

The Stamford Church of Christ Story

FROM ORIGIN TO JUBILEE

Part Two

At a congregational retreat in September 1987 our elders decided that it was important that our ministers lead them, and possibly later the congregation, in a study of women's roles in the church. In our first exploratory studies over that winter, it became apparent that we could not keep picking and choosing – sometimes from the very same texts – what we would understand in letter-of-the-law ways and what we wouldn't. Ken Durham would move on to Springfield, Missouri in the summer of 1988 and Dale Pauls would assume pulpit responsibilities, but this process continued under Dale's leadership. Over the next ten years, Dale was a graduate student in Medieval History at New York University and his studies there brought a valuable depth of historical understanding to our deliberations. Twice, once in the winter of 1989-1990 and once in the spring of 1993 five-week presentations on the subject of "Women in the Church at First" were made to the congregation. The approach in these studies was textual, with a primary focus on discovering from both the literary and historical context the original intent of the inspired writers when they wrote the passages in question. We came to see that when Paul, for instance, urged restrictions for women in the churches he was addressing, he was guiding Christians in the patriarchal first-century culture in which they lived; he was not making that culture mandatory for all time.

Gradually over the course of the 1990s a consensus for change built. In October 1998 our elders and minister stated that it was their teaching position that "distinctions of roles, privileges, rights and status on the basis of birth are ended in Christ." Then, following a twenty-four-hour prayer vigil our elders determined to move forward toward ending all restrictions on women's participation in congregational life. On Sunday, December 6, 1998 in a group reading from the pulpit men and women participated equally. Since then women have led in all aspects of worship, have taught adult Bible classes, preached sermons, served as deacons, and one, Bill Cochran's wife, Clare, briefly replaced him as an elder in 2013 until relocating to be near a daughter in Baltimore after Bill's death. In 2002 we published a booklet entitled *Sons and Daughters* describing this ten-year process and its biblical rationale; since then it has circulated widely among interested Churches of Christ. Then for two years, 2013-2015, Naomi Walters served a preaching residency with us while working on a D.Min. program at Lipscomb University and before moving on to join the Bible faculty at Rochester College. Naomi preached once a month, taught classes, upgraded our social media presence, and participated fully in the deliberative processes of church oversight with our elders and other ministers.

Meanwhile, beginning in the 1990s our church family has been richly enhanced by the remarkable and inspirational worship ministry of Eddie Pleasant highlighted each year by an A Cappella Christmas Carol Sing-Along that packs our chapel with festive townsfolk; by Debbie Pauls coming on staff as a part-time Minister of Involvement; by the Buddy-Mentor program in Bridgeport for many years under Kim Bohannon's direction in which many members serve as mentors to inner-city children; and by substantial involvement in

Camp Shiloh directed by former Stamford member Lori Bumpas. For a time other members, Ray Newton and Curt Marshall, served as presidents of Shiloh's board and Dale served as secretary. More recently, mission focus has expanded to Hope for Haiti's Children, a Church of Christ effort that offers education sponsorship and orphan care in Haiti.

As the 1990s ended it became clear that the church needed more office and classroom space. Fundraising began. We broke ground in March 2005 and received our certificate of occupancy in 2009. As in the past, members stepped forward to oversee this project, Al Lomoriello serving as general contractor with able assistance from Bill and Clare Cochran. As a result we now have a two-level new wing valued at over \$1,000,000 with only \$60,000 of debt incurred, all of this during the recession years of the late 2000s. We then retired that debt and updated the audio-visual capacity in our sanctuary in 2011. More recently, our building and grounds have been made even more beautiful by a prayer room and a fountain-gazebo complex, thanks to James Zurzola, and by continuing upgrades to Carita's Garden by the Cochran and Sykes families.

Also during the last decade our church family was given amazing opportunities to serve the larger faith community in lower Fairfield County. For two years Dale directed the Stamford Clergy Association and was also president of the InterFaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut. Then for seven years we hosted a monthly Interfaith Book Club to advance mutual understanding between our various world religions. And in 2015 we started a new monthly program, Readings in Current Affairs, in recognition that being Christian in our time is facilitated by being knowledgeable in areas related to peace, justice and human flourishing.

So fifty years after the Exodus we are a racially and socially diversified church representative of the communities from which we come – rich and poor, straight and gay, black, white, Hispanic and Asian with immigrants from Africa, India, the Caribbean and Latin America. We hope to be – and we work toward this goal – the safest place on earth, a place of grace, kindness, forgiveness and acceptance for all who come regardless of background or life experiences. We believe Christ's church is meant to be that. A benchmark sermon in this regard was Dale's "And on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch," April 26th, 2015, available on our church website's Sermon Launcher. We are still driven by the vision of restoration but we bring to that vision historical understanding of the many filters that over the centuries were laid down over the very simple and loving teachings of Jesus.

We realize that we live in transitional times. Some speak of a post-Christian America. Church attendance is in general decline across the nation. Many people are now weighing churches against the teachings of Jesus and their own experiences and are finding them wanting. They seek compassion, common sense and inclusiveness that in their own experiences they have not found in churches, mosques and synagogues. But we see this as not all bad news. In fact, it is very likely that today we stand on the threshold of a great global spiritual awakening, a religious turning point that comes, say, every 500 years, the likes of which has not been seen since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. So,

yes, while some things may be falling apart, other better things are coming together. It's always been that way when the historic church comes to its great turning points. At first some things are unsettling, but they also offer great hope. They challenge what isn't working in the church and its message and its mission. They point to new insight and direction. And in the end, historically this is what always happens: faith catches fire again and dynamically spreads. This time truly globally.

By the grace of God, we here in the Stamford Church of Christ in this our fiftieth year, our Year of Jubilee, are consciously at the center of these expanding possibilities. We respect knowledge here – biblical, historical and scientific. And here, in the words of Haiti's Jean-Bertrand Aristide, all people are people. It is then with full trust in the God that we in the eternal spirit of Jubilee turn our efforts to the next fifty years, to life that is flourishing. To life that is sustaining. To life with God in Christ.

Sources: Nancy Lavender Domyan, *The History of the Stamford Church of Christ, 1966-1985: The Fulfillment of a Dream* and Dale Pauls, *Sons and Daughters: Hearing Women's Voices at the Stamford Church of Christ* (2002); and Naomi Walters, "Discerning Congregational Identity at the Stamford Church of Christ," Chapter One (DMin thesis, Lipscomb University, pending 2016). And a very special thank you to our office manager, Sandy Hogan, whose hard work and gentle, loving service always represents us at our very best.