions about its life and practice. All three manifestations of the church exist in a covenantal rather than hierarchical relationship.

The Chalice

The chalice symbolizes the central place of communion in worship for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The X-shaped cross of the disciple Andrew is a reminder of the ministry of each person and the importance of evangelism.

