



THE TIDE TURNS TOWARDS RESTORATION

A Brief History of the Stone-Campbell Movement in
Tuscaloosa County, Alabama

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Although not reaching the same prevalence as it has in and around Florence (home of T.B. Larimore's Mars Hill College, the current Mars Hill Bible School, and Heritage Christian University) or Montgomery (Alabama Christian Academy, Faulkner University, and Amridge University), the Stone-Campbell Movement has nevertheless done much to shape the religious and educational landscapes of the Tuscaloosa, Alabama, area. From its local origins in the 1830s work of abolitionist James A. Butler to an ongoing wave of church plantings among the Churches of Christ, this paper overviews the numerous impacts of the Stone-Campbell Movement in and around Tuscaloosa during the last two centuries.

Today, the area is home to congregations from three SCM fellowships—the Churches of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, and the “General Assembly”—representing a broad array of theological and cultural orientations. The relative strength of the SCM in the area has allowed these fellowships to defy, or at least dampen, broader demographic declines which have challenged the movement across the United States and even elsewhere in Alabama. During the twentieth century, local members of SCM fellowships were also involved in two school projects in and around the Tuscaloosa area: the Disciples' ill-fated University of Alabama School of Religion in the 1920s, and the involvement of local Churches of Christ in UA's midcentury “Bible Chair” program. Though neither of these institutions exists today, each made important contributions to Tuscaloosa's, and Alabama's, educational histories.

Disciples of Christ and the “General Assembly”

The history of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Tuscaloosa County is best understood as a series of waves or generations, sometimes spaced out by years or even decades, rather than as a

single sustained effort. The earliest stirrings of the movement in the area came with the publication of a religious periodical known as *The Disciple*, which began circulating from the city in 1830. Contributors to the paper included movement-affiliated authors like W.H. Hooker, Alexander Graham, and the abolitionist James A. Butler,¹ whose evangelistic work in the area was publicly commended by Alexander Campbell.² Yet in 1843 the paper was relocated to Columbus, Mississippi,³ and according to preacher and historian Asa Plyler, “it seems that the efforts of the pioneers died out, and for many, many years there was no Church of Christ in the city of Tuscaloosa.”⁴

A second major wave of activity, leading to the establishment of the area’s two Disciples of Christ congregations, was spurred on in 1881 by a “Brother Beasley,” who established (or rather, reestablished) a congregation in Tuscaloosa that year.⁵ Another important milestone in the history of Tuscaloosa Disciples was O.P. Spiegel’s 1899 tent meeting on Greensboro Avenue, which helped crystallize the area’s members, including a “faithful remnant of the then extinct Church of Christ of Northport,” into what is now First Christian Church of Tuscaloosa.⁶ (Spiegel would later seek to establish a Disciples-affiliated “School of Religion” in Tuscaloosa in the

¹ According to David Edwin Harrell Jr., *A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, vol. 1, *Quest for a Christian America, 1800-1865*, 2003 ed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 114-115, “Disciples abolitionists were a colorful lot... James A. Butler, an aristocratic Southerner, fought slavery in Alabama and Mississippi until forced to leave the South just prior to the Civil War.”

² Asa M. Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama* (Henderson, TN: Hester Publications), 152.

³ George H. Watson and Mildred B. Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area* (St. Louis, MO: The Bethany Press, 1965), 109.

⁴ Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama*, 152-153.

⁵ Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement*, vol. 2, *1866-1906* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 176.

⁶ Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 234-235. This meeting built on Beasley’s earlier work, an undertaking which had somehow been largely forgotten until J. Oviatt Bowers discovered a reference to the 1881 establishment of the Christian Church in Tuscaloosa in some of his business paperwork. For more on Bowers, see “Jemison Oviatt Bowers, 1901-1966,” *Tuscaloosa Area Virtual Museum*, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://tavm.omeka.net/items/show/1018>.

1920s, though the project would ultimately fail for lack of funding.)⁷ The Cottdale Christian Church was also formed during this era, owing a great deal to the efforts of R.W. VanHook. The congregation's current sign dates its founding to 1883, though the standard reference on the state's Christian Churches places its origin two years later in 1885.⁸

One other Disciples-connected congregation merits mention here: the Saint Joseph Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ,⁹ located on Elm Street in West End. This church is part of a small, primarily African American SCM group known as the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, or alternately as the "General Assembly." This fellowship has its roots in eastern North Carolina, where in 1886 two small associations of Disciples congregations united in a "General Assembly" which would have the responsibilities of "overseeing the ministry, advancing the establishment of new churches, and strengthening existing congregations."¹⁰

Churches of Christ

The start of the modern era, which led to the establishment of Tuscaloosa's first Churches of Christ, came somewhat later; after all, as late as the 1940s, Asa Plyler could write that "In this fine city we have only one congregation"¹¹ and that "we only have about three congregations in

⁷ My article on "Disciples of Christ and The University of Alabama School of Religion That Wasn't" is forthcoming in the *Alabama Review*.

⁸ Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 174.

⁹ One brief mention of this congregation in the historical record can be found in the *Tuscaloosa News* "Spiritual calendar" for January 25, 2003 (accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/DA/20030125/News/606098732/TL>) which notes that a "Willie Walker, pastor of Saint Joseph Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ" would be speaking at the nearby Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), 50-51.

¹¹ Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama*, 151.

this county.”¹² The sole Church of Christ in the city of Tuscaloosa proper at the time of Plyler’s writing, the Central congregation, began in 1928 as a small group of believers who temporarily rented space in the Tuscaloosa County Courthouse, the First Christian Church,¹³ and the Ritz Theatre before settling into a more permanent facility in 1937.¹⁴ A key figure in Central’s establishment and growth was H.A. Dixon, who worked as the congregation’s minister and taught at the University of Alabama before moving to Henderson, Tennessee, to serve as president of Freed-Hardeman College.¹⁵

Although Central was Tuscaloosa’s lone congregation of the Churches of Christ for about two decades, there were two other congregations in the county, both located to the north of the city. The first was the Mt. Pleasant congregation, which began around 1930, not long after Central. The noted evangelist W.R. Wilcutt held a gospel meeting in the area, where he had lived previously, and through that meeting “gathered up a few members that were already there and baptized several others and established a church there.”¹⁶ The other congregation, Rock Springs, is the forebear of the current Whitson Place congregation, which is one of the oldest (albeit not continuously meeting) congregations in the state. The congregation originally dates to the mid-nineteenth century, though its existence has been interrupted at times owing to a lack of local

¹² Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama*, 149.

¹³ Barbara Martin, “The Central Church of Christ,” in *The Heritage of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Publishing Consultants, Inc., 1999), 21

¹⁴ Dabney Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama* (1990), 34.

¹⁵ Rick Rowland, *Campus Ministries: A Historical Study of Churches of Christ Campus Ministries and Selected College Ministries from 1706 to 1990* (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible Publications, 1991), 35.

¹⁶ Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama*, 149-150. The exact location of this congregation is unknown to this researcher. Plyler says only that the church was “Up in the north edge of the county” and that the Rock Springs (now Whitson Place) congregation is “A few miles to the east” of Mt. Pleasant. The Tuscaloosa County Alabama Genealogy & History Network (<https://alabama.msghn.org/tuscaloosa/churches.html>, accessed June 1, 2021) lists a “Mount Pleasant Church” at the coordinates of 33.589444, -87.490833, which corresponds to the current intersection of Old Cheatam Rd and Old Jasper Rd, a location which fits within the parameters of Plyler’s description. The fate of this congregation is also unknown.

leadership, the destruction of its facility, and a couple of relocations—first, north of Yellow Creek, then back to the general vicinity of its original location around 1935.¹⁷

The next major wave of expansion for the Churches of Christ in and around the city started in 1947 when a Black woman, Joanna Shackelford of Montgomery, Alabama, visited Tuscaloosa and worshiped with the all-white Central congregation. After the service, Shackelford, “a long time member of the Church of Christ, an active Bible class teacher, and... a dedicated worshiper,”¹⁸ encouraged the elders to establish a congregation in town for Black Christians. The elders responded by holding a tent meeting, led by Central’s minister, bringing about seventeen conversions. Shortly thereafter, a new congregation, known as the Church of Christ (colored) of Tuscaloosa, began meeting at the intersection of 32nd Avenue and 18th Street but soon moved one road over to 19th Street in 1950.¹⁹ In 1979, the congregation again moved a short distance away (this time, to 17th Street) and took on the name of the Westside Church of Christ.²⁰

A separate tent meeting led to the establishment of the Cottdale congregation around 1950.²¹ This effort built on H.A. Dixon’s ongoing radio ministry, which had led to the conversion of Cottdale resident Manie Englebert in 1947; because Englebert was unable to physically attend services, a small group of Christians had been meeting at her home weekly for several years prior to Dixon’s tent meeting.²² Continuing the work of expansion, the current

¹⁷ Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama*, 150.

¹⁸ Varner B. Webb, “Westside Church of Christ I,” in *The Heritage of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Publishing Consultants, Inc., 1999), 37.

¹⁹ Varner B. Webb, “Westside Church of Christ II,” in *The Heritage of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Publishing Consultants, Inc., 1999), 38.

²⁰ “Our Congregational History,” Westside Church of Christ, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://www.westside-coc.com/our-congregational-history>.

²¹ Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 35.

²² Kelly Sims, “A Church You Can Call Home,” 2014.

Northport congregation was established in 1951 when seventy-five members from Central moved into a new facility located at the intersection of Main Avenue and 22nd Street.²³ Only three years later, this congregation in Northport would oversee its own church planting, establishing the University congregation with a group of around fifty members in 1954.²⁴ The former Alberta congregation, which later merged with University, grew out of a small Bible study group in 1958 and moved into a permanent building in 1960; the congregation in Moundville, just over the Tuscaloosa County-Hale County line, likewise dates to the same general era.²⁵ Additionally, the South Tuscaloosa Church of Christ, the city's oldest noninstitutional congregation, was formed in 1961.²⁶

The rapid pace of expansion slowed somewhat in the decades following, though a few congregations past and present originated during that span. The area's largest noninstitutional congregation, the Northport-based Northwood Church of Christ, was formed in 1983.²⁷ 1991 brought about the establishment of the East Pointe Church of Christ, which worshiped for the first time in its current building in May 1995.²⁸ Too, the High Forest congregation, which

²³ Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 34. See also O.L. White and Joe E. Williams, "Northport Church of Christ," in *History of Northport Churches: An Outline History of All Northport, Alabama Churches*, ed. Marvin L. Harper (Northport, AL: Northport Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 31-34.

²⁴ Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 35.

²⁵ Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 34. For more information, see "The Church Of Christ at Moundville, AL USA," FindTheChurch.com, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://findthechurch.com/congregation.php?ftclD=moundvilleSWAL>.

²⁶ The 1961 date is found in the congregation's online entry in "Churches of Christ in the United States," accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.21stcc.com/ccusa/ccusa_maintenance.cfm?idno=79. For more information, see "The South Tuscaloosa Church Of Christ at Tuscaloosa, AL USA," FindTheChurch.com, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://findthechurch.com/congregation.php?ftclD=tuscaloosaSouth>.

²⁷ The 1983 date is found in the congregation's online entry in "Churches of Christ in the United States," accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.21stcc.com/ccusa/ccusa_maintenance.cfm?idno=76. For more information, see "The Northwood Church Of Christ at Northport, AL USA," FindTheChurch.com, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://findthechurch.com/congregation.php?ftclD=northportNorthwoodNWAL>.

²⁸ "Our History," East Pointe Church of Christ, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.eastpointechurchofchrist.com/our-history.html>.

merged with Central in 1996,²⁹ appears in a few newspaper and other sources from this general era, most of which date to the late 1970s or early 1980s.³⁰ Another former congregation, the Oakdale Church of Christ, appears to have been meeting on the Northington Campus in Tuscaloosa as of 1979.³¹

The most recent wave (perhaps still ongoing) of new congregations started in 2007 with the establishment of the Mercedes Drive congregation.³² Hillcrest followed in 2014,³³ trailed closely by North Tuscaloosa in 2015.³⁴ Most recently, the Oak City congregation began meeting at the Phelps Activity Center in 2019.³⁵

One other institution meriting brief mention here is the Churches of Christ “Bible Chair,” no longer in existence, which allowed students to take courses taught by local ministers for UA credit. The “Bible Chair” format was developed by the Disciples of Christ at the University of Michigan in 1893, and the arrangement quickly spread to many state university campuses and expanded to include participants from a wide variety of Christian groups. UA’s Bible Chair dated back to the 1920s,³⁶ but the Churches of Christ were not represented in the program until

²⁹ Martin, “The Central Church of Christ,” 21

³⁰ According to one source, Charles Blair and his family “moved to Tuscaloosa, AL where Charles preached for the High Forest church of Christ. For more, see “Our Minister,” Stop 11 Road Church of Christ, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://www.stop11roadchurchofchrist.com/welcome/our-minister/>. Two articles from the *Words of Truth*, both published in 1984, reveal that Dana Watford was working as the High Forest congregation’s minister by that time. See Dana Watford, “Who Moved The Stakes,” *Words of Truth*, April 13, 1984, and Dana Watford, “Commitment To Christ,” *Words of Truth*, April 20, 1984.

³¹ The list of Churches of Christ in Alton Lambert, *History of Tuscaloosa County*, vol. 3 (Centre, AL: Stewart University Press, 1979), 7, includes the Alberta, Central, Cottdonale, 19th Street, Northport, Oakdale, and University congregations. This researcher has not found any other references to Oakdale to date.

³² The 2007 date is found in the congregation’s online entry in “Churches of Christ in the United States, accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.21stcc.com/ccusa/ccusa_maintenance.cfm?idno=15196.

³³ The 2014 date is found in the congregation’s online entry in “Churches of Christ in the United States, accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.21stcc.com/ccusa/ccusa_maintenance.cfm?idno=15664.

³⁴ John Young, “North Tuscaloosa Church of Christ: A Chronicle of the First Four Years,” accessed June 1, 2021, <https://northtuscaloosa.com/north-tuscaloosa-church-of-christ-a-chronicle-of-the-first-four-years/>.

³⁵ “Oak City Church of Christ,” Facebook, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/oakcitycofc/>.

³⁶ Michael Cager Thomas, “Organized Religion at a State University” (MA thesis, University of Alabama, 1966), 39.

1946, when H.A. Dixon briefly taught Bible at UA. When he left Tuscaloosa in 1948, the program fell by the wayside, but in 1950, Oran Miller restarted the work, and Kenneth Reed of the University congregation later took charge.³⁷

The Movement in Context Today

Today, Alabama Churches of Christ, including those in the Tuscaloosa area, are numerically strong compared to their counterparts in most states. According to the most recent statistical data compiled by Carl H. Royster, Alabama Churches of Christ constitute 838 congregations composed of 105,093 adherents, including 82,523 baptized members, and totaling an average combined Sunday morning attendance of 83,987. This places Alabama third, behind only the slightly more populous Tennessee and the much larger Texas, in all four categories.³⁸

At the same time, even the comparatively strong position of Churches of Christ in Alabama finds them in numerical decline³⁹ and lagging behind several other Christian groups in the state. The 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, conducted by the Pew Research Center, found that approximately 3% of adult Alabamians were associated most closely with the Churches of Christ. Groups with larger shares of the adult population included the United

³⁷ Rowland, *Campus Ministries*, 35-36.

³⁸ Carl H. Royster, "Churches of Christ in the United States Statistical Summary by State/Territory," last updated June 2020, https://www.21stcc.com/pdfs/ccusa_stats_sheet.pdf. Stanley E. Grenberg, in "A Case Study of Growth and Decline: The Churches of Christ, 2006-2016," *Great Commission Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 92, notes that these three states, along with Arkansas and Oklahoma, contain over half of the total number of members of Churches of Christ.

³⁹ For comparison, the 2015 figures were 854 congregations with 110,215 adherents, including 86,289 baptized members, combining for an average Sunday morning attendance of 88,179; the 2018 numbers were 841 congregations, 106,035 adherents, 83,262 baptized members, and 84,679 in attendance. See Carl H. Royster, *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2018 ed. (Nashville, TN: 21st Century Christian, 2018), 28. This page is also available online at https://www.21stcc.com/pdfs/PDF_Sample_1.pdf.

Methodist Church and the National Baptist Convention with 5% apiece, Catholicism with 7%, and the Southern Baptist Convention, the clear leader, with 25%. The religiously unaffiliated “nones” also account for 12% of Alabama adults.⁴⁰ The Disciples of Christ have fared even worse demographically than Churches of Christ, with Pew assigning less than 1% of adult Alabamians to the group, and the Institute on Religion & Democracy argued in 2019 that the group could lose as much as half of its total membership within a decade if its decline continues at the current trajectory.⁴¹

⁴⁰ “Adults in Alabama,” Pew Research Center, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/alabama/>.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Walton, “Disciples of Christ Claim Distinction of Fastest Declining Church,” *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion & Democracy’s Blog*, August 20, 2019, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2019/08/20/christian-church-disciples/>.