

Simply Christians:

a journey of spiritual transformation

– a reflection on the values of Churches of Christ in NSW

Every family has its own unique stories. Stories of happiness and pain. Stories of hardship, growth and joy. These stories are formative and reflect *who* we are and *what* we value. For the Churches of Christ the formative stories of our family go back centuries. We have been shaped by those who have gone before us. Inheriting traits and practices that influence who we are today.

While our past *shapes* us, it does not *make* us. The Churches of Christ are a tribe that is united by *shared values* – not necessarily uniform practices. So each generation, in each location, is striving to *continuously be transformed* into the image of God. Exploring for themselves who God wants them to be – an expression of *freedom and simplicity*.

Each community of believers has the freedom to start with a blank piece of paper – returning to the Word and Spirit – rediscovering *simple Christianity* in their context. A key idea for Churches of Christ over the years has been, “*We just want to follow the Bible – and not be afraid of where God leads us!*”

These values of *freedom and simplicity* can easily get lost as each generation quickly forms their own preferred way of doing things. The Churches of Christ understand that followers of God

must revisit these ideas regularly if we want to retain them as vibrant aspects of our God-centred life and culture.

In Australia we share the rights and privileges that come with modern society. The freedom of religion, speech and assembly mixed with ideas of justice and equality are assumed in the West. But these rights have emerged over the last 500 years, waking up across Europe and spreading around the world.

The Churches of Christ were formed in this rapidly changing context. In the sixteenth century when the Bible was being translated into different languages people realised that they did not need a priest to intercede on their behalf with God. At the same time the presumption that people must be ruled by a King with no representation was being challenged. The world was being reshaped by living documents like: The English Bill of Rights (1689); The American Bill of Rights (1789); and The French Rights of Man (1789). These new ideas were revolutionizing the world:

- *we can think for ourselves*
- *we can read the Bible for ourselves*
- *we can govern ourselves*
- *we can each connect to God directly*

During the 18th and 19th centuries these freedoms were emerging in the newer nations: particularly Australia, New Zealand and North America – *the new world*. On these frontiers people felt free to think for themselves (*no need for priests/experts*) and govern themselves (*no need for monarchy/hierarchy*). And in this new world *people are opening their Bibles, reading it for themselves, and allowing it to point them to Jesus*.

In the 1830s Scottish settlers arriving in Adelaide planted the seeds for this thinking in the Australian frontier. As the nation was forming groups of Christians gathered with the plea, “*We just want to be simply Christians!*”

Over time groups met and merged forming networks of association. The name “Churches of Christ” was not introduced as a denominational title but was only a simple description of who they were. Sometimes they used descriptions like Christian Church, Disciples of Christ or Community Church.

There were many, many groups like this around the world. An example is the group believers led by James O’Kelly in Surry County Virginia in 1794. They rejected the religious traditions they had grown up with and formed a new group of believers. They wrote down what they considered to be the cardinal principles of the Christian faith:

1. *The Lord Jesus is the only head of the church*
2. *We will call ourselves simply “Christians”*
3. *The Bible is our only creed and guide*
4. *The only test of church fellowship and membership is
Christian character*
5. *We respect the right of each individual to make their own
private judgements*
6. *We pray that Christians will be united so that the world
may believe in God*

These principles reflect the simplicity and clarity of frontier thinking. There were many groups like this, in effect, *starting with a blank piece of paper* and, with guidance from God’s Word, starting again. The common desire was not to look for something new but rather to go back to the beginning searching for the simplicity and purity of church in the first century. This was born out of a deep frustration with the cluttered traditions

that had been shaping religious practice over the previous centuries. The rapid changes emerging in the world were conducive to thinking that gave permission for men and women to rediscover the core elements of Christianity. Simple Christianity, without the religious clutter.

During this period of history there were slogans that reflected this search for simplicity:

- *Where the bible speaks, we speak. Where the bible is silent we are silent.*
- *In essentials unity, in opinions liberty, in all things love*
- *Christians only, but not the only Christians*

Each group has its own personality. Over the last two centuries some groups have connected to God more with their **heads** (an emphasis on biblical doctrine); some with their **hearts** (an emphasis on spiritual experience); and some with their **hands** (an emphasis on holy service) – but most try to balance out all three areas. **These values of simplicity and freedom in Christ led to some distinctive traits that are generally found in Churches of Christ:**

- **reflecting the centrality of Jesus: we highly value baptism and the Lord's Supper** – these are two ways that believers can physically and personally re-enact Jesus' life saving act – his sacrifice for us – committing and recommitting their lives to him
- **reflecting the responsibilities of freedom: we value the independence of local churches** – there is no controlling denominational structure that tells local churches what they must believe or do in their local context. Christ remains the head of his church and we are inspired by his leadership
- **reflecting the ownership of community: we value the interdependence of local churches** – as a network of mission-shaped Christian communities we collaborate, helping each other in our mission, modelling transparency and mutual accountability

- **reflecting the opportunity of personal mission: we value every member as a minister and missionary** – *there is no professional priests who are the go-between connecting the individual to God. Each member is a participant, empowered for ministry and mission*
- **reflecting the surrender of servanthood: we value the Bible as the God’s inspired word** – *the Bible is our sole statement of belief and plays a central role in determining our understanding of God’s character and divine will for us*
- **reflecting the gracefulness of God: we value unity, diversity, freedom and liberty** – *we acknowledge that every person is different and may find God in different styles and perspectives. Our church communities reflect this diversity and we treat fellow-journeymen with respect, tolerance and grace – following the example of our God*

The Churches of Christ in Australia are uniquely Australian. Our culture combines the mix of British and American, European and Aboriginal, Middle Eastern and Asian. So the factors that shape our community of churches are filtered through our own cultural experiences and the unique ANZAC spirit. As Gary Bouma says, *“Australians hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively about it. The spiritual is treated as sacred. What is held protectively in the heart is sacred; the sacred is handled with great care. Not all things that evoke awe and wonder are loud and noisy, brassy and for sale.”*

So while our church communities have been shaped by the world, they remain a product of our own country. Shaped on our own frontiers, the richness of our religious heritage is that we believe, at our core, that *every Australian can open the Bible and not be afraid of where God leads them to go*. That with freedom found only in Jesus we are free to take a blank piece of paper and return to *simple Christianity*. As Gary Bouma continues, *“‘A shy hope in the heart’ aptly expresses*

the nature of Australian religion and spirituality. There is a profound shyness – yet deeply grounded hope – held tenderly in the heart, in the heart of Australia,”

Today, the Churches of Christ in NSW strive to be an interdependent network of *healthy, mission-shaped communities of fresh hope*. We have over 100 communities that form this network. Each one may look different – but they all share the same core values. These may take the form of large community churches, refuges for the disadvantaged, residential aged care centres, creative small groups – but all focused on *being communities that follow Jesus* – that’s what fresh hope is all about.

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