

ABSTRACT

“THIS IS OUR STORY:”
A CONTEXTUAL AND APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY-INFORMED HISTORY
OF THE VALLEY FORGE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

By
David Paul Siebenaler
April 2024
146 pages

This project applies Appreciative Inquiry and a contextual approach to writing a history of the Valley Forge Christian Church in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) enables organizations and communities to explore and appropriate those elements of their stories that inspire hope and confidence. Instead of focusing on discrete problems to be isolated and solved, AI takes a more wholistic approach by asking groups to identify and learn from their times of greatest vitality. In conjunction with the pioneering work of Carol Kammen, who has published extensively on the topics of researching and writing local and congregational history, AI provides a useful framework for exploring and learning from the history of the Valley Forge congregation. This study traces the church’s story from its founding as part of the Stone-Campbell restoration movement amid the challenging circumstances of post-Civil War northeast Tennessee. It continues with the church’s early growth and “near death” experiences in the early twentieth century. It narrates the period of renewal and reorganization that followed, and it concludes with the era of significant growth and vitality that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century. With the church’s recent observance of the 150th anniversary of its founding in view, this project offers an historically informed resource for the congregation as it reflects on and plans for the continuation of its unique story within the larger story of God’s redemptive and reconciling work.

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OF THE VALLEY FORGE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

David Paul Siebenaler

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry

Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University
Johnson City, Tennessee
2024

DEDICATION

To

Deborah Siebenaler, Ruthann Siebenaler, Katherine Banks, and Rebecca Lockridge

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“I thank my God every time I remember you.” (Philippians 1:3)

Like the apostle Paul, I am filled with profound gratitude when I bring to mind all those who provided help and encouragement with this project. Of course, I must begin with the family of believers who constitute the Valley Forge Christian Church, for whom this project represents something like a love letter. “Thank you” does not come close to expressing the depth of my appreciation for allowing me to share over fifteen years of your story as your preaching minister. You have blessed me beyond measure. Another great source of blessing and invaluable help in the research process are the librarians and archivists. For this project, they include: my daughter, Katherine Banks, who manages the Holloway Archives at Milligan University and the Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University; Joe Penza, Carter County Archivist and librarian at the Elizabethton Carter County Public Library in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and the staff of the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. Many thanks to Dr. David Kiger and Dr. Paul Blowers, both of Emmanuel Christian Seminary, for your encouragement and wise counsel throughout the process. Finally, and most important, I tender my deepest thanks to my beloved wife, Deborah. Without your patience, kindness, and love (not to mention technological expertise!), I would be lost. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

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INTRODUCTION

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” According to Deuteronomy 26:5, these words introduce the narrative of God’s mighty acts of deliverance in behalf of ancient Israel.¹ They lie at the heart of an act of worship that centers around thanksgiving for God’s provision. Past and present merge as the worshiper recites the series of events that have led to this moment in which the worshiper presents an offering of first fruits to the priest. This narrative rehearsal creates a direct link between what God has done for Israel in the past to what God is doing for her in the present. Performed annually at the time of harvest, this ritual illustrates the central role that historical memory plays in the Jewish tradition. For Christians, the eucharistic meal performs a similar function. Words and actions at the Lord’s table point to past events—Christ’s suffering, death, burial, and resurrection—that carry profound present implications for believing communicants. Both the Israelite standing before the priest and the Christian receiving the bread and the wine situate themselves within a larger story. Their identities emerge and take shape from these intentional acts of recalling what God has done for them and discerning both what God is doing now in their midst and where God is leading them.²

¹ All subsequent citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. Whether one posits a postexilic date and multiple authorship for Deuteronomy (see, for example, Ronald E. Clements, “Deuteronomy” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 278-284) or one holds to the traditional view of Mosaic provenance (see, for example, Gary H. Hall, *Deuteronomy in The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2000), 14-23), the historical/creedal nature of this statement remains undisputed. As Clements notes, “To be an Israelite was to be a beneficiary of a long history of God’s gracious providence and care, which had made slaves into free and prosperous citizens. This is the message that echoes through the confessional recital of the past in 25:5-10a.” Clements, 479.

² William Robinson, the eminent 20th century British Churches of Christ scholar, makes this point clear in his instructional manual entitled *The Administration of the Lord’s Supper* (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1947): “Again,

What is true of individual believers applies to communities of faith as well. Christian congregations have stories that arise from biblical sources and extend throughout church history, and these stories include the unique elements of their own particular trajectories. At the same time, it is worth noting that their stories are closely intertwined with their local, regional, and national contexts. In other words, they do not exist in an historical vacuum. These complex stories must be told so that congregations can develop a stronger sense of who they are, how God has worked among them, and where God might be leading them. In this project, I will tell the story of a specific congregation—the Valley Forge Christian Church (hereafter VFCC) in Elizabethton, Tennessee—where I have served as the preaching minister for over fifteen years. This undertaking has enabled me to address a larger question: how does the process of producing and sharing a congregational history contribute to the discernment of God’s movement in and around the congregation at the present time?

The timing for such a project proved to be especially fortuitous, since it coincided with a year-long commemoration of the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of VFCC. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the celebration began in a low-key manner on the actual “birth date” of the third Sunday in November 2021. This was followed in the spring and early summer of 2022 by a six-week revival that consisted of guest preachers sharing a series of messages centered around the theme of “Close Encounters with Jesus” during the Sunday morning services. The revival culminated in the congregation’s annual celebration of “homecoming” that took place over two Sundays. On the first Sunday (June 26, 2022), Tommy Oaks, a gifted storyteller and “Timothy” of VFCC led worship and preached for the morning

the [eucharistic] service should be *objective* in character rather than *subjective*. It will be directed towards God, and not towards ourselves, to what He *has done* in the glorious Gospel, to what He *is doing*, and to what He has *promised* to do.” Robinson’s italics. Reprinted in Charles E. Gresham and Tom Lawson, eds. *The Lord’s Supper: Historical Writings on Its Meaning to the Body of Christ* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1993), 60.

service. Later in the day, the congregation gathered to view a video produced by Kent Edens, a professional cinematographer and church member who put together a series of home movie clips depicting community and church events ranging from the 1950s through the early 2000s. Dr. Thomas L. Smith, a former youth minister at VFCC and soon-to-retire president of Johnson University, preached for the second “homecoming” service on Sunday, July 3, 2022. Interestingly—perhaps even providentially—both speakers shared messages that celebrated the church’s past and called for a renewed and hopeful focus on the future, with a particular emphasis on discipling young people. Appropriately, Vacation Bible School came next, with Tommy Oaks and his son, John Thomas returning to lead in that outreach to children and families from July 10 through July 14.³

Prior to the sesquicentennial commemorative events of 2022, a group of thirty to forty congregants engaged in a thirteen-week study of the Stone-Campbell Movement, utilizing *Renewal for Mission: A Concise History of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ* as the main resource.⁴ This study took place on Wednesday nights during the weekly prayer meeting services, and it situated the story of VFCC within the national and regional contexts of the nineteenth-century Christian unity movement with which the congregation has identified since its founding. The study also included a brief overview of general church history and early American religious history. Although a majority of the participants consisted of more active, long-term members of the church, the group also included a small number of newer members

³ Although the order was reversed, a similar series of special commemorative events took place during the church’s centennial celebration in the summer of 1971. Two weeks of Vacation Bible School (June 7-16) preceded a one-week revival (June 27-July 4) with homecoming on the final day of the revival. More detailed information about these events may be found on a commemorative book cover and other promotional materials that belong to the VFCC historical materials collection.

⁴ W. Dennis Helsabeck, Jr., Gary Holloway, and Douglas A. Foster, *Renewal for Mission: A Concise History of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2009).

and interested individuals (approximately 6-8 each week).⁵ At the beginning of the study, the participants had the opportunity to complete an anonymous “Church History Interest Survey” in which they rated their responses on a scale of one (not at all) to five (very much) to the following set of questions:

1. How knowledgeable are you about the history of the Restoration Movement/Christian Churches?⁶
2. How interested are you in learning more about the history of the Restoration Movement/Christian Churches?
3. How important do you think it is for church members to know about the history of the Restoration Movement/Christian Churches?
4. How knowledgeable are you about the history of Valley Forge Christian Church?
5. How interested are you in learning more about the history of Valley Forge Christian Church?
6. How important do you think it is for church members to know about the history of Valley Forge Christian Church?

Thirteen individuals submitted completed surveys, for a response rate of around 37% (based on an average attendance of 35 at the Wednesday night services).

The first question generated an average response of 2.23 with a median of 2, indicating a somewhat low level of familiarity with the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement. No one rated their knowledgeability higher than a 4. By contrast, nine of the thirteen participants

⁵ At the time when the study took place, the active, residential church membership rolls numbered around 150, and the Sunday morning worship attendance averaged around 100. Based on these metrics, the participation rate in the study ranges from 20% of total church membership to 40% of Sunday morning worshipers. In any case, one might accurately describe this group as representative of the “core” members of the congregation.

⁶ Nomenclature always presents a challenge when referring to the Stone-Campbell Movement, primarily due to its division into three major “streams”—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the so-called “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the *a capella* Churches of Christ—since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for example, Christian Church/Church of Christ historian Henry Webb’s discussion of this vexing topic in Henry Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2003), 2-6. Church of Christ historian Leroy Garrett was one of the first major interpreters of the movement to refer to it by the names of its founders: Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell. See Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An Anecdotal History of Three Churches* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981). Interestingly, Garrett later revised and re-published his work with the title, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994). While the term “Stone-Campbell Movement” has gained wide usage in academic and ministerial circles, lay persons in the “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are more likely to be familiar with “Restoration Movement” terminology—hence, the use of this term in the questionnaire.

responded to the second question with a 5, for an average of 4.46 with a median of 5. Almost identical results occurred with the third question—the average response was 4.69 with a median of 5. This portion of the survey clearly demonstrated a strong interest in gaining a greater understanding of the tradition that has defined VFCC throughout its existence. It seems likely that VFCC is not alone in experiencing the need to redress what has become a pervasive sense of ahistorical rootlessness.

Ironically, the modern heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement (especially its more conservative streams—including the “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ) render themselves particularly susceptible to this sort of spiritual amnesia. Church of Christ historian Douglas A. Foster notes that there is a pronounced tendency among these churches to dismiss all of church history from the first through the nineteenth centuries as irrelevant, because in the early 1800s the New Testament church was purportedly “restored” through the efforts of Barton W. Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and others. Following this logic even further, the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement itself becomes a moot point, since the churches of that movement have now allegedly returned to their biblical roots. In pointed contrast to this perspective, Foster asserts, “Everything that has happened in the pilgrimage of Christ’s church through the centuries is part of who we are today.”⁷ Furthermore, according to Foster, becoming familiar with this history cultivates the Christian virtues of gratitude and humility. He calls for the development of a “spiritual historical consciousness” that enables Christians “to reevaluate our understandings of the church itself with a renewed commitment to being the people of God in our own time, but with the humility to admit that our understandings

⁷ Douglas A. Foster, “Ignorance Is Not Bliss: What Christians Lose When They Ignore Their History” *Christian Standard* (November 7, 2004): 6 (710). It is worth noting that Foster’s article appeared in the most widely circulated periodical of the “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

and practices can no more reach final perfection than those of any of God's people through the ages."⁸ These themes provided much of the rationale for the Wednesday night study at VFCC.

The last three questions of the survey focused specifically on the history of the congregation itself, with an average response of 2.77 and a median response of 3 to the fourth question. When compared to the respondents' overall rating of their knowledge of the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, this outcome revealed a slightly higher (perceived) familiarity with the VFCC story. Nevertheless, when one considers that a significant majority of the study participants were long-time church members, this result points to a surprising lack of "spiritual historical consciousness" even at the local level. On the positive side, the identical responses to the fifth and sixth questions demonstrated a healthy appetite for increased awareness and understanding of the story that involves people, places, and events that are "closer to home." If the respondents showed an eagerness to learn more about the Stone-Campbell Movement, they were even more enthusiastic about congregational history. Eleven of the thirteen respondents answered questions five and six with a 5, thus producing an average response of 4.77 with a median of 5.

These results track closely with the popular interest in local history that emerged in American society during the post-Civil War era, centered around the centennial celebration of the nation's founding. According to historian Carol Kammen, a widely recognized expert in the field of local history, community histories proliferated during the late nineteenth century primarily because of two factors: nostalgia (bordering at times on hagiography) with regard to a community's pioneer past and "boosterism" in relation to the present desire to retain and attract industry, population, and cultural, educational, and religious institutions. For the most part,

⁸ Foster, 7 (711).

amateur historians who belonged to the educated and professional classes (which, at the time, meant that they were mostly white males) produced these accounts. They had not received formal training in the academic discipline of historical research and writing, which itself had only just begun to make its presence known in American universities in the late 1800s. Even so, due to their relatively high socioeconomic status, their narratives tended to ignore the struggles and contributions of the more marginalized members of their communities.⁹

Later in the twentieth century, as academic historians developed a greater appreciation for local and regional history, a more inclusive approach to local history-writing in terms of both authors and subject matter began to become more widespread, albeit at a frustratingly slow pace. While acknowledging that some progress has been made, Kammen laments,

Local historians have been, on the whole, antimodern; they have been overly concerned with beginnings and with the distribution of land, without looking carefully at the recent past or their own times. Local historians have rarely touched on topics that concern change, especially alterations brought about by technology, or ecological change, or the diversification of the population.¹⁰

On a more optimistic note, Kammen credits the American bicentennial with stimulating a renewed interest in local history that continues to the present day in various forms, ranging from genealogical research to debates over monuments and other historical markers. Through the use of Appreciative Inquiry (described below) as an interpretive framework, this project capitalizes on that phenomenon as it relates to VFCC, and it incorporates Kammen's concerns about paying closer attention to those whose names and voices seldom make it into the "official" accounts.

Kammen offers more specific guidance for those who write congregational histories, urging them to provide "meat" as well as "bones" to their readers.¹¹ The category of "bones"

⁹ Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 5-14.

¹⁰ Kammen, 18.

¹¹ Kammen, 81-82.

includes items such as lists of ministers, meeting minutes, financial records, property deeds, church building locations, and so forth. Such data, of course, are indispensable for constructing a coherent and accurate chronology, but all too often congregational histories fail to go beyond those details to provide the “meatier” substance of nuance and context. For example, it might be interesting and even helpful to know the completion date of a particular building project. But larger questions call for a more in-depth investigation. Why did the congregation choose to build at that time, and by what process did they arrive at that decision? What did the structure (and perhaps its location) communicate about the changing socioeconomic status of the church’s members? How did the building reflect the beliefs and practices of the congregation? In terms of architectural style, was it more conventional or “cutting edge” for its time? What message was the building intended to convey to the surrounding community? Were there larger economic factors that either inhibited or contributed to the completion of the project? What were neighboring churches doing at this time with regard to their meeting facilities? If the building project involved a relocation, was it due to changing demographics? The pursuit of answers to these kinds of questions leads to a more engaging and often more complicated narrative—in other words, a history that resembles human life lived in community with all of its ambiguity and unresolved tensions. It humanizes the past and makes it more accessible to a wider audience.

Undoubtedly, as Kammen contends, historians must provide context because of the invaluable and indispensable richness it adds to historical narratives (local or otherwise). Historians must also present a clear rationale for researching and writing about a particular topic, such as congregational history. With regard to VFCC, the most immediate reason for such an undertaking obviously consists of the church’s sesquicentennial celebration. But it goes well beyond that, due to concurrent global events. As with faith communities everywhere, VFCC

continued to grapple with the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on congregational morale and vision throughout the course of this project. At the same time, the intersection of the global health crisis with this milestone moment in the church’s history presented a *Kairos*-like opportunity for looking backward through the lens of an approach known as “appreciative inquiry” as a way of charting a forward course during uncertain times.

“Appreciative Inquiry” (hereafter AI) enables organizations and communities to explore and appropriate those elements of their stories that inspire hope and confidence. Instead of focusing on discrete problems to be isolated and solved, AI takes a more wholistic approach by asking groups to identify and learn from their times of greatest vitality. First developed for use in the business and non-profit world, AI offers a helpful model for doing congregational history. Fuller Theological Seminary professor Mark Lau Branson led the way in applying the insights of AI theory and practice to the realm of congregational life. His seminal work—*Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change* (second edition)—provides the essential foundation for the “appreciative” aspect of this project.¹² Branson draws extensively from the pioneering work of David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, as well as AI scholars Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard J. Mohr, and Ralph Kelly for his theoretical framework.¹³

At its most basic level, AI incorporates a four-stage process known as the “4-I Model” (Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, and Innovate). The following table illustrates Branson’s comparison

¹² Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

¹³ See especially Suresh Srivastva and David L. Cooperrider, eds., *Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organizations*, rev. ed. (Euclid, OH: Williams Custom Publishing, 1999). See also Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard J. Mohr, and Ralph Kelly, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Wiley, 2011).

of the four components of a traditional organizational problem-solving approach to the four action phases of the 4-I Model:¹⁴

<i>Problem-Solving</i>	<i>Appreciative Inquiry</i>
<p>“Felt Need” Identification of Problem ↓ Analysis of Causes ↓ Analysis of Possible Solutions ↓ Action Plan/Treatment</p>	<p>Inquire into the stories of life-giving forces. ↓ Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry. ↓ Create shared images for a preferred future. ↓ Find innovative ways to create that future</p>

As Branson notes, most organizations (including churches) “assume that the job of leaders is to find the problems and fix them.”¹⁵ In the case of VFCC, this approach would entail viewing and addressing the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on congregational life much like a medical professional would diagnose an illness or dysfunction and prescribe an appropriate treatment regimen.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this leads to a rather narrow focus on the patient’s presenting condition as an isolated issue, with little or no consideration given to the much wider picture that includes the patient’s medical history.

AI redresses this imbalance and its bias toward “presentism” by adopting a broader perspective that includes the “life-giving forces” in an organization’s past. It begins, then, with the assumption that, according to Branson, “all organizations have significant life forces, and these forces are available in stories and imaginations.” Furthermore, Branson contends, when an

¹⁴ This table is reproduced from Table 2.1 in Branson, 24. Branson, in turn, adapted his table from concepts delineated in David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, “Appreciative Inquiry into Organizational Life,” in *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, vol 1, ed. W. A. Pasmore and R. W. Woodman (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press. 1987), and in Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly, 83.

¹⁵ Branson, 23.

¹⁶ So, for example, the approximately twenty percent decline in worship attendance that VFCC experienced over the course of the pandemic would be seen as a problem that requires an immediate solution.

organization such as a congregation makes a deliberate effort to access those narratives, its members become better equipped to “construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most hopeful images of the future.”¹⁷ As it relates to congregational history, AI offers a model of investigation, description, and evaluation that centers around two vitally important and interrelated questions: how has God graciously worked in and through this particular body of Christians, and what are the implications for discerning God’s movement among us now and in the immediate future? Of course, this model does not give license to construct a “whitewashed” or “Pollyanna-ish” version of VFCC’s past. On the contrary, AI compels the congregational historian to construct a narrative that steers carefully between the Scylla of “golden age” romanticism and the Charybdis of what C.S. Lewis dubbed as “chronological snobbery.”¹⁸

Throughout the process of research and writing, it is also necessary to remember that historians do not occupy a position of unbiased objectivity. Indeed, while striving for accuracy in terms of specific details (names, dates, places, etc.), historians must also recognize that a vital part of their work consists of interpretation. In this regard, the dictum of eminent Stone-Campbell church historian and educator Dean E. Walker carries particular relevance: “The discipline of history is the study of events: the evidence on which they are based; and the significance of the meaning inherent in them.”¹⁹ The latter part of Walker’s definition points to both the inevitability as well as the necessity of the interpretive task. Given that understanding, AI provides congregational historians with one very helpful interpretive lens—not rose-colored

¹⁷ Branson, 24.

¹⁸ The term appears in C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 207. Lewis defines this fallacy as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”

¹⁹ Dean E. Walker, “Church History,” in *Adventuring for Christian Unity and Other Essays*, eds., Tom Foust and William J. Richardson (Johnson City, TN: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1992), 274.

glasses, but a means of focusing on discrete aspects of a congregation's story. The search for meaning transcends a rote recital of events; instead, it revolves around an intentional quest for what Branson describes as "the signs of God's grace in our stories."²⁰ Accordingly, this project drew from a variety of "life-giving" episodes in VFCC's past: from the mundane and the extraordinary, from triumphs and tragedies, and from glaring errors and glowing accomplishments.

For the purposes of this project, I made use of the first two phases of AI: Initiate and Inquire. As noted above, the intersection of VFCC's sesquicentennial with the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for undertaking this endeavor. The "Initiate" phase consisted largely of informal conversations with church leaders and members about the need for an updated congregational history as part of a larger process of discerning where God might be leading VFCC in the gradually emerging post-COVID era. The response to this idea was overwhelmingly positive; one indicator was the widespread interest in and numerous contributions to the "history display" that occupied a prominent place near the entrance to the sanctuary in November 2021 and again during the homecoming celebration in the summer of 2022. The "Inquire" phase involved standard historical research into Kammen's categories of both the "bones" and the "meat" of available resources. What follows is the outcome of that investigation and interpretation: a contextual and appreciative history of the Valley Forge Christian Church in Elizabethton, Tennessee. It begins by locating that history within the grand narrative of God's work of reconciliation with fallen humanity in and through the universal church. On that basis, it examines the congregation's humble beginnings and traces its course through initial growth and an early "near death" experience. After exploring the challenges and

²⁰ Branson, 74.

experimentation that occurred in the church's story during the first half of the twentieth century, it describes the flourishing that took place in the decades following the Second World War. The story concludes with Appreciative Inquiry-generated suggestions for drawing from the "life-giving" resources from the past as the Valley Forge Christian Church continues its journey into the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The story of Valley Forge Christian Church begins long before its founders signed the original charter in 1871. In *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, British Church of Christ theologian William Robinson argues that the idea of the church as the community of God's people stems from "God's bid for fellowship" with humanity, because "fellowship is the hidden structure of reality," rooted in the triune nature of God.¹ The Bible represents the authoritative revelation of this divine initiative; as such, it has a distinctively communal emphasis. "It is a book about the church," Robinson contends, "and only about the individual as he is related to the church."² Robinson traces this concept of the church to God's election of Israel and God's history with Israel. The Old Testament narrates the narrowing scope of "God's bid for fellowship" to the post-exilic "remnant of Israel," which finds its fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. For Robinson, the church of the New Testament widens outward from this point, beginning with the calling of the twelve apostles. He describes this group as "the

¹ William Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1948), 18. The British Churches of Christ represent a parallel "restoration" movement that emerged in the British Isles largely from Scottish independent Baptist roots during the early nineteenth century. See *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s. v. "Great Britain and Ireland, Churches of Christ in," by David M. Thompson. A fuller treatment may be found in David M. Thompson, *Let Sects and Parties Fall: A Short History of the Association of the Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland* (Birmingham, UK: Berean Press, 1980). Robinson served from 1920 to 1949 as Principal of Overdale College, the theological training college for the British Churches of Christ. He then taught Christian doctrine and theology at Butler School of Religion in Indianapolis from 1951 to 1956. It was during his tenure at Butler (a graduate seminary of the Disciples of Christ) that his seminal work, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, became more widely known among the North American Stone-Campbell restoration movement churches. See *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s. v. "Robinson, William," by Paul M. Blowers.

² Robinson, 28.

church in embryo” because of its heterogenous nature. “This is what *fellowship* means,” Robinson declares, “not the gathering together of a group of like-minded uninteresting people calculated to bore anyone other than themselves, but the nonexplosive interlocking of those rich differences of personality which, if left to themselves or organized on a class basis, would lead to endless strife.”³ Although this diverse apostolic fellowship dissipates briefly at the time of Christ’s execution, it reconstitutes itself after his resurrection, and on Pentecost it launches into the world as “the concrete reality by which Christ becomes manifest to the world, and by which he acts in history.”⁴ According to Robinson, the church—in both its universal and its local aspects—is nothing more or less than “the continuation of the Incarnation.”⁵ This means, of course, that the church mirrors the mysterious and paradoxical combination of the human and the divine. “Like [Christ],” Robinson observes, “it is both local and yet universal. It is never just the community in a single locality. When a body of people, say twenty, are gathered together as a church to offer to God the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, they are joined to the whole church in time and space.”⁶

Based on this scriptural understanding of the church as the embodiment of God’s millennia-spanning bid for fellowship with humanity and the continuation of Christ’s incarnate ministry, the story of Valley Forge Christian Church becomes more richly textured than a simple chronology of ministers and building projects would indicate. “Our story” includes the vast mosaic of saints and sinners, reformers and reactionaries, institutions and movements, ordained ministers and laypersons that make up the panoply of church history. Thus, we are the heirs of a tradition that extends across time and space, and it behooves us to acknowledge our indebtedness

³ Robinson, 42-43.

⁴ Robinson, 99.

⁵ Robinson, 101.

⁶ Robinson, 104.

to the generations of faithful Christians who embodied the divine mission of human redemption in their life together in distinct congregations. Whether meeting for worship, prayer, instruction, and eucharistic fellowship in a wealthy member's home during the first century, AD, or in a cavernous cathedral during the medieval era, or in a rough-hewn log structure constructed "for the use of all Religious denominations" in post-Civil War northeast Tennessee, such communities have always been critical to realizing both the nature and the purpose of the church as a whole.⁷

Indeed, as Stone-Campbell church historian Dean E. Walker contends, the local congregation is the "necessary structure" by which the universal church manifests itself and fulfills its mission. While acknowledging that the church in the New Testament exhibits variety in terms of its missional undertakings, Walker maintains that "there is no exception to the rule that without the congregation there is no Church."⁸ Thus, every assembly of Christians exercises stewardship over a sacred trust that comes from Christ himself. For Walker, this "tradition of Christ" is embodied primarily if not exclusively in the life of the local congregation, and it contains three essential elements:

The Church or people of God is faithful to the Trust of God when it engages, first in the preaching of the Gospel; second, in offering, by virtue of its capacity as the royal priesthood, the sacraments of baptism and the communion of the eucharist, to all who present themselves for the reception of these rites; and third, in the discipline of Christ, the practical summary of which is found in the Epistles of the

⁷ The quote regarding the log structure refers to the "log church" that stands adjacent to the Valley Forge Christian Church campus. It is from a deed made out by James and Mariah McCathern to "Daniel Ellis, Elijah Williams, and John Bayless and their successors forever for the consideration of the love and affection we have for the worship of All Mighty (sic) God" on September 15, 1882. The handwritten deed is recorded in the Carter County Recorder's Book of Deeds, 494-495.

⁸ Dean E. Walker, "The Tradition of Christ," in *Adventuring for Christian Unity and Other Essays* (Johnson City, TN: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1992), 537. Originally published by the Milligan College Press, ca. 1963-64, according to the editors' notes, 550. Walker wrote this paper in opposition to the process known as "Restructure," whereby a portion of the Stone-Campbell churches sought to organize into a full-fledged denomination. This culminated in the formation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1968. He was concerned that this restructuring would obscure the essential role of the local congregation as the primary embodiment of the universal church.

New Testament. In other words, the Church as the Body of Christ is prophetic, priestly, and didactic.⁹

Whenever and wherever a congregation comes into existence and commits itself to that threefold tradition, the church universal appears and grows in a certain place. For this noble purpose, a small group of Christians came together at Locust Grove in 1871 near the mountain community of Hampton, Tennessee, and they formed themselves into a congregation that would come to be known as the Valley Forge Christian Church. In other words, they planted a seed, trusting in the One “who gives the increase.”¹⁰

A Time for Planting

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.”¹¹ With poetic insight, the “Teacher” (also known by his Hebrew title, Kohelet) of Ecclesiastes observes the pendulum-like movement of time in terms of both the created order and human events. Wisdom, Kohelet implies, consists of discerning the times and acting in accordance with the divine will that mysteriously oversees the unfolding of both natural and human history.¹² The agricultural metaphor of planting points to a time of hopeful beginnings; it infers actions taken with confidence in what lies ahead. The farmer embeds the seed in the earth with a mixture of certainty and hope that it will germinate, grow, and produce a crop in the seasons that follow. Jesus refers to this process occasionally in his teachings to illustrate the potential of “the reign of heaven/the reign of God” on earth. In one notable parable, he tells of a farmer who broadcasts

⁹ Walker, 535.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 3:7 NKJV

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 NRSV

¹² W. Sibley Towner, “Ecclesiastes” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. V (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 305. As Towner puts it, “The ‘times’ are moments of human-scale appropriateness intricately interwoven with implicit cosmic orders.... The wise person’s task evidently is to know when the right time has come and to move visibly with whatever invisible program there may be.”

seed indiscriminately on various types of soil with mostly disappointing results wherever the conditions are inhospitable. That which falls on the “good soil,” however, produces an almost impossibly abundant harvest— “growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”¹³ The emphasis in this and similar teachings lies in the deed of sowing itself; everything depends on this faith-full act. It always involves a certain amount of risk-taking, but it also requires discernment of the times, of knowing when the season for sowing has arrived.

For the founders of Valley Forge Christian Church, the “time for planting” occurred in 1871, not long after an intense period of considerable uprooting and upheaval in northeast Tennessee and throughout the United States. It had been just over six years since the guns had gradually fallen silent after Lee’s surrender to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in south central Virginia on April 9, 1865. During the preceding four years (1861-1865), the nation experienced unprecedented bloodletting as brother took up arms against brother. The dividing lines between North and South did not adhere directly to the boundaries of the self-proclaimed Confederate States of America. Pockets and whole regions of pro-Union sympathy (or, at least, opposition to secession) existed throughout the southern states and in some cases became hotbeds of resistance against Confederate authority. This was especially true in northeast Tennessee and particularly in Carter County (where Valley Forge Christian Church is located), where long-simmering resentment against the domination of state government by political and economic interests in the western and central sections of the state boiled over in the aftermath of the statewide vote in favor of secession in June 1861.¹⁴

¹³ Mark 4:8 NRSV. The entire parable as well as Jesus’ explanation to his disciples features prominently in Mark’s gospel, and both supply the interpretive key to Mark according to Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). As Tolbert sees it, the “sower” is God, and the “seed” is Jesus himself. The parable also occurs in the other synoptic gospels: Matthew 13:1-9 and Luke 8:4-7.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive scholarly account of the impact of the Civil War in northeast Tennessee, see Noel C. Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For an in-depth discussion of antebellum political divisions within Tennessee, see

As Stone-Campbell historian Henry Webb notes, the pro-Union proclivities of northeast Tennessee had little to do with the issue of slavery. Due to its mountainous terrain, this section of the Volunteer State did not witness the development of large-scale, labor-intensive agriculture centered around the production of cash crops such as cotton. “Thus,” Webb contends, “slavery was not important to its economy; in fact, slave holding was not profitable and at the beginning of the Civil War only 8% of the population was black in contrast to 25% in middle Tennessee and 33% in the western portion of the State.”¹⁵ Although slaveowner-turned-abolitionist Elihu Embree published *The Emancipator* for a brief time in 1820 from Jonesborough in neighboring Washington County, widespread antislavery sentiment did not supply the primary motivation for northeast Tennesseans’ resistance to secession.¹⁶ Instead, the residents of this region felt ignored or neglected by the state government in Nashville, which, from their point of view was controlled by powerful individuals and business concerns, many of whom profited from slavery. The vote for secession from the Union in 1861 provided the opportunity not only to express their

especially pp. 6-21. Of the 1,429 votes cast in Carter County over the secession issue, only 86 (6%) were in favor. Fisher provides a table of the vote by county and by region in Appendix C, pp. 188-190. Carter County registered among the highest “no” vote percentages, surpassed only by three other counties in the east Tennessee region: Campbell, Scott, and Sevier.

¹⁵ Henry Webb, “The Contributions of the Stone-Campbell Movement to the Religious Culture of East Tennessee” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 29 (Summer 1994): 123. According to the United States Census for 1860, the population statistics for Carter County are as follows: 6,728 white; 22 “free colored;” and 374 slaves. Assuming that all slaves were African American, this means that slightly less than 6% of the inhabitants of Carter County were non-white. See [1860 Census: Population of the United States](#), 456-461. Accessed 12/16/2022. According to information compiled by local historian (and deceased Valley Forge Christian Church member) Frank Merritt, there were seven slaveowners in the Seventh District of Carter County, which includes what would come to be known as the Valley Forge community. Among them, they owned a total of fifteen slaves. This number had decreased significantly from two decades earlier, at which time there were twenty-two slaveowners and eighty-six slaves in the Seventh District. Merritt obtained this information from the 1840 Census and the Carter County Tax List for 1860 from the County Clerk’s Office in Elizabethton, Tennessee. See Frank Merritt, *Early History of Carter County: 1760-1861* (Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1975), 203-205.

¹⁶ See [The Emancipator | Tennessee Encyclopedia](#), by Tara Mitchell Mielnik. It was “the first newspaper in the United States solely devoted to the abolition of slavery.” The son of a Quaker minister and a former slaveowner, Elihu Embree (along with his brother Elijah) was involved in the nascent iron industry in northeastern Tennessee during the early nineteenth century. After freeing his slaves, he channeled his energies into the abolitionist movement. See [Embree, Elihu | Tennessee Encyclopedia](#), by Durwood Dunn.

sectional displeasure, but it also led in some cases to open rebellion that took the form of guerilla warfare against Confederate supply lines and occupation forces over the next four years.

With the outbreak of hostilities between North and South in April 1861, the northeast corner of Tennessee quickly became contested territory as Confederate forces moved into the restive region to avert a Union invasion. Important railroad links between Virginia and the lower South passed through the area and offered tempting targets for those inclined to active resistance to Confederate rule. In what amounted to guerilla warfare, three members of the influential Carter family from Carter County took active roles in plotting and carrying out the destruction of railroad bridges from Chattanooga to Bristol in early November 1861. As news of the bridge burners' exploits spread, a general uprising took place throughout the region, including a major revolt by Unionists in Elizabethton—the county seat of Carter County, some three miles north of the Valley Forge community. After a weeklong pitched battle between over one thousand insurgents and Confederate forces at Elizabethton, the uprising failed when an anticipated Union invasion did not materialize.¹⁷

For the next three and one-half years, the struggle continued as intermittent violence between Unionist and secessionist guerrilla bands ravaged the area and inflamed tensions. One of the more well-known figures on the Unionist side was a farmer and wagon maker named Daniel Ellis, who lived in O'Brien Forge (later renamed Valley Forge).¹⁸ A lifelong resident of Carter County and Mexican War veteran, Ellis ardently supported the Union cause and became a “pilot” who guided young men out of Confederate-occupied northeast Tennessee counties into Kentucky

¹⁷ Fisher, 51-61.

¹⁸ According to Frank Merritt's self-published booklet entitled *Valley Forge Families* (1995), the Carter family constructed and operated the original iron ore forge along the Doe River. Sometime during the 1820s, they sold it to James O'Brien and his sons, and the community took on its eponymous designation. At some later date, the name changed to Valley Forge. There are no page numbers in this publication; however, this information is found on the first page of the section entitled “Valley Forge News—People and Places—Through the Years.”

where they could enlist as regular Union army soldiers. In his memoir published shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War, Ellis relates an incident that took place in early February 1864 that involved “piloting” a number of “Federal soldiers returning to their posts, Union citizens who could not stay at home, and a number of young men who were fleeing from the conscript law” to Union-occupied Knoxville through Confederate-held territory. Of note is the fact that the starting point for this excursion through mountainous terrain, as in many previous instances, was Ellis’ homeplace in O’Brien Forge.¹⁹ Like many other rural communities throughout northeast Tennessee during the Civil War, O’Brien/Valley Forge often found itself under the scrutiny of Confederate officials and secessionists who encountered stiff resistance whenever they tried to suppress the subversive activities taking place in those locales. Indeed, the Confederate provost marshal of Carter County, Captain William Stringfield, acknowledged the dangers involved in such operations when he wrote in 1862 that he “did not visit very much out—as the enforcement of *the conscript law* made it a rather dangerous thing to do—unless with soldiers.”²⁰

The lingering bitterness that was the legacy of widespread violence and division in northeast Tennessee abated gradually during the Reconstruction era. Because the Unionists emerged triumphant, their wartime leaders gained political, economic, and social prominence throughout the region. Daniel Ellis was among these, and he played a pivotal role in postwar religious developments in the Valley Forge community. Ellis is credited with constructing what came to be known as the “Old Log Church” that still stands on property adjacent to land owned by Valley Forge Christian Church.²¹ It is unclear who, if anyone, actually owned this plot when

¹⁹ Daniel Ellis, *Thrilling Adventures of Daniel Ellis* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1867; reprint ed., Johnson City, Tennessee: Don & Mignon, 1974), 220. “Piloting was an extraordinarily hazardous duty,” notes Fisher, “and the price of failure was confinement in a Confederate prison or death.” Fisher, 65.

²⁰ Quoted in Fisher, 70.

²¹ According to Frank Merritt, “Some Methodist believers, probably led by Captain Dan Ellis, were among religious people who gathered together and built the Old Log Church (sometimes called Cedar Grove) shortly after the end of the Civil War.” Merritt also provides a list of charter members of the Valley Forge United Methodist Church, which

the meeting house was built, but on September 15, 1882, James and Mariah McCathern sold to “Daniel Elis (sic), Elijah Williams, and John Bayless and their successors forever for the consideration of the love and affection we have for the worship of All Mity (sic) God a tract of land imbracing (sic) the Cedar Grove Meeting house on Doe River.” The McCatherns further specified, “To have and to hold the same to the Said Trustees and their successors forever for the use of all religious denominations. That is, it shall be free for all to use and occupy the same.”²² This log structure would provide the first permanent meeting place for the congregation that was established in November 1871 at Locust Grove near Hampton, Tennessee and eventually came to be known as the Valley Forge Christian Church.

The reason for relocating to the O’Brien/Valley Forge community remains unclear, although it situated the new congregation near what would become an important transportation route that linked the mountainous sections of Carter County with its lower-lying districts. Northern investors with an eye to developing the mining and logging industries in the southern Appalachian highlands funded the construction of the East Tennessee Western North Carolina Railroad, which generally followed the route of the Doe River from Roan Mountain to its confluence with the Watauga River in Elizabethton. In his *Later History of Carter County: 1865-1980*, Frank Merritt notes that construction on this rail line began in 1876 and was completed in 1881; it included the creation of a tunnel through Jenkins Mountain, which lies between Hampton and Valley Forge.²³ A few years later, passenger rail service on the “Tweetsie” (as it

includes U. S. Grant Ellis, a son of Daniel Ellis. See Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*, sections entitled “Valley Forge United Methodist Church” and “Ellis Family.”

²² Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book U, pages 494-495.

²³ Merritt, *Later History*, 6-8. Although the railroad no longer exists, the tunnel and a nearby trestle remain. Residents of the Valley Forge community often refer to wind blowing from the direction of Hampton and Jenkins Mountain as the “tunnel wind.” More recently, supporters of the “Tweetsie Trail” (a “rails to trails” hiking and bicycling trail from Johnson City to Elizabethton that uses the old ETWNC railroad bed) have purchased land near the tunnel with the intention of extending the recreational trail system to Hampton and beyond. Valley Forge Christian Church hosted a gathering of interested individuals and local officials on August 5, 2021, to discuss this

came to be known affectionately) started, and it flourished for the next several decades, largely due to the development in 1884 of a hotel and resort complex on Roan Mountain by John T. Wilder, a retired Union Army general. A native of New York who later moved to Indiana, Wilder had been involved in the 1863 campaign to take Chattanooga. He returned to Tennessee after the war's end and spent the remainder of his life pursuing various business and political interests in the eastern part of the state. Wilder's Roan Mountain project spurred the nascent tourism industry in Carter County, drawing large numbers of both local residents and visitors from outside the region who passed through the Valley Forge community enroute to the cooler climates of higher elevations during the summer.²⁴

Along with the efforts of other Northern investors and entrepreneurs, Wilder's other business ventures undoubtedly contributed to both the economic growth and the notable population increase that occurred in Carter County during the late nineteenth century. Citing United States Census figures, Merritt notes that the population of the county as a whole increased by approximately 27% between 1870 and 1880—a figure that is even more noteworthy since a portion of the county became a separate political unit (Unicoi County) during this decade. The population of Carter County increased by over one-third in the following decade (1880-1890) and by one-quarter in the closing decade of the nineteenth century.²⁵ While it is not possible to

venture. If realized, the trail extension would literally pass through the front yard of the church property, thus presenting ministry opportunities to trail users.

²⁴ See *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, s.v. "John Thomas Wilder," by Patrice Hobbs Glass. [Wilder, John Thomas | Tennessee Encyclopedia](#). Accessed February 4, 2023. See also Samuel C. Williams, "General John T. Wilder," *Indiana Magazine of History* 31 (September 1935): 169-203. Williams notes that Wilder "purchased a large boundary of magnetic iron ore lands in western North Carolina and built on Roan Mountain (6,313 feet altitude) Cloudland Hotel—at the time the highest habitation east of the Rocky Mountains—a resort for those seeking immunity from hay-fever." Williams, 199. Merritt quotes an advertisement for the hotel, inviting "all who suffer under the burning summer sun, if breath of cool air, if want fishing, if want drink from cool fountains that gush, if want to view the most wonderful scenery in the world, Come—come to the Hills of Tennessee." Merritt, *Later History*, 10.

²⁵ Merritt, *Later History*, 422.

discern precise numbers for Valley Forge until 1900, census figures show that the population of the seventh civil district of Carter County (consisting primarily of Elizabethton and Valley Forge) grew from 970 inhabitants in 1870 to 1,153 in 1880. Elizabethton proper grew from 321 to 362 residents; when these numbers are excluded from the seventh civil district totals, it yields a growth rate of approximately 22% for Valley Forge and the surrounding area.²⁶ The following decade produced even more impressive number for the district as a whole, as it reported 1,550 inhabitants, for a growth rate of over one-third. Much of this growth, however, seems to have occurred in Elizabethton, which doubled its population during this period.²⁷ In 1894, Valley Forge became the fourteenth civil district, and according to the 1900 census its population was 447.²⁸ By 1910, its population had grown substantially, increasing by 44% to 644.²⁹

Clearly, the Valley Forge community offered fertile ground for planting a new congregation in 1871. Of course, the founders of Valley Forge Christian Church could not have foreseen the transformative economic development and significant population growth that were just around the corner. At the same time, they were almost certainly aware that the bitter divisions of the antebellum and Civil War years were only just beginning to wane. Nevertheless, like the warriors of Issachar, they “had understanding of the times” and acted accordingly.³⁰ The time of war and destruction lay in the past; the time had come to perform a hopeful act by planting a seed, even in the midst of still-uncertain times. Who were these individuals, and what

²⁶ [1880 Census: Volume 1. Statistics of the Population of the United States](#), 331. Accessed February 4, 2023. Elizabethton is referred to as “Elizabethtown town.”

²⁷ https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1890/volume-1/1890a_v1-11.pdf, 318. Accessed February 4, 2023. From 1880 to 1890, Elizabethton grew from 362 to 734 inhabitants.

²⁸ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p8.pdf>, 366. Accessed February 4, 2023. Merritt reports that Daniel Ellis, Jr. (son of Captain Daniel Ellis), D.A. Holly, and D.M. Grindstaff were chosen to mark the district boundary lines, and the voting place would be either schoolhouse or the Log Church. Merritt, *Later History*, 19.

²⁹ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/volume-3/volume-3-p6.pdf>, 725. Accessed February 4, 2023.

³⁰ I Chronicles 12:32 (NRSV).

was their vision for the congregation that they formed? We explore the answers to these questions below.

Few in Number

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’”³¹ The gospel accounts of the early ministry of Jesus of Nazareth generally agree that he gathered a small group of disciples to accompany him, learn from him, and share in his mission. Their numbers eventually grew to twelve, although there seems to be another group of seventy (or possibly seventy-two, perhaps inclusive of the twelve) disciples that had some association with Jesus’ ministry at one point.³² Large crowds occasionally gathered to hear Jesus teach, to receive healing, and to witness miracles, but the nucleus of the “Jesus movement” remained few in number, even unimpressive by secular standards. Indeed, Jesus apparently preferred it this way, eschewing the temptation to build a mass following and even actively discouraging a sort of superficial commitment.³³

This divine predilection for working with and through small numbers of mostly ordinary people permeates biblical literature—from the call of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis to the winnowing of Gideon’s army in Judges, from Amos’ repeated protest that “[Jacob/Israel] is so small!” to Mary’s response to the Annunciation by Gabriel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”³⁴ By the same token, it is through these seemingly insignificant individuals and groups

³¹ Matthew 4:18-19.

³² The only explicit reference to this group is found in Luke 10:1-20.

³³ See, for example, John 6:15, in which Jesus withdraws from the “Feeding of the 5,000” crowd that seeks to crown him king—by force, if necessary. At the end of the lengthy “bread of life” discourse that follows, Jesus’ words cause offense. As a result, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” In fact, only the twelve remain. John 6:66. Another example would be the contrast from the Sermon on the Mount between the narrow gate that leads to life and the broad gate that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14).

³⁴ The quotes are from Amos 7:2, 5 and Luke 1:38.

that God brings about surprising growth and transformation. Jesus' parables of the seeds sown in various soils (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23), the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), and the woman mixing yeast into flour (Matthew 13:33) underscore this point. Such is the case with the founding of Valley Forge Christian Church and countless other congregations throughout time.

It begins with a relatively small number of people who did not number among the elite business and political interests of their locality. Instead, they were for the most part of common stock who engaged in labor-intensive occupations that one would expect to find in a rural community that retained some aspects of life from the now long-passed frontier.³⁵ According to the original church roll book, the first officers of the church included the following individuals (listed with their ages and occupations as cited in the 1870 census):

Elders: Charles Headrick (49, brick mason) and John Grindstaff (43, farmer)
Deacons: David T. Chambers (26, farmer), William G. Bowers (40, farmer and miller), Samuel S. Livingston (23, blacksmith), and Pleasant P. Williams (61, farmer)
Treasurer: Elijah Williams (21, farmer)
Clerk: John Headrick (26, brick mason).³⁶

The same roll book includes a list of the "Charter and Early Members of the Valley Forge Christian Church," consisting of sixty-eight men, women, and children who affiliated with the congregation at some point during the first two decades of its existence.³⁷ Not surprisingly, a survey of 1880 census data on these individuals yields a similar socio-economic portrait. Of

³⁵ European migration to northeast Tennessee began sometime in the mid-eighteenth century with the establishment of trading posts and other isolated habitations along the Watauga and Holston rivers. In defiance of the "Proclamation Line" of 1763 forbidding settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains, larger numbers of colonists (some from North Carolina but mostly from the Shenandoah Valley of neighboring Virginia) moved into the region and established a self-governing entity known as the Watauga Association in 1772 with its own constitution. See [Watauga Association | Tennessee Encyclopedia](#).

³⁶ Valley Forge Christian Church Roll Book, I. Census records accessed via [United States Census, 1870 • FamilySearch](#).

³⁷ Merritt reproduces this list in *Later History*, 419.

those men who had an occupation listed, the vast majority were farmers; virtually all of the women were identified as “keeping house.”³⁸

Although census data provide no greater specificity, it is likely that many of these farmers engaged in the cultivation and production of bright leaf tobacco—a crop that became widespread throughout the southern Appalachian region during the post-Civil War era. Historian Tom Lee contends that mountain farmers in northeast Tennessee and western North Carolina participated in a “bright tobacco boom” that both accompanied and contributed to the industrialization and urbanization of those areas in the late 1800s. “The railroads that brought industrial exploitation to the mountains,” Lee observes, “also made the emergence of commercial tobacco farming possible and bound mountain farmers ever more tightly to urban centers and markets located outside the region as well as manufacturing and commercial centers within the region.”³⁹ An example of this was the Bristol, Elizabethton, and North Carolina Railway Company—formed by tobacco businessman A.D. Reynolds (brother of R.J. Reynolds) and other investors—to gain access “to the iron ores of the Blue Ridge Mountains via Elizabethton in Carter County, Tennessee, and Mountain City in Johnson County, Tennessee.”⁴⁰

The Valley Forge community lay directly in the path of this transportation artery, so whether or not they were directly involved in the production of bright leaf tobacco during the church’s founding era, the first-generation members of Valley Forge Christian Church certainly

³⁸ At least one of the male church members was a minister (Radford Ellis), but his name never appears in any lists of Valley Forge Christian Church ministers. Eliza Livingston was the single exception among the women; she was categorized as a “laborer.” See [United States Census, 1880 • FamilySearch](#) for further information. Unfortunately, records of the 1890 Census are fragmentary and do not include data from Tennessee.

³⁹ Tom Lee, “Southern Appalachia’s Nineteenth-Century Bright Tobacco Boom: Industrialization, Urbanization, and the Culture of Tobacco” *Agricultural History* 88, No. 2 (Spring 2014), 176. Lee argues that this phenomenon offers evidence that contradicts the long-held stereotype of southern Appalachian culture as backward, impoverished, and isolated. Previous historians, he points out, “conveniently overlooked factors in Appalachian agriculture and rural life that influenced modernization in the mountains and gave agency to mountain people.” Lee, 176.

⁴⁰ Lee, 186.

experienced the impact of larger economic forces. As such, they were not among the movers and shakers of their time and place. Instead, many were “salt of the earth” folk like Hugh and Clarinda Jenkins, who were among the church’s charter members. One of their descendants, Nadine Timbs, relates in an unpublished reminiscence that Hugh (her great grandfather, 1825-1922) returned from service in the Mexican War and married Clarinda Unks (1835-1917). Her brief description of their life together—along with their five children—offers a glimpse into the world that they shared with their neighbors and fellow church members:

Hugh and Clarinda worked hard raising their family. They built their house from trees cut from the surrounding mountain. Clarinda treated her family with home remedies handed down to her from her mother. All the family members pitched in and shared the duties of the farm. It was a full-time job keeping food on the table and canning goods for the winter months. They raised hogs and chickens to help supply their food. They owned two milk cows. Their horses were used for transportation and to plow the fields.⁴¹

A staunch Unionist, Hugh Jenkins traveled by foot to Union-occupied Knoxville in 1861 to enlist in the Union Army. According to Timbs, he fought in the battles of Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, and he returned to Valley Forge in 1865 where he resumed farming.⁴² Through their lifetime of hard work and their love of family, community, and country, Hugh and Clarinda Jenkins exemplified the kind of ordinary people through whom God often chooses to work, and who helped to form the bedrock foundation of the Valley Forge Christian Church.⁴³ They, along with the other founding members, had the courage and the foresight to embrace a radical vision

⁴¹ Nadine Timbs, “Hugh Jenkins,” unpublished paper, n.d., 1. Timbs notes that she obtained much of her information about Hugh and Clarinda Jenkins from her Aunt Lilly McInturff, who lived most of her life in Valley Forge and was a granddaughter of Hugh and Clarinda Jenkins. Timbs, 6.

⁴² Timbs, 3-4.

⁴³ For a thoughtful and thorough reflection on the concept of the divine preference to work through ordinary people and by ordinary means, see Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). In his chapter entitled “We Don’t Need Another Hero,” Horton maintains that Christians “need ordinary people around us who exemplify godly qualities and take the time to invest in our lives.” Horton, 155. Perhaps he has in mind people like Hugh and Clarinda Jenkins, as well as countless others throughout the history of the church whose names might not be widely known but whose positive influence on succeeding generations is incalculable.

for the congregation that they set out to establish. They sought to embody the ideals of a religious reform movement for Christian unity that emerged earlier in the nineteenth century in north central Kentucky and southwestern Pennsylvania—what came to be known as the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.

A Bold Vision

Both the language of the original charter and the designation of the new congregation as a “Christian Church” by its founders point to a deliberate decision to associate themselves with a group of churches that, by some estimates, had become the sixth-largest Protestant body in the United States by 1870.⁴⁴ The Stone and Campbell reform movements began merging following a series of unity meetings held in Georgetown and Lexington, Kentucky from Christmas Day of 1831 through New Year’s Day of 1832.⁴⁵ Prior to that, Barton Warren Stone had established himself as the leading figure within the “Christian” movement that traced its origins to the sacramental meetings/revivals at Concord and Cane Ridge, Kentucky during the summer of 1801.⁴⁶ As an ordained Presbyterian minister, Stone ran afoul of church authorities who were displeased by his (and some of his colleagues’) embrace and promotion of revivalism.

⁴⁴ Henry Webb draws from W.E. Garrison’s history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, *Religion Follows the Frontier: A History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1931), 223. Here, Garrison notes that the membership of the Stone-Campbell churches numbered some 300,000 by the end of the Civil War. In citing this figure, Webb cautions that the federal census did not distinguish between Stone-Campbell Christian churches and other churches that referred to themselves simply as “Christian.” See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 219 and n. 1, 506. Note also that Webb mistakenly attributes Garrison’s work to his father, J.H. Garrison. See also [1870 Census: Vol. I. The statistics of the population of the United States](#), Table XVII—(A) and (B), Statistics of Churches in the United States, 505. In this section of the report, census officials express their frustration over gathering accurate data: “In view of the frankly acknowledged inability of the officials of each denomination to whom application for assistance was made, to render any practical aid, it was deemed best to follow the precedent established in 1850 and 1860 of merging the two denominations under a single title.” Given their strong aversion to centralization and their congregational polity, the Stone-Campbell churches’ lack of cooperation with the census is not surprising.

⁴⁵ Barton W. Stone offers his account of this crucial event in “Union of Christians,” *The Christian Messenger* 6 (1832), 6-8.

⁴⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt makes the definitive connection between the “holy fairs” (i.e., sacramental meetings) that emerged in seventeenth-century Scotland and the so-called “Great Western Revival” that swept parts of Kentucky and Tennessee during the early nineteenth century. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 2nd ed., 205-212.

Eventually, Stone and a group of like-minded Presbyterian ministers withdrew from denominational jurisdiction and formed the short-lived Springfield Presbytery. Convinced that both creedal formulations and denominational power structures inhibited Christian unity and undermined the church's evangelistic mission, Stone and his fellow reformers issued *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* in 1804. In this seminal document for what would become the Stone-Campbell movement, they announced their decision to disband and "sink into union with the Body of Christ at large."⁴⁷ Sounding themes that would become central to the broader movement, they called on all Christians to "take the Bible only as the sure guide to heaven," and they urged a return to local church autonomy in a spirit of freedom and cooperation.⁴⁸ Above all, they implored Christians to "pray more and dispute less."⁴⁹

Nearly seventy years later, echoes of these concerns occur in the Valley Forge Christian Church charter. Here the founders express their intentions for the newly formed congregation:

We the undersigned Disciples of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ do this 9th Day of November, 1872 mutually agree to take the Bible as our man (sic) of council it being the only bond by which Christian union can be perpetuated and promoted as it is the only infallible rule both for faith and practice.⁵⁰

This document represents a clear and concise identification with the Stone-Campbell movement's aspirations for Christian unity based on a return to the beliefs and practices of the church during the apostolic era. It places high confidence in the Bible as the "infallible" source of guidance for this restoration project. By this point in time, the idea of "a restoration of the ancient order of things" as found particularly in the pages of the New Testament had become

⁴⁷ "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" in C.A. Young, ed., *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Reprint ed., Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1985), 20. Douglas A. Foster argues convincingly that, of the five signers of the *Last Will*, Richard McNemar was probably the primary author. See Douglas A. Foster, "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery: Its Presbyterian Context and Signers" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 183-184.

⁴⁸ "Last Will and Testament," 21.

⁴⁹ "Last Will and Testament," 22.

⁵⁰ Church Record Book, Valley Forge Christian Church, 1.

well-established among the churches of the Stone-Campbell movement, largely due to the influence of father and son duo, Thomas and Alexander Campbell.⁵¹

After migrating from Ulster (northeastern Ireland) to western Pennsylvania in 1807, the elder Campbell, Thomas, became convinced of the unique opportunity to realize Christian unity in the new American republic. An ordained minister in the Old Light, Anti-burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Thomas Campbell yearned for the healing of divided Christendom so that the conversion of the world might be accomplished.⁵² Like Stone, his efforts to promote greater inclusivity at frontier sacramental gatherings drew negative attention from denominational officials, ultimately resulting in his withdrawal from their authority and the formation of the Christian Association of Washington. This group of like-minded individuals from Washington County, Pennsylvania and its environs shared Thomas Campbell's desire for Christian unity, and they encouraged him to produce a manifesto of sorts outlining their views and goals. In accordance with their wishes, he wrote and published the *Declaration and Address* in 1809, and it stands alongside the *Last Will and Testament* as another key founding document for the Stone-Campbell movement. At the heart of this much lengthier work are thirteen

⁵¹ See Alexander Campbell's series of articles entitled "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things" in the periodical he published from 1823 to 1829, *The Christian Baptist* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1988), reprint ed.

⁵² As William D. Helsabeck, Jr. convincingly argues, Thomas Campbell brought many influences with him to North America from his ministry in the tension-filled religious and political situation in northeastern Ireland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries. Among these were his involvement in the Evangelical Society of Ulster and his favorable impression of the "Independent" church at Rich Hill, which was near the community of Ahorey where Thomas lived with his family and ministered. Both of these experiences, Helsabeck notes, contributed to Thomas' "broad view of the nature of the church." See William D. Helsabeck, Jr., "Thomas Campbell in Ireland: Influences to be Carried to the New World" (M.A. thesis, Luther Seminary, 1999), 13-18. James L. Gorman makes a similar case regarding Thomas Campbell's affiliation with the Evangelical Society of Ulster in "The Omission of Missions: Transatlantic Evangelical Missions Culture and the Historiography of the Campbell Movement's Origins" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 21 (Spring, 2018): 22-25. Gorman sees Thomas Campbell's subsequent work with the Christian Association of Washington and Alexander Campbell's reforming efforts within the larger context of a major religious phenomenon, the rise of evangelicalism in the British Isles and in North America. Gorman maintains that "[Thomas Campbell's] proposal of interdenominational cooperation upon the basis of a primitive evangelical gospel for the sake of evangelizing the world and prompting the return of Christ was far from new; this was the message of the evangelical missions culture that powerfully shaped both Campbells." Gorman, 25. For the more comprehensive version of Gorman's historiographical argument, see James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Abilene, ACU Press, 2017).

“propositions,” the first of which issues a clarion call to Christian unity: “That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same in their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.”⁵³ In the third and fourth propositions, Thomas Campbell further argues that “nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God” and that “the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.”⁵⁴ One can easily make a direct connection between the sentiments articulated in these propositions and the commitment made by the founders of the Valley Forge Christian Church to “take the Bible as our man (sic) of council it being the only bond by which Christian union can be perpetuated and promoted as it is the only infallible rule both for faith and practice.”⁵⁵ They self-consciously

⁵³ “Declaration and Address” in Young, 107-108. Note the inclusive nature of Campbell’s definition of Christian identity. It consists of those who profess two things: faith in Christ and obedience to the Scriptures. The accent falls on the act of profession—not on conformity to external criteria such as creedal statements or prescribed practices. Campbell’s definition is deeply personal in terms of both object (Christ) and subject (the believer, who submits to and lives under scriptural authority to the best of her or his understanding). It is also worth noting that, for Campbell, the primary outward marker of membership in the body of Christ is Christian character. Several years later, Alexander Campbell will make a similar argument in a controversy among his own followers about his position on baptism by immersion and its relationship to salvation. In the so-called “Lunenburg Letter” correspondence, Alexander Campbell makes this astounding assertion: “Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most....It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.” Alexander Campbell, “Any Christians Among the Protestant Parties” *Millennial Harbinger* (September 1837): 412.

⁵⁴ “Declaration and Address” in Young, 108-109.

⁵⁵ Church Record Book, Valley Forge Christian Church, 1. The obscured or misspelled word may have been “manual.”

positioned themselves within a tradition that was a relative newcomer to the American religious scene, and thus it was not an uncontroversial decision on their part.

Because of its proximity to Kentucky where the “Christian” movement associated with Barton W. Stone was centered, the middle section of Tennessee witnessed the emergence of the first Stone movement congregations in the state in the early 1800s. Through the efforts of James Miller, one of Stone’s associates, the first Christian church in northeast Tennessee was organized around 1826 in Boones Creek Valley. Significantly, it drew a considerable number of its members from the nearby Buffalo Ridge Baptist Church and “caused great consternation among the Baptists of the area.”⁵⁶ Another Baptist congregation in neighboring Carter County, the Sinking Creek Baptist Church, had experienced upheaval a year earlier over the baptism of a woman named Fanny Renfro by Jeriel Dodge, another Stone acolyte who was described in the church minutes as “a man not of our union” and “not agreeable to gospel order as practiced by the Baptist churches.”⁵⁷ In accordance with the Stone movement’s rejection of the requirement that one testify of a saving experience as a prerequisite to baptism, Dodge simply baptized Renfro upon her confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The resulting furor precipitated an investigation by the local Baptist association and led to the eventual expulsion of several members of the Sinking Creek church. This group then formed the nucleus of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church (now Hopwood Memorial Christian Church) sometime around 1828.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Herman A. Norton, *Tennessee Christians: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tennessee* (Nashville: Reed and Company, 1971), 15. Norton further notes that Stone ordained Miller, a native of Maine who probably had some past association with the “Christian” movement in New England under the leadership of Elias Smith and Abner Jones, both of whom had separated from the Baptists.

⁵⁷ Quotes from Merritt, *Early History of Carter County*, 80 and Cynthia Ann Cornwell, *Beside the Waters of the Buffalo: A History of Milligan College to 1941* (Milligan College, Tennessee: Milligan College History Project, 1989), 2. For biographical information about Dodge, see Mary Hardin McCown, “Jeriel Dodge (1788-1843),” 30 January 1967, Mary Hardin McCown Papers, Box 1, Holloway Archives of Milligan University, Milligan, Tennessee.

⁵⁸ Cornwell, 1-3. See also John T. Brown, *Churches of Christ: A Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in the United States, Australasia, England, and Canada* (Louisville, KY: John P. Morton and

Relations between Baptists and Stone-Campbell Christian churches throughout Tennessee remained fraught over the next several decades, not only over theological differences, but also due to the widespread perception (not entirely unjustified) among Baptists that much of the “Christians” numerical growth was at their expense. Indeed, entire Baptist congregations embraced the Stone-Campbell “reformation” throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, often with the encouragement and support of Alexander Campbell, whose reform movement spread westward and southward from its base in western Pennsylvania and northeastern Ohio and eventually joined forces with the Stone movement.⁵⁹ For instance, the first Baptist congregation in Nashville joined the “Campbellite” reform movement under the ministrations of its pastor, Philip S. Fall, in 1828. Ten years earlier, Fall had joined the Baptist church but after reading some of Campbell’s writings, he became an enthusiastic proponent of Campbell’s vision of “the ancient order of things” for the church.⁶⁰ While events in Nashville probably had no direct impact on interactions between Baptist and Stone-Campbell adherents in northeast Tennessee, incidents like this nevertheless fed a narrative that only reinforced the acrimony between the two groups. Baptists continued to regard the Stone-Campbell movement with suspicion during the antebellum period, and Baptist leaders published popular books that warned

Company, 1904), 282; Henry C. Wagner, “History of Disciples of Christ in Upper East Tennessee” (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1943), 63; and Merritt, *Early History*, 117-118. Merritt also notes that the Sinking Creek church gave James Miller a letter of dismissal dated April 16, 1825. Merritt, *Early History*, 82, n. 23.

⁵⁹ From approximately 1820 onward, Alexander Campbell began to eclipse his father by embarking on a career of engaging in public debates, speaking, and editing two religious journals: *The Christian Baptist* (1823-1829) and the *Millennial Harbinger* (1830-1866).

⁶⁰ Baptist historian Albert W. Hardin, Jr. theorizes that Fall’s “defection” should be attributed primarily to Campbell’s influence: “No doubt Campbell’s rationalistic approach to theological questions was a great appeal to his own thinking with his own educational background.” Hardin further opines, “Fall was not reared in the Baptist faith and was no doubt more open to new approaches than many of his Baptist colleagues.” Both quotes from Albert W. Hardin, Jr., “The Campbellite Reform Movement in the Takeover of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, and Its Aftermath,” *Tennessee Baptist History* 18 (Fall 2016), 45.

the faithful of the dangers of “Campbellism.”⁶¹ Presbyterian and Methodist leaders joined in the fray as well, largely for the same reasons that the Baptists sounded the alarm: competition for numbers and concern about what they perceived to be heterodox Stone-Campbell teachings and practices. Evangelist John Wright’s account of a revival held at the Buffalo Creek Christian Church in August 1841 offers evidence that confirmed their suspicions; he reports that he and fellow evangelist James Miller “gained for the King fifty-three, a part of these from the world, the rest from the Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, and one from the Universalists.”⁶² In response to such existential threats, as one historian of the Stone-Campbell movement in Tennessee notes, “Many Methodist preachers, revivalists, and editors adopted a policy criticizing and ridiculing [the Stone-Campbell movement] just as the Baptists had done.”⁶³ One of these, Methodist clergyman Fountain Pitts, published his “refutation of the errors and infidelity of Campbellism” in 1835.⁶⁴ Even as late as 1890, Methodist pastor Thomas McKnight Stuart published *Errors of Campbellism* in which he called on “every Methodist minister [to] prepare himself to meet intelligently and successfully this form of error.”⁶⁵

Since the overwhelming majority of churches in Carter County, Tennessee identified with either the Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian communions in 1870, it seems likely that the founders of Valley Forge Christian Church would not expect to find a warm welcome from their

⁶¹ Two of the more well-known of these works are *Alexander Campbell and Campbellism Exposed* by J.R. Graves and *Campbellism Examined* by Jeremiah Jeter. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Baptists,” by Anthony Springer and s.v. “Jeter, Jeremiah Bell,” by Melissa Johnson.

⁶² Letter from John Wright, Jonesborough, September 8, 1841, to Alexander Campbell, in “News from the Churches,” *Millennial Harbinger* (December 1841), 590.

⁶³ Norton, 42.

⁶⁴ Fountain E. Pitts, *Book on Baptism: Chiefly Designed as a Refutation of the Errors and Infidelity of Campbellism* (Nashville: Western Methodist Office, 1835). According to George W. Elley of Lexington, Kentucky, Pitts’ book circulated widely; by his description it “was scattered over Tennessee and a large portion of Alabama, Mississippi, etc.” See “Elder F.E. Pitts and His Tracts on Campbellism,” *Millennial Harbinger* (March 1845), 114.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Outsiders’ Views of the Movement,” by Gary E. Weedman. The full title of Stuart’s book is *Errors of Campbellism, Being a Review of All Fundamental Errors of the System of Faith and Church Polity of the Denomination Founded by Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1890).

neighbors of differing religious persuasions. The 1870 census for Carter County lists fourteen congregations, consisting of seven Methodist, one Presbyterian, one Baptist, and five “Christian” congregations.⁶⁶ The Baptist figure almost certainly represents an undercount of their numbers, as local historian Frank Merritt identifies at least five Baptist congregations from Carter County meeting with the Baptist churches from neighboring Johnson County in 1868 to form the Watauga Baptist Association. He also lists six more Baptist churches that were organized (or, in the case of the Sinking Creek congregation, re-organized) between 1869 and 1875.⁶⁷ In addition to the Valley Forge Christian Church, the only other Stone-Campbell church that was founded in Carter County during the 1870s was Borderview Christian Church in the Keenburb community north of Elizabethton.⁶⁸ One sign of the future vitality of the Stone-Campbell movement in northeast Tennessee was the establishment of the “Buffalo Male and Female Institute” (the precursor to Milligan College) by the Buffalo Creek Christian Church in 1866 under the leadership of their minister, Wilson G. Barker.⁶⁹ At this point in time, however, the school was in its infancy, and it struggled to remain financially viable.

Outnumbered and suspected of being heretics, schismatics, and opportunists, those who espoused Stone-Campbell principles in Carter County, Tennessee in 1871 risked the kind of opposition and outright hostility that their co-religionists faced more broadly. Nevertheless, the founders of Valley Forge Christian Church affixed their signatures to a brief statement that

⁶⁶ [1870 Census: Vol. I. The statistics of the population of the United States](#), 554. The “Christian” churches are Buffalo Creek, Turkeytown (predecessor of the present-day Brick Christian Church), and Mt. Pleasant (predecessor of the Hampton Christian Church). The other two included in the census remain unknown. See Merritt, *Early History of Carter County*, 117-123. See also Wagner’s list of Carter County Christian churches and their dates of organization. Only the above mentioned three were founded before 1870. Wagner, 200.

⁶⁷ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 385-386. Merritt obtained this information from the minutes of the Watauga Baptist Association.

⁶⁸ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 4. The Borderview church was founded in 1871.

⁶⁹ Cornwell, 5-7. As Cornwell explains, the Institute was an expansion of the common school that the Buffalo Creek church established some three decades earlier and continued to support. Barber and other church leaders led its transformation into a co-educational school that offered both primary and secondary instruction.

committed them to a bold vision of working toward Christian unity through “a restoration of the ancient order of things.” Inspired by the examples and teachings of Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell, the church’s founders—though few in number—saw the times as auspicious and took the risk of planting a seed that they nurtured in the hope of producing a bountiful harvest. The next few decades would prove to be challenging times for the realization of their bold vision.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY GROWTH AND STRUGGLES: 1871/72-1914

Although the story of Valley Forge Christian Church belongs to a much larger narrative that centers around the church as the embodiment and the carrier of God's mission to the world, its particular beginning point lies in the Reconstruction era of American history. Its physical location as a congregation placed it in the recently defeated Confederacy, which would seem to be inauspicious. Large sections of the South lay in ruins, and the region's economy was devastated by four years of war. Tennessee shared in these dire circumstances, but it also enjoyed a somewhat favored status largely due to the fact that Abraham Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, had served in the state legislature and as congressman, governor, and senator from the Volunteer State.¹ Lincoln appointed him as military governor of Tennessee during the Civil War, a position he held until he accepted the nomination to be Lincoln's running mate under the National Union Party banner in 1864. Shortly after Lincoln's assassination and his succession to the presidency, Johnson, a Democrat, began to clash with the Republican-controlled Congress over how to rehabilitate the defeated South.² The so-called Radical Republicans eventually prevailed in their efforts to impose a more severe form of reconstruction

¹ As a young man, Johnson moved from North Carolina to Greeneville, Tennessee where he operated a tailor shop and became involved in local politics. See Neil Hamilton, *Presidents: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001), 137-145 for a concise overview and assessment of Johnson's life and career. The standard biography is Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1989).

² Johnson was impeached and barely escaped removal from office in 1868. After retiring to Tennessee, he was elected to the Senate in 1874 but died a year later. Interestingly, he died in Carter County while visiting his sister who lived in the area known as Stoney Creek. Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 6.

that included the division of the southern states into five military districts and occupation by federal troops. Congress tasked these military administrations with supervising the formation of new state governments that would protect the rights of the former slaves. Tennessee was the only state that did not come under military occupation; it was readmitted to statehood in 1866 after ratifying the Fourteenth Amendment, during the period known as “presidential reconstruction.”³ Furthermore, the northeast section of the state remained staunchly loyal to the ultimately victorious Union during the war, so the founders of Valley Forge Christian Church had some justification for their optimistic outlook and hopeful actions. For these men and women, as for the nation, it was a time for a fresh start, for beginning anew.

A Flourishing Church

“Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women.”⁴

Although its early growth was not as exponential as that of the first church in Jerusalem, the first ten years or so of the Valley Forge congregation’s existence did indeed witness an upward trajectory as the membership expanded from the original nucleus of between ten and twenty individuals to approximately seventy.⁵ This figure appears for the first time as an official

³ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., Edwin S. Gaustad, John B. Boles, Sally Foreman Griffith, Randall M. Miller, and Randall B. Woods, *Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 522. See also Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 82. For an extensive and somewhat sympathetic treatment of Johnson’s approach to reconstruction, see Paul H. Bergeron, *Andrew Johnson’s Civil War and Reconstruction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2011), 65-98.

⁴ Acts 5:12-14

⁵ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 401.

statistic in the 1885 *Yearbook of the Disciples of Christ*.⁶ The report identifies one of the original elders, John Grindstaff, as the “correspondent” who provided this information. According to Grindstaff, the Valley Forge Christian Church consisted of seventy members, and J. Scott served as their preacher on a monthly basis. It was not unusual at this time for small, rural congregations to hold services infrequently, since Stone-Campbell preachers often traveled in a circuit, much like their Methodist colleagues (albeit without the Methodists’ centralized structure).⁷ Few of these churches could afford to pay a full-time minister. Three years later, the number of members increased slightly to seventy-eight, a figure that represented between ten and fifteen percent of the population of the Valley Forge community.⁸ According to another source, “In 1888 Elijah Williams and David Chambers reported to the Annual Meeting a membership of 74, C.M. Burchfield as minister, and a Sunday School in ‘good condition.’”⁹ In either case, this made Valley Forge Christian Church the fifth-largest Stone-Campbell congregation in Carter County, out of a total of seventeen churches that reported to the 1888 edition of the *Yearbook*. It also shows that the young congregation was participating in what came to be known as the East Tennessee Christian Convention, which began as a meeting of Stone-Campbell churches at the Boones Creek church in 1829.¹⁰ This gathering evolved into the East Tennessee Co-operative,

⁶ Robert Moffett, ed., *1885 Yearbook of the Disciples of Christ* (Cincinnati: General Christian Missionary Convention, 1885), 93. Available at [1885 Yearbook of the Disciples of Christ \(discipleshistory.org\)](https://discipleshistory.org). Accessed June 26, 2023. The information in this volume actually pertains to data gathered for 1884.

⁷ During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, some churches in the Stone-Campbell movement began to shift gradually away from a self-educated, itinerant model of local church ministry toward the formally educated “resident preacher” system of pastoral ministry. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Ministry,” by D. Newell Williams, Paul M. Blowers, and Douglas A. Foster.

⁸ Robert Moffett, ed., *1888 Yearbook of the Disciples of Christ* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1888), 40. 1890 census figures are not available. According to the 1880 census, however, the population of the seventh civil district of Carter County (excluding Elizabethton) was 791. The actual population of the Valley Forge community was probably much less than this, since the 1900 census lists a total of 447 for the newly created fourteenth civil district that was largely confined to Valley Forge. See [1880 Census: Volume 1. Statistics of the Population of the United States](#), 331 and [Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900, Population, Part 1](#), 366. Accessed June 26, 2023.

⁹ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 402. Merritt does not provide a citation for this information.

¹⁰ Norton, 16. This convention is the oldest of its type in the Stone-Campbell movement.

which was a voluntary organization of the Stone-Campbell churches for the promotion of evangelism and church planting in that region. This group of churches eventually expanded to include congregations from southwest Virginia and western North Carolina; their once-a-year gathering came to be known as the “Annual Meeting.”¹¹

It was during this period of increasing membership that a watershed moment in the history of the Stone-Campbell movement in the United States occurred. Beginning with the landmark merger of 1832, the “Christians” or “Disciples of Christ” (as the adherents of the movement usually described themselves) had experienced considerable growth along with gradual, grudging acceptance by the mainstream Protestant establishment that dominated American religious life.¹² One of their own— James Abram Garfield, the only ordained minister to serve as president of the United States—was elected to the nation’s highest office in 1880¹³ Although Tennessee’s twelve electoral votes went to Garfield’s Democratic opponent, Winfield

¹¹ Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 158-160, describes the emergence of similar regional and statewide organizations among the Stone-Campbell churches. Despite his earlier aversion to ecclesiastical structures, Alexander Campbell later became an enthusiastic proponent of the concept and practice of “cooperation.” See, for example, Alexander Campbell, “The Co-Operation of Churches—No. 1,” *Millennial Harbinger* (May, 1831): 237-238; “Five Arguments for Church Organization,” *Millennial Harbinger* (November, 1842): 523; “Church Organization—No. I,” *Millennial Harbinger* (February, 1849): 93; “Church Organization—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* (April, 1849): 222-223; and “Church Organization—No. III,” *Millennial Harbinger* (May, 1849), 475-476. According to Williams *et al*, these “regional and state meetings for worship, preaching, and cooperation in evangelism [became] the norm by the 1840s.” D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 32.

¹² As noted in the previous chapter, significant hostility toward the “Campbellites” persisted throughout the nineteenth century, especially on the local level. But the inclusion of the “Christians” as a separate denominational category in the 1850 census indicates their emergence as a major religious group by mid-century. See, for example, the table that lists church statistics for Tennessee at [The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850 - Tennessee](#), 592. Accessed June 22, 2023. The categories are Baptist, Christian, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Friends (Quaker), Lutheran, and Methodist.

¹³ A native of Ohio, Garfield (1831-1881) was educated at a Stone-Campbell college in Hiram, Ohio. After a brief preaching career, he entered the political arena in 1859 as a Republican state legislator and then served in the Union army during the Civil War, rising to the rank of major general. Garfield was elected to Congress in 1863, where he served until his election to the presidency in 1880. Along with other prominent Stone-Campbell leaders, Garfield helped to establish the *Christian Standard* in 1865; this became a highly influential journal among northern Stone-Campbell churches. Garfield died in September 1881 from gunshot wounds inflicted by Charles Guiteau, a disgruntled and possibly deranged civil service aspirant. For an extensive analysis of Garfield’s intertwined religious and political career, see Jerry B. Rushford, “Political Disciple: The Relationship Between James A. Garfield and the Disciples of Christ” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 1977).

Scott Hancock (who won the state’s popular vote handily), Carter County voted resoundingly for Garfield.¹⁴ Given its strong pro-Union stance during the Civil War and the deep prewar political divisions between east Tennessee and the middle and western sections of the state, this result aligned with a longstanding pattern that continued well into the next century.¹⁵ Even so, this electoral victory must have been gratifying to the members of the fledgling Valley Forge Christian Church, since those who voted most likely cast their ballots for the Republican candidate. The ascension to the presidency by a prominent member and advocate of their movement less than a decade after their founding portended continued progress on both the national and local levels (despite Garfield’s untimely death at the hands of an assassin just six months into his term of office).

For the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, such was the case. By 1888, the congregation had reached a level of financial stability that enabled them to start contributing to the work of the Foreign Christian Missionary Society.¹⁶ This marks the beginning of a longstanding commitment by the Valley Forge Christian Church to global, domestic, and local missions that continues to the present day. It also represents an evolving sense of connection to the wider church and a recognition of the crucial role of local congregations in promoting world evangelization. This first foray into supporting missions coincided with a period of emerging agencies and institutions within the Stone-Campbell movement that not only indicated vitality

¹⁴ See [1880 United States presidential election in Tennessee - Wikipedia](#). Accessed June 22, 2023. Carter County gave Garfield his fourth highest percentage among all the counties in Tennessee at just over 80%. It was exceeded by neighboring Johnson County (84%), Scott County (82%) and Sevier County (slightly less than 83%).

¹⁵ See the “Carter County Presidential Voting Record” table that shows election results from 1884 to 1980 in Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 422.

¹⁶ Norton, 175. Launched in 1875, the Foreign Christian Missionary Society represented an organized and cooperative effort among the Stone-Campbell churches to support overseas mission endeavors. For an overview of its history and significance, see *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Foreign Christian Missionary Society,” by William J. Nottingham. See also Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 222-224.

but also, ironically, became a focal point for discord and division in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The Stone-Campbell movement as a whole arrived late to the remarkable expansion of Protestant missionary enterprises that took place throughout the nineteenth century. As Stone-Campbell historian Henry Webb notes, “While various denominations were enthusiastically planning and promoting foreign missions, the Disciples were debating whether or not a New Testament people could utilize an organization beyond the local church to enable them to do missionary work.”¹⁷ The earliest Stone-Campbell missionary agency—the American Christian Missionary Society—came into being as a result of a convention held in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1849. Its initial efforts produced disappointing results, and it became embroiled in controversy during the Civil War when it passed a “loyalty resolution” at its 1863 meeting that condemned Confederate leaders and soldiers as “armed traitors.”¹⁸ One year after the war’s conclusion, Moses E. Lard, a conservative Stone-Campbell journalist, declared confidently, “If now we have triumphantly come through this storm, and still gloriously stand an undivided people, have we not reason to count with confidence on the future? May we not boldly say, trusting in God to help us, *we can never divide?*”¹⁹ And yet Lard himself—along with other conservative Stone-Campbell editors, educators, preachers, and leaders, mostly from the South—led the charge in condemning missionary societies and other “innovations” as “unscriptural.” In so doing, they

¹⁷ Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 219-220. As with the concept of “cooperations,” Alexander Campbell was initially opposed to missionary societies, despite his father’s earlier involvement with the Evangelical Society of Ulster in northeastern Ireland and with the Christian Association of Washington in western Pennsylvania. According to James L. Gorman, both “Campbells started their journey back toward supporting missionary societies in 1827 and set the stage for a historiography of omitting the early evangelical missions influence on them.” Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals*, 207.

¹⁸ Quoted in Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 196. The ACMS conventions during the Civil War mostly consisted of delegates and attendees from the northern states, due to travel restrictions.

¹⁹ Moses E. Lard, “Can We Divide?” *Lard’s Quarterly* (April 1866): 336. [Lard’s Quarterly \(1864-68\): Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive](#). Accessed June 28, 2023.

helped to lay the foundation for the first major division in the movement, which unfolded over the last third of the nineteenth century between the Christian churches/Disciples of Christ and the *a capella* Churches of Christ.²⁰

Ironically, the epicenter for that burgeoning schism lay in Tennessee where Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb, in their capacities as successive editors of the Nashville-based *Gospel Advocate*, voiced their opposition to instrumental music in worship, missionary societies, and other practices they deemed “unauthorized.” Fanning and Lipscomb adamantly maintained that scriptural silence (particularly in the New Testament) on any given subject equated to divine prohibition. From their perspective, those churches that adopted such practices had effectively abandoned the principles of the Stone-Campbell movement.²¹ While it appears that theological differences lay at the heart of this separation, some historians have called attention to critical social, political, and economic factors as well. For instance, David Edwin Harrell, Jr. points to sectional attitudes rooted in the pre-Civil War controversy over slavery among the Stone-Campbell churches. The resulting antipathies intensified during both the war itself and the

²⁰ The “Sand Creek Address and Declaration” of 1889 articulates the grievances of those in the Stone-Campbell movement who rejected such practices as “man-made missionary societies,” church festivals, choirs, and “the one man, imported preacher-pastor to take oversight of the church.” Interestingly, this document (whose title plays on Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address”), does not list the use of instrumental music an exclusionary cause. It was produced by a group of local church leaders who gathered for an annual meeting of Stone-Campbell churches at Sand Creek, Illinois. It was subsequently published for wider circulation in the *Octographic Review*, edited by Daniel Sommer, an outspoken opponent of instrumental music in worship. See [Documents of Sand Creek: Declaration Version 1 \(acu.edu\)](#). Accessed June 28, 2023.

²¹ The notion of scriptural silence as prohibitive stems from one way of interpreting Thomas Campbell’s language in the fifth proposition of the “Declaration and Address,” which reads: “That with respect to the commands and ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the scriptures are silent, as to the express time or manner of performance, no human authority has power to interfere, in order to supply the supposed deficiency, by making laws for the church.” This seems to be the inspiration for the classic Stone-Campbell movement slogan, “Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Gorman labels Fanning’s and Lipscomb’s approach to interpreting and applying scripture (including its silences) as “patternist primitivism” in contrast to “pragmatic primitivism.” The former, he argues, “refers to the view that the New Testament contains a ‘pattern’ for worship.” As such, it “focuses on identifying, extracting, and applying that primitive pattern in modern times.” In his view, “it is typically sectarian in nature, separating from those who either ignore or misunderstand the pattern.” Pragmatic primitivism, on the other hand, “simply used the Bible generically (rather than a legalistically defined pattern) as a shared foundation on which denominations could unite for ‘simple evangelical gospel’ missions.” Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals*, 188, n. 86.

Reconstruction era that followed. “The Church of Christ-Disciples of Christ rupture was basically a North-South division (although rural-urban and other factors are important),” he contends, and he further notes that “the pattern becomes increasingly clear after 1870.”²²

Henry Webb builds on Harrell’s argument and offers Tennessee as a case study of sorts. As the division developed, large numbers of Stone-Campbell churches in the middle and western sections of the state eventually identified themselves with the more conservative *a capella* Churches of Christ, whereas most of the Stone-Campbell churches in the eastern third (including Valley Forge Christian Church) aligned with the more progressive and Northern-oriented Disciples of Christ. “The sectional parallel between the Union-Confederate division of the state and the schism over the use of the instrument is more than mere coincidence,” he observes.²³ For Webb, the explanation for this curious turn of events lies in the resentment that the economically devastated South felt toward the prosperous post-war North. Impoverished Stone-Campbell congregations in the defeated Confederacy did not have the means to support missionary societies or to pay for new buildings, resident ministers, and musical instruments. In essence, Webb argues, they made a virtue of necessity, and their rejection of instrumental music in worship became the predominant symbol of their cultural and theological purity vis-à-vis the prosperous and supposedly decadent northern churches. “Laboring under intolerable economic disadvantages, suffering from defeat in the war, and smarting under the judgment that emancipation implied,” Webb maintains, “the South became not only sectionally self-conscious

²² David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 132, n. 145.

²³ Henry E. Webb, “Sectional Conflict and Schism Within the Disciples of Christ Following the Civil War,” in C. Robert Wetzel, ed., *Essays on New Testament Christianity: A Festschrift in Honor of Dean E. Walker* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1978), 124.

but sectionally defensive.”²⁴ The geographic dividing lines among Stone-Campbell churches in post-Civil War Tennessee offer compelling evidence in support of Harrell’s and Webb’s claims about the impact of sectionalism on the movement, and the contribution by the Valley Forge Christian Church to the Foreign Christian Missionary Society in 1888 lends further credence to their case.²⁵ The 1906 Religious Census confirmed the reality that the Stone-Campbell movement had indeed divided into two separate and distinct bodies.²⁶

As the twentieth century drew nearer, then, the members and leaders of this relatively young congregation nestled in the mountains of east Tennessee found themselves moving forward, as part of the more progressive and northern-oriented Disciples of Christ/Christian churches stream of the Stone-Campbell movement. By 1891, their membership had increased to 98, and their Sunday school program was showing signs of growth, with an average of 35 in attendance.²⁷ Based on scattered statistics from various sources for the last decade of the nineteenth century, it appears that the church’s membership plateaued during the 1890s and began to decline sharply at some point shortly after the turn of the century. The church’s pastor, P. P. Williams, reported 89 members, 40 in average Sunday School attendance, and an annual salary of \$20.00 in the 1897 edition of the “Year Book of the Churches of Christ in Tennessee” (published by the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society from 1897 through 1901).²⁸ The 1899

²⁴ Webb, “Sectional Conflict and Schism,” 121. In support of his argument, Webb cites Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), in which Marty asserts that, after the Civil War, “Southern churchmen were more and more concerned to resist religious change” and became the “most rigidly orthodox Protestants in America.”

²⁵ According to Norton, “the majority of the Tennessee brethren were opposed to societies, the musical instrument, stately edifices, and resident ministers” at this time. This underscores the significance of the decision by the Valley Forge congregation to begin supporting the FCMS, when the majority of their counterparts in the Stone-Campbell movement throughout Tennessee were moving decisively in the opposite direction. Norton, 174.

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of this landmark date, see Douglas A. Foster, “The 1906 Census of Religious Bodies and Division in the Stone-Campbell Movement: A Closer Look,” *Discipliana* 66, no. 3 (Fall, 2006): 83-93.

²⁷ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 402.

²⁸ A.I. Myhr, ed., *Year Book of the Churches of Christ in Tennessee* (Johnson City, TN: J.W. Cass, 1897), n.p. These figures appear in the Appendix under the title, “Report of the Committee on Church Reports). Valley Forge

edition contains the report of the “Annual Convention of the First District of Tennessee meeting at Poplar Ridge,” which includes the information that the Convention received \$2.00 from the Sunday school and \$5.00 from the church at Cedar Grove/Valley Forge in Carter County. Once again, P.P. Williams reported for the congregation: 98 members, 40 Sunday school participants, and an annual preacher’s salary of \$14.00.²⁹ No references whatsoever to the congregation in Valley Forge appear in the 1900 and 1901 editions of the *Year Book*, which suggests that the church’s connection with the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and the East Tennessee Co-operation was tenuous, at best.

The Tennessee Christian Missionary Society itself came into existence as the result of a meeting that took place at the Woodland Street Christian Church in Nashville on February 11, 1889. The following year, the first “State Missionary Convention of the Christian Church of Tennessee” gathered at the Walnut Street Christian Church in Chattanooga.³⁰ As in other states, the primary purpose of the Society was to promote evangelism and new church planting, and in true Stone-Campbell fashion, it depended on voluntary financial support from churches and individuals. Its proponents espoused the idea of “co-operation” instead of radical congregational autonomy as the best means for growing the movement and promoting its principles of restoration and unity.³¹ Like their counterparts in other states, they created a structure that

Christian Church is referred to as Cedar Grove at this time. In the “Apportionments” section (32), Cedar Grove is assessed \$5.00 as a recommended annual contribution, based on the size of the church.

²⁹ A.I. Myhr, ed., *Year Book of the Churches of Christ in Tennessee* (Johnson City, TN: J.W. Cass, 1899), 37. Valley Forge does not appear at all in either the 1900- or 1901-*Year Books*. The “First District” refers to the churches in the counties of northeast Tennessee, including Carter County. Their “Annual Convention” represented a continuation of the original “East Tennessee Co-operation.”

³⁰ Norton, 189-193.

³¹ No less a luminary than William Robinson contends that Alexander Campbell himself favored the “co-operation” principle. From an analysis of the chapter entitled “The Body of Christ” in *The Christian System* (1837) and a series of articles on “The Nature of Christian Organization” in the *Millennial Harbinger* (1841-1843), Robinson argues that Campbell supported a form of congregationalism “which regards the local church as an outcrop of the one Church at that particular time and place.” Based on this conceptualization, Campbell advocated a form of “modified Presbyterianism” that conjoined congregational self-governance with co-operation among churches by means of

consisted of a “state secretary/evangelist” who oversaw the business of the Society and traveled throughout the state promoting its work among the churches. Under the leadership of the state secretary, the Society also supported district evangelists who labored in particular regions; most of their work involved holding revival meetings and filling pulpits for congregations that did not have or could not support a resident minister. A statewide convention met every year to review the Society’s progress and to promote fellowship among the churches through a program of worship, preaching, and business sessions. This paralleled what was happening on the national level during the post-Civil War era with the emergence of various missionary and benevolent agencies within the Stone-Campbell movement and their association with the General Christian Missionary Convention.³²

A Floundering Church

“Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?”³³ Writing after the return from the Babylonian Captivity, the psalmist expresses vividly the lament of God’s people during a time of

democratically chosen representative assemblies, according to Robinson. See William Robinson, “Did Alexander Campbell Believe in Congregationalism?” Provocative Pamphlets, No. 32 (Melbourne, Australia: Federal Literature Committee of Churches of Christ in Australia, 1957). Available at [William Robinson's Did Alexander Campbell Believe in Congregationalism? \(acu.edu\)](http://www.acu.edu). Accessed July 4, 2023. It is worth noting that this form of church polity has been prevalent among the Churches of Christ in the United Kingdom (to which Robinson belonged) and its dominions almost from their inception. The first “Co-Operation Meeting” of British Churches of Christ took place in Edinburgh in 1842. The second gathering did not occur until 1847, when Alexander Campbell presided over the meeting in Chester as part of his preaching and speaking tour throughout Great Britain. See Williams, et al, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*, 95-96 and Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 438-439.

³² The General Christian Missionary Convention evolved from the first nationwide Stone-Campbell movement gathering that took place in Cincinnati in 1849. This led to the creation of the above-mentioned American Christian Missionary Society, whose annual meetings were re-organized as the General Convention in 1869. Under the so-called “Louisville Plan,” the convention was supposed to function as a representative assembly of the churches, but the concept met with widespread opposition by critics who viewed it as an “unscriptural” intrusion into congregational autonomy. Subsequently, it became a gathering of interested individuals who paid for membership in the Convention; it was not until the early twentieth century that it was reorganized on a representative basis as the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ. See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 197-200 and *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Conventions,” by Timothy C. Smith.

³³ Psalm 85:4-6.

discouragement. According to one commentator, “Psalm 85 may well have originated as a prayer of the people amid the disappointing circumstances of the early post-exilic era.”³⁴ The initial joy emanating from a new beginning gave way to the stark reality of a precarious existence and unfulfilled expectations. Thus, the people keenly experienced the need for God’s reviving work in their midst. As the congregation known variously as Valley Forge or Cedar Grove Christian Church entered a new century and began the fourth decade of its story, its members also found themselves in need of revival.³⁵

While the Valley Forge/Cedar Grove Christian Church obviously did not align with the anti-missionary society and non-instrumental Churches of Christ, it appears that they—like many Stone-Campbell churches in the late nineteenth century—entertained suspicions about any form of “organized” work or at least kept it at arm’s length. It may be of some significance then that this apparent lack of involvement with and support for state and national mission agencies coincided with a period of weakness and struggle for the church. The next time any congregational data appear in any official form is in the 1914 edition of the *Year Book of Churches of Christ (Disciples)*, in which church membership is listed as forty.³⁶ Clearly something happened between 1899 and 1914 to cause such a precipitous decline! This regression stands out more noticeably when compared to the population growth during the intervening years. As noted in the preceding chapter, the population of the Valley Forge community (the fourteenth civil district of Carter County) increased from 447 to 644 during the first decade of

³⁴ J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1016.

³⁵ The interchangeable names seem to stem from the fact that the church’s members for the most part lived in the Valley Forge community, and the location of the “Old Log Church” where they gathered for worship was known as Cedar Grove. From 1914 onward, the *Year Book* lists the church as Valley Forge, although for a brief time during the early 1900s, it was also known as the Spring Hill church. See Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 404.

³⁶ *Year Book of the Churches of Christ (Disciples): 1914* (Cincinnati: American Christian Missionary Society, 1914), 253. Interestingly, the Bible school at the church contributed \$3.00 to the FCMS in 1914.

the twentieth century. Why did the growth rate of the Valley Forge Christian Church fail to keep pace with the natural increase of the surrounding community? This question becomes even more puzzling in light of the fact that the church experienced periodic revivals that added to the membership in the late 1890s and early 1900s. For example, Merritt includes an anecdotal recollection of one of these meetings that took place near the end of the nineteenth century:

“Aunt Minne” Garrison Meredith remembered in a 1964 interview that Jim Bass and W.C. Maupin [held] a revival about 1898 when she was 8 years old. Brother Maupin stood in the doorway of the Old Log Church and preached to an overflow crowd. Several responded including John and Mary Alice Hilton Garrison, “Aunt Minnie’s” parents. She remembered at the close of the revival a big baptizing which took place in front of the Mrs. Todd Simerly home, overlooking the Doe River. Her parents, as a couple, came from one side of the river, and Kirby and Martha Garrison Humphrey (Cling Humphrey’s parents) came from the other side.³⁷

Another revival occurred in 1901 that included a “singing school” and a “poke supper” that raised \$7.50 in funding for the church’s expenses.³⁸ An unnamed correspondent to the *Tennessee Standard*, a publication of the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, reported the “several good meetings” had taken place in early 1901 in northeast Tennessee, including one at Valley Forge, where there had been “25 additions.”³⁹

The new century thus began on a hopeful note, and the congregation undertook the construction of its first “meeting house” in 1903. Prior to this date, the congregation shared the “Old Log Church” on a rotating basis with at least two other bodies of believers that eventually became the Valley Forge Freewill Baptist and the Valley Forge United Methodist churches.⁴⁰

³⁷ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 402.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 404.

³⁹ “Notes,” *Tennessee Standard* (March 15, 1901): 1.

⁴⁰ Frank Merritt, *More History of Carter County* (Kingsport, TN: Arcata Graphics, 1991), 360. According to Merritt, it “operated as a Union Church, each religious persuasion having a Sunday, some sort of organization, but everyone attending services whenever a minister arrived in the community to hold services.”

On June 15, 1903, Elijah and Althea McCathern Williams deeded property near what was known as the McCathern spring “for the love and affection we have for the Christian church.”⁴¹ The original trustees for this new church property were John W. Headrick, John C. Garrison, and Nathaniel T. Simerly, who were charged with “erecting a church house...which shall be known as the Spring Hill Christian Church.”⁴² In relatively short order, a wood-frame structure arose on this site, and it remained there until it burned in 1924. According to Frank Merritt, the building “was known simply as the ‘Church on the Hill,’” and the Rev. J.C. Reynolds, the preacher from the recently founded First Christian Church in Elizabethton, spoke at the building dedication.⁴³

Sometime between this landmark event and the year that witnessed the beginning of the Great War in Europe, Spring Hill/Valley Forge Christian Church experienced a time of crisis. It was not alone, as a report in the *Tennessee Standard* indicates: “The following churches must be helped or the cause will suffer: Morristown, Jonesboro, Elizabethtown, Mountain City, Bristol, La Follette...and many other congregations in the country.”⁴⁴ In searching for causes, one might point to the lack of full-time resident ministers during this period as a source of instability.

⁴¹ Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book 15, page 96. A full transcript of the deed is in Appendix A. Althia (also spelled Althea) Williams was a daughter of James and Moriah McCatheran, who contributed the land in 1882 on which the “Old Log Church” or “Cedar Grove Meeting House” was located; it was intended “for the use of all Religious denominations.” Elijah Williams was one of the trustees in that original transaction. Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*, “Williams Family.”

⁴² The Williams’ sold the property to the trustees “and their successors” for \$1.00. Direct descendants of all three of these trustees may be found in the Valley Forge Christian Church today. Kathy Jenkins and her sons, Thomas and Jacob, and their children are descendants of John W. Headrick. John C. Garrisons’ offspring include the aforementioned “Aunt Minnie” Garrison Meredith (deceased 1970), as well as current members Jerry Garrison and John “Dusty” Garrison. Present-day members who are descendants of Nathaniel Simerly include: Earl McKinney and Sherry Hick, Abby Hicks-Brace, and Joshua Hicks. Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*, “Headrick Family,” “Garrison Family,” and “Simerly Family.”

⁴³ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 404. Merritt further notes that “Carolina Emmert Williams also remembered the ‘dinner on the ground’ and her family taking two hams to the feeding.” Her husband, Roger T. Williams, was son of one of the church’s early minister, P.P. Williams. See Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*, “Williams Family.” The First Christian Church in nearby Elizabethton was organized in 1891, and its first building was constructed in 1903 also. Merritt, *More History of Carter County*, 500.

⁴⁴ “Notes,” *Tennessee Standard* (September 15, 1902): 1. The phrase “in the country” probably refers to rural churches like Valley Forge.

Of course, this had been the case since the church's founding, as the following list of ministers and their durations of service at Valley Forge makes clear:

J.E. Scott (1872-1873)
A.M. Ferguson (1874, 1877-1878, 1885)
W.C. Maupin (1875-1876, 1879)
C.M. Burchfield (1881-1882, 1888)
J.H. Sutton (1883-1884)
Pless P. Williams (1899, multiple other times throughout 1890s and early 1900s, 1914-1915)⁴⁵

It should be noted that there is a gap in this list covering the time frame under consideration. According to Merritt, Pless Williams served "10 or 12 times in period." It seems likely, then, that the church frequently went without the services of a preacher (even on a part-time basis) and that Williams occasionally filled that role. Perhaps this arrangement sufficed during the church's early growth phase, but when the congregation reached a "critical mass" of members, something with more continuity was needed. Throughout American Protestantism in general, a major shift toward the "resident minister" system took place during the nineteenth century as population centers expanded and churches grew with them. Stone-Campbell churches gradually moved in this direction as well, although they lagged somewhat behind due to the preponderance of rural and small-town congregations in their ranks.

Along with the absence of a consistent pastoral presence within the congregation, an external factor may have contributed even more decisively to the decline that Valley Forge Christian Church experienced in the early twentieth century. Indeed, according to evangelist A. Preston Gray, who conducted a two-week revival at Valley Forge in late February and early March of 1914, the culprit was unmistakable. "Upon my arrival at the place things were in very bad shape," Gray reported to the *Christian Standard*. "Liquor—this 'mean,' cheap liquor—

⁴⁵ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 419. W.C. Maupin and his brother, Brit Maupin, were ordained by the Christian church in Jonesboro (now spelled Jonesborough), Tennessee in 1866. Norton, 141.

flowed like a river. This awful floodtide of strong drink has done irreparable damage in this picturesque valley, and even the little church almost went down in the inundation.”⁴⁶ Gray, who was serving at the time as the State Evangelist with the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, tied the church’s troubles directly to the illegal production and consumption of “‘mean,’ cheap liquor” (by which he probably meant what is commonly referred to as “moonshine”).⁴⁷ In so doing, Gray joined his voice with the chorus of both state and national Stone-Campbell leaders who espoused the cause of prohibition, which had become a controversial and divisive issue in Tennessee by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Emerging from the temperance movement that arose in the aftermath of the early nineteenth century revivals known as the Second Great Awakening, the effort to restrict and eventually ban altogether the production and distribution of alcohol gained considerable momentum both in Tennessee and throughout the nation after the Civil War. Founded in 1874, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union drew widespread support from the major Protestant denominations, including the churches of the Stone-Campbell movement. One of the organization’s prominent leaders was Silena Moore Holman, a Christian church laywoman from Fayetteville, Tennessee who served as president of the Tennessee Women’s Christian Temperance Union for fifteen years.⁴⁸ Holman crossed swords with David Lipscomb, editor of the Nashville-based *Gospel Advocate*, over the use of fermented wine in communion—a practice which Lipscomb found unobjectionable on scriptural grounds. Nevertheless, Holman considered it offensive and a source of temptation because it was, for her, “the drunkard’s drink.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ A. Preston Gray, “Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival,” *Christian Standard* (March 1914): 35 (515).

⁴⁷ Norton, 232. See also *Tennessee Christian* (September/October 1911): 21.

⁴⁸ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Holman, Silena Moore,” by Lisa W. Davison.

⁴⁹ According to historian Paul E. Isaac, this matter appeared in the pages of the *Gospel Advocate* over a period of more than thirty years spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Paul E. Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics: Turbulent Decades in Tennessee, 1885-1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1965), 24-26.

Furthermore, in one of several articles published in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1885, Holman called on all Stone-Campbell ministers to “give us the prohibition of the liquor traffic, give us the universal practice of abstinence among the followers of Jesus, and, with the blessing of God, we predict a speedy revival of religion in the church and a rapid extension of it all over the world.”⁵⁰ Essentially, the purpose of this soaring rhetoric was to enlist church leaders in a political crusade to elect candidates to the state legislature who supported adding a prohibition amendment to the state constitution. The elections that took place the following year produced the desired result, but when the amendment was submitted for voter approval in 1887, it failed to garner a majority anywhere except in the counties of east Tennessee.⁵¹ Carter County voted overwhelmingly for the amendment, 1332 in favor of passage versus 386 against it.⁵²

Undeterred, the proponents of prohibition in Tennessee redoubled their efforts and pushed for local legislation that would curtail alcohol sales and effectively create “dry” zones throughout much of the state. Holman and other temperance leaders threw their support behind the recently established statewide Prohibition party, since the two major parties skirted the issue or at least tended not to prioritize it in their platforms. A Stone-Campbell figure from Carter County became deeply involved in the Prohibition party’s electoral aspirations; Josephus Hopwood, president of Milligan College, ran for governor on the Prohibition party ticket in 1896 and lost by a wide margin.⁵³ Despite this defeat, Hopwood’s strong stance apparently led to the

⁵⁰ Quoted in Isaac, 26.

⁵¹ Isaac, 55. Isaac describes this region as the place where “the prohibition cause had its stronghold.”

⁵² These figures were obtained from the original certificate of election in the Tennessee State Library Archives. RG 87, Election Returns, Series I, Box 78.

⁵³ Isaac, 71-72. According to Milligan historian Cynthia Cornwell, Hopwood “first became aware of the abuses of alcohol during his duty in the Civil War.” In 1895, he joined with James Tate, a former Milligan student, in editing *The Pilot*, a Prohibitionist newspaper, and he launched his ill-fated campaign for governor the following year. The victor in that race was Robert Love Taylor, a Milligan alumnus and neighbor to the school! See Cornwell, 19. She also notes that Josephus and Sarah LaRue Hopwood ensured that “every land deed which they made included a clause making it illegal for the buyer to ever use the land to produce or sell alcohol.” Cornwell, 33, n. 59.

closure of several stills in Carter County.⁵⁴ After the poor showings by the Prohibition party in electoral politics at the end of the nineteenth century, prohibition activists channeled their energies into supporting major party candidates who backed their cause.⁵⁵ One politician who received their enthusiastic endorsement was Edward Ward Carmack, the son of a Christian church minister and bitter political opponent of Robert Love Taylor in the Tennessee Democratic Party.⁵⁶ In her capacity as president of the Tennessee Women's Christian Temperance Union, Silena Moore Holman supported Carmack in his primary campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1907-1908. She attributed his loss to the incumbent governor, Malcolm R. Patterson, to misleading statements by Patterson about his stance on prohibition and to election fraud.⁵⁷ Patterson went on to win a new term of office, but he faced a legislature that was dominated by prohibition supporters in both parties who passed some of the state's strongest prohibition laws to date over his veto.

Ironically and tragically, the prohibition cause was energized by the death of Carmack in a gun battle on the streets of Nashville between Carmack and a father-and-son duo who were ardent allies of Governor Patterson. As historian Paul Isaac puts it, "the prohibitionists now had a first-class martyr-saint, and they proceeded to make the most of him."⁵⁸ The outcome of this intense political drama was that in 1909 Tennessee joined the "veritable 'dry wave' that swept

⁵⁴ Cornwell, 33. N. 61. Hopwood himself asserted this in his memoir. See Josephus Hopwood, *A Journey Through the Years: An Autobiography* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1932), 82, 84-85.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the [Souvenir booklet from the thirty-third annual convention of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union meeting in Nashville November 1907 - Education Outreach - Tennessee Virtual Archive \(oclc.org\)](#). Accessed July 5, 2023. Silena Moore Holman's photograph appears on page 5 of this booklet, along with "Words of Welcome" to "the great-hearted women who compose our 'Grand Army of the Republic,' the women who fight under the banner of the Women's Christian Temperance Union for God and home and native land." In a later section (pages 7-8) entitled "Temperance and the W.C.T.U. in Tennessee," the convention attendees read this confident declaration: "We expect to have a very important part in the victory that is sure to come in 1909, when the 'Old Volunteer State' is to join the prohibition ranks and be forever free from the curse of liquor traffic."

⁵⁶ Isaac, 106-107.

⁵⁷ Isaac, 153.

⁵⁸ Isaac, 159.

the Deep South”—beginning with Oklahoma in 1907—by adopting some of the strongest state-level prohibition measures in the United States.⁵⁹

Silena Moore Holman, Josephus Hopwood, Edward Ward Carmack, and A. Preston Gray all exemplified the broader connections between the Stone-Campbell and temperance/prohibition movements.⁶⁰ The Tennessee Christian Missionary Convention expressed its sentiments in its 1897-98 *Year Book*: “That we recognize in the liquor traffic the most potent cause of crime, misery and want in all the land and the greatest enemy with which the church has to contend, and that we feel it is our duty to do all in our power to overthrow the manufacture, sale and use of intoxicating drinks.”⁶¹ Similarly, in 1899 the General Christian Missionary Convention passed this resolution: “That we pledge our untiring hostility to the liquor business, and that we favor the prohibition of the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors as a beverage.”⁶² Eight years later, the same convention authorized the creation of a Board of Temperance under the umbrella of the American Christian Missionary Society. This new agency was later expanded into the Board of Temperance and Social Service. By the time that Tennessee adopted its own prohibition legislation in 1909, leaders of the Christian church/Disciples of Christ stream of the Stone-Campbell movement had clearly signaled their nearly unanimous support for the prohibition cause. How did the victory of prohibition proponents in Tennessee affect the Valley Forge community and the “Church on the Hill” in its midst?

⁵⁹ Mark Lawrence Schrod, *Smashing the Liquor Machine: A Global History of Prohibition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 480-481. The other states were Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina. As the title of Schrod’s work suggests, prohibition was a global phenomenon.

⁶⁰ Perhaps the most well-known Stone-Campbell personality associated with prohibition was Carry Nation, the hatchet-wielding, saloon-smashing antics brought her national attention. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Nation, Carry Amelia Moore Gloyd,” by Fran Grace.

⁶¹ A.I. Myhr, ed., *Year Book of the Churches of Christ in Tennessee: 1897-1898*, 25.

⁶² Quoted in Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1975), 293.

Perhaps the most significant (and certainly unintended) consequence was the proliferation of illegal liquor-producing operations, particularly in rural and remote areas where “bootlegging” had already become a thriving underground industry, largely due to the passage of the so-called “Four-Mile Law” in 1877. This legislation allowed local communities to forbid “the retail sale of all intoxicating beverages within four miles of any chartered institution of learning outside an incorporated town.”⁶³ It was amended a decade later to extend the original ban to a four-mile radius around any school, whether or not it was chartered or if the school was public or private. “This had the effect,” historian Paul Isaac notes, “of forbidding the retail liquor business in practically all of rural Tennessee.”⁶⁴ The passage of statewide prohibition only provided further impetus to bootleggers in places like Carter County, where the mountainous terrain provided ideal conditions for their illicit activities. Because of its strategic location along a major transportation route between the higher and lower-lying (and more populated) areas of the county, the Valley Forge community was undoubtedly affected adversely after 1909. While Gray’s vivid picture of an “awful floodtide of strong drink” might have been overdrawn and somewhat self-congratulatory, it stands to reason that statewide prohibition only exacerbated a bad situation by further incentivizing an existing black market in contraband liquor. Valley Forge, like other rural communities across the state, suffered the consequences.

When A. Preston Gray arrived there in late February of 1914 to conduct a two-week revival, he found a church and a community in crisis. In his report to the *Christian Standard*, he painted a bleak picture of the congregation’s spiritual condition: “Many had lost the ‘joy of salvation,’ and the church as a force for God was almost totally extinguished.”⁶⁵ Gray, a native

⁶³ Isaac, 10-11.

⁶⁴ Isaac, 74.

⁶⁵ Gray, “Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival,” 35 (515).

of the Hales Chapel/Gray community in nearby Washington County, had been appointed to the position of State Evangelist after the untimely death of his predecessor, John W. McGarvey, Jr. in 1911.⁶⁶ The State Secretary of the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, James T. McKissick, took office that same year and promoted a vigorous program of evangelism and church revitalization over the next three years.⁶⁷ Gray's two-week campaign in Valley Forge was part of McKissick's concerted effort to restore struggling churches to better health, and Gray was well-suited to such a task. One preacher sang the young evangelist's praises after Gray held a revival at the Christian church in Etowah, Tennessee in 1912; Edgar A. Wasson (the church's minister) declared that Gray "comes nearer to my idea of an evangelist than any other man whom I know. He preached a positive doctrine, in an uncompromising way, and with great power and conviction. I am sure that he has won the love and respect of the very best people of this place among all denominations."⁶⁸ Wasson further noted that there were twenty-four additions to the church's membership during the series of meetings at which Gray preached.

By his own accounting, Gray had a similar impact two years later in Valley Forge. Despite the inclement late-winter weather conditions, large numbers attended the services, and by the end of the campaign a total of 104 individuals responded to the nightly invitations. Gray notes, "Of this number some were by relationship, and a larger number who had backslidden. Twenty-two were by primary obedience. Some who re-enlisted were as faithful as anybody. From these, elders and deacons were selected."⁶⁹ Apparently, Gray expended considerable

⁶⁶ Norris, 228-232. McGarvey's father was a well-known biblical scholar and staunch opponent of theological liberalism. He served as professor and president at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky until his death in 1911. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "McGarvey, John W.," by M. Eugene Boring.

⁶⁷ McKissick left his position as State Secretary in August 1914 to serve as president of Milligan College. During his three-year tenure with the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, he conducted several revivals that resulted in the addition of some five thousand individuals to Christian churches in Tennessee. See Cornwell, 136-137.

⁶⁸ Edgar A. Wasson, "Dedication at Etowah, Tenn.," *Christian Standard* (June 22, 1912): 28 (1028).

⁶⁹ Gray, "Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival," 35 (515).

efforts on reorganizing the church, as it had fallen into disarray. “While many were upright in private life,” Gray noted, “the work of despoliation resulted from the neglect of all, and especially the elders.”⁷⁰ As is often the case with troubled and dying churches, weak internal leadership was a major contributing factor to the malaise that Gray encountered at Valley Forge. Also, it is worth noting that the congregation evidently had ceased to participate in the cooperative work of both the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and the Christian churches in east Tennessee. For example, there is no mention of Valley Forge in the list of churches who were represented at the annual gathering of east Tennessee Christian churches that took place in 1912 at the Oak Grove Christian Church in Carter County.⁷¹ The same holds true for the prior year’s meeting as well.⁷² Despite this lack of participation and support for either the statewide or regional cooperative programs, it was through the state society’s intervention in the person of A. Preston Gray that the Valley Forge Christian Church escaped near-extinction and began to experience revitalization.

This remarkable turnaround proved not to be short-lived, either. Two years later, J.N. Shepherd, who was serving as the church’s pastor, reported that the total membership of the congregation had grown to 100. Giving to “state missions” from the congregation totaled \$27.00, a figure that nearly doubled that which was remitted in 1914 (\$15.66).⁷³ Indeed, from the time of

⁷⁰ Gray, “Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival,” 35 (515).

⁷¹ “Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the First District, East Tennessee held at the Oak Grove Church, Elizabethton, August 21-24, 1912,” *Tennessee Christian* (November 1912): 7-8. 10-11. Furthermore, the “Minutes of the 23rd Annual Meeting of Disciples of Christ in Tennessee held at Clarksville, September 16-19, 1912” includes a list of churches that contributed to the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society. Valley Forge is not among these. See *Tennessee Christian* (November 1912): 1-6.

⁷² “Annual Convention of First District Churches,” *Tennessee Christian* (September/October 1911): 7-8. This meeting was held at the Christian church in Neva, in nearby Johnson County. In this report, the “Committee on Future Work” called for the churches in the district to raise \$1,000 to support a district evangelist, but Valley Forge does not appear among the “apportionments” assigned to the various congregations in the first district. This same issue of the *Tennessee Christian* (21) contains the notice that “A. Preston Gray reports beginning evangelistic work in Tennessee on May 1.”

⁷³ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1914*, 253; *Year Book: 1916*, 263.

Gray's revival in 1914 to the burning of the "Church on the Hill" in 1924, the Valley Forge Christian Church exhibited considerable stability in terms of both membership and finances. According to the report submitted by pastor E.E. Edens to the 1918 *Year Book*, membership totaled 118 and giving for "local expenses" was \$253.50.⁷⁴ Three years later, little had changed in terms of church membership, which stood at 119. By contrast, giving for "local expenses" increased to \$495.64—a reflection, perhaps of postwar economic growth.⁷⁵ The "little church that almost went down in the inundation" was afloat again and sailing through calmer seas.

A backward glance over the period from Garfield's election in 1880 to Gray's revival in 1914 reveals some themes in the story of the Valley Forge Christian Church that are worthy of reflection. Larger events and developments—such as the gradual acceptance of the Stone-Campbell churches by the Protestant mainstream that dominated American culture, the growing sectional rift within the Stone-Campbell movement during the post-Reconstruction era, and the divisive debate in Tennessee over prohibition—all had an impact on how the congregation fared during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After all, churches do not exist in some sort of historical vacuum; they respond to and are shaped by the issues and concerns of their times. Whether those responses are healthy and beneficial to the life of the congregation correlates closely with the quality and consistency of its leadership, both lay and pastoral. Any deficiency in this regard tends to render a congregation more vulnerable to the deleterious effects of those broader matters, as was the case with the Valley Forge Christian Church at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, there was a countervailing factor that mitigated and helped to reverse the church's decline: the structures that united the Stone-Campbell churches in Tennessee in voluntary cooperation with one another. Had it not been for

⁷⁴ *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1918*, 288

⁷⁵ *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1921*, 353.

the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and its commitment to help struggling churches like Valley Forge, the congregation's story might have ended in dwindling irrelevance. Instead, revival and renewal occurred, and the story continued to move forward. Ironically, as the church entered into a period of new growth and vitality, the concept and practice of "cooperation" would become a source of contention and eventual division in the Stone-Campbell movement. This, too, would have a momentous impact on the story of the Valley Forge Christian Church.

CHAPTER THREE

UP FROM THE ASHES: 1914-1946

Approximately six months after the pivotal revival at Valley Forge Christian Church in 1914, momentous events occurred in Europe that would have far-reaching effects. War erupted among the great powers of that continent, and for the next four years the conflict raged along multiple fronts, consuming millions of lives and causing unprecedented destruction. The so-called “Great War” officially ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, but an uneasy peace ensued in a world that was transformed. After keeping the United States neutral for much of the war, President Woodrow Wilson secured passage of a declaration of war against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) in April 1917 and began mobilizing and deploying armed forces and material on the side of the Allies. Contending that “the world must be made safe for democracy,” Wilson greatly expanded the organizational power of the federal government—a move heralded by progressive politicians and activists as a template for dealing with various social and economic problems in the postwar era.¹

Leaders of the major Protestant denominations enthusiastically supported American involvement in the war, because many of them sympathized with progressive ideas about centralization and cooperation as the best means for ameliorating the negative impacts of industrialization and urbanization. Deeply influenced by theological liberalism and the “social

¹ Indeed, historian Ellis Hawley describes the American experience of World War I as “The Progressive War.” See Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1997), 2nd ed., 16-30.

gospel” movement, they had formed the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 to coordinate the evangelistic and benevolent efforts of their respective communions for “the mighty task of putting conscience and justice and love into a Christian civilization.”² This ecumenical body viewed American participation in the war as a glorious crusade that was, in the words of Charles S. Macfarland (who served as secretary of the Council’s Social Services Commission), “a religious thing coming straight from the heart of Jesus Christ.”³

Representatives of the Christian churches/Disciples of Christ, many of whom shared the Council’s progressive inclinations, played important roles in establishing and leading the Federal Council of Churches.⁴ One of them, James H. Garrison, editor emeritus of the *Christian-Evangelist*, opined to his largely Stone-Campbell readership in March 1918, “We know what we are fighting for. President Wilson has clearly defined our aims. The man who is unwilling to lay down his life, if need be, for these principles, lacks the heroism of Jesus and of the army of martyrs.”⁵ He went on to call for the completion of the “Men and Millions” campaign, a five-year, movement-wide effort begun just before the war to raise funds for Christian church/Disciples of Christ agencies and to recruit ministers and missionaries. Based on its success and comparing it to war-bond sale drives, Garrison proposed for the postwar era the establishment of “a ten-year program of aggressive Christianity, at home and abroad, embracing money, missions, education, benevolence, congregational efficiency, Bible school work, brotherhood unity in service, and in cooperation with all others who are striving to make Christ

² Quoted in Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002), rev. ed., 244.

³ Quoted in Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1: *The Irony of It All, 1839-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 278.

⁴ McAllister and Tucker, 281-283.

⁵ James H. Garrison, “The Editor’s Easy Chair,” *The Christian-Evangelist* (March 28, 1918): 325. According to McAllister and Tucker, 281, Garrison suggested the name for the Federal Council of Churches.

Master of the world.”⁶ Valley Forge Christian Church was among the numerous congregations in Tennessee and throughout the nation that contributed to the “Men and Millions” campaign that Garrison celebrated. According to the 1919 *Year Book*, Valley Forge gave \$35.00 to the cause from July 1918 through June 1919.⁷

Such stirring rhetoric coupled with the positive response to the “Men and Millions” campaign indicated a spirit of unity among the Christian churches/Disciples of Christ stream of the Stone-Campbell movement. Conflating patriotism with religious fervor, progressive elements within the movement forged ahead in the immediate aftermath of the war with idealistic plans that involved centralized mission and benevolence agencies at the state and national levels, working in concert with those of other Protestant denominations to create a more just and stable social order. They soon found that their optimism was misplaced, as the more conservative rank-and-file membership of the churches resisted what appeared to them to be an attempt by theological liberals to gain and consolidate power over movement-related institutions. The creation of a single agency, the United Christian Missionary Society, in 1919 aroused the suspicions of conservative Disciples who saw this as the latest salvo in a renewed conflict between progressives and traditionalists that dated back to the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It also paralleled the “modernist-fundamentalist” controversy that engulfed American Protestantism as a whole during the same period. Ironically, the exigencies of the “Great War” temporarily overshadowed this internecine strife, but it resumed with a vengeance during the

⁶ Garrison, 325.

⁷ *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1919*, 379. Norton notes that “Tennessee was one of the last states in which the campaign was launched,” in November 1917. This perhaps explains why Valley Forge’s contribution occurred sometime around the official closure of the campaign. See Norton, 237-238.

period of postwar “normalcy.”⁸ Valley Forge Christian Church would not remain untouched by these developments, even as the congregation moved forward from its rebirth.

War and Peace?

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”⁹ This prophetic condemnation of leaders who promoted a false sense of security in Judah during the late seventh century BC resonates with the situation among the Christian churches/Disciples of Christ stream of the Stone-Campbell movement as they emerged from the “war to end all wars.” On the surface, it appeared that the progressives’ vision of organizational Christian unity would prevail, but traditionalists quickly dispelled any notions of tranquil acquiescence. In response to a call entitled “To the Rescue of the Restoration Movement” in the July 26, 1919, edition of the *Christian Standard*, conservative Disciples met in Cincinnati for the first of several “Restoration Congresses.” These gatherings expressed opposition to the policies and practices of the United Christian Missionary Society and other agencies associated with the International Convention.¹⁰ The primary concern for those who attended the Restoration Congresses was the issue of “open membership” (the reception of unimmersed individuals into congregational membership, especially by missionaries supported by the United Christian Missionary Society), which conservatives viewed as a betrayal of Stone-Campbell restorationist principles. As with the issue of instrumental music in worship in the previous century, open membership came to represent broader cultural divisions. Instead of sectionalism, however, the

⁸ The best scholarly treatment of this controversy remains George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). According to Marsden, not all conservatives were fundamentalists in the strictest sense. “Some,” he argues, “like the traditionalists among the Disciples of Christ, were regarded as part of the fundamentalist movement largely because their aims were parallel and in certain of their attacks they had common opponents.” Marsden, 102.

⁹ Jeremiah 6:14.

¹⁰ Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 279-284. As noted earlier, the General Missionary Convention transformed itself into a delegate assembly known as the International Convention of Disciples of Christ in 1917.

divergence between progressive and traditionalist Disciples in the early twentieth century had more to do with centralization and local autonomy as competing forms of social organization.

Gatherings similar to the Restoration Congresses took place at the state and regional levels as well, including Tennessee, where the churches of the First District (comprising northeast Tennessee) held an “East Tennessee Group Evangelism Congress” in Johnson City on March 15-16, 1921.¹¹ While the overarching purpose of the meeting was to pool resources in order to help struggling churches in the region, a strong undercurrent of criticism directed toward centralized agencies was present as well. In a follow-up front-page editorial published two weeks after this “Group Evangelism Congress,” the editor of the *Christian Standard* asked, “Brethren, how long will congregations in other sections of the land complacently wait for a professional leadership to come to the rescue while their own talents lie undeveloped and unused?”¹² This dismissive attitude toward “professional leadership” represented a thinly veiled reference to the state and national agencies of the Disciples. For the churches of northeastern Tennessee, the Group Evangelism Congress symbolized their discontent with the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society in particular, which was going through a period of turmoil. According to one historian of the Stone-Campbell movement in Tennessee, this gathering in Johnson City “had ominous overtones for the future of the State Missionary Society, and indeed for all the Christian Churches in the state. It was the first time that one district had proposed to launch out on a program independent of the other districts and of the State Society.”¹³

¹¹ C.J. Sharp, “Watch Eastern Tennessee for Concrete Demonstration of New Testament Christianity,” *Christian Standard* (March 5, 1921): 3-4. The program for the Congress appears on the cover of the same issue. The *Christian Standard* had previously urged churches to implement something like this in an outline for action provided in its pages in December 1920.

¹² “East Tennessee Uncovers Its Talents,” *Christian Standard* (April 2, 1921): 1. The subtitle for the article reads, “First Group Evangelism Congress Results in Determination to Restore New Testament Principle of Mutual Helpfulness and Individual Responsibility.”

¹³ Norton, 247.

It is unclear whether representatives of the Valley Forge Christian Church participated in the aforementioned Congress, but it seems likely that its members and leaders shared in the growing antipathy toward both the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and the United Christian Missionary Society among the churches of east Tennessee.¹⁴ Later in 1921, the leadership of First Christian Church in Johnson City called on the United Christian Missionary Society to make known clearly its “plea and policy for the future” on open membership. “This church wishes to continue with the society,” wrote S.S. Lappin in correspondence to the *Christian Standard*, “but wishes its money, as designed by the givers, to advance the cause of New Testament Christianity.”¹⁵ William E. Sweeney, who served as pastor of this flagship east Tennessee congregation and presided over the East Tennessee Group Evangelism Congress, became one of the leading voices in the region expressing skepticism about the state and national missionary agencies. For this reason, he faced opposition when he was nominated to serve as vice-president of the Tennessee Christian Missionary Convention in 1924; another delegate contended that “Sweeney was supporting independent missionary work and was not supporting the state program.”¹⁶ Although he eventually won election, another controversy erupted the

¹⁴ According to the 1921 *Year Book*, E. Roy Gentry was serving as the “1/6 time” pastor at Valley Forge. His name does not appear among the thirty-eight ministers and lay leaders who “were pledged for Group Evangelism in East Tennessee.” See Traverce Harrison, “First Group Evangelism Congress,” *Christian Standard* (April 2, 1921): 5. Valley Forge/Cedar Grove is included in a list of “organized churches of Christ in the First District” in “East Tennessee: Field and Forces,” *Christian Standard* (March 5, 1921): 4.

¹⁵ S.S. Lappin, “East Tennessee News Notes,” *Christian Standard* (December 17, 1921): 5. The implication of Lappin’s language was that “New Testament Christianity” and “open membership” were incompatible. Looming even larger was the issue of a centralized, bureaucratic organization that seemed to ignore the concerns and usurp the authority of the local church.

¹⁶ Norton, 252. “Independent missionary work” refers to Christian churches/Disciples of Christ missionaries who operated outside the United Christian Missionary Society system. Because these missionaries solicited and received support directly from local congregations, they were often referred to as “direct-support” missionaries. As the gulf between progressive and traditionalist Disciples widened during the early twentieth century, the latter gravitated toward the “direct-support” model and came to be known as “independent” Christian churches and churches of Christ. The “co-operative” label applied to those churches that supported the United Christian Missionary Society and other general agencies. As Henry Webb explains, independent missionary activity first appeared in 1901 with the Yotsuya Mission in Japan, and it expanded rapidly in response to the formation of the United Christian Missionary Society in 1919. See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 312-320.

following year at the state convention (held at Milligan College) over his nomination to the presidency of the convention. According to the customary procedures of the convention, as the incumbent vice-president, he should have advanced automatically to the chief leadership position. The members of the nominating committee put forward a candidate who was more favorable to the progressive elements, claiming agnosticism about the convention's past practices. Although the convention eventually elected Sweeney to the presidency in a unanimous vote, this incident reinforced the sense of suspicion and distrust among the east Tennessee churches with regard to the leaders and supporters of the state society.¹⁷

Sweeney's ministry intersected briefly but significantly with the Valley Forge Christian Church in August 1926 when he spoke at the dedication of the church's new brick building.¹⁸ As noted in the previous chapter, the "Church on the Hill" burned in October 1924, just two weeks after the local elementary school building suffered the same fate. The conflagration occurred in the midst of a revival conducted by First District evangelist John N. Shepherd, who had pastored the church previously on a part-time basis.¹⁹ In a gesture of local ecumenicity, the Doe River Baptist Church offered its building for the completion of the revival meetings. One eyewitness recalled "seeing the building burn and hearing the bell ringing on its own as the building and bell tower came collapsing to the ground."²⁰ It is unclear where the congregation met for the next two

¹⁷ Norton, 252-253. See also "Tennessee Holds Convention," *Christian Standard* (July 10, 1926): 10.

¹⁸ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 406.

¹⁹ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1916*, 263. Shepherd is listed as the ¼ time minister at the same time he was serving as district evangelist. He accepted the call to this ministry at the First District convention held in Mountain City, Tennessee in August 1915. See the "First District Convention Minutes, Mountain City, August 19-22, 1915," *Tennessee Christian* (October 1915): 13.

²⁰ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 404. Merritt apparently gleaned this information from conversations with James McKinley "Ken" Potter and his wife, Ruby (Simerly) Potter. In his account of "The Simerly Family" in *Valley Forge Families*, Merritt notes that Ken Potter "helped build the VF Chr Ch original structure in 1925. For years Ken sang tenor in the choir." The Potters' children (Loretta Range and Martha Raye Hardin) and some of their grandchildren (Kathy Foster and Mike Range) continue to be active members of the congregation. The family's musical tradition continues as well—until recently, Loretta Range sang in the choir, and Kathy Foster serves as the pianist for Sunday morning worship. Mike Range provides audio-visual technical support.

years, but they began construction of a new facility in the summer of 1925 on nearby land donated by D.M. “Mack” Chambers and his wife, Martha Ellis Chambers, who owned and operated a general merchandise store on adjacent property.²¹ For the sum of one dollar “and the love and devotion and interest they have in the promotion of the Kingdom of Christ,” they conveyed this plot of land to the current trustees of the church: W.C. Williams, W.L. Headrick, and K.S. Garrison on May 19, 1925. The gift came with certain limitations, however; the deed specified that “the property described below is to be used by the Christian Church and its auxiliary only and no festivals, plays, and ice cream suppers are to be held in the church house that is to be erected on same forever.”²² It seems that the Chambers’ objected to any church-sponsored event that involved entertainment and/or the solicitation of funds from non-members for the support of the church and its ministries. The stipulation they inserted into the deed would have long-lasting ramifications, as there continued to be ardent resistance among some church members to the sale of merchandise by visiting musical groups within the confines of the church building well into the twenty-first century.

Construction of the building that continues to house the Valley Forge Christian Church today began shortly after the signing of the deed, sometime during the summer of 1925. The entire project took approximately one year to complete, and it seems to have been carried out largely by congregational members. Local historian Frank Merritt offers this account of the

²¹ D.M. Chambers’ father was David T. Chambers, who was among the first group of deacons when the church was organized. Martha Ellis Chambers was a granddaughter of Captain Dan Ellis of Civil War fame. See “Chambers Family” and “Ellis Family,” *Valley Forge Families*.

²² Register of Deeds, Carter County, Tennessee, Book 66, Page 480. Similar language occurs in the “Sand Creek Address and Declaration” of 1889, in which a group of Stone-Campbell churches condemned certain practices as unwarranted by the New Testament. Among these was “the church holding festivals of various kinds in the house of the Lord or elsewhere, demanding sometimes that each participant shall pay a certain sum for an admittance fee.” Although this document is primarily connected to the formation of the *a capella* Churches of Christ, it appears that similar sentiments persisted among the more conservative Stone-Campbell churches. See [Documents of Sand Creek: Declaration Version 1 \(acu.edu\)](#). Accessed July 31, 2023.

process: “The bricks were hauled from Keensburg by Radford Ellis in his wagon and team of horses. Bill Headrick and Nat ‘Mod’ Williams laid most of the brick, assisted by Paul Headrick, Carl Williams, and Frank Headrick; Bob Meredith was in charge of carpenter work assisted by Ken Potter and Dave Simerly.”²³ Merritt further notes that the builders followed a design that was similar to the Methodist church building in the Hunter community in the Stoney Creek section of Carter County. A photographic comparison of both structures in their current configurations reveals the architectural likenesses:



²³ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 405. All of the names cited here were direct descendants of the church’s founders. See “Ellis Family,” “Headrick Family,” “Meredith Family,” “Simerly Family,” and “Williams Family” in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*. Keensburg is a rural community located a few miles north of the county seat of Elizabethton.



The choice of brick as the primary building material and the incorporation of stained-glass windows into the new structure both point to the improved financial condition of the congregation during the 1920s. When the decade began, church members contributed \$495.64 annually toward “local expenses,” and five years later that figure increased more than five-fold to \$2,673.20.²⁴ Indeed, Carter County as a whole experienced an economic boom around this time that began with the construction of a large textile plant in Elizabethton in the fall of 1925. Local officials and business leaders came to an agreement with the J.P. Bemberg Company—a German rayon manufacturer—to build a facility that was part of a much larger phenomenon throughout southern Appalachia. According to one historian, rayon production in Virginia and Tennessee accounted for fifty percent of total national rayon output by the time of the Second World War.²⁵ Both men and women streamed into the county seat from the surrounding rural districts (including Valley Forge) to fill the thousands of job openings that the plant offered. Instead of settling in Elizabethton, many of these workers chose to commute from the mountain

²⁴ *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches): 1920*, 382; *Year Book: 1925*, 641.

²⁵ John F. Holly, “Elizabethton, Tennessee: A Case Study of Southern Industrialization” (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1949), 133.

farms on which they lived.²⁶ Another German-owned rayon plant opened in August 1928, and it eventually added several thousand more jobs. While the completion of the new Valley Forge Christian Church building predated the opening of these immense factories, the economic transformation that took place in Carter County during the latter half of the 1920s certainly contributed to the congregation's ability to pay the estimated \$5,000 cost of construction.²⁷

The congregation also benefitted from publicity and contributions from outside sources, including the state missionary society (!) and a church in a neighboring county. The January 1926 edition of the *Tennessee Christian* contained this notice on the front page: "The little church at Valley Forge lost its building to fire over a year ago; they have begun building a new and better building, but they need help. How it would cheer those faithful disciples if a good many would send in a little aid. We ought to do this. Send to W.C. Williams, Valley Forge." This appeal ended with a quote from Galatians 6:2: "Bear ye one another's burdens."²⁸ Unfortunately, no financial records exist to provide evidence of donations coming from other individuals or churches, but one of the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary attests to the generosity of the Christian church in Neva in adjacent Johnson County.²⁹

²⁶ According to historian Tommy David Lee II, "some 40 percent of rayon workers lived outside Elizabethton and commuted to work." Tommy David Lee II, "Rise Up and Call Us Blessed: From Farm to Factory in the Tri-Cities, Tennessee-Virginia, 1900-1950" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 2001), 197.

²⁷ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 405. Lee notes that Elizabethton had no sidewalks or paved streets in 1923. Three years later, it had several miles of both, as well as a sewage system. Lee, 140-141.

²⁸ "News Notes," *Tennessee Christian* (January 1926): 1. Merritt describes W.C. Williams (familiarily known as "Uncle Billy" to members of the congregation) as a "teacher for 16 years; then first School Board member from 2nd School District (1907); 14th District Magistrate, 1924-1940; VF Merchant 35 years; Leader, 'main stay' and Elder, VF Chr Ch for many years." His father, Elijah Williams, was the original treasurer of the church, and his maternal grandparents, James and Moriah McCatheran deeded the Cedar Grove meeting house/Old Log Church for the use of all religious groups. See Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 401 and Merritt, "Williams Family," *Valley Forge Families*.

²⁹ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 406. It is the only window that commemorates a church; the remainder display the names of individuals and families who were members of the congregation. Merritt connects the Neva window to "the influence of France and Rose Reece Humphrey," who had family ties with the Johnson County congregation. *Ibid.*

In any case, the fact that the State Secretary of the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, Merrill D. Clubb, published (and probably authored) this call to help the Valley Forge church may have stemmed from the somewhat closer relationship between the church and the state society after the 1914 revival.³⁰ From that point onward, Valley Forge seems to have provided more consistent financial support to the state society than it had previously. For example, the official account of the 1917 state convention in Nashville shows that Valley Forge was one of nine churches in Carter County that sent money to the state society that year; the church and Bible School gave a total of \$14.80 to “state missions.”³¹ The amount given to “local expenses” was \$253.50; thus, the remittance to the state society represented approximately 5.5 percent of total giving.³² With some fluctuation, this pattern of giving began in 1915, and it continued at least through 1921.³³

Sometime thereafter, the church apparently ceased its giving to state missions, which can be attributed to a combination of at least three factors. In the first place, after the loss of its meeting place in 1924, the congregation very likely poured most of its financial resources into paying for the construction of its new building and for the resulting indebtedness. Second, the relationship between Valley Forge Christian Church (and, indeed, the Christian churches of northeast Tennessee in general) and both the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and the

³⁰ According to Norton, Clubb pastored congregations in Chattanooga and Dyersburg, Tennessee prior to accepting the leadership role with the state society. He had also previously served as financial secretary of the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky and as State Secretary of Southern California. See Norton, 249.

³¹ “Minutes of the Convention of Churches of Christ of Tennessee, Convened at 17th Street Church, Nashville, Sept. 25-28, 1917,” *Tennessee Christian* (December-January, 1918): 6.

³² The “local expense” figure comes from the 1918 edition of the *Year Book of Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches)*, 218. It provides statistics from the previous year.

³³ The 1916 *Year Book* reports a total of \$27.00 given to state missions in 1915, while the 1917 *Year Book* shows \$8.00 for 1916. No amount appears in the 1919 *Year Book*, but this was the year (1918) that the Valley Forge church gave \$35.00 to the “Men and Millions” campaign. Both the 1920 and 1921 editions of the *Year Book* record \$15.00 given to state missions. For the next three years, no report was submitted to the *Year Books* (1922-1924), and subsequent entries for the remainder of the 1920s shows no remittances to state missions. See *Year Book: 1916*, 265; *Year Book: 1917*, 278; *Year Book: 1919*, 374; *Year Book: 1920*, 382; and *Year Book: 1921*, 353.

general agencies of the Disciples of Christ/Christian churches became increasingly strained during the 1920s, as part of the larger controversy over “open membership” and the direction of the Disciples/Christian church stream of the Stone-Campbell movement as a whole. Finally, the financial crash of October 1929 and the resulting depression that lasted throughout the 1930s severely curtailed giving in all the churches. Survival became the overriding concern, which meant that funds remained close to home. “From a high of \$64,000 by the churches for all mission causes the year the Depression began,” historian Herman A. Norton notes, “contributions dropped sharply each year, and by 1934 they were down to \$36,000.”³⁴

When William E. Sweeney of the First Christian Church in Johnson City spoke at the dedication of the new Valley Forge Christian Church building in August 1926, Carter County stood at the threshold of what appeared to be an era of unprecedented and prolonged prosperity with the arrival of the textile industry in Elizabethton. Economic depression was the furthest thing from the minds of those gathered for the “dedication dinner” that “was spread on tables placed in the yard of D.M. and Martha Chambers.”³⁵ But storm clouds of a doctrinal and ecclesiological kind were already gathering on the horizon—indeed, they began building before the war and only intensified afterward—and Sweeney’s presence as the keynote speaker for the celebratory occasion signified their presence. A lawyer-turned-preacher, his father was one of four brothers who were known as the “Preaching Sweeneys,” and the best known of the quartet was Sweeney’s uncle, Zachary Taylor Sweeney, long-time pastor of the Tabernacle Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana.³⁶ Both uncle and nephew gained national reputations as leading voices opposing “open membership” and liberal theology. At first, both were cautiously

³⁴ Norton, 260-261. The Tennessee Christian Missionary Society had to reduce its staff due to decreased funding.

³⁵ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 406.

³⁶ Donald R. Jeanes, “The Influence of William E. Sweeney on the Twentieth Century Restoration Movement (M.Div. thesis, Emmanuel School of Religion, 1972), 4-5.

supportive of the newly formed United Christian Missionary Society and other cooperative efforts as the most efficient ways to advance the cause of “New Testament Christianity.” As controversy swirled around the United Christian Missionary Society during the early 1920s over the alleged practice of “open membership” by its missionaries, the elder Sweeney tried to reform the organization from within and labored to avoid outright division between traditionalists and progressives.³⁷ William E. Sweeney pursued a similar path in Tennessee where he championed and led cooperative efforts among the churches (such as the East Tennessee Group Evangelism Congress). Like his uncle, however, he also warned against what he perceived to be the dangers of centralization.³⁸ Chief among these was the potential for conflict over control of centralized organizations, leading inevitably to schism.

When William E. Sweeney delivered his dedication sermon for the new church building at Valley Forge, the storm clouds were about to burst. The tenuous peace that his uncle had seemingly helped to broker at the International Convention in Oklahoma City in 1925 would fall apart at the Memphis convention in November 1926, when progressive Disciples outmaneuvered their conservative counterparts.³⁹ Z.T. Sweeney died in February 1926, and his nephew, perhaps anticipating what progressive Disciples might do at the upcoming Memphis convention, joined with a group of well-known conservative preachers to form a “Committee on Future Action” in June 1926.⁴⁰ They planned a pre-convention congress of like-minded Disciples

³⁷ See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 279-306 for his treatment of Sweeney’s involvement in this controversy. See also Lester G. McAllister, *Z.T. Sweeney: Preacher and Peacemaker* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1968), 86-104, and Robert E. Reeves, “A Biography of Z.T. Sweeney” (M.A. thesis, Butler University School of Religion, 1959), 117-128. <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1254&context=grtheses>. Accessed August 5, 2023.

³⁸ See Jeanes, 62-64.

³⁹ At the Oklahoma City convention, conservatives led by Z.T. Sweeney and others succeeded in passing a resolution that categorically condemned the practice of “open membership” by UCMS missionaries and provided for the dismissal of those who refused to comply. Webb refers to this convention as “the zenith of conservative influence.” See Webb, 297-302.

⁴⁰ Reeves, 138; Webb, 303-304.

to prepare their strategy in response to progressives' efforts to reassert control over the United Christian Missionary Society. While it is likely that many of the church members who attended the Valley Forge dedication service were at least dimly aware of their honored guest's involvement in this gathering storm, it seems equally likely that they would have sympathized with his positions on "open membership" and centralized agencies.

A prelude to the drama at Memphis unfolded at the state convention held at the Ovoca campground near Tullahoma, Tennessee in July 1926. According to historian Herman A. Norton, when the convention opened, representatives from churches in the eastern section of the state introduced a resolution endorsing the action taken at the 1925 Oklahoma City International Convention vis-à-vis the United Christian Missionary Society. Church leaders from the middle and western sections joined with the state secretary, Merrill Clubb, in opposing the resolution, which was finally defeated 38-20, with numerous abstentions. Ironically, no one spoke in favor of "open membership." Instead, the opponents of the pro-Oklahoma City resolution argued that it was premature and that it "would amount to approving a creed."⁴¹ William E. Sweeney stood before the crowd at Valley Forge as a prominent proponent of the doomed resolution at the recently concluded state convention. Once again, it is reasonable to surmise that most of his listeners had some knowledge of his involvement in these events that took place closer to home. More than likely, they found themselves in agreement with Sweeney as he took a leading role, along with other conservative Disciples, in launching the North American Christian Convention a year later as a response to their frustration over the outcome of the International Convention at

⁴¹ Norton, 254. Interestingly, progressive Disciples made a similar case against the so-called "Sweeney Resolution" (authored by Z.T. Sweeney) at the 1922 International Convention in Winona Lake, Indiana. They decried its condemnation of "open membership" as a form of "creedalism." See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 293. From its earliest days, the Stone-Campbell movement considered creedal statements as one of the chief sources of disunity and denominationalism.

Memphis.⁴² This new convention met for the first time in Indianapolis in October 1927, and it marked the beginning of a process of separation between progressive (or “cooperative”) and traditionalist (or “independent,” so named because of their support for missionaries who operated independently of the United Christian Missionary Society and other Disciple agencies) factions.

As events played out on the national stage in Memphis and Indianapolis over the next several months, the Valley Forge congregation settled into its new worship space, which was described in one local newspaper account of the dedication ceremony as a “modern” structure.⁴³ In part, this description may refer to the fact that the builders incorporated electrical lighting and wiring, which was still something of a novelty. Elizabethton was “electrified” after the completion of the nearby Wilbur Dam in 1912, but the benefits of hydroelectric power reached the outlying areas of Carter County at a much slower pace.⁴⁴ Because the new church building occupied land next to the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad, it was well situated to take advantage of the power lines that ran parallel to the railroad. Under the glow of electric lights, the congregants gathered in the large open sanctuary that dominated the floor plan of the building. They sat in straight pews that were arranged in rows, facing the stage that ran the length of the projection to the east. Other than a small entryway and belltower on the main level and a furnace room on the lower level, the 1926 building contained no other rooms for offices or Bible classes or fellowship events. Nevertheless, it functioned as a gathering place for all generations, who came together for services that would have included hymn-singing, praying,

⁴² Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 309-311. Norton notes that “contributions to the UCMS and to the TCMS, the state partner of the national organization, dropped over \$10,000 in the year after the Memphis action. East Tennessee churches were responsible for practically all of the decrease.” Norton, 255-256.

⁴³ Newspaper clipping of indeterminate date or provenance, Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁴⁴ See [The Grand Old Dam \(tva.com\)](http://www.tva.com) for a brief history of the construction of this pre-Tennessee Valley Authority dam. It actually began generating electricity on December 25, 1911.

preaching, and communion.⁴⁵ Although the congregation did not yet have the services of a full-time minister, it is likely that they observed the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis, as was (and continues to be) the common practice among the churches of all three major streams of the Stone-Campbell movement. For the approximately 150 people who made up the membership of the Valley Forge Christian Church, the controversies over cooperation and centralization at the state and national levels of the Disciples of Christ/Christian churches must have seemed at most a distant distraction, as they focused on rising up from the ashes and building anew.⁴⁶

Peace and War

“And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet.”⁴⁷

Throughout the remainder of the 1920s, the Valley Forge Christian Church and community experienced a time of relative prosperity, largely due to the economic impact of the textile plants in Elizabethton. Young women in particular from the rural parts of Carter County were drawn by the prospect of financial security that the factories seemed to offer them. This tranquil period ended with a series of strikes, beginning on March 12, 1929, when a group of female workers walked away from their jobs to protest their low wages.⁴⁸ The strike quickly spread, and the strikers sought union affiliation. Union meetings took on a religious tone, as

⁴⁵ An older communion table is in storage in the basement of the 1926 building. The author has been unable to ascertain whether it dates back to the original furnishings.

⁴⁶ According to the 1925 *Year Book*, the membership of Valley Forge Christian Church stood at 155 (resident) and 16 (non-resident). See *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ: 1925*, 581. Four years later, almost identical figures were reported: 150 (resident) and 20 (non-resident). See *Year Book of the Disciples of Christ: 1929*, 592.

⁴⁷ Matthew 24:6.

⁴⁸ According to historian James A. Hodges, “Many of the workers in Elizabethton, 40 percent of whom were young girls, worked a 56-hour week at pay scales ranging from \$8.64 to \$10.08 per week, which is 16 to 18 cents an hour.” See James A. Hodges, “Challenge to the New South: The Great Textile Strike in Elizabethton, Tennessee, 1929,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 23 (December 1964): 345.

workers were exhorted to “come forward” and take the union oath. On one occasion, a local Baptist preacher addressed the strikers: “The hand of oppression is growing on our people.... You women work for practically nothing. You must come together and say that such things must cease to be.”⁴⁹ Labor officials and federal negotiators put together a “gentlemen’s agreement” that temporarily ended the strike, but when the textile company failed to keep its end of the bargain, the strike resumed. Matters took a violent turn with the deployment of national guard troops to protect strikebreakers who were being recruited from rural mountain communities and transported by bus into Elizabethton. Female workers set up picket lines throughout the county, including Valley Forge, where “women teased the guardsmen and shamed the strikebreakers.”⁵⁰ At least one contemporary newspaper account tells of a clash between picketers and National Guardsmen in Valley Forge at which tear gas was used and an estimated 75 to 100 individuals were arrested. “Cars and buses were commandeered to take this group to jail,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel* correspondent John T. Moutoux reported. “Several women attempted to resist arrest and were overpowered bodily.”⁵¹

It is unknown whether any members of the Valley Forge Christian Church were involved in any of the labor unrest that enveloped Elizabethton and Carter County during the spring of 1929. No records exist of sermons or other public declarations by church leaders concerning the strike. Nevertheless, since most of the resistance to the policies of the textile mill owners originated from the fiercely independent workers who lived in the rural areas of the county, it is

⁴⁹ Quoted in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September 1986): 365.

⁵⁰ Hall, 366. Hall notes that, in addition to approximately 1,250 arrests due to confrontations with the National Guard, several houses “were blown up; the town water main was dynamited.” Ibid. See also Hodges, 354.

⁵¹ John T. Moutoux, “Strike Troubles,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 16 May 1929, 10.

probable that at least some church members participated in the strike.⁵² Negotiators eventually announced an agreement on May 25, 1929, that ended the second strike, albeit with only grudging acceptance by many of the striking workers.⁵³ Operations resumed at the plants a few months later, but bitter feelings lingered due to the unofficial “blacklisting” that cost several of the female strikers their jobs.⁵⁴ It is difficult to imagine that this headline-making event that drew national attention had little or no impact on the lives of Valley Forge Christian Church members, but there can be no doubt that they all felt the eventual effects of the financial crash that occurred some five months after the end of the strike. The stock-market collapse of late October 1929 brought an abrupt end to the prosperity of the 1920s and ushered in the longest and deepest economic depression the nation had ever endured.

Although the decade-long contraction affected urban areas more profoundly than rural districts (since the latter retained some measure of economic self-sufficiency), the Great Depression brought widespread hardship to churches and the communities they served. Valley Forge Christian Church was no exception in this regard; *Year Book* statistics show steadily declining offerings for “local expenses” as the depression deepened. No reliable figures are available for 1929 or 1930, but in 1931 the church received \$446.25 in contributions toward that category. By 1933, that amount had declined to \$327.69, and in 1934 it was \$239.32.⁵⁵ At the

⁵² Hall describes the negative response of the more well-to-do residents of Elizabethton toward the women strikers who paraded through the city; they referred to the latter as “those hussies from Hampton.” Hampton is a mountain community that lies approximately three miles east of Valley Forge. The derogatory phrase apparently was a catch-all term used particularly by merchants’ wives in Elizabethton to denigrate the female factory workers who were involved in the strike. See Hall, 376-377. By contrast, after visiting Elizabethton during the strike, noted author Sherwood Anderson depicted the strikers as “awkward young girls, awkward young boys, men and women with prematurely old faces.” Quoted in Hodges, 352.

⁵³ Hodges, 355-356.

⁵⁴ Hall, 381. Hall further notes that “from the time the rayon plants reopened in the fall of 1929 until World War II, the number of women they employed steadily declined.” Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ: 1931*, 619; *Year Book: 1933*, 482; *Year Book: 1934*, 492. The editors of the *Year Books* for 1929, 1930, and 1932 evidently received no report from Valley Forge for that year, as the only data included are estimates of church membership and Bible school enrollment based on the previous year’s submissions.

same time, church membership increased from approximately 150 in 1929 to an estimated 225 in 1935. By the end of the decade, church membership stood at 258, thus continuing an upward trend that countered the narrative of an “American religious depression.”⁵⁶ Perhaps due to limited financial resources, the church continued to employ ministers on a part-time basis, sharing their preachers with other Christian churches in the county. For example, a Milligan College student and local evangelist named John Hall served as the part-time minister at Valley Forge and three other churches in 1936. He preached at the South Side Christian Church on the first Sunday of the month; Oak Grove Christian Church on the second Sunday; Hampton Christian Church on the third Sunday; and Valley Forge Christian Church on the fourth Sunday. According to local historian Frank Merritt, Hall recalled in later years that Valley Forge was “one of the better paying rural churches, averaging about \$15 or \$20 per weekend.”⁵⁷ In 1938, Valley Forge shared its preacher, J.N. Shepherd, with the Turkeytown, Brick, and Lick Creek Christian Churches.⁵⁸ This pattern of part-time pastoral ministry remained in place at Valley Forge throughout the Depression and the Second World War.

Of course, the support of the church and its ministries depended largely on the resources of its members, many of whom sustained themselves through a combination of farming and engaging in other occupations such as factory work or in various trades. Typical of these hard-working individuals were those described by Valley Forge native and longtime church member, Nadine “Dixie” Jenkins Timbs. Among these were her beloved uncle and aunt, Charlie and “Net”

⁵⁶ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ: 1929*, 592; *Year Book: 1935*, 515; *Year Book: 1940*, 558. See Robert T. Handy, “The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935,” *Church History* 29 (March 1960): 3-16. Handy asserts, “On the rural church scene, there was clear evidence of decline before 1929, both in terms of benevolence contributions and the attendance at services of resident members.” Handy, 5. Valley Forge supports Handy’s contention about giving, but its membership statistics stand in contrast to his findings.

⁵⁷ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 406.

⁵⁸ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ: 1938*, 552.

(Nettie Jenkins) Simerly.⁵⁹ In the following excerpt from Timbs' unpublished recollections she vividly describes her relatives' mountain farm homestead.

They lived in a large two-story white house with a porch that wrapped around the entire front and one side. The house was situated on a couple acres of land. There were all kinds of fruit trees such as plum, apple, cherry. Through the property ran the clear cool 100% pure water from the McCatherans (sic) spring.... There was a level garden space where all kinds of fresh vegetables were grown. These were put to good use through the summer and canned to last through the winter to feed the large family.... Built above the cellar was a smoke house. There was a barn nearby for the cow, there were chickens to supply fresh eggs. A hog pen housed a couple of hogs to supply the family with plenty of meat. Below the house was a springhouse. The milk and butter and all perishable items were kept in a cool place in the water resting on rocks. In the summertime Aunt Net churned and molded out the butter in the springhouse.

Timbs goes on to note that “Aunt Net managed the wages Uncle Charlie brought home. She stretched the dollar as far as possible and then some. She and the children picked blackberries and they would go way up on Jenkins Mountain and pick huckleberries.... Nothing was wasted in her home. Everything was put to good use.”⁶⁰

The Simerly's thrifty way of living and working did not preclude generosity, as illustrated in a particular memory about “Uncle Charlie.” Timbs' father related to her that “one cold winter day [Timbs' father and her uncle] were doing some carpentry work. A man working with them was trying to work and had on a thin jacket and was about frozen and Uncle Charlie took off his own coat and gave it to the man. I never forgot this kind deed.”⁶¹ Compassionate deeds such as this stemmed from the deeply rooted faith that played a central role in the lives of Timbs'

⁵⁹ See “Simerly Family” and “Jenkins Family” in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*. According to Merritt, Charlie Simerly was also known as “Red Eye.” James Charles Simerly (1882-1953) was married to Nettie Jenkins Simerly (1884-1964). See [James Charles “Charlie” Simerly \(1882-1953\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#). Accessed August 12, 2023.

⁶⁰ Timbs, “Uncle Charlie and Aunt Net Simerly” in *The People of Valley Forge: A Collection of Memories*, 1, 3-4. Unpublished manuscript in author's possession.

⁶¹ Timbs, “Uncle Charlie and Aunt Net Simerly,” 2. As Timbs was born in 1925, it seems likely that this incident took place sometime during the Depression. Her father, Edd Jenkins, “was a carpenter by trade, in charge of building the Educational Annex to the VF Christian Church where he served as Deacon/Elder for over 40 years.” See Merritt, “Jenkins Family,” *Valley Forge Families*.

beloved aunt and uncle. “Aunt Net was a long-time faithful member of the Valley Forge Christian Church,” she recalls, “having come from three generations who were also members of the church. She was a firm believer in the church’s doctrine. One of her grandchildren, named Doris, had been away for a period of time and when she came home and said she had never been baptized, Aunt Net insisted that Doris be baptized, and so she was.”⁶² Nettie Jenkins Simerly epitomized the combination of piety and practical faith that made it possible for the Valley Forge Christian Church not only to sustain itself during dire economic times but also to minister to the needs of others in the community. Timbs concludes her remembrance by noting that her aunt “always made time to go visit someone sick in the community especially if it was a relative. She was from a close-knit family, and they stuck together through thick and thin. Her standards and values were of the highest. She was a kind and generous person.”⁶³

The women of the church organized a Ladies Aid Society during the early 1930s, and they played a vital role in both supporting the church and providing benevolence. Through their fund-raising efforts, the new church building was furnished with its first piano in 1935, and Ruth Livingston served as the congregation’s pianist for the next several years.⁶⁴ According to Nadine Timbs, local merchant and schoolteacher W.C. Williams (1872-1940, affectionately known in the community as “Uncle Billy”) served as “an elder, song leader and service leader for the Valley Forge Christian Church for 40 years.... He would lead our prayer meetings on Wednesday

⁶² Timbs, “Uncle Charlie and Aunt Net Simerly,” 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁴ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 408; *Elizabethton Star*, December 12, 1935, 3. See also Merritt, “Livingston Family” in *Valley Forge Families*. Ruth Livingston’s grandfather, Samuel Livingston, was one of the founding deacons of the church. Her parents, George and Kathryn Headrick Livingston, are memorialized in one of the stained-glass windows. Merritt notes that her sister, Ina Lee, married Vernon Hensley who “painted ‘Jesus and the Woman at the Well,’ a Biblical scene, which graced VF Church Sanctuary for many years.” *Ibid.*

nights, and if any children were unruly or talking, he didn't hesitate to call them down."⁶⁵ Along with donating the piano to accompany "Uncle Billy's" song leading, the Ladies Aid Society sponsored numerous activities designed to keep the church doors open. For instance, a local newspaper published a notice in the fall of 1934 (one of many throughout the 1930s) about a Saturday night "ice cream and pie supper at the Valley Forge school" hosted by the Ladies Aid.⁶⁶ On another occasion in 1936, the group offered tangible encouragement and support to the church's minister and to the preacher who was holding a revival at that time: "Rev. John Hall was presented with a package containing a wrist watch, in appreciation for his work at the church. Rev. Shepherd was given five dollars toward the revival now going on at the church."⁶⁷

The Ladies Aid met in members' homes, and their gatherings typically consisted of a "devotional lesson," prayer, discussion of business items, a social activity, and refreshments. They often worked on making quilts, as the report of a meeting in the winter of 1936 indicates: "Enough squares were brought to this meeting to complete the quilt being made by the Ladies Aid."⁶⁸ They established a tradition that continued well into the twenty-first century, and its purpose was to keep a supply of quilts available for anyone in the community who might have need—whether due to impoverishment, loss of a home through fire, or other dire circumstances. A great deal of painstaking labor went into this process, and the end result was a beautiful and

⁶⁵ Dixie Nadine Jenkins Timbs, "The Story of Uncle Billy Williams" in *The People of Valley Forge: A Collection of Memories*, 1. Unpublished manuscript in author's possession. She further notes that he "gave credit to people who had to charge their groceries, and he kept books back in a corner of his store where there was also a telephone. The NARC and Bemberg plants would call when someone was being hired, and Uncle Billy would get word to that person and tell them to report to the personnel office." Ibid.

⁶⁶ *Elizabethton Star*, September 8, 1934, 3. Interestingly, the location for this event may have as much to do with seating capacity and kitchen facilities as it did with the stipulation in the 1925 deed that specifically banned "festivals, plays, and ice cream suppers...in the Church house." Carter County Register of Deeds, Book 66, Page 480.

⁶⁷ "Valley Forge Aid Meets Wednesday," *Elizabethton Star*, July 12, 1936, 3. "Rev. Shepherd" probably refers to John N. Shepherd, who pastored the church in 1916, 1924, 1927, and 1933. Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 419.

⁶⁸ *Elizabethton Star*, February 21, 1936, 3.

functional means of expressing Christian charity. On at least one other occasion, this group provided and served a “turkey and chicken supper Thanksgiving Day in the Block building below the church” as an outreach to a community that—along with the rest of the country—was experiencing the devastating impact of the major economic setback that occurred in 1937.⁶⁹ Finally, it is worth noting that, a year earlier and in the depths of the ongoing depression, the Valley Forge Ladies Aid (as well as the church itself) also helped another Carter County Christian church eliminate their indebtedness.⁷⁰

Clearly, the women of the church took a leading role in securing the church’s financial stability and in ministering to the needs of the community during the 1930s. Their efforts point to the significance of local initiatives, along with federal programs, in providing much-needed relief and assistance. Indeed, the focus on economic survival may have contributed to a more localized perspective that caused the conflict between progressives and traditionalists in the Christian churches to fade somewhat during the Depression era. Along with almost all of the Christian churches in northeast Tennessee, Valley Forge Christian Church simply ignored the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society, the United Christian Missionary Society, and other Disciples of Christ agencies. *Year Book* reports from the 1930s show only one year (1937) in which the church gave to the TCMS; otherwise, it appears that Valley Forge offered no other support during the decade.⁷¹ Surprisingly, however, the church apparently started making contributions in 1931

⁶⁹ “Mrs. C.H. Jaynes Entertains Ladies Aid Valley Forge,” *Elizabethton Star*, November 17, 1937, 3. This brief article includes the information about plans for this supper. For a description of the deep recession that began in August 1937, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 243-249.

⁷⁰ “Church Debt is Wiped Out,” *Elizabethton Star*, May 21, 1936, 4. The Carter Christian Church in the Stony Creek section of the county had been organized recently, and its members had constructed a house of worship. According to the article, numerous churches and individuals throughout the county contributed to the elimination of the church’s debt.

⁷¹ *Year Book of Disciples of Christ: 1937*, 544. Valley Forge gave \$25.00 to the “State Society.”

to the Disciples of Christ Pension Fund in behalf of its ministers.⁷² On the other hand, when the “Unified Promotion” system of giving to all state and national agencies was introduced in Tennessee in 1938, the suggested annual amount for Valley Forge was \$70.00. There are no records to indicate that the church ever contributed anything to “Unified Promotion” or to other Disciples of Christ organizations after 1937.⁷³

Despite the growing disconnect with the Nashville-based state society, the churches of northeast Tennessee continued their robust tradition of annual conventions and concerted efforts for evangelism and church development.⁷⁴ The First District convention (also known as the East Tennessee Christian Convention) took place at Valley Forge in 1937; according to local historian Frank Merritt, members of the congregation hosted convention-goers in their homes and served a large “Sunday dinner, picnic style” to the attendees.⁷⁵ Ruth Livingston, the church’s first pianist, recalled that the convention “began on a Thursday evening, with three services on Friday and Saturday, and two services on Sunday.”⁷⁶ Evidently, the church’s leaders valued involvement with and support for the East Tennessee Convention as a means of maintaining ties with the Christian churches of the region and working together with them on a voluntary basis. One of the

⁷² “Is Your Church on This List?” *Tennessee Christian* (March 1931): 8. Valley Forge is included in a list of churches paying 8% of their pastor’s salary into the Pension Fund. It is unclear whether the church continued to provide this benefit after 1931. The Pension Fund itself began as the Board of Ministerial Relief in 1895; it was reorganized as the Pension Fund of the Disciples of Christ in 1928, and a new system of remittances was put into place in 1931. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Pension Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ,” by Lester Palmer.

⁷³ “Unified Promotion and Suggested Goals,” *Tennessee Christian* (September 1938): 5. Norton notes that opposition to Unified Promotion was particularly pronounced among the churches of northeast Tennessee. After the official introduction of the program in the state, several congregations—mostly from the northeast corner of the state—asked to no longer be listed in the *Year Book*. See Norton, 259-260. Valley Forge continued to submit reports (albeit sporadically) until 1958.

⁷⁴ As Norton ruefully notes, “The enthusiasm and solidarity of the [northeast Tennessee] region was forcefully demonstrated by the attendance at district conventions. The consistently large attendance at the East Tennessee Convention put that of State Convention to shame.” He illustrates this enthusiasm “gap” by comparing attendance at the East Tennessee Convention of 1930 (over 2,000) to that state convention of the same year (around 175). See Norton, 258.

⁷⁵ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 408.

⁷⁶ Ruth Livingston Morris, “Annual Meetings.” Unpublished manuscript in author’s possession.

church's part-time ministers at various points throughout the 1930s and 1940s was John N. Shepherd, who had also served as the First District evangelist. It seems likely that he would have encouraged participation in the regional convention and its activities.⁷⁷

Despite the economic challenges and the hardships of the Great Depression, Valley Forge Christian Church experienced considerable growth and stability during the 1930s. By 1940, the membership had increased to 258 compared to approximately 150 ten years earlier.⁷⁸ Largely through the sacrificial efforts of ordinary members and groups such as the Ladies Aid Society, the church continued to meet regularly and to minister to the needs of its members and the surrounding community. For the most part, Valley Forge Christian Church—together with its sister churches in northeast Tennessee—identified increasingly throughout the 1930s with the emerging “independent” stream of the Stone-Campbell movement, although the congregation avoided much of the partisan rancor that frequently characterized the growing schism between conservative and progressive Disciples. Economic concerns overshadowed the controversies that had erupted during the 1920s over “open membership,” centralization, and related issues. A false peace prevailed during the Depression years as unity-minded church leaders, agency officials, and educators from all sides labored from 1934 to 1948 to find common ground.⁷⁹ Sadly, their attempt to articulate a unifying agenda in a major report issued in 1946 fell on deaf ears as

⁷⁷ Shepherd is listed as the minister for Valley Forge Christian Church in the *Year Books* for 1933 (482); 1937 (544); 1938 (552), and 1942 (513). See also Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 419. According to Merritt, Shepherd also served pastorates in 1916, 1924, and 1927. Obviously, he was well-known to the people of Valley Forge. He accepted the call to be the First District evangelist in 1915. See “First District Convention Minutes, Mountain City, Aug. 19-22, 1915,” *Tennessee Christian* (October 1915): 13.

⁷⁸ *Year Book*: 1930, 608; *Year Book*: 1940, 558.

⁷⁹ Officially known as the “Commission on Restudy the Disciples of Christ,” this consultative body included the aforementioned William E. Sweeney among its number. For Sweeney, organization was not a divisive issue per se; he was concerned about the human tendency to use such institutions simply to wield power. In a 1939 address to the Commission on Restudy, Sweeney warned, “Officials in such organizations through long periods of service acquired a wide acquaintance and powerful influence. The temptation to use this influence in an improper manner to further the work of their organization sometimes proved irresistible.” Quoted in Jeanes, 62. See also Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 329-353 for a thorough discussion of the work of the Commission.

“independent” and “cooperative” Disciples became increasingly polarized during the post-Second World War era.

While 1946 marked a turning point in the broader narrative of the Stone-Campbell movement, it also proved to be another pivotal year in the story of the Valley Forge Christian Church. The economic problems related to the Depression dissipated rapidly after the United States became a belligerent on the side of the Allies after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Unemployment vanished almost overnight as the nation mobilized for war. As was the case throughout the country, significant numbers of young men and women from the Valley Forge church and community served in the armed forces, including Preston Hampton, who was held as a prisoner of war in Germany after the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944) until his liberation in May 1945.⁸⁰

Back on the home front, the church took two significant steps that portended more far-reaching changes for the postwar future. The church held its first “Daily Vacation Bible School” in 1944 under the direction of their “half-time” minister, Oswald D. Wilson.⁸¹ This was indicative of the growing emphasis on children’s and youth ministry that would come to the forefront with the advent of the “Baby Boom” in the postwar age. The congregation’s leaders also purchased a house on adjoining property for use as a parsonage, perhaps in anticipation of hiring a full-time residential minister in the near future. Indeed, with the end of the wars in Europe and the Pacific and the emergence of the United States as a global superpower, Valley Forge Christian Church

⁸⁰ Timbs, “Jenkins Mountain” in *The People of Valley Forge*. See also Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 280. Merritt further notes that, according to the 1946 *Elizabethton Star*’s “Salute to Service Personnel,” approximately 5,000 Carter County residents served in the armed forces during the Second World War. This figure represented roughly one-seventh of the county’s population based on the 1940 Census (34,975). Ibid, 273.

⁸¹ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 408. The “half-time” designation may mean that Wilson divided his time between two congregations, or that he was bivocational and the church paid him a part-time salary. The church most likely used curriculum from the Standard Publishing Company, which became a major producer of Sunday School and Vacation Bible School materials. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Educational Ministry: Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” Eleanor A. Daniel.

was poised on what appeared to be a period of unprecedented vitality. As the world began to rise up from the ashes of genocide and atomic bombing, the congregation that arose from the ashes of devastation some twenty years earlier continued on its upward trajectory and entered into a new chapter of its story as part of God's "bid for fellowship" with humanity.

CHAPTER FOUR

YEARS OF PLENTY: 1946-1999

Like most Americans, northeast Tennesseans greeted the end of the Second World War with jubilation. Although the advent of the atomic age and the Cold War soon tempered this celebratory spirit, it nevertheless seemed as if a page had been turned and a more promising future beckoned. Churches benefited from this optimistic outlook as Americans flocked to their services and programs in record numbers. By the early 1950s, a religious revival of sorts was in full swing, as measured in terms of church attendance, contributions, and building projects.¹ Valley Forge Christian Church exemplified this forward-looking mindset in two significant and interrelated developments that took place during the immediate postwar era. In 1946, for the first time in its seventy-five-year history, the congregation's leaders called a minister to serve in a full-time capacity. Nearly two years later, the church dedicated a new educational wing that was added to the 1926 structure. Both of these events revealed a church that was entering a new phase of its story—a time of confidence and maturity that extended through the end of the twentieth century. From 1946 onwards, Valley Forge Christian Church reaped a bountiful harvest from the seeds that had been planted and cultivated since its founding, and it also sowed new seeds in terms of children's and youth ministries, outreach to the community, and support of

¹ According to Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan, spending on church building projects rose from \$26 million in 1945 to slightly over \$1 billion in 1960—a nearly forty-fold increase! See Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 360, n. 32.

global missions. At the same time, the church firmly aligned itself with the “independent” stream of Stone-Campbell Christian churches as the unity movement divided once more.

Promising Signs

“He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’”²

Markan scholar Mary Ann Tolbert labels this text the “Parable of the Earth Producing of Itself,” because in this story Jesus emphasizes the mysterious, unseen action of the soil that responds bountifully to the diligent work of the sower (who sows the “word” of the good news about God’s coming kingdom, according to Jesus’ interpretation in Mark 4:14).³ Likewise, when Jesus’ followers faithfully implant gospel seeds through their individual and collective actions, they do not fully understand how God works through their efforts to redeem and transform the world around them. But when they do their part—like the sower in the parable—they begin to see signs that point to an eventual harvest: “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” Thus, it was with the leaders and members of Valley Forge Christian Church at mid-century; they recognized the opportune times and planted seeds that would bear fruit for generations to come. By adopting a new model of ministry and by constructing a new space for Christian education and fellowship, they prepared the ground for future growth; their actions produced promising signs of an abundant future.

² Mark 4:26-29.

³ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 161-162.

The decision to call a full-time minister to Valley Forge marked a radical departure from previous practice. Due to financial constraints and historic hesitation about “professional” ministers in the Stone-Campbell movement, the congregation operated for the first seventy-five years of its existence with the services of local evangelists who preached occasionally—often once or twice a month.⁴ Some Christian churches in northeast Tennessee had begun to adopt the professional, residential model of ministry in the early twentieth century, including First Christian Church of Elizabethton and First Christian Church of Johnson City.⁵ Somewhat belatedly, Valley Forge Christian Church joined this trend on October 15, 1946, when J.J. (Jesse James) Musick began his tenure as the church’s first full-time minister.⁶ A native of southwest Virginia, Musick became well-known in northeast Tennessee Christian church circles as a young evangelist. He came to Valley Forge after a sixteen-year ministry with the First Christian Church of Elizabethton, during which that congregation grew considerably. “At the close of his thirteenth year,” historian H.C. Wagner notes, “[Musick] reported 672 additions to the church, 348 by baptism and 324 by letter or statement.”⁷ Furthermore, under Musick’s leadership, First Christian planted three other congregations in different sections of the city of Elizabethton: East End (now East Side Christian Church, 1932), West End (now West Side Christian Church, 1933), and South Side Christian Church (1935).⁸ Musick’s reputation preceded him and must have

⁴ Alexander Campbell expressed considerable disdain for what he sometimes referred to as the “hireling clergy.” His negative attitude certainly contributed to the strong bias against the “one-man pastor-preacher” ministry model that persisted among the more conservative churches of the Stone-Campbell movement well into the early twentieth century. See, for example, his “Third Epistle of Peter” in the *Christian Baptist* (July 4, 1825): 243-247.

⁵ Exact dates remain unclear, but it appears that both congregations had full-time ministers by the 1920s. The aforementioned William E. Sweeney served First Christian Church in Johnson City from 1921-1928 in a full-time capacity. J.J. Musick began a full-time ministry at First Christian Church in Elizabethton in 1929. See Wagner, “History of Disciples of Christ in Upper East Tennessee,” 85-97.

⁶ “Valley Forge Christian Church Dedication Planned for Sunday,” *Elizabethton Star*, May 28, 1948, 2. The unnamed correspondent refers to “the present minister, J.J. Music (sic), who has been at the church since October 15, 1946.”

⁷ Wagner, 97.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98. Musick left First Christian in 1944 for full-time evangelistic ministry with the Appalachian Mountain Evangelizing Association. See “J.J. Musick Enters Evangelistic Field,” *Christian Standard* (December 2, 1944): 9.

caught the attention of the Valley Forge church leaders. Citing the recollection of one of those leaders, “Uncle Bob” Meredith, local historian Frank Merritt notes that Musick accepted the call on one condition: “If they’re all behind me, and if they are ready to go to work and build.”⁹

Evidently, the congregation and its leaders rallied around Musick’s visionary leadership, because approximately seven months later they undertook a major remodeling and expansion project that culminated in the dedication of a new education and fellowship wing in May 1948. The sanctuary took on its current configuration, which involved re-orienting the worship space by ninety degrees so that the congregation would now face north (instead of east) toward an expanded stage area that included a pulpit, choir loft, and baptistry. This new arrangement created more seating space for the growing congregation, which would see the addition of 115 members during Musick’s ministry of three and one-half years.¹⁰ The construction of an education wing with numerous classrooms signified a major commitment to the children and youth of the congregation as they would now have space to meet in age-graded classes.¹¹

Completed at a cost of \$30,000 and with a great deal of labor contributed by church members, the new facility opened its doors after a dedication service on Sunday, May 30, 1948. The program for that occasion spoke of the aspirations that lay behind this effort: “In planning the building, we have thought not only of today’s needs but of tomorrow’s needs as well. As this

⁹ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 409. See also “Meredith Family” in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*, in which Merritt notes that “Uncle Bob” served as an elder of the congregation for over fifty years.

¹⁰ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 410. *Year Book* reports for 1947 through 1949 show 97 additions through baptism and transfer of membership. See *Year Book: 1947*, 593; *Year Book: 1948*, 613; *Year Book: 1949*, 610. Total church membership increased from 210 in 1947 to 225 in 1949. The *Year Book* report for 1946 does not contain reliable statistics as it was based on an estimate from 1943. No reports had been submitted during the intervening years. See *Year Book: 1946*, 582.

¹¹ As Christian educator Eleanor A. Daniel notes, “Christian Churches/Churches of Christ continued their emphasis on basic Bible literacy and generally used curricula obtained from Standard Publishing Company” as “independent” and “cooperative” Disciples drifted further apart throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Standard materials were age-graded and designed to be used by lay teachers.” See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Educational Ministry: Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” by Eleanor A. Daniel.

community develops, we want the Valley Forge Church to be in the vanguard of progress.”¹² In the responsive dedicatory vows, Musick sounded themes of community, family, unity, and mission: “For worship in praise and song; for the ministry of the Word; for the observance of the holy ordinances; to the sanctification of family life; to the training and nurture of childhood; to the inspiration of youth; to the help of the needy; to the promotion of brotherhood; and to the extension of God’s kingdom throughout the whole earth.”¹³ In another forward-looking gesture, Musick preached a sermon entitled “The Church and the Coming Generation” during the regular morning worship service. The afternoon dedication ceremony demonstrated Valley Forge’s ties with sister congregations in the region: Fred W. Smith (Musick’s successor at First Christian Church in Elizabethton) read scripture, and Joseph H. Dampier (minister at First Christian Church in Johnson City) offered the closing prayer. The following photographs of the occasion appeared in a special edition of the *Watauga Spinnerette*, a publication of the local textile plant, the North American Rayon Corporation.¹⁴

¹² Dedicatory Services pamphlet: Valley Forge Christian Church, May 30, 1948. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

¹³ Dedicatory Services pamphlet.

¹⁴ *Watauga Spinnerette* (April 1949): 20-21.





Two months prior to the dedication of the new facilities, a significant event occurred with regard to the property on which the expanded church building stood. On March 24, 1948, the original owners of the land filed a quit claim deed with the Carter County Register of Deeds. For the sum of one dollar, David M. and Martha E. Chambers stated that they “do hereby release, relinquish, and quit-claim...all of their right, title and interest” in the property.¹⁵ The stipulations in the previous deed from 1925 prevented members of the congregation from holding festivals and other fund-raising events on the church property. It further mandated that the property would revert to the original owners or their heirs if the church building was destroyed and was not replaced within two years. All of these restrictions were now rendered null and void. Fortunately, the church never experienced the bitter property disputes that plagued some Stone-Campbell

¹⁵ Carter County Register of Deeds, Book 146, page 201.

congregations during the late 1940s and early 1950s as the division between “cooperative” and “independent” Disciples widened.¹⁶

Surprisingly, Musick himself occupied a moderating position when it came to the incipient schism. His sympathies certainly lay with the “independent” stream of the movement, as evidenced by his preaching. For example, in an undated sermon entitled “Except the Lord Build the House,” Musick made the case for a “blueprint” understanding of restoring the New Testament church. “All of us know,” he avowed, “that the most successful periods of the Church have been the times when the plans of the divine Architect were most carefully followed.”¹⁷ At the same time, he cautioned against identifying the church’s vitality with “the progress of our numerous plans and programs”—seemingly an indirect criticism of the increasingly centralized and bureaucratized form of church governance favored by “cooperative” Disciples. Many of the latter had come to reject the concept of restoration as the primary means for realizing Christian unity. While Musick remained firmly committed to that ideal, he also tried to maintain ties with both groups, and he was even willing to criticize his fellow “independents” when they engaged in hostile tactics toward the “cooperatives.” In December 1940, Musick contributed an editorial piece to the *Christian Standard* entitled “All These Were Kept Out of the Program.” He had attended the North American Christian Convention (a gathering of mostly “independent” Disciples) in Indianapolis two months earlier, and he expressed his disappointment over the fact that both “independent” missionaries and those working through the “cooperative” mission agencies were excluded from the roster of speakers. Citing “cooperative” missionaries such as Royal J. Dye and mission agency executives Raphael H. Miller and Archibald McLean as

¹⁶ See James B. North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1994), 335-337. North provides a helpful chart detailing the contentious litigation that marked this period.

¹⁷ J.J. Musick, *Sermons to Foster Faith* (Johnson City, Tennessee: Don & Mignon, 1969), 57.

longtime sources of personal inspiration, Musick affirmed his admiration for all missionaries, regardless of their “independent” or “cooperative” status. Summing up his argument, Musick declared that “in spite of all the wrangling we have had over missionary personalities, agencies and methods during the twenty-one years of my ministry, I still feel that way about it!”¹⁸

Perhaps Musick’s irenic and moderating spirit had something to do with the fact that, during his tenure at Valley Forge Christian Church, the congregation contributed significant sums to the “Week of Compassion,” a “cooperative” and ecumenical program inaugurated in 1944 to fund relief and reconstruction efforts in the coming postwar world.¹⁹ In 1947, Valley Forge gave \$425.96 to this cause, \$535.32 in 1948, and \$595.32 in 1949.²⁰ Although these amounts far surpassed previous giving to the state missionary society, they also represented the last recorded contributions from Valley Forge to any “cooperative” entity. The next two ministers who succeeded Musick—R. Morris Mounts and Paul F. Nourse—submitted reports to the Disciples’ *Year Book* only sporadically, and the latter began to send annual statistics to the *Directory of the Ministry of the Undenominational Fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ* in 1955. This publication first appeared that same year as a way of listing those ministers, missionaries and congregations that strongly identified with the “independent” stream of the Stone-Campbell movement.²¹ Whatever involvement Valley Forge had with “cooperative”

¹⁸ J.J. Musick, “All These Were Kept Out of the Program,” *Christian Standard* (December 21, 1940): 34. Dye and his wife served as medical missionaries in the Belgian Congo with the Foreign Christian Missionary Society. Miller co-directed the “Men and Millions” campaign, and McLean led the Foreign Christian Missionary Society from 1882 to 1920. For Dye and Miller, see McAllister and Tucker, 317, 335-336. For McLean, see *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “McLean, Archibald,” by Mark G. Toulouse.

¹⁹ McAllister and Tucker, 408.

²⁰ *Year Book: 1947*, 593; *Year Book: 1948*, 613; *Year Book: 1949*, 610. These were substantial sums, especially when compared to the giving for “local expenses” each year, which averaged just over \$12,000 per year.

²¹ See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “*Directory of the Ministry*,” by Larry L. Woodard. Nourse appears as the minister at Valley Forge Christian Church in the 1955 (102) and 1957 (76) editions of the *Directory*. Nourse left Valley Forge in late 1957, and there is no listing for 1958. Apparently, the *Directory* was not published in 1959; the next listing occurs in the 1960 edition (81). It identifies David E. Davis as the minister and J.D. Smith as the minister of music at Valley Forge. No membership statistics are provided.

Disciples in the past largely disappeared by the mid-1950s, although the formal break did not occur until more than a decade later.²² As was true of many congregations during the “Baby Boom” era, the members and leaders of Valley Forge Christian Church focused much of their energy inwardly as they experienced unprecedented growth.

Prosperous Times

“And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”²³

While the numerical increase that took place at Valley Forge during the 1950s probably did not rival that of the Jerusalem church in its infancy, there nevertheless was a sense of vigor and exuberance as the recently added classrooms and expanded worship space filled at times to overflowing. Although self-reported church statistics sometimes paint a rosy picture, it is still noteworthy that church membership nearly doubled in a five-year timespan; according to reports submitted to the *Year Book*, membership increased from 225 in 1950 to 425 in 1955.²⁴ Revival meetings accounted for periodic influxes of large numbers of new members. For example, a bulletin from October 21, 1951, lists twenty-eight individuals “who responded to the Gospel during the revival” of the previous two weeks. At least twelve of these were married couples; thus, it is likely that at least some of these had children at home, which would have added further numbers to overall attendance.²⁵ In another sign of rising religious zeal, a separate list identified “Four Recruits for Christian Service” as a result of the revival: Oma Jean Benfield, George

²² At least one historian of the Stone-Campbell movement identified the publication of the *Directory of the Ministry* in 1955 as the milestone point of divergence between “cooperatives” and “independents.” See A.T. DeGroot, *Church of Christ Number Two* (Birmingham, England: printed by the author, 1956).

²³ Acts 2:47.

²⁴ *Year Book: 1950*, 637; *Year Book: 1955*, 678.

²⁵ Valley Forge Christian Church Bulletin for October 21, 1951. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

Montgomery, Patsy Simerly, and Henrietta Thomas.²⁶ Two weeks later, the weekly bulletin contained the notice that the “total membership now totals 307 members, with 21 absentees. There have been 102 additions within the past twenty-two months.”²⁷ Just over four months earlier, Mounts reported exciting news to the congregation as he summed up the year from June 1950 through June 1951: “The total offerings are \$13,308.66. This is a record offering for the church during any one year. The total membership at the present time is 282. This is a record enrollment.”²⁸

The burgeoning numbers present one side of the story, but the list of announcements in a typical Sunday morning bulletin provides a more richly detailed glimpse into what was a very active church life during the early 1950s. It is reproduced in full below:

After Bible School Sunday Morning: All boys and girls who have attended the C.E. Rallys (sic) when we won the C.E. BANNER, please remain after Bible School to the picture made for the LOOKOUT.

Monday: Daily Vacation Bible School begins tomorrow morning at 9:00. All boys and girls should be interested in this because a very interesting and helpful class has been planned for every age group.

Tuesday: The Rev. James Furman, who is the executive secretary of the United Dry Forces, will be the guest speaker here at the church Tuesday, June 19, at 7:30 p.m. The public as well as our congregation is invited to attend.

Wednesday: Don't forget to come to Prayer Meeting. YOUR presence is NEEDED. One hundred ninety-five were present at the Prayer Service last week. The Loyal Women led with thirty-four present. The Challengers followed with twenty-nine present. In the younger classes, the Junior Class led with nineteen

²⁶ Frank Merritt provides information on two of these individuals. He notes that Oma Jean Benfield was a “Star Hampton HS Basketball player; and Soloist and Choir Director, VF Chr Ch.” Based on her birth year of 1934, she would have been sixteen or seventeen at the time of the revival. Patsy Simerly was from the extensive Simerly clan that supplied numerous members of the church from its earliest years. Merritt simply states that she served as a Carter County Bank teller. According to US Census records, she was born in 1939; thus, she would have been around twelve when the revival took place. 1950 Census records accessed via [United States Census, 1950: Carter. Census Records 1950 • FamilySearch](#). Accessed September 7, 2023. See “Benfield Family” and “Simerly Family” in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*.

²⁷ Valley Forge Christian Church Bulletin for November 4, 1951. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

²⁸ Valley Forge Christian Church Bulletin for Jun 24, 1951. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

present. The Primary Class and the Intermediate Class followed, each having fifteen present. Mr. Mounts ask (sic) that all class treasurers please bring a financial report of their class for the past year to him by Wednesday.

Thursday: The Women's Council meets at the church at 7:30. Sun Shine Sisters will be revealed. Please bring the basket and the towel to the meeting.²⁹

A close analysis of these items yields three important glimpses into the life of the congregation and its priorities. First and perhaps most obvious: during this time of vigorous growth, Valley Forge Christian Church recognized the importance of devoting significant resources to Christian education. Evidently, the church encouraged the young people to attend local Christian Endeavor rallies, to the extent that they occasionally won recognition for the number who attended the meetings. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the fact that the Christian Endeavor organization was interdenominational in nature. In addition to meeting weekly in their own congregations, the Christian Endeavor societies from various Protestant denominations “also gathered regularly in ecumenical local, regional, national, and international union meetings, giving young people opportunities to interact with other youth, to share information about their work, and to hear prominent church leaders address key issues facing the church.”³⁰ Clearly, the leaders of the church saw the value of not only providing a structured program of Christian education, spiritual growth, and leadership development for their young people, but they also encouraged fellowship with Christian youth from other denominations, in the best tradition of the Stone-Campbell movement.³¹ Further evidence of the church's commitment to its children and youth appears in the notice about the start of Daily Vacation Bible School and in the

²⁹ Valley Forge Christian Church Bulletin for June 17, 1951. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

³⁰ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor (United Society of Christian Endeavor),” by Christopher Lee Coble.

³¹ It is also worth noting that the bulletin announcement summoned the youth to gather for a photograph that would appear in *The Lookout*, which was a weekly periodical devoted largely to Christian education matters. Published by the Standard Publishing Company and circulating primarily among the emerging “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, *The Lookout* took its name from the Lookout Committee of the Christian Endeavor Organization. See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “*Lookout, The*,” by Gary L. Lee.

mention of several Sunday School classes in the mid-week prayer meeting attendance report from the previous week.

Second, the announcement about a meeting of the “United Dry Forces” indicates at least some level of involvement in social issues as well as a sense of service to the community by providing a public meeting venue. Although nationwide Prohibition was repealed in 1933, local governments in Tennessee continued to regulate the sale of alcoholic beverages, and Carter County remained relatively “dry,” due to the influence of organizations such as the “United Dry Forces.”³² It seems likely that the minister (R. Morris Mounts) and the leaders of the church sympathized with the aims of this group, as their approval would have been necessary to extend the invitation. Unfortunately, there are no official church records to corroborate this decision, but the fact that the church opened its doors to the community for this meeting demonstrates a commendable interest in civic engagement. Perhaps they were motivated in part by the memory of the problems that the church and community struggled with some four decades earlier when, by some accounts, the congregation nearly succumbed to the “awful floodtide of strong drink.”³³

Finally, the last bulletin announcement for June 17, 1951, points to the ongoing work of the women’s ministry, now referred to as the “Women’s Council.” This group took a leading role in promoting missions, through education and financial support. For example, an account of a meeting in early July 1950 notes that “Mrs. Nell Brice presented the mission study, and it was centered around three Mission Stations in the Philippine Islands. Manila, Cebu, and Northern

³² Based in Nashville, the “United Dry Forces” sent speakers to churches, schools, and civic clubs across the state to advocate for restriction and abstinence. According to a report in the *Elizabethton Star* about another representative of the “United Dry Forces” on a speaking tour of the area, Rev. Furman was the “Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the United Dry Forces of Tennessee, Inc.” in 1950. Presumably, he still held this position when he spoke at Valley Forge. See “Dr. Vernon White to Speak at First Baptist Sunday,” *Elizabethton Star* (March 29, 1950): 3.

³³ “Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival,” *Christian Standard* (March 21, 1914): 35.

Luzon were discussed.”³⁴ Later in the meeting, the group agreed to send their monthly missionary offering to the work in the Philippines. At their December gathering of the same year, the Women’s Council heard a mission report by Frank Merritt, who urged them to support Barton L. McElroy, an Army chaplain with whom Merritt had become acquainted during a training course. McElroy, who also taught at the Cincinnati Bible Seminary, would be going to Manila to join the work of “independent” missionary Carrie Wolfe and to teach at the Preacher Training Institute in that city.³⁵ Merritt concluded his presentation with a direct challenge: “I am in favor of Missions. Are you?”³⁶ The Women’s Council followed through on Merritt’s invitation and established a longstanding tradition of supporting both global and local missions. The minutes of their meeting some forty years later show that they sent funds to Boon and Jerry Thaprom, a Thai Christian couple doing evangelistic and development work in Thailand and Myanmar. They also joined together with other church members in making “47 ½ gallons of apple butter and 37 gallons of apple jelly for the children at the Grundy Orphanage.”³⁷

Evidently, the women’s interest in missions inspired other groups within the church to undertake similar projects. The “Home Builders” Sunday School class (a group of young adult couples with children), for instance, heard at their first meeting in 1951 that “the record cabinet the class bought for the East Tennessee Christian Home was delivered at Christmas to the home

³⁴ “Three Mission Stations Topic of Valley Forge Women’s Council Meet,” *Elizabethton Star* (July 6, 1950): 5.

³⁵ Leslie (who died in 1945) and Carrie Wolfe began their missionary work in the Philippines in 1907 under the auspices of the Foreign Christian Missionary Society, which later merged with the United Christian Missionary Society. They disassociated with that agency in 1926 and became “direct support” missionaries, thus aligning themselves with the “independent” group of Stone-Campbell churches in the United States. For an overview of the Stone-Campbell movement in the Philippines, see D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 275-279. See also Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 302-305, 316.

³⁶ “Women’s Council Valley Forge Gives Christmas Event,” *Elizabethton Star* (December 26, 1950): 3.

³⁷ Minutes of the Valley Forge Ladies Council for September 20, 1990. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. The “Grundy Orphanage” refers to the Mountain Mission School in Grundy, Virginia, which was founded in 1921 to provide shelter and education for “orphaned and needy children of the Appalachian area.” Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 327.

and was really appreciated.”³⁸ Young people also joined in the giving spirit. At a gathering of the “Bible School Council” in early 1955, Mrs. Evelyn Lowrance reported that her students in the “Intermediate Girl’s Class” were sending a monthly donation to Winston-Salem Bible College, a predominantly African American ministerial training school established in 1945.³⁹ Interest in the school dates at least to the fall of 1952, as indicated by an informational bulletin cover provided by Winston-Salem and used by the church. It also contained an announcement urging church members “to make a contribution to the East Tennessee Christian Home for Children. Instead of filling jars with food this year, everybody may make a donation of money.”⁴⁰

Whether giving in kind (such as homemade apple butter and record cabinets) or through monetary donations, the people of Valley Forge Christian Church demonstrated a strong commitment to both local and global missions during the immediate postwar period. They also recognized the value of working together with other churches in the area, as demonstrated by their willingness to host an all-day gathering of the Christian churches of Carter County during the summer of 1951. As host pastor, Morris Mounts presided over the morning session, and Paul Headrick, treasurer of the Valley Forge church, served as the secretary and treasurer of the convention. According to a local newspaper account, some three hundred individuals attended the three sessions that were held throughout the day, and the young people of the church registered and ushered the guests.⁴¹ In addition to preaching and worship, each session featured

³⁸ “Fred VanHuss Presides at Home Builders Class Meet,” *Elizabethton Star* (January 7, 1951): 12. The East Tennessee Christian Home was established in 1946 under the leadership of Fred W. Smith, pastor of the First Christian Church, Elizabethton. See Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 118.

³⁹ “Valley Forge Bible School Council Reviews Work and Future Projects,” *Elizabethton Star* (February 23, 1955): 3. *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Winston-Salem Bible College,” by Gary L. Lee. The school became Carolina Christian College in 2007. See [History - Carolina Christian College](#), accessed September 23, 2023.

⁴⁰ Valley Forge Christian Church Bulletin for September 28, 1952. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁴¹ “Valley Forge Christian Church Host Annual Carter County Convention,” *Elizabethton Star* (July 22, 1951): 5.

business items, such as organizing and appointing officers and committees for the upcoming year, as well as receiving committee reports about activities during the preceding year. Although the Christian churches of Carter County had, for the most part, identified more closely with the “independent” stream of the Stone-Campbell churches by mid-century, they still encouraged and practiced voluntary cooperation among congregations at the local and regional level in order to promote fellowship, evangelism, and local missions.

Valley Forge Christian Church continued its participation in similar efforts throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Carter County Men’s Fellowship of Christian Churches began meeting in 1955 as an organization dedicated to promoting unity among the churches. From the outset (much like the Carter County Christian Convention), their monthly gatherings centered around preaching, worship, and fellowship. The group also collected funds for the support of local missions, to assist new or struggling congregations, and to provide scholarships for aspiring ministerial students. Members of the Valley Forge church were involved in the Men’s Fellowship from its inception. At its second meeting, Valley Forge was one of eleven county churches represented among the attendees, and their pastor, Paul Nourse, served as acting chairman pending the election of a president. Additionally, William Holtsclaw—a longtime and highly respected elder at Valley Forge—agreed to serve as an “alternate director” representing a district within the county on the organization’s board.⁴² A decade later, the *East Tennessee Christian* (a short-lived monthly publication of the East Tennessee Christian Convention) featured a photograph with a caption stating that “President R.M. Bell of Johnson Bible College was the evening speaker for the Quarterly Rally, held at the Valley Forge Christian Church, February 24,

⁴² “Organizational Details Mapped Out by Men’s Christian Fellowship,” *Elizabethton Star* (June 30, 1955): 6.

1966.”⁴³ Two years later, a front page article in the same periodical announced a \$10,000 fundraising campaign for a new church in Morristown, Tennessee. Valley Forge appeared among a list of northeast Tennessee churches along with a suggested amount to contribute (apparently based on Valley Forge’s membership numbers) toward this effort.⁴⁴ While it is unclear whether Valley Forge responded to this plea, its inclusion on the list indicates ongoing interest and involvement in local cooperative endeavors among the churches throughout this period of congregational vitality.

In another sign of their favorable view of voluntary cooperation, Valley Forge enthusiastically supported and hosted areawide youth revivals and rallies. For example, the church announced a “pre-Easter youth revival” that would begin on Sunday night, April 6, 1952, and would continue through the rest of the week. “Young people from the Gleamers and the Challengers Classes will be in complete charge of the services,” according to the newspaper announcement.⁴⁵ Some four years later, in February 1956, Valley Forge hosted a district youth rally, at which over five hundred young people, sponsors, and ministers gathered. Not surprisingly, Valley Forge had the most youth present (forty), and the “Juniors” age group won the monthly attendance award. Two young ladies from the Valley Forge church took on

⁴³ “Activities of the Area,” *East Tennessee Christian* (March 1966): 2. The Helsabeck Stone-Campbell Archives at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University holds a complete collection of this periodical, which was published from August 1965 through October 1970.

⁴⁴ “\$10,000 Needed for Morristown Church,” *East Tennessee Christian* (April 1968): 1. Valley Forge’s apportionment was \$300.

⁴⁵ “Youth Revival Starts Tonight at Valley Forge Christian,” *Elizabethton Star* (April 6, 1952): 13. An accompanying photograph shows the members of the youth choir that provided special music throughout the revival. Comprised of members of the “Gleamers” and “Challengers” Sunday School classes, it appears that these groups consisted of adolescents and young adults. The choir consisted of eight young men and eighteen young women.

leadership roles at the meeting: Sue Crumley was appointed to serve on the “Speech Contest” committee, and June Banner kept the attendance records.⁴⁶

Another detail from the newspaper account of the youth rally at Valley Forge points to a significant postwar development in the church’s life; the correspondent (Mrs. Nell Brice) noted the presence and participation of two Milligan College students who were also working with the youth at Valley Forge: Gene Garlich and Scott Bartchy.⁴⁷ This seems to be the first time that the church employed ministerial staff (presumably on a part-time basis) other than a preacher, and it accords with an emerging trend among Protestant churches in general and Stone-Campbell churches more specifically during the “Baby Boom” era. One scholar of youth ministry among the “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ notes that the 1960 edition of the *Directory of the Ministry* “included youth ministry (YM) in its original list of abbreviations” for the first time.⁴⁸ It is worth reiterating that Valley Forge began submitting their data to the *Directory* in 1955 during the ministry of Paul Nourse—a strong indicator of the congregation’s identification with the “independent” churches.⁴⁹ Although subsequent entries in the *Directory* for the next two decades list only the names of the preaching ministers (with one exception) at

⁴⁶ “Over 500 Present for Christian Youth Rally,” *Elizabethton Star* (March 7, 1956): 3. An educator and librarian, Sue Crumley Trinkle later served as the church’s part-time secretary, and she also organized and supervised the church library in later years. Sue’s son, Bradley, married Elaine Harrison, daughter of Max and June (Jaynes) Harrison—both of whom came from prominent families in the Valley Forge church and community. June Banner was the daughter of Ernest and Mabel Banner; Ernest also served in church leadership for over fifty years. He and the aforementioned William Holtsclaw moved to the Valley Forge community from the Roan Mountain area around 1950. According to Frank Merritt, they were “schoolmates” and “closest friends until William’s death in 1985.” See “Banner Family” and “Harrison Family” in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*.

⁴⁷ “Over 500 Present for Christian Youth Rally.” Bartchy went on to pursue an academic career as a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity at UCLA. See [S. Scott Bartchy | UCLA History](#), accessed October 21, 2023.

⁴⁸ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Youth Groups/Youth Ministry: Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” by J. David Miller. As noted above, the *Directory of the Ministry* began publication in 1955 as a listing of “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

⁴⁹ *Directory of the Ministry of the Undenominational Fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ: 1955* (St. Ann, Missouri: Directory of the Ministry, 1955), 102. The 1958 edition of the *Year Book of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)* contains the last updated entry from Valley Forge. See *Year Book: 1958*, 727.

Valley Forge, the church continued to employ youth ministers from time to time.⁵⁰ Some—such as Darrell Stout—came from within the congregation.⁵¹ Others were students at schools such as Milligan, Johnson Bible College, and Emmanuel School of Religion. One of the latter—Tommy Smith of nearby Hampton—went on to serve as a professor and as president of Johnson.⁵²

Lay volunteers also played a critical role in supporting and maintaining children's and youth ministries at Valley Forge, and the congregational leaders provided financial support and encouraged innovative approaches to working with the young people. For example, shortly after H. Clay Bailey began his preaching ministry in 1965, his wife, Joan received permission from the church board to organize a youth choir.⁵³ The following year, the church board invited Dr. Charles Gresham, a professor of Christian education at Emmanuel School of Religion, to conduct a series of teacher-training workshops on Wednesday evenings.⁵⁴ In keeping with technological developments, the church expended \$150 in 1967 to purchase a slide/film strip projector "for young people's work."⁵⁵ Perhaps the boldest initiative came from two young mothers in the congregation—Norma Jean Jones and Mozella Orr—who organized and taught a kindergarten for the Valley Forge church and community, beginning in the fall of 1967. Operating out of two classrooms in the education wing, they provided a much-needed service at a time when the state of Tennessee did not require or consistently offer kindergarten as part of

⁵⁰ The single exception occurs in the 1960 edition, which lists J.D. Smith as minister of music from Milligan. See *Directory of the Ministry: 1960* (now published in Springfield, Illinois), 81.

⁵¹ The VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for September 6, 1970, record a motion by Bill Jones, who recommended the hiring of Darrell and Brenda (Garrison) Stout as "youth directors" at \$150 per month. The board unanimously approved this proposal. Darrell Stout went on to serve as the long-time preaching minister at a Christian church near Nashville, Indiana. See "Garrison Family" in Merritt, *Valley Forge Families*.

⁵² Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 418.

⁵³ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for April 4, 1965. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁵⁴ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for June 5, 1966. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁵⁵ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for April 2, 1967. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. This was not an insignificant expenditure, especially when one considers that the general fund balance at the end of the church's fiscal year in 1963 was \$327.27. See VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for July 7, 1963.

the public-school curriculum.⁵⁶ One year later, the church board reaffirmed its support for this program, with one of the elders, Max Harrison, serving as its director.⁵⁷ The kindergarten continued until 1973, when the local elementary school began offering classes.

Other outreach efforts during this time targeted adolescents and young adults through athletic programming. In November 1973, Bill Jones (who had recently begun serving as an elder at Valley Forge) received permission from the church board to organize a basketball team and enter it in an area church basketball league.⁵⁸ He also coached the team, and among those whom he recruited was Dennis Berry, who later joined the church and went on to serve as a deacon and later as an elder. Six months later, Mr. Jones sought and received the board's blessing to purchase equipment for a church softball team, which he coached for the next several years.⁵⁹ He also taught a Sunday school class for high school seniors and college-age young adults, from which he drew players for both teams. Eventually, another class emerged from this age group calling themselves the "TNT" (Teens and Twenties) class, and in 1976, they paid the entrance fee for the church softball team to participate in the local league.⁶⁰ This class continues to provide vital financial and volunteer support for the various ministries of the church (referring to themselves humorously as the "Thirties and Thereafter" class).

At approximately the same time that Bill Jones was organizing the basketball and softball teams, a young couple within the church—Tommy and Kathy Jenkins—began working with the youth on a voluntary basis. During their tenure as youth leaders, the church board approved the

⁵⁶ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for July 2, 1967. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. Mandatory kindergarten in Tennessee was established in 1993. See [Section 49-6-201 - Minimum Kindergarten Program Law, Tenn. Code § 49-6-201 | Casetext Search + Citator](#). Accessed October 26, 2023.

⁵⁷ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for June 2, 1968. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁵⁸ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for November 4, 1973. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁵⁹ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for April 7, 1974. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁰ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for November 3, 1968, and for April 4, 1976. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

purchase of puppets to be used by the youth for special presentations as well as a 16-millimeter film projector with sound.⁶¹ Up to this point in time, the church board funded youth activities and ministries on an as-needed basis. For example, the board agreed to pay the expenses of a youth group trip to a baseball game in Cincinnati in the spring of 1975, with Milburn Ellis (a deacon) and Richard Ginn (the church's pastor who had come to Valley Forge in 1974, following Clay Bailey's departure to teach at Bluefield College of Evangelism in West Virginia) serving as sponsors.⁶² The end of 1975, however, marked an important turning point as these items were incorporated into the annual budget for the first time in the church's history.⁶³

Besides encouraging innovative approaches to discipling young people, the church's leaders also promoted a strong missions emphasis throughout the 1960s and 1970s and beyond. The missions budget for 1963 totaled \$1950; local and regional recipients included the Carter County Christian Men's Fellowship, the East Tennessee Christian Home for children in Elizabethton, the East Tennessee Evangelistic Association, and the Mountain Mission School in Grundy, Virginia. The church also supported several colleges aligned with the "independent" stream of the Stone-Campbell movement: Milligan College, Atlanta Christian College, Cincinnati Bible Seminary, and Johnson Bible College. The aforementioned Barton L. McElroy was the only non-domestic missionary included in the 1963 appropriations.⁶⁴ In terms of both dollar amounts and number of missions supported, the missions budget grew considerably over the next decade. By 1976, it totaled over \$7,000, and it included thirty-two separate items

⁶¹ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for July 13, 1975, and October 5, 1975. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶² VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for March 2, 1975. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶³ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for November 2, 1975. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁴ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for October 22, 1962. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. As noted above, support for McElroy's teaching ministry in the Philippines originated with the Women's Council in 1950.

distributed over a wide variety of educational institutions, benevolent agencies, new church plants, and domestic and overseas missions.⁶⁵ This was in line with the church board's previously stated goal of dedicating forty percent of the congregation's offerings to missions.⁶⁶

At least two controversies surrounding missions arose during this period, but neither seemed to have a negative impact on the congregation's overall enthusiasm for missions. Both occurred in the early 1970s; the first had to do with unspecified concerns related to Emmanuel School of Religion, a recently established graduate seminary in nearby Johnson City with close ties to the "independent" churches. The board minutes record the visit of Ray Alber, an Emmanuel representative, with the church board on December 6, 1970, with no elaboration on the substance of the board members' interaction with him.⁶⁷ Nearly a year later, the board discussed the possibility of directly supported two members of the Emmanuel faculty (Dr. Charles Gresham and Dr. Beauford Bryant), but there is no record of any further action being taken on the matter, and the 1976 missions budget included \$600 for Emmanuel.⁶⁸

The second controversy contained greater potential for congregational discord over missions, as it involved a "home-grown" missionary who was also the son of an elder. Kenneth Holtsclaw attended and graduated from Johnson Bible College with support from Valley Forge during the late 1960s.⁶⁹ He was ordained by the congregation in 1970 and served for a brief time in local pastoral ministry before departing for Puerto Rico in 1972 to undertake missions work

⁶⁵ "1976 Missions Budget." Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁶ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for January 6, 1974. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁷ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for December 6, 1970. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁸ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for November 6, 1971. See also the "1976 Missions Budget." Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁶⁹ According to the VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for June 5, 1967, the board appropriated \$150 per month to "support Kenneth Holtsclaw at Johnson Bible College" during the academic year. The following year, the board reaffirmed this financial commitment in a motion that included support for Tommy Oaks, another ministerial student from the congregation. See VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for August 31, 1968. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

along with his wife, Patsy, who had also attended Johnson.⁷⁰ Within a few months of their arrival in Puerto Rico, word reached the church board of Kenneth Holtsclaw's embrace of Pentecostal teachings and practices, which prompted the board (at the behest of his father, William Holtsclaw) to vote to withdraw their support on January 25, 1973.⁷¹ Shortly thereafter, the church board met with the congregation to share their concerns and to explain their action.⁷² In both instances, the church leaders demonstrated close oversight of the missions that the church supported instead of a *laissez-faire* attitude. They also moved quickly and decisively when concerns came to their attention. Finally, at least with regard to the Holtsclaw controversy, they kept open the lines of communication with the congregation by transparently sharing their reasons for acting as they did. These factors perhaps explain why neither of these incidents undermined congregational support for missions in general. Indeed, the level of giving to missions as a percentage of the church's total expenditure remained fairly stable throughout the remainder of the century.

Much of the credit for this devolves upon Clay Bailey, who returned to the Valley Forge pulpit in 1978 and enthusiastically promoted missions until his retirement in 1999. Due to his personal connections through his studies at Emmanuel, the church became long-time supporters

⁷⁰ The VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for March 1, 1970, note that plans were being made for Kenneth Holtsclaw's ordination service. No specific date for the service is given. The VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for August 6, 1972, include the announcement of "services to say farewell to Kenneth Holtsclaw and family as they leave for the mission field in Puerto Rico."

⁷¹ VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for January 25, 1973. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. As Stone-Campbell scholar Thomas H. Olbricht notes, interest in charismatic phenomena grew among "younger persons in the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ at the end of the 1960s." As he further explains, "The older rationalism had broken down with the rise of existentialism and later deconstructionism, paving the way for openness to less constrained and more emotive experiences." See *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., "Charismatics," by Thomas H. Olbricht. It should also be noted that William Holtsclaw personally paid for the relocation of his son and daughter-in-law to the United States. Since Valley Forge provided a substantial amount of their financial support, the withdrawal of that funding made it impossible for them to continue their work in Puerto Rico.

⁷² VFCC "Board Meeting Minutes" for February 4, 1973. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

of Leo Salvador in the Philippines and Boon and Jerry Thaprom in Myanmar. During Bailey's ministry, Valley Forge also expanded its outreach to include local interdenominational benevolent ministries, such as the Shepherd's Inn and Assistance and Resource Ministries (ARM), both located in Elizabethton. Indeed, Larry McKinney, a longtime member of the congregation, served for several years on the board for Shepherd's Inn, a ministry to women and children in crisis situations. McKinney also provided plumbing and other household maintenance services for the shelter that continues to be operated by this ministry. He exemplified a growing interest in personal involvement in local missions that Bailey and the church leaders encouraged during the closing decades of the twentieth century.⁷³

Along with emphasizing youth and missions during the postwar era, the Valley Forge Christian Church finalized its alignment with the "independent" stream of the Stone-Campbell movement as the result of a congregational meeting held on June 30, 1968. The church members unanimously approved this action, presumably in response to the "Restructure" process that began in the late 1950s as an effort to create a new denominational polity for the Christian churches. This culminated in the formal adoption of the "Provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" at the International Convention of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kansas City, Missouri on September 26, 1968.⁷⁴ In anticipation of this re-ordering into a representative framework based on local, regional, and general "manifestations" of the

⁷³ Larry McKinney passed away on November 16, 2023. He was preceded in death by his four brothers, three of whom (Arvel, Pink, and Roy) had been active members of Valley Forge Christian Church. His sister, Phyllis Olliver, survives as of this writing. They are known collectively as the "Blackeyes" of Long Hollow, a nickname bestowed upon them by Clay Bailey, who baptized several members of the family during his ministry.

⁷⁴ Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*, 186-189. See also *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "Restructure," by Richard L. Hamm.

church, the Valley Forge congregation met and approved the following resolution (reproduced below in full):

RESOLUTION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
(CHURCH OF CHRIST) VALLEY FORGE,
ROUTE 1, ELIZABETHTON, TENNESSEE

WHEREAS, it has come to the attention of the Official Board of the Christian Church (Church of Christ) Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee with mailing address Route 1, Elizabethton, Tennessee, that the name of the Christian Church (Church of Christ) Valley Forge appears listed in the YEAR BOOK, Disciples of Christ, published by the International Convention of Christian Churches, Howard E. Dentler, Editor; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Church of Christ) Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee, with mailing address Route 1, Elizabethton, Tennessee, has never authorized the listing of its name in said YEAR BOOK, has never participated in the International Convention of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, is not connected therewith by any previous action of the Christian Church, (Church of Christ) Valley Forge, and desires that its name be deleted from all future issues of said YEAR BOOK unless such listing is properly authorized by the congregation of the Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge, by action in the future:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee, with mailing address of Route 1, Elizabethton, Tennessee, in congregation duly assembled, at a regular Sunday morning worship service, upon notice duly given, and with 182 members in attendance, that:

1. Mr. Howard E. Dentler, Editor, YEAR BOOK, Disciples of Christ, Box 19136, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46219, be requested and instructed to delete and omit the name of The Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee, with mailing address of Route 1, Elizabethton, Tennessee, from the next and all future issues of the said YEAR BOOK, Disciples of Christ, published under the direction of the International Convention of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, unless proper authorization for such listing is given in the future by proper action of the congregation of The Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge.
2. That the Secretary or Clerk of the Church mail a copy of this resolution, verified under oath, to Mr. Howard E. Dentler, Editor, YEAR BOOK, Disciples of Christ, Box 19136, Indianapolis, Indiana 46219, by registered mail.
3. That this resolution be spread upon the minutes of the Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge.

THE FOREGOING RESOLUTION was duly passed by The Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee, with mailing address of Route 1, Elizabethton, Tennessee, in body duly assembled with 182 members

in attendance, on the 30 (sic) day of June 1968, at a regular Sunday morning worship service, by unanimous vote.⁷⁵

The resolution was signed by Tom Oaks, the board chairman, and Max L. Harrison, the board secretary/clerk. In passing this measure, the Valley Forge congregation joined numerous other congregations that belatedly withdrew from the *Year Book* and the incipient Disciples of Christ denomination during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷⁶ From 1969 onward, Valley Forge no longer appeared among the church listings in the Disciples' *Year Book*.⁷⁷

Curiously, the resolution consistently identifies the congregation as “The Christian Church (Church of Christ), Valley Forge” throughout the document. While there is no indication that Valley Forge ever considered itself a part of the *a capella* Churches of Christ, it used both designations interchangeably throughout its history, as was typical of many Stone-Campbell congregations. For a period of time in the mid-twentieth century, the church was known simply as “Valley Forge Church of Christ.” It seems that David Davis, who served as preaching minister from 1959 into 1960, advocated for this nomenclature.⁷⁸ A bulletin cover that possibly dates from Davis's tenure identifies the congregation simply as “The Church of Christ” above a photograph of the church building (which includes a sign that reads “Valley Forge Church of Christ”). An article entitled “Facts Concerning Valley Forge Church of Christ” appears on the back side and these “Facts” demonstrate the alignment of the congregation with the more traditional principles of the emerging “independent” Christian churches.

⁷⁵ This resolution was attached to the VFCC “Board Meeting Minutes” for July 25, 1968. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁷⁶ Webb estimates that some 3,000 congregations withdrew their listing in the *Year Book* in the aftermath of the adoption of the “Provisional Design” by the International Convention, which became the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). See Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 369.

⁷⁷ See *Year Book: 1969*, 5284.

⁷⁸ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 413.

The article's unknown author (Davis, perhaps?) begins with a statement about the nature of the church and its Christocentric creed: "The church is a collective body of Christians. We have only one head, Christ. We wear no name but his. 'We do not claim to be the only Christians, but Christians only.' Christ is our creed. He is our only foundation." The next section describes two paths to membership in the Valley Forge congregation:

First: You may make a public statement that you have been baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins and that you desire to be a part of this fellowship.
Second: Upon a public statement that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and by being baptized into Christ, you are added to the church. The same thing that makes you a Christian makes you a part of the church.

Not surprisingly, definitions of what are described as the two scripturally authorized "ordinances" of the church—baptism and the Lord's Supper—follow. Regarding baptism, the author contends that the word itself represents a transliterated Greek word that means to immerse.⁷⁹ Consequently, "we practice and accept only immersion as baptism. Immersion is for the repentant believer and is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38, Romans 6:4)." For the Valley Forge Church of Christ, the second ordinance "is observed every Lord's Day in remembrance of Him (Acts 20:7)." The article concludes with an affirmation of biblical authority and a restatement of the church's creedal foundation: "The teachings of this church are in accordance with the Bible. We accept the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God. Humanly devised creeds are a device whereby the people of God are separated. Thus, we have no creed but Christ."⁸⁰

This synopsis of beliefs and practices suggests that the Valley Forge church concurred with nearly all of the Christian churches of northeast Tennessee as they parted ways with the

⁷⁹ As did Alexander Campbell on numerous occasions, in public debate and in print. See, for example, Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (reprint ed., Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1989), 40-41.

⁸⁰ Undated bulletin cover. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

Tennessee Christian Missionary Society and the “restructuring” Disciples of Christ apparatus. Tellingly, the sections on church membership and baptism allude to the issue of “open membership,” which had been a major point of contention between conservative and progressive Disciples since the early twentieth century. While the latter embraced what one Stone-Campbell scholar has defined as “the practice of admitting unimmersed believers into membership in a local congregation,” the former adhered to a restorationist understanding of church membership that required immersion.⁸¹ Clearly, Valley Forge identified with the second camp, and the “Church of Christ” terminology seems to reflect that choice. This presented another problem, however, with the establishment of several new *a capella* Church of Christ congregations throughout northeast Tennessee in general and Carter County in particular during the 1940s and 1950s.⁸² In order to avoid confusion, the church board approved the singular use of “Valley Forge Christian Church” as the official name of the congregation at the end of 1968, and this usage has continued to the present time.⁸³

As Valley Forge Christian Church entered the last quarter of the twentieth century, it did so with a strong sense of theological and ecclesiological identity, a well-established commitment to both local and global missions, and a vigorous program of ministry to children and youth. These emphases persisted throughout Clay Bailey’s second term as preaching minister (1978-1999), during which he provided stability and continuity in a time of demographic change. Signs of a shift toward an ageing and declining population had already begun to emerge two decades

⁸¹ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v., “Open Membership,” by Mark G. Toulouse.

⁸² In describing the sectional origins of the first major rupture in the Stone-Campbell movement, Henry Webb points to the geographical divisions of Tennessee to make his case. “The extent to which the churches of eastern Tennessee identified with the North is reflected in the fact that there are few churches of Christ (non-instrumental) in eastern Tennessee that can trace their beginnings back beyond the [twentieth] century.” See Webb, “Sectional Conflict and Schism Within the Disciples of Christ Following the Civil War,” 124.

⁸³ VFCC “Board Meeting Minutes” for December 1, 1968. Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. All entries in the *Directory of the Ministry* from 1968 onward list the congregation as Valley Forge Christian Church.

earlier. The “baby boom” of the immediate postwar era eventually gave way to what local historian Frank Merritt termed the “plague of the fifties” when several young adults and families migrated from Carter County to obtain higher education or to pursue career interests elsewhere.⁸⁴ These negative socio-economic trends accelerated with the loss of a significant portion of the county’s textile manufacturing base during the 1980s and 1990s.⁸⁵

Against this backdrop of countervailing forces, Valley Forge maintained a membership of approximately 350 individuals throughout Bailey’s ministry, according to reports submitted to the *Directory of the Ministry*.⁸⁶ Furthermore, a briefly published church newsletter entitled “Valley Forge Voice” from August 2000 indicates a high level of involvement and activity taking place within the congregation at the dawning of the new millennium. Along with announcements about Vacation Bible School and various youth activities, the “Voice” includes an article detailing numerous additions to the church through baptism and transfer of membership during the preceding year.⁸⁷ Another news item illustrates both the congregation’s ongoing support for local missions and its sense of connection with area churches. “Sherry Hicks is the new VFCC coordinator for ARM (Assistance Resource Ministries),” the article states. “Sherry will be keeping our church informed about the organization’s ministry in our community and any needs we may help to meet.”⁸⁸ It also lists several upcoming events, such as the Mountain Christian Church Convention at the Newland (North Carolina) Christian Church, the Tri-Cities Children’s

⁸⁴ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 411-412.

⁸⁵ See [North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation | Tennessee Encyclopedia](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the 1984 *Directory of the Ministry*, 173 and the 1999 *Directory of the Ministry*, 230. Of course, these figures do not represent actual worship attendance or participation. Unfortunately, no such records exist.

⁸⁷ “Our Family is Growing!” in *Valley Forge Voice* (August 2000). Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. The new members included: Roy and Jean Ingram, Charles and Susan Campbell, Ethan Meredith, Dustin Arnett, Jill Simerly, Tabitha Campbell, Paige Biliter, and Andrew Lingerfelt.

⁸⁸ “Did You Know?” in *Valley Forge Voice* (August 2006). Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection. As noted above, Sherry (Campbell) Hicks is a lifelong member of the church.

Ministry Conference at First Christian Church in Johnson City, and the Carter County Christian Men's Fellowship meeting at Blue Springs Christian Church.⁸⁹ Presumably, the underlying idea behind providing this information was to encourage Valley Forge congregants to attend and support gatherings that gave expression to a broader view of the church.

This snapshot from the early days of the twenty-first century shows that the seeds planted in the immediate postwar era yielded an abundant harvest, not only in terms of numerical growth, but also in the areas of ministry to children and youth, support of local and global missions, and affirmation of identity. Some fifty-two years earlier, the members of the Valley Forge Christian Church offered the following prayer at the dedication of their new education wing: "May multitudes here be born unto God, so that when all these here today shall have gone to their reward in their eternal home, others will take up the service until Jesus comes and all His are gathered home."⁹⁰ Standing between the Old Log Church and the fellowship hall built in 1993, the nearly century-old structure where the congregation gathers regularly bears witness to the ongoing fulfillment of that prayer, as the story continues with the planting of new seeds.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Dan Rutherford, who succeeded Clay Bailey as preaching minister at Valley Forge, was scheduled to speak at this annual regional gathering of western North Carolina Christian churches.

⁹⁰ "Dedicatory Services, Valley Forge Christian Church, May 30, 1948." Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

EPILOGUE

INTO A NEW MILLENNIUM AND BEYOND

“Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, ‘Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.... There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land.’”¹

Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s two visions—one of seven “fat and sleek” cows and seven “thin and ugly” cows and another of seven “plump and good” ears of grain and seven “thin and blighted” ears of grain—marks a turning point in Joseph’s fortunes in the dramatic novella that concludes Genesis.² The imprisoned Hebrew slave turns out to be a wise Hebrew seer who bears good news and bad news for the ruler and people of Egypt. Seven years of “great plenty” are coming, but they will be followed by seven years of famine that will obliterate the memory of the abundant times. Joseph proves his value not only as a divinely gifted interpreter of dreams; he also has a plan for dealing with the dire situation that lies ahead. He advises Pharaoh to appoint a “discerning and wise” administrator to oversee a program of preparation for future needs. The message is clear: times of prosperity call for discerning and wise leadership that looks beyond the moment and resists self-satisfaction and complacency while anticipating the future.

Appreciative Inquiry adopts a similar approach. Those who make use of it search out and draw from the abundant resources of the past in order to imagine a new time even in the midst of

¹ Genesis 41:25, 29.

² In his commentary on Genesis, Terence E. Fretheim contends that the “Joseph, Judah, and Jacob’s Family” narrative in chapters 37-50 should be viewed as a “unified whole” that “focuses on the move from Israel as an individual to Israel as a family, to Israel as a people.” Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994): 592.

challenging present conditions. Specifically, its practitioners seek to identify, recover, and engage with those “stories of life-giving forces” that have shaped an organization or community throughout the course of its existence.³ Like Joseph, they husband those resources for the lean times that inevitably occur in the life cycles of congregations and other human communities. These stories provide hope for a new future—one that utilizes and incorporates insights from the past even as it embraces new opportunities for growth and seed-planting.

As the Valley Forge Christian Church moves past the 150th anniversary of its own genesis, the current congregation finds itself in a transitional time between an abundant recent past and an uncertain future. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the church experienced a slow decline in membership and worship attendance along with a demographic shift that mirrored trends toward an aging and decreasing population in Carter County as a whole.⁴ At the same time, the church’s financial resources remained strong enough for the acquisition of adjoining properties for recreation, storage, and future expansion. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 brought about the temporary suspension of in-person services during the spring and early summer of 2020 and the inauguration of live-streaming as a means of maintaining connectivity among the church’s members. With the incremental return to a full schedule of services and activities by late 2021, Valley Forge Christian Church emerged from the pandemic relatively unscathed in terms of overall attendance and participation. The most notable casualties were two adult Sunday School classes—the Men’s Class and the Ladies’ Class—that merged with other classes when the Sunday School program resumed.

³ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 26.

⁴ The population of Carter County, Tennessee declined from 57,424 in 2010 to an estimated 56,410 in 2022. See [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Carter County, Tennessee](#). Accessed December 18, 2023. The median age in 2022 was 46, which was about twenty percent higher than the comparable figures for Tennessee (38.9) and the United States (38.5). See [Carter County, TN - Profile data - Census Reporter](#). Accessed December 18, 2023.

Because these developments occurred during the author’s tenure as preaching minister (December 2007 through May 2023) at Valley Forge, it remains for future interpreters to provide a more thorough and objective account of this period, particularly with regard to the process that resulted in the author’s departure. What follows constitutes an attempt to briefly recount specific “life-giving” themes or emphases arising from the preceding narrative that provide guidance and clarity for the church as it moves forward into the future that God is preparing for it. Like Joseph’s granaries filled with the abundant harvests of the prosperous years (Genesis 41:46-49), the story of Valley Forge Christian Church offers both sustenance for the lean times and inspiration for better times to come.

Full Granaries

As told in the first chapter, the church’s “origin story” resembles that of countless congregations in that it begins with a relatively small group of individuals from mostly ordinary backgrounds banding together for a common purpose. Undaunted by the fact that they were few in number, the men and women who established the Cedar Grove (later Valley Forge) Christian Church on November 9, 1872, acted in a manner consistent with Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed in Mark 4:30-32. In this teaching, the planting of a rather unremarkable seed (“the smallest of all the seeds on earth”) results in the growth of a shrub that provides shelter and refuge for “the birds of the air.”⁵ This transformation represents God’s preferred manner of working in the

⁵ Mary Ann Tolbert insists that this parable, along with the preceding parables about the Sower and the Soils (Mark 4:3-8) and the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29), “are not, for Mark, seed parables but earth parables, and it is multiple references to earth that bind them together.” Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 149. Interestingly, as PHEME PERKINS points out, the Markan version of this parable contrasts with Matthew’s and Luke’s later iterations in that the final result is a shrub instead of a large tree which, in Old Testament usage, often symbolizes the great nations of the world. “The image of a mustard bush,” PERKINS asserts, “as the kingdom of God set over against the alternative vision of the nations as great trees points to another feature of God’s rule. The kingdom does not replicate the kind of greatness that human nations attempt to build for themselves.” PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995): 577-578.

world, because it often begins quietly and in small, almost unnoticeable ways. Furthermore, it develops over time and in ways not fully controlled or understood by human forces. Although the world might not find either the mustard seed or the mustard bush impressive, those who align themselves with God's purposes know that God tends to work through the faithful yet often nondescript few rather than through the mighty and the many.

The story of Valley Forge Christian Church bears witness to this dynamic, not only in terms of its origins but also with regard to its "second founding" in 1914 (chapter two), when "the church as a force for God was almost totally extinguished," according to evangelist A. Preston Gray.⁶ In both instances, conventional wisdom would not have counseled optimism about the church's future, based on numbers alone. And yet, significant growth and renewal occurred, especially after the season of revival that took place during the late winter of 1914. As the current congregation deals with the reality of somewhat diminished numbers due to more recent events, its leaders and members can draw encouragement from the fact that the church has seen other low points in the past, from which the church eventually recovered and grew stronger. In the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, the congregation would do well to reflect on the spirit and vision that animated the small group of people who constituted the church's founders. They would further benefit from considering what a season of revival might look like in the current circumstances. This does not necessarily entail trying to replicate the methodology and approach of early twentieth century revivalism, with the expectation of immediate and striking results as on previous occasions.⁷ Instead, it involves cultivating an openness to God's movement in their

⁶ A. Preston Gray, "Valley Forge (Tenn.) Revival," *Christian Standard* (March 21, 1914): 35.

⁷ Gray reported 104 additions by baptism and "re-enlistment" during the 1914 revival. *Ibid.* Revival meetings became less occasional and more recurring on an annual or even semi-annual basis by the middle of the twentieth century. For example, the report of a two-week revival in November 1959 conducted by Morris Mounts (who served as the preaching minister at Valley Forge from 1950 to 1954) lists the names of 37 individuals who either received

midst through intentional spiritual disciplines such as prayer (both individual and corporate) and guided meditations on scripture. Revival becomes more likely when the church members as a whole recall that their particular story begins with the larger framework of God's "bid for fellowship" with humanity and centers around the church's role as "the perpetuation of the incarnation."⁸ It receives further impetus from the understanding that God is less concerned with numbers than with faithfulness and commitment when it comes to building (or rebuilding) the church. Retelling the "origin story" and "re-founding story" of Valley Forge Christian Church by means of Appreciative Inquiry places this concept squarely before the current congregations as a source of hope and inspiration as it seeks revival and engages in the process of rebuilding.

The closely related themes of identity and connection emerge from the account in chapter three of the Valley Forge church's experience of both adversity and significant growth during the three decades following the 1914 revival. Although the congregation lost its house of worship to fire in the fall of 1924, it quickly rebuilt, thanks in part to donations from sister congregations and to gifts in response to solicitations made by the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society. When the present structure was dedicated in 1926, the church invited William Sweeney, pastor of the First Christian Church in Johnson City, to serve as the keynote speaker. Viewed through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry, these two data points contribute to a larger picture of voluntary cooperation based on a sense of identifying with and participating in something larger than the local congregation: the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. Indeed, the Valley Forge church dates its deliberate alignment with the principles and practices of the Stone-Campbell Movement

baptism (19), transferred their membership (5), or rededicated themselves (13). Among these were three current members: Hazel (Brummit) Smith, Thomas Franklin, and Patsy (Guy) Holtsclaw. "Record of Revival Meeting, November 2-13, 1959". Valley Forge Christian Church historical collection.

⁸ As noted in the Introduction, these key descriptive phrases recur throughout William Robinson's seminal work, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*.

to its founding, and it maintains an ongoing—albeit, not always consistent—connection with the churches of that fellowship to the present. By the early twentieth century, the Christian churches of northeast Tennessee (including Valley Forge) had developed a healthy tradition of working together on a voluntary basis through longstanding regional and district conventions. The Valley Forge church benefited on numerous occasions from the services of district evangelists who filled the pulpit for varying lengths of time.⁹

When controversy erupted on a nationwide scale during the 1920s between proponents of a more centralized system of church governance and those who favored congregational autonomy (the so-called “independents”), Valley Forge gravitated toward the latter, along with nearly all of her sister congregations in northeast Tennessee. Although the process of division between these two groups played out over the next four decades, the northeast Tennessee Christian churches continued to cooperate with one another voluntarily. In so doing, they developed a strong sense of identity that balanced local church autonomy with cooperative endeavors aimed at strengthening the churches and fulfilling the larger church’s mission in the areas of evangelism and benevolence.

Looking back on the time between their “rebirth” in 1914 and the beginning of the post-Second World War era, the current members of the Valley Forge Christian Church have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of maintaining strong bonds with Stone-Campbell related churches, schools, and other parachurch organizations in their region. To a great extent, the church owes its rejuvenation more than a century ago to those very same connections. Now, as they face a similar need for renewal in the present, how might they both contribute to and

⁹ John Shepherd served as the First District evangelist for several years; during his tenure, he provided interim pastoral leadership for Valley Forge Christian Church on at six separate occasions between 1916 and 1942. See Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 419.

benefit from a more intentional involvement with and support of local entities such as the Carter County Christian Men’s Fellowship, Higher Ministries, Camp ACC, the Ministry Resource Center at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Milligan University, the East Tennessee Christian Home and Academy, and the East Tennessee Christian Convention? They might discover that they are not alone in the difficulties that confront them, nor are they without resources with which to address those challenges. Furthermore, by strengthening those connections, they would anchor themselves more firmly within the Stone-Campbell tradition and its vision of Christian unity through the restoration of New Testament norms for the church. It would embolden and empower them to look beyond themselves and to embrace their vocation as “a community of understanding and concern within the Church” that exists for the benefit of the larger church and the world.¹⁰ “No man is an island, entire of itself,” the poet and Anglican clergyman John Donne famously declared in his oft-quoted eponymous poem.¹¹ The same principle holds true for congregations. Appreciative Inquiry reveals the significance of identity and connection in the story of Valley Forge’s rejuvenation between 1914 and 1946, and it points to the need for a renewed exploration and application of those emphases as the congregation works through its current challenges.

Finally, an appreciative analysis of the more recent past offers “life-giving” guidance by illuminating both the spirit of experimentation and innovation as well as the broader mission-mindedness that characterized the story of Valley Forge Christian Church throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. As described in chapter four, the new times of population growth

¹⁰ As noted in the Introduction, this is Robert O. Fife’s definition of a movement—what he terms the “neglected alternative” that eschews both sectarian and denominational ecclesiological formulations. Thus, the churches that identify with the Stone-Campbell movement do not see themselves as “the one true church.” Rather, they seek to embody in their life together the oneness among believers for which Christ prayed in John 17:20-21. See Robert O. Fife, “The Neglected Alternative,” *Celebration of Heritage* (Joplin, Missouri.: College Press, 1992), 268.

¹¹ [No Man Is an Island by John Donne - Famous poems, famous poets. - All Poetry](#). Accessed December 22, 2023.

and economic prosperity that began in the late 1940s called for a new (for Valley Forge) model of ministry, inaugurated by the church's first full-time minister, J.J. Musick. During his tenure, the church also began to invest considerably more time and resources in Christian education for all ages, as symbolized by the addition of an education wing to the main building. The particular emphasis was on ministry to the increasing number of children and youth as the "baby boom" reverberated throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The seeds planted in the late 1940s bore fruit for the next several decades as the young people of that era took on church leadership and service roles (both formal and informal) during the latter twentieth century and well into the new millennium. Additionally, the encouragement and support by congregational leaders for innovative ministries such as the kindergarten led by Norma Jean Jones and Mozella Orr and the church softball team coached by Bill Jones suggested a church culture that valued widespread involvement and participation by a variety of church members.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this chapter in the church's story also included a more robust engagement with both local and global missions. During his long ministry at Valley Forge, Clay Bailey played a pivotal role in advocating for the expansion of the church's missions budget—both in terms of total giving and in the number of missions supported by the church. As noted in chapter four, these included overseas missionaries with whom Bailey developed close personal relationships, Bible colleges and seminaries associated with the "independent" Christian churches, and local and regional benevolent ministries that drew support from churches across the denominational spectrum. That legacy continued well into the twenty-first century; for example, as recently as 2022, Valley Forge began supporting the work of Ian and Alyssa Dugger with Casas por Cristo in the Dominican Republic. The grandson of longtime church members, Clyde and Norma Ruth (deceased) Dugger, Ian began serving with this housing ministry in 2020,

and his parents, Glen and Greta Dugger, participated in a mission work trip led by Ian and Alyssa to the Dominican Republic in early 2023, with financial support from Valley Forge.¹² Ongoing engagement with missions such as this bless the church not only with opportunities for service (especially for the church's older students and adults of varying ages) but also with a wider horizon for envisioning the work of God in the world and their part in that work.

Appreciative Inquiry into what constitutes the lived experience of many of the middle-aged and senior adult members of Valley Forge Christian Church provides a full granary of stories centered around openness to change, widespread congregational involvement, and missional engagement. Likewise, the granaries that contain the stories of generations now completely past offer sustenance and hope by pointing to the church's humble beginnings, the occurrence of revival and rebirth, and the importance of identity and connection during the process of rejuvenation. Conversations about the church's current condition and its future direction must begin by making withdrawals from these storehouses of memory—withdrawals that provide “life-giving stories” as nourishment for the present and seeds to plant in anticipation of abundant harvests in seasons to come.

A Time to Plant, Once More

Since the author's departure from Valley Forge at the end of May 2023, the church has received pastoral guidance from Dr. David Tysinger, an experienced local practitioner of intentional interim ministry. Under his leadership, the church has begun recovering from recent trauma and has engaged in some actions and celebrated some accomplishments that portend well for the future. At the outset of his ministry, Dr. Tysinger encouraged greater participation by lay

¹² See [Missionaries | Casas por Cristo - Mission Trips](#). Accessed December 26, 2023.

members of the congregation in leading the Wednesday evening prayer meeting services. Three individuals now share this responsibility on a rotating monthly basis: Dusty Garrison, Glen Dugger, and Jake Jenkins. This harkens back to earlier times when practices like this were common, since Valley Forge did not have a full-time minister until 1946. Not only does it foster a sense of wider involvement by church members, but it also empowers them to develop and use their abilities and gifts for the benefit of the congregation. Furthermore, it allows for the consideration of different models of ministry that go beyond one that assigns those responsibilities almost entirely to the professional staff and the lay leadership.

Another promising development occurred in the late spring of 2023 when the church leaders made a decision that reaffirmed the church's commitment to missions. They offered the use of the now-vacant parsonage to Milligan University to house Joel and Rachel Williams and their three children for the fall semester of 2023. The Williams' serve as missionaries among the Turkana people in Kenya with Christian Missionary Fellowship International, and they were Milligan's "missionaries in residence" during the fall term. On the Williams' last Sunday before leaving Tennessee to return to Illinois and then to Kenya, Joel preached at Valley Forge, and the ladies of the church presented the family with one of their handmade quilts. Past, present, and future all merged together in this simple gesture of kindness and blessing. As the church moves forward, its leaders should remain open to other creative ways of partnering with schools and missions that facilitate a more personal connection between the congregation and those whom they support. Given the fact that fewer ministers want to live in church-provided housing as part of their compensation, Valley Forge might even contemplate re-purposing the parsonage for use by visiting missionaries and/or others in need of temporary shelter.

Along similar lines of missional involvement, Valley Forge undertook its first collection of materials in the fall of 2023 for Operation Christmas Child/Operation Shoebox, an outreach of the Samaritan's Purse organization. The congregation's response far exceeded the initial goal of filling 125 boxes. According to Cheryl Tysinger, who spearheaded the project, the final tally was 304 boxes.¹³ This result demonstrates both the generosity and the eagerness of church members to do something concrete as part of God's reconciling mission. Churchwide projects like this also build unity as members work together toward a common purpose that transcends the issues and problems that tend to bring division. It would be wise to develop a broad-based missions team—drawn from a variety of church members—who would research, promote, and implement similar efforts on an ongoing basis.

Finally, it should be noted that the composition of the recently formed search committee for a new minister holds great promise for the future of Valley Forge Christian Church. In the past, this group typically consisted exclusively of a selection of elders and deacons (thus, it was an all-male body). The current committee includes two women and several non-church board members, and it better represents a cross-section of the congregation. If the church wishes to undergo another “re-birth” and enter into a process of rejuvenation, then this particular act of seed-planting should be carefully nurtured and replicated across all areas of the church's life. All church members should be encouraged to share their gifts for the edification of the church and for the furtherance of the church's mission.

The value of Appreciative Inquiry lies in its ability to identify the “life-giving forces” of a shared past and to connect them with hopeful signs that are emerging in the present. By applying

¹³ Conversation with Cheryl and David Tysinger, November 11, 2023.

the first two phases (initial introduction to theory and practice, followed by historical inquiry) of that model, the foregoing account and analysis of the story of Valley Forge Christian Church prepares the congregation and its leaders to take the next crucial steps toward a promising future. These consist, quite simply, of imagining and innovating, on the basis of what the inquiry thus far has revealed.¹⁴ It has shown that when the church has looked to God in faith rather than focusing on limited numbers and resources, when it has been receptive to God's renewing work in its midst, when its leaders have encouraged a spirit of involvement and experimentation, when it has recognized and acted on its identity as "a community of understanding and concern" that values Christian unity and biblical norms, it becomes a sign and source of God's healing and saving work in the world.

By making strategic withdrawals from the storehouse of memory that has shaped and guided the church's identity and mission, the current congregation can find direction and purpose as they collectively compose the next chapter in the continuing story of God's "bid for fellowship" for humanity. In so doing, they can take ownership of their story while following the One who is at the center of that story and who makes it all possible: Jesus Christ, "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."¹⁵

Soli Deo gloria

¹⁴ Branson, 25-26.

¹⁵ Revelation 22:13.

APPENDIX
TRANSCRIPTIONS OF DOCUMENTS RELATED TO
VALLEY FORGE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

A. Deed for the "Old Log Church" (Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book U, pages 494-495), September 15, 1882

We, James McCatherine (sic) and Wife, Mariah McCathern (sic), have this day bargained and sold to Daniel Ellis, Elijah Williams, and John Bayless and their Successors forever for the consideration of the love and affection we have for the worship of All Mity (sic) God a tract of land embracing the Cedar Grove Meeting House on Doe River in the State of Tennessee, Carter County, District No. 7th containing by estimation an eighth of an acre be the same more or less and bounded as follows (to wit).

Beginning a cedar on Smith's line then with the same, East five poles to a cedar. Then South four poles to a cedar. Then West five poles to a cedar. Then North four poles to the Beginning. To have and to hold the same to the Said Trustees and their successors forever for the use of all Religious denominations. That is, it shall be free for all to use and occupy the same. We do covenant with the said Trustees that we are lawfully seized of said land and have a good right to convey it. We do further covenant and bind ourselves to warrant and forever defend the title to said land and any part thereof and to the said Trustees and successors forever. This 15th day of September, 1882.

Test(ified):	J. H. Hyder	James McCathern
	James Morress (signed with X)	Mariah McCathern (signed with X)

Personally appeared before me, Geo. T. Williams, Clerk of the County Court of said County the within named James McCathern and Mariah McCathern. The bargainers with whom I am personally acquainted and acknowledged that they executed the within instrument for the purpose therein expressed. And Mariah McCathern wife of the said having Jas. McCathern formally appeared before me positively and apart from her husband. The said Mariah McCathern acknowledged the execution of the said instrument to have done by her freely, voluntarily, and understandingly without compulsion or constraint from her said husband and for the purpose therein expressed.

Witness: G.T. Williams, Clerk of said Court at office this 18th day of Sept. 1882.

Geo. T. Williams, Clerk
By J. R. Burrow, D.C. (Deputy Clerk)

B. Deed conveying property from Altheia (McCatheran) Williams and Elijah H. Williams to the trustees of "Spring Hill Christian Church," later renamed Valley Forge Christian Church (Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book 15, pages 96-97), June 15, 1903

This indenture made and entered into this June 15, 1903 AD by and between Altheia Wiliams and E. H. Williams, parties of the first part, and J.W. Headrick, J.C. Garrison, and N.T. Simerly (Trustees) and their successors, parties of the second part, all of Carther County, State of Tenn. Witnesseth, that for and in consideration of \$1.00, one dollar, to us in hand paid, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged and for the further consideration of the love and affection we have for the Christian Church, we have this day bargained, sold, and conveyed unto the parties of the second part and their successors for the exclusive use of the Christian Church and for the purposes of erecting a church house on the following described property lying and being in the 14th Civil District of said County & State (which shall be known as the Spring Hill Christian Church), described as follows to wit. Beginning at a stake on William V. Morris' line, thence east 70 feet to a stake, thence south 50 feet to a stake, thence west 70 feet to a stake on William V. Morris' line. Thence with same north 50 feet to the beginning containing 3500 feet. Also a lane twelve feet wide running with William's line to W. F. Headrick's line then with his line to the public road. To have and to hold unto the parties of the second part and their successors forever. And we further covenant with the parties of the second part that we are lawfully seized and possessed of said land and have a perfect right to convey the same, and we further bind ourselves to warrant and defend the title against the lawful claims of all persons whomsoever. In testimony whereof we have set our hand and seal day and date first above written.

Altheia Williams (signed with X)

E.H. Williams

State of Tennessee

County of Carter

Personally appeared before me, W.C. Williams, a notary public in and for said County & State the within named bargainers, Altheia Williams, and E.H. Williams with whom I am personally acquainted and who acknowledged the execution of said deed for the purposed therein expressed, and Altheia Williams, wife of said E.H. Williams, having appeared before me privately and apart from her said husband and acknowledged the execution of the said deed to have been done freely, voluntarily, and understandingly without compulsion or constraint from her said husband and for the purposes therein expressed.

W.C. Williams, notary

D.K. Lovelace, Register

C. Deed conveying property from D.M. Chambers and Martha Chambers to the trustees of the Valley Forge Christian Church (Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book 146, page 201), May 19, 1925

This indenture, made this 19th day of May, AD 1925, between D.M. and Martha Chambers, Valley Forge, in the State of Tennessee, of the first part, and W.C. Williams, W.L. Headrick, and K.S. Garrison, Trustees of the Christian Church at Valley Forge, Tenn., Valley Forge, Tenn., of the second part,

Witnesseth, that the said parties of the first part, in consideration of the sum of One Dollar, and the love, devotion, and interest they have in the promotion of the Kingdom of Christ to them in hand paid by the parties of the second part, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, it is specifically agreed to by all parties concerned that the property described herein is to be used by the Christian Church and its auxiliary and no festivals, plays, or ice cream suppers are to be held in the church house that is to be erected on same forever. And also the parties of the first part or their successors or assigned are to have the right to go on said premises and repair sewer line any time, have granted, bargained, sold, and conveyed and do hereby grant, bargain, sell, and convey unto the said parties of the second part the following described premises—to wit: Situate in District No. 14 at Valley Forge adjoining E.T. & W.N.C. R.R. right of public road and D.M. Chambers. Beginning on a stake on Railroad right of way 30 feet from center of Main Line track then S 70° 30' W 78 feet to a stake then South 21°E 57 feet to center of Public Road, then with the Public Road South 74½° E 96 feet to the Rail Road Right of Way, then N 23½° W, 110 feet to the beginning containing 1/8 acres more or less, with the hereditaments and appurtenances thereto appertaining, hereby releasing all claim to homestead and dower therein. To have and to hold the said premises to the said parties of the second part, and their successors and assigns, forever.

And the said parties of the first part, for themselves, and for their heirs, executors, and administrators, do hereby covenant with the said parties of the second part and their successors and assigns, that they are lawfully seized in fee simple of the premises above conveyed, and they have full power, authority, and right to convey the same; that said premises are free from all encumbrances. Now it is expressly agreed by both parties that in the event that the church building should be destroyed at any time and the said trustees or their successors do not attempt to rebuild within two years of said destruction then said tract of land on which building stood shall revert back to D.M. and Martha Chambers or their heirs and assigns, and that they will forever warrant and defend the said premises and the title thereto against the lawful claims of all person whomsoever.

In Witness Whereof, the said parties of the first part have hereto set their hands and seals, the day and year first above written.

D.M. Chambers
Martha Chambers

State of Tennessee, Carter County

Personally appeared before me, D.L. Hyder, a Notary Public in and for said County, the within-named bargainors, D.M. Chambers and wife Martha Chambers, with whom I am personally acquainted, and who acknowledged they executed the within instrument for the purposes therein contained. And having appeared before me privately and apart from her husband, the said Martha Chambers, acknowledged the execution of the said Deed to have been done by her freely, voluntarily, and understandingly, without compulsion or constraint from her said husband, and for the purposes therein expressed.

Witness my hand and official seal, at office, this 20th day of May, AD 1925.

D.L. Hyder, Notary Public
D.E. Ritchie, Register

D. Quit Claim deed from D.M. Chambers and Martha Chambers to the trustees of the Valley Forge Christian Church (Carter County, Tennessee Register of Deeds, Book 446, page 201), January 26, 1948

THIS Quit Claim Deed, made and entered into on this the 26th day of January, 1948 by and between D.M. Chambers and wife, Martha E. Chambers, of Washington County, Tennessee, parties of the first part, and K.S. Garrison, Paul A. Hedrick (sic) and Claude Janes (sic), Trustees, and their successors in trust who are from time to time elected of the Valley Forge Christian Church, of Carter County, Tennessee, parties of the second part.

WITNESSETH: That, whereas, on May 19, 1925, the parties of the first part executed to the Trustees of the Valley Forge Christian Church a certain piece of property hereinafter described, which deed is of record in the Register's Office in D.B. 66, page 480, and

Whereas, the said grantors caused to be inserted in said deed a reservation and condition that in the event that said church should be destroyed by fire and not rebuilt for a period of two years, then the same should revert to the said parties of the first part, or to their heirs, and,

Whereas, by virtue of the valuable improvements placed on said property, it is the desire of the said parties that said conditions be released and relinquished.

Now, Therefore, in consideration of the sum of One dollar, cash in hand paid, the said parties of the first part do hereby release, relinquish and quit-claim unto the said parties of the second part, all or their right, title and interest by virtue of said reservation in said deed in and to the following describe property:

Situated in District 14 of Carter County, Tenn., and described as follows:

Beginning on a stake on railroad right of way, 30 feet from center of Main line tract; thence S. 70 deg. 30 min. W. 78 feet to a stake; thence 2. 21 deg. E 57 feet to center of public road; thence with public road S. 74½ deg. E. 96 feet to the railroad right of way; thence N. 23½ deg. W. 110 feet to the Beginning, containing one-eighth of an acre, more or less.

In witness Whereof, the parties of the first part have hereunto set their hands and seals the day and date above written.

D.M. Chambers
Martha E. Chambers

STATE OF FLORIDA
LAKE COUNTY

Personally appeared before me, Martha S. Byrd, a Notary Public in and for the aforesaid State and County, the within named bargainors, D.M. Chambers and wife, Martha E. Chambers, with whom I am personally acquainted and who acknowledged that they executed the within instrument for the purposes therein contained.

Witness my hand and seal at office this sixth day of February, 1948.

Martha S. Byrd, Notary Public

STATE OF TENNESSEE: CARTER COUNTY REGISTER'S OFFICE
E.W. Buckles, Register

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