

The Stamford Church of Christ Story

FROM ORIGIN TO JUBILEE

Part One

It has always been an exhilarating idea – to start over, to go back to our beginnings, and to restore the life and spirit of Christianity as envisioned by Jesus and his apostles. The very finest achievements of the historic church have often, to one degree or another, been driven by this shining vision of restoration. Every monastic movement. The great reform movements of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance itself with its quest to get “back-to-the-sources.” Luther’s focus on *sola scriptura*. Baptists. Puritans. Quakers. Contemporary Catholic reformers like Hans Küng. And again on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century, this idea flourished. There on a virgin continent, it was thought, a golden age of spiritual innocence could be inaugurated. What had already happened politically, a new nation with a new constitution, might now happen religiously, a church unified by returning to its pure beginnings uncontaminated by European church traditions and religiously-inspired violence. This church would find in the New Testament a constitution for faith and practice as inspirational and as liberating as the national constitution just created a generation earlier.

From these beginnings came the Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. And in the early 1960s among Churches of Christ in the South and Midwest there arose the concept of an Exodus Movement, involving sending entire communities of believers inspired by this vision to form ready-made congregations in the urban Northeast. This movement, at the time, made national headlines and was featured in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and *The Wall Street Journal*.

The fifty-five-family-strong group that came to Stamford in the summer of 1966 was led by Jim Pounders and was immediately joined by eleven families already living in southwestern Connecticut. They bought the property at our current location complete with a main house, log cabin and small cottage, began meeting in Newfield School, appointed elders, ran regular columns in the local newspaper, a weekly radio program, Dial-a-Devotional and summer Vacation Bible Schools, became self-supporting within two and a half years, and turned their attention to building construction. Work began in November 1970 with the church serving as its own general contractor. Members poured concrete, dug water lines, framed the structure and painted, and the building, complete with our existing chapel and community room and an office and educational wing, was officially opened Thanksgiving weekend 1971.

What they built over the course of that year, with work parties every Saturday and every evening, served us admirably well into the late 1990s. It was a truly impressive achievement, but equally important was the spiritual foundation being laid. These pioneer first members came, after all, from a religious heritage of congregational autonomy and so they brought to Stamford strongly independent and differing ideas about church, worship and evangelism. Their ability to work through these and build spiritual bonds would become a Stamford pattern. And from the beginning they reached out into Stamford’s poorer quarters, to what was then called the “Southwest Quadrant,” a section of town scheduled for urban renewal, running religious educational programs for children and sending a number each summer to Camp Shiloh. Those

involved still remember breaking up knife fights, the eight-year-old child who jumped out of the second-story window during Sunday School one day, and the difficulty they themselves had finding apartments to rent when they told potential landlords they'd be having children from Stamford's south end visiting them.

Over these early years, many of the original families began to leave usually because of corporate transfers, business or marriage opportunities and family needs elsewhere. Many were young. Almost all left with wonderful memories of their time in Stamford. The summer of 1972 was particularly bittersweet as Jim and Carolyn Pounders, to whom our church still owes so much, relocated to Tennessee, but the church also received a donation of \$49,000 from a blind charitable trust that cut its indebtedness in half. This pattern of low indebtedness, started then, has benefited the church ever since.

For the next several years, people moved in, others moved out, a young man named Paul Meyers served as minister for eighteen months, and the eldership dissolved due to corporate transfers. In March 1975 Frank and Peggy Nitto began their five-year ministry with the church. Frank instilled in the church, both in practice and from the pulpit, a strong pattern for hospitality and sociability. No one was better at welcoming newcomers to town or church; Frank would simply drop everything and see them settled in. 1977 was another year of member-intensive construction work, this time on the minister's house which the Nitto family moved into in late November. These were also years with strong youth programs, large and memorable area-wide youth rallies, the Messiah Moppets' puppet ministry, and active involvement with Timothy Hill Children's Ranch.

With Frank's direction, Bob Bohannon, J.G. Pinkerton and Bob Speer became elders on July 17, 1977. This brief history precludes mentioning the names of all who capably served here as elders, but these three men and those who went on to serve in their spirit, especially Bill Cochran who so selflessly served for twenty years and those who currently serve, Scott Johnson, John Williams, Guy Bocicaut and Tony Keating deserve special commendation for shepherding the church in ways that have made it what it is today, as does Eddie Pleasant, our worship minister, who in every way serves alongside our elders. All these and others brought and continue to bring a strong tradition of continuity, courage and compassion to church leadership here. J.G. is still especially honored for insisting that ministers here be free, whether he at first agreed with them or not, to honestly teach what they believed to be true. We became a church in which no issue or question was considered off-limits and no challenge was considered too great to consider; all this is, in large measure, a credit to J.G.'s vision and generosity of spirit. It was also at Frank's initiative that Dale Pauls came to join the ministry staff in June 1978, serving in his first ten years here largely in educational and administrative ways. His Sunday morning Advanced Christian Doctrine Class began in October 1979 and ran for many years, instilling in the congregation solid theological literacy.

In the summer of 1980 the Nitto family moved on to California, and in January 1981 Ken Durham moved here to begin an eight-year ministry. These years (1981-1988) were distinguished by Ken's remarkable skill in the pulpit, Dale's continuing ministry, Hudson House retreats, effective days of prayer and fasting perhaps climaxed by the remarkable recovery of Jenny Yust from aplastic anemia, volunteering at the Stamford Emergency Shelter, the beginning

of Care Groups, our first Passover seder, Vanguard Seminars on topics related to world religions, cinema and faith and physics, an eighteen-month internship with Curt Marshall and Eric Hancock, and the first Marketplace Forum in October 1984 as part of a sustained congregational focus on discipleship in the marketplace. Ken's speaking abilities led to his becoming during this time a regular speaker for the nation-wide Herald of Truth Television Ministries.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week

Taken from the Jubilee Homecoming Brochure, September 2016