

# Churches of Christ Sunday, 5 October, 2014

## 2014 Theme: A Movement Moving



### Why a Churches of Christ Sunday?

Designating a Sunday each year to be “Churches of Christ Sunday” gives our churches an opportunity to focus on some of the key themes that make us Churches of Christ. This is not a day that every church in our Movement will take the time to celebrate. However, it is worth engaging with as many in our congregations may not be sure of our values, emphases and characteristics, especially if they have come from other church backgrounds. Aside from that, it is good to remember that we belong to each other.

### How can we celebrate Churches of Christ Sunday?

We'd encourage you to take some time on October 5 to simply remember that we are part of a Movement, part of a family of churches. You might want to focus part of the service on this, use some aspects of this letter, or mention it in your church newsletter. We think the theme this year is vitally important for our Churches.

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### A Movement Moving

*You shall declare before the Lord your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean.” (Deuteronomy 26:5)*

*Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)*

### Christian Movements

Churches of Christ call ourselves a *movement*, not a denomination. We are people who seek to pattern ourselves on the New Testament church. Like Jesus' first followers, we are called to ‘make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’ (Matthew 28: 18 – 20)

The church was birthed on the day of Pentecost when perhaps 120 people were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15, 2:1 -2). Around 3000 people were baptised that day moved by the preaching of Peter. Led by the Spirit, apostolically gifted preachers like Paul established churches in many key cities across the Roman Empire.

In the next stage of its history the Christian church grew from as few as 25,000 adherents in AD 100 to up to 20 million in AD 310. It was a remarkable, exponentially growing movement. Key to this

explosive growth was a focus on discipleship; being apprenticed into the Christian community and learning to follow the teachings of Jesus.

The Celtic Christian movement began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This led to the conversion of pagan Ireland, and the sending of many missionaries who established Christian communities throughout Northern Europe.

The modern missionary movement, which began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continues to this day, planted the seeds which have made Christianity today a truly global faith.

Churches of Christ began as a movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. We grew from a handful of people with some nonconformist ideas, to a group which had over million adherents within less than a century. It is a story of explosive growth.

The Churches of Christ story is one of courageous travelling evangelists, enthusiastic church planting, and a passion for the Kingdom of God on earth that transcended denominational boundaries for the sake of mission.

In the Australian context, small numbers of people captivated by the ideas of the founders of the movement gathered together to break bread on Sundays, and to share their ideas with others during the week. Their efforts were energised by visits by and training from American evangelists. Inspired to plant churches in new areas, multiple congregations gathered to erect new church buildings in a single day (in an era pre-dating restrictive building permits!) Tent missions, outdoor preaching, and weekly gospel services were ways in which our passion for mission was expressed, leading to the growth of Churches of Christ in Australia from small beginnings.

### **Our Movement Today: Stories of Hope**

There are exciting expressions of movement into mission occurring around the country through Churches of Christ.

Churches of Christ in Queensland have been focusing on bringing more of the light of Christ to communities. The last 12 months have seen a significant growth in terms of projects and programs in the more informal areas of their mission. Currently, there are over 200 key Christian volunteers who are forming the core of their new mission workforce. These volunteers serve and engage around 1500 people through numerous Kingdom Access Points each month. At the same time, attendance at conventional churches has experienced a steady increase since 2008.

Milton Oliver is Senior Minister of Roxburgh Park Church of Christ, an outer northern suburb of Melbourne. The church is made up of people from many ethnic backgrounds, is growing well among a diverse community and has a high emphasis on discipleship and training. The church has a vision for planting 16 communities of hope and compassion in the outer northern corridor of Melbourne. As a result of this Milton has assumed the role of Senior Minister also further North at Wallan, and the two churches are aligning in this vision.

John Bond from Lifestreams Christian Church in Perth is the South Asia Pacific World Zone Leader for Dynamic Church Planting International. This organisation has a vision to plant 5 million churches

around the world. There are a number of thriving church plants in Australia as well as across Asia and Africa as a result of this ministry.

Fresh Hope (NSW) is pioneering “The Transformational Church Project” involving seven churches gathering to sharpen their unique ethos and mission. This is to act as a catalyst to transform churches for mission and the Kingdom of God.

Hewett and Elizabeth Churches in South Australia combined resources to plant Northern Communities of Hope in one of the lowest socio-economic areas in Australia. Most are dependent on welfare to live. Every week this church hosts a lunch for people in the community, expressing the love of Christ in action.

There are a plethora of other stories around of churches of all shapes and sizes running various styles of alternative services, planting new churches, connecting with their local communities through various welfare or community activities such as meals ministries or playgroups.

### **Our Movement Today: Challenge and Opportunity**

Some local churches are finding the business of evangelism and disciple-making difficult. This is not unique to Churches of Christ; massive shifts in society have seen Christian affiliation and church membership dropping in many Australian denominations. We can no longer assume that people know anything about the bible or the Christian story. Instead, we find ourselves having to be ‘missionaries’ in a foreign culture.

It is important to remember that the New Testament church found itself in a ‘missionary’ context. The message of Christ was “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Across the Roman Empire a plethora of gods were worshipped, and few Gentiles would have known anything about the Hebrew Scriptures. As a people inspired by the New Testament church, we are well placed to reflect on what it means to be a ‘missionary’ movement today.

The Australian pioneers of Churches of Christ believed in ‘simple’ church inspired by the New Testament, without the need for clergy, dedicated church buildings, creeds and confessions, or church hierarchies. They broke bread in homes, they baptised in creeks, they engaged in street preaching, they adapted to their context, they formed a genuine ‘lay’ movement. Our founding DNA should embolden us to birth diverse expressions of Christian community in the twenty-first century.

Jesus spoke of how new wine needs “new wineskins”; how new actions of God’s Spirit require new forms. The structure and style of churches that will be genuinely “native” to various ethnic groups in our land, to subcultures within Australian society, even to our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, may not yet have been birthed. Yet as the growth of the early church has shown, our faith can adapt across many cultures and subcultures to form communities centred on Christ.

Our State Conferences offer support, encouragement and links to other churches for any church looking to engage in mission in its own local community. Resources are there to help us reimagine what it might mean to approach our local communities with a ‘missionary’ posture, seeking to learn, to understand, to serve, to communicate, and to engage our communities with the gospel.

Global Mission Partners offers support to any church looking to engage in mission “to the ends of the earth”. Such cross-cultural service, while of great worth in its own right, can also help us to think more like ‘missionaries’ in our own local settings.

### **The Dynamics of a Movement**

The current ‘ice bucket challenge’ dominating social media has some ‘movement’ dynamics. In this, everyone who accepts the challenge to be filmed tipping a bucket of ice water over their head nominates two others to do likewise. This simple ‘multiplication’ model went from a handful of participants to over a million in the course of a few months.

This model demonstrates the key factor in the growth of a movement: transmission via multiplication producing exponential growth.

For a Christian mission to become a movement, it cannot simply be about adding converts. It must be about making disciples, who are equipped to make disciples, who are equipped to make disciples. It is also about churches that plant churches that can plant churches that can plant churches, and so on ad infinitum. This is multiplication. This is what is needed to win Australia and the world for Christ.

We can look at this phenomenon in entirely worldly terms. However, we are reminded of the words of Christ: “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44). Without the work of the Holy Spirit, all our attempts at mission are futile.

A defining moment for the birth of Churches of Christ occurred during the Cane Ridge revival of 1801 in Kentucky. This was not so much a dignified occasion but a passionate outpouring of weeping, dancing, groaning, singing, fainting, and jerking as the Holy Spirit touched lives in a powerful way.

Churches of Christ began as a movement because of the work of God’s Spirit. It can only continue as a movement through that same power.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist Gipsy Smith was asked by another preacher to explain the success of his preaching. His answer was: "Go back home, lock yourself up in a private room. Take a piece of chalk and mark a circle on the floor, get down on your knees inside the circle, There, on your knees, pray fervently and brokenly that God would start a revival within that chalk circle. *When this prayer is answered, revival will have begun.*"

For Churches of Christ to continue as a vital movement, prayer for God’s Spirit to be poured out on us as individuals and churches is indispensable.

### **Movement Motivation**

The scriptures caution us that if I “do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (I Corinthians 13:1-3)

As anyone who has attempted a diet or exercise regime can testify, guilt can only get us so far before we run out of steam. Guilt is in fact a toxic and unsustainable motivator. But passion is something else again. A passion for fitness and good health can drive the discipline needed for lifelong healthy habits. A deep passion for God and for people is the 'fuel' for authentic mission.

A key phrase for Churches of Christ from its beginning has been "in essential unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love." In all things love! What a revolutionary paradigm!

Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:14 "For Christ's love compels us." As people inspired by the New Testament, let us be captivated again by the love of God poured out in Christ for us. Let us be reminded anew of the compassion of God for those who need Christ. It is a love too deep not to share, it is a grace so amazing it is worth singing about, it is news so wonderful it needs to be proclaimed... in our own local 'Jerusalem'... and to the ends of the earth.

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### **A Passage for Study on Movement in Mission: Ephesians 3**

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

### **Questions on Ephesians 3 for reflection or group discussion**

What is my awareness of the love of God like?

What would it look like to be filled with "all the fullness of God" as an individual? As a community? What would change?

"Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known." What might this look like?

How might the boundless riches of Christ be made "plain to everyone" in our local community?

Are there particular people, or groups of people, we might pray for to "make plain" the love of Christ?

What might be the next steps to "make plain" the love of Christ to those we have identified for prayer?

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." What is a "wild dream" you'd like to ask God for? For you? For your family? For your church? For the world?

### **Further questions for discussion**

#### **Individuals**

How is my love for God and love for others going?

Who can I love and serve better in my world? How?

What might God be inviting me to do to share with more people about Jesus?

What are the next steps for me to grow as a disciple?

Who can I invest in to grow as a disciple?

How can I go deeper in my prayer life? ("Let revival begin in this circle" ...)

### **Small groups**

How might we together listen to the needs of people in our community better?

How might God be inviting us to be a blessing to our neighbours? Our wider community? Who?

How are we going at being growing disciples? Making new or stronger disciples?

Who or what might God be calling us to pray for together?

How might our prayer together be re-energised?

### **Church leaders**

How is our heart for prayer going as a community? For listening to God together?

How are we going at forming mature disciples in our community? What might we do next to deepen the discipleship within our church?

How can we learn more about the people in our local community? How might God be calling us to serve them?

Are there new churches, or new mission experiments, we should be seeking to birth? How can we discern God's will for this? Where do we begin?

*John 4: 35 Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! 36 And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.*