

Characteristics of Our Churches

A statement prepared by Lorraine & Lyndsay Jacobs, former General Secretaries of the World Convention of Churches of Christ

The family of churches known as Christian Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Churches of Christ grew out of an early 19th Century movement with origins in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Today there are congregations related to this Christian World Communion in more than 178 countries.

What are the 'characteristics' or 'distinctives' of this global family?

Today in any Christian World Communion there is great diversity in belief and practice. There are also many features of each family that are shared by the whole church of Jesus Christ. What follows is an attempt to create an overall but simple picture of who Churches of Christ and Christian Churches are and so it needs to be read as a whole. It also needs to be read in the context that no attempt is being made to separate this family from the church of Christ universal but rather to describe its place within the whole church.

So what are the marks of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ?

It is possible to choose ten major characteristics:

1. A concern for Christian Unity
2. A commitment to Evangelism and Mission
3. An emphasis on the centrality of the New Testament
4. A simple Confession of Faith
5. Believers' Baptism
6. Weekly Communion
7. A Biblical Name
8. Congregational autonomy
9. Lay Leadership
10. Diversity/Freedom/Liberty

1. A concern for Christian Unity.

In the 1808 'Declaration and Address' Thomas Campbell wrote that the 'Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one'. Another pioneer, Barton Stone, spoke of Christian unity being the 'polar star'. The 'Christian' movement was a movement for unity within the fragmented and often hostile and competitive church environment of that time but ultimately became a separate movement. Today there are different understandings of how Christian unity might be understood and achieved ranging from commitment to the ecumenical movement, with some involved in dialogue and negotiation with other church families, through a belief that there is already an underlying God-given unity despite apparent division, to those who feel that they have discovered what the church should be like and that unity will come through others recognising this and joining with them.

2. A commitment to Evangelism and Mission.

Unity was never an end in itself. Its desirability came out of the understanding 'that the world could be won only if the church became one'. Today that commitment is shown both by emphasising the need for personal commitment to Jesus Christ and by a concern for peace and justice for all people. Many will balance these two emphases but often one will be emphasised much more than the other.

3. A New Testament emphasis.

Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are 'People of The Book'. They believed that unity could be achieved by 'restoring' the New Testament Church - stripping away the accumulation of traditions that had brought about division. The authority was the scriptures - not the church. Many still like to be referred to as the 'Restoration Movement'; others believe there are difficulties in accepting that the New Testament provides a clear unified model for the church and believe that the church must also be open to God's present word measured against the biblical revelation. All members of Churches of Christ and Christian Churches would describe themselves as

biblical but interpretation varies greatly.

4. A simple confession of faith.

From Matthew 16:16 came the cornerstone question for church membership: 'Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ and accept him as your Lord and Saviour?' Answering yes to that question is all that is required for membership though many congregations now have membership classes. This simple question avoided the use of - often divisive - creeds. Many today will not make any use of creeds; others will use them as a means of expressing faith - but not a test of faith.

5. Believers' Baptism.

Only people who have reached an age where they can make their own confession of faith are baptised. The means of baptism is always immersion. Many congregations will now accept into membership - by transfer - those who become church members through other traditions; other congregations are adamant that believers' baptism is essential. Baptistries - for immersion - are features of worship facilities.

6. Weekly Communion.

Again believing that they follow the New Testament model, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ celebrate communion or 'The Lord's Supper' each Sunday.

7. Biblical Name.

Members of the emerging 19th Century Movement wanted to be known only as 'Christians' or 'Disciples of Christ'. Slogans such as 'Christians only - but not the only Christians' and 'Biblical names for Biblical people' captured this emphasis. Congregations use names such as Church (or Churches or church) of Christ, Christian Church or Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). There are also congregations within uniting churches in many areas and countries.

8. Congregational Autonomy.

Members of Churches of Christ and Christian Churches live under the authority of Christ but this authority is seen as being worked out in the local congregation. For many this congregational autonomy is absolute; many others guard their autonomy jealously but have established ways of working together; many are organised in regions and/or nationally but still with a very large degree of congregational autonomy. Globally there is very limited organisation. Some countries that have nationally organised work cooperate through the 'Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council'. The World Convention of Churches of Christ is a global fellowship which endeavours to build up fellowship and understanding within the whole family.

9. Lay Leadership.

The 'Priesthood of all Believers' is a mark of all Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. We speak of 'mutual ministry'. Participation by lay people in all aspects of the church's life is a notable feature. Lay people conduct the sacraments. Women and men are seen as equal by many parts of the family but others see distinct roles for men and women. There is an employed and trained ministry with recognition varying from a 'paid member' to an expectation of special leadership.

10. Diversity.

'In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things love' is the best known slogan in our family. Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have always allowed for diversity and much of that diversity has been enriching. Diversity also allows for the possibility of intolerance and division and that unfortunately has been part of our experience. This Christian family is left with the challenge of finding for itself the unity-in-diversity it seeks for the whole church of Jesus Christ.