

Why I Love Disciple Churches

New Churches are part of who we are as Disciples of Christ. Everyone who is reading this article has benefited by being part of a faith community, and that faith community at one time was a New Church! The faith community in which I received baptism was First Christian Church in Flora, Indiana. It was over 150 years old at the time I waded into the water, but at one time it was a new church that a group of Disciples gathered to start a new faith community to bring new disciples to Jesus.

Why am I involved in Ohio's New Church development? I believe New Churches are part of every church's evangelism strategy. Every faith community has role in bringing new disciples to Jesus, and every faith community has a role of bringing into the body of Christ new faith communities to bring new disciples to Jesus.

The oldest books of the New Testament are letters from Paul to the various New Churches. He encourages them to grow in faith, reach out to other people with Jesus' message, and encourages them to cast the seed of planting new faith communities both near and far. I try to base my ministry following this New Testament example. Here at Saint Andrew Christian Church I am called to feed the faith of this congregation of disciples and to allow them to feed my spiritual growth, too. We also are called to seek out new disciples here where Dublin meets Powell which flows into Columbus and runs into Worthington. And we are not disappointed at the wonderful and gifted new disciples we are blessed in our gathering. Saint Andrew also is blessed by the warm relationship with have with the new churches who are just now forming near us. These new faith communities are reaching people we could have never found . They are inspiring us to have new ideas in the way we make new disciples for Christ. And they are refreshing us with the new church Spirit that flows out from their new communities of faith. This is why I am a Disciple pastor at Saint Andrew Christian Church and this is why I love being part of the Ohio New Church movement.

Blessing in the name of Jesus,

Rev. Morgan Wickizer (Chair of The Ohio New Church Committee, Pastor of Saint Andrew Christian Church, And a Disciple of Christ.)

A call to new church ministry

We often talk about our first church planting training when we gathered with other hopefuls. For Kelley and me, having been married only a few months, it was like giving birth to a new life. We left our training wondering what the future would hold but knowing that we were on the right path and that Living Faith Community Church had been conceived. So we went back home, to South Dayton and formed our core group of 12, after sharing the vision that God had given us, to build a pool...

There are all kinds of new churches, all kinds of visions, all kinds of reasons that God infuses into church planters. For us, it was all about a pool at Bethesda, where the man with Infirmities sat and wondered "why can't I get in?" He learned about pools, about sitting on the side and watching others take the plunge and ultimately about his need to be made whole, in Christ. Kelley and I had been called to plant a church where people could find wholeness in the pool of new life. We realized that all too often Christians (and those on the side lines) had been asking how they could be made whole, how they could really find peace, how they could get someone, anyone, and hopefully God put the pieces back together again. When Jesus asked "do you want to be made whole?" he was getting to the core of our living faith. Do we want His presence in our spirit, soul and body? Christians know about jumping in the water of new life and receiving Jesus in their spirit. But for so many of us, we miss out on the deeper dive, of inviting Jesus into our soul (mind, will, emotion) and our bodies. Sometimes we find ourselves jumping in and sitting out at the same time. We say yes to Christ, get baptized but wonder why we still may be stuck. This is confusing to Christians and to onlookers.

We wanted Living Faith to be the place for a deeper dive, for wholeness in Christ. So for us a living faith grows out of a 24/7 deeper dive into the waters of new life in Christ. Sunday worship is great but there needs to be more, like weekday small gathering, ongoing outreach, and intentional deeper dive workshops. We call this part Living Faith Living Well Workshops. Many of us know about this deeper dive through church camp as kids. But we have discovered that many people, kids and adults alike, have never experienced camp life and really could benefit from time away to dig deeper into things of the spirit, soul and body. Wholeness from the past, from broken relationships, addictions, emotions...time to invited the spirit of God into the unmentionable and hidden areas that keep us on the side lines of new life.

Living Faith Community Church has been an incredible journey with Jesus and with His people. Some who have stayed with us, some who have stopped in for the light of Christ and the warmth of community and have moved on. We have offered numerous Workshops that have introduced participants to the concept of wholeness in all their being. We have taken part in Outreach that has touched the lives of Daytonians and children in Honduras. We have offered Small group gatherings for neighborhood kids, and weekly studies for adults. But most of all, we have invited people to take the faith plunge and find new life in Christ. Six years later...Living Faith Community Church still is about the pool where Jesus invites us to meet Him and discover new life in our spirit, soul and body. What an incredible and precious calling!

Rev. Tom Parker , Living Faith Community Church South Dayton

A Call to New Church

People are only called to new church, it's not a job description that's going to attract a lot of people. It requires you to have a second job, a spouse with a full-time job or both. You have no immediate team in place, no building, established funding or security for the future. There are no guarantees this will work. I tell people new church is an emotional osculation between pure serenity and sheer terror.

So why am I doing this? Simply put, I'm called. I feel God's pull to build something new. A calling to create an open and energetic community founded on God given principles of inclusivity, dialogue and advocacy. To gather people together who haven't found a church that fit them, gave up on church, haven't given church a try, or (sadly) were told they were not welcomed at church. Inclusivity means building a community that understands Paul's writing in Galatians that God is building a Kingdom free of earthly labels. The Holy Spirit will bring those to grace whom seek it, my calling is to make sure there is a community waiting for them. Dialogue will allow us to live out our Disciples Identity of a reasonable faith not built on conformity, but unity. In our common tradition we seek to allow individuals to grow and think as God leads them. However, it is important to have a community to teach and converse with for growth to occur. Advocacy is a biblical mandate for us to speak for, struggle with, and help the oppressed find their voice. Social-justice is not a luxury or a pet project, it's a mark of a rightly ordered community.

New Church is a blank slate to create a community God is calling to being. My team and I are in the process of creating our events for next year and planning for the future. There are road blocks, some very big. We must be creative to overcome and always keep our God centered vision and mission at our center. The long and the short of it though is, I am called to build a part of the Kingdom of God, who can say no to that?

-Minister Brian Saxe, Disciples Gathering

Walking by Faith, Not by Sight

Since beginning this journey of being a new church pastor I have asked several people if they were ever really sure they heard the voice of God correctly. I have heard varying degrees of certainty but most have overwhelmingly said there are moments when they have questioned how they ended up on this path.

My journey actually began eight years ago thousands of miles from home in Egypt. While there participating in a meeting for the World Student Christian Federation I kept hearing a small voice resonating on the inside. One night I withdrew from the group and just began writing. I then folded those sheets of papers up and tucked them away without saying anything to anyone. As I approached graduation from seminary I found those same sheets of paper and shared them with a friend. We began to discuss the possibilities and I felt a spark of excitement. They then made the mistake of telling me the vision I had wrote years ago was a new church; my heart sank. I had heard horror stories of new church ministry and statistics that seemed just as dismal. I didn't want any part of it yet I couldn't just let go of the vision.

The region then offered a workshop for people who were interested or exploring a call to new church ministry. Then people, random people, would begin talking to me. Everything in my life seemed to be pointing toward new church but I was afraid. I decided I couldn't be like Jonah because I couldn't swim and ultimately I had to be a good steward of the gifts God had entrusted to me. I resolved in my heart and mind that if this was the path that was truly destined for me then doors would open. Almost instantly things became available. I still do not know where the journey is leading me or what Second Chance Christian Church will look like when it is fully operational. There are days that I know beyond a shadow of doubt that I am a new church pastor. But there are still days that I question this decision when the road becomes rocky or unexpected challenges arise. I have committed to staying on the journey and doing my part to advance God's kingdom.

-Rev. Trayce L. Stewart, Second Chance Christian Church

God is Always At Work Around Us! (all we have to do is pay attention!)

Late November 2012 my family and I moved to Gahanna, OH. 2013 was a difficult year, a year of many transitions and adjustments. As we all dealt with the new place, on my mind the question of where are we going to serve and worship God was always present. You see, my mom, who is 86 years old and has always lived in Puerto Rico, came to live with us and she does not speak much English. We went here and there, but not much was happening. Then, one day, I placed on Facebook a picture of the “condito” (small condo) we bought. To my surprise Rev. John Romig commented: “Charito, you are so close!” So, curiosity got the best of me and we decided to visit Gender Road Christian Church in Canal Winchester. We were treated so warmly from the very first day. Worship reminded me of my home church in Puerto Rico. People were welcoming and there is always food! However, what called my attention was GRCC mission statement: *“Our mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to further the kingdom of God. Our task is to witness in all situations to the grace of God. We seek in all people a response in faith and commitment. In the spirit of Christ we agree to differ, resolve to love and unite to serve.”* We kept attending.

Not too long after that and to add to the transition, I was diagnosed with breast cancer in a very early stage. GRCC was there comforting me, praying for me, and giving me the follow-up I needed... and they hardly knew me! We became members... who could resist all that love? ! After the cancer drama, one Sunday morning, while waiting for worship, Pastor John approached me and told me he had been praying about a Spanish worship service in order to reach the Hispanic community and asked if I was interested. I answered: “Yes! Let’s keep praying about that!” And we did.

Within a couple of months, Pastor John, Quique (my husband), and I met to brainstorm about this idea. We knew we were walking into uncharted territory, as it was not a new church start, but another worship expression of GRCC. After our conversation we decided to present the idea to the congregation Elders and the Board, and it was not contested; all were on board. We started on December 8, 2013 with Pastor John and Quique playing guitar, my daughter Angela singing, I playing the “guiro” and translating pastor John’s sermons. We sing, pray, and read Scripture in Spanish and English. Today we have one family committed to the church and to God. They come every Sunday to worship and the relationship is growing.

When I think back and reflect on all that has happened, I can say that God was and is working around me and my family, around Canal Winchester, around GRCC, and around this new family. God inspired Pastor John and moved others to start a worship service. We do not know what is going to happen down the road, but we all know God is there, leading, working all around us. All we have to do is pay attention!

- Rev. Charito Fernández, Gender Road Christian Church

Waiting on the Lord

I was about to enter my second year of search and call. I had graduated seminary, been ordained and been impatiently pacing, ready to explode with ministry and service to God. Some phone or Skype interviews turned to in-person ones but nothing felt right. I found myself questioning if I would find a congregation that embraced my quirky attitude, unique way of life and progressive theology. The fire and enthusiasm I felt for my first ordained position was quickly being reduced to “I hope I find a job soon, I don’t know what I’m going to do if I don’t, what if I was all wrong about this, how can I tone down my inner eco-friendly, vegetarian hippie to appear professional and mature and still remain true to myself?”

Then in August 2012, our regional pastor and president, Bill Edwards, approached me when he was visiting Advance Conference at Camp Christian. (In retrospect, big surprise. God tends to call me and speak to me often through my camp experiences.) He asked I would be willing to prayerfully consider new church ministry. I immediately said that it wasn’t for me (knowing virtually nothing about it of course, just knowing it was scary and unknown). I voiced my concern and worry over my lack of experience and skills. He gently asked me to simply consider it.

Over the next weeks, I tried to forget our conversation, pushed it to the back of my mind and continued to pray for an established church position. But God would not allow me to forget about it. Before I knew it, I was writing drafts of mission statements and core values while inwardly denying that new church was for me. Many prayers, wonderings, journal entries and anxieties later, I gradually began sitting with the thought that God was calling me to be a new church planter. And while I certainly found myself in a place of great fear and trepidation, I also felt intense excitement and the joy of possibility - things I had never felt while considering other positions and job offers. Being a new church planter is not easy - just as serving an established congregation is not easy - but I am incredibly glad that I’ve found myself in a ministry where I feel called, needed and supported. I constantly pray for God to work through my inexperience and fears and am grateful that God desires to work with me to show as many people as possible the love of Christ.

-Rev. Ellen Huffman, Co-Pastor of Fringe: a community growing

Call to New Church Ministry

On May 17th we will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of Misión Cristiana El Faro-Discípulos de Cristo, the only Spanish Disciples of Christ congregation in the city of Lorain and in Lorain County. Currently we are nested in the Christian Temple Disciples of Christ, in the small chapel that we have learned to love. This nesting business brings a comforting thought to my mind. When birds are expecting their young, the male, and sometimes also the female, start collecting materials to build a home. Anything from string, straw, cloth, wool, anything they can find to form this nest so that their little ones will be cared for and protected until the babies are strong enough to fly away. Most of the time, the parent birds force their little ones to leave the nest; some parent birds, however, are not in such a hurry. This is what I think of when I see the special relationship we have developed with the English congregation at Christian Temple. There is a slight difference in worship styles; there is, however, no difference in our love for God, respect for each other and love for our neighbor. Pastor Donahue and his gracious congregation have displayed no hurry for us to leave the “nest” as yet. Perhaps someday we will, but El Faro has felt no pressure to leave; on the contrary, we have been led to feel very welcomed. We give the glory to God for allowing us to work together and sharing the space in the peace and joy of Christ.

I have been the minister of El Faro for seven years and I feel blessed and privileged. During these years, I have seen many faces come and go. Misión Cristiana El Faro could be described as a small clinic, where some have come with a broken in spirit, looking for a small church to connect with God. They have come, healed and moved on. Some have moved to different places in the USA, others have retired and gone back to their native land, Puerto Rico. I have seen some young people that grew up with us, now married or away in school somewhere. We also have had the sad experience of losing some dear members to illnesses; they have gone to Heaven. Along with the sadness, there is always the joy of marriages, birthdays, baptisms, children presented to the Lord, and people giving their lives to Christ.

Ten years! Time has certainly passed by quickly, but when I am presented with the comment, “where did the time go?” I know exactly where it went, because it wasn’t wasted. Our time was invested in people, in community, in maturing and growing spiritually. Our time went into worship, into Bible studies, into visiting homes and bringing God’s Word into Nursing Homes, shut ins and prisons. Most of all, our time went into prayer, searching for a deeper connection with God. These ten years of our existence, Misión Cristiana El Faro went into helping one another and helping our community, partnering with Christian Temple and its pantry ministry. Working together to provide groceries, and hot meals has meant a lot to all those that have walked through the doors of the Christian Temple. The greatest thing of all is that the neighborhood knows that in this building there coexist two different cultures, two congregations working as one for the glory of God. I think we have made a statement of unity and I am so proud, blessed and humble to be a part of this ministry.

-Minister Crucita Marrero

You Never Know

“You never know how good you are until you are called to rise.” —Emily Dickenson

For a couple of years, this was the tagline on my email. As I sat contemplating my role with the Delaware Project after it had been restructured, God whispered these words to me. The whisper grew louder, and I remember saying out loud “are you kidding me?” You are calling me to rise, NOW?!

I thought God and I were very clear that I would discern my calling once my kids were both in school. My little one was still going to be at home with me for 2 more years! There was no way in my mind I was going to be able to make this work. It seemed SO big!

I have loved God for literally as long as I remember. I have always felt a unique connection to people and a true soul connection to God’s human creation. I had felt a sense of call when I was in my teens. I had always wanted to be a missionary. I thought that was what I was going to do in my ministry and service to God.

I prayed. I sang. I prayed some more and sang a lot more. In my singing, “Here I am Lord”, clarity came for me. While this is a song about calling, it was not the calling language that got me, rather the line,

“I will hold your people in my heart.”

I said, “I can do that, Lord. I do that already. I do it now. I can do this. Yes, Lord. Use me.”

The Delaware Project is such a unique ministry. What remained a vital ministry in the restructuring was The Free Store at Camp Christian, where we serve our neighbors through providing material items for those in need. While the material needs are necessary for this ministry, it is not what I believe keep folks coming back. It is the radical hospitality and extension of love and friendship that keeps them coming back. It is the safe place, the hope and the kindness that keeps them coming back. It is the people who volunteer their time and love, who say to God, “I will hold your people in my heart” that keeps people coming back.

As it turns out, I am a missionary. God is allowing me to follow my dream of being a missionary, just in Delaware, Ohio, down the road from my home. My hope and prayer is that I do the best I can for our God, that God will indeed be well pleased with the way I am “holding God’s people in my heart.” It is truly my pleasure to serve God through The Delaware Project.

-Minister Wendy Taylor, The Delaware Project

Call to New Church Ministry

By now, most of you are probably aware that Brian and I have been living in Westerville for almost a year and a half now and partnering with some of the "disciples diaspora" in Columbus to create a new faith community, Disciples Gathering. What you may not know, is how we came up with this name. It was important to us, from the beginning, that we be clearly identifiable as a DOC congregation. We believe so much in the Disciples' identity, which is central to our calling. The word Gathering is more vision specific. At its core, for us, this is what being/doing church is about. The verb of church is rooted in gathering...to worship, to serve, to witness, to learn, to advocate. The very act of gathering puts our faith into action and propels us into ever more expansive expressions of faith. Yes, in truth, sometimes we simply celebrate the holy sacrament of showing up, but speaking from personal experience, that is often the greatest gift we can receive in community.

All this being said, Disciples Gathering is open to ALL disciples. We were recently asked the question looming around some of your congregations, when it comes to new church. What does your congregation have to do with ours? OR Why should we help you? There are lots of answers to this question. Let's start with, it's who we are. It is who we are as a denomination, as people of faith, as a new church. We were founded as part of a movement, a faith collective, if you will. At the heart of our Disciples' identity is community/partnership/gathering....communion. I don't think anyone would deny this, but I do believe that there are opportunities for us to live out this identity to a fuller expression of faith.

The New Wineskins campaign is an incredible opportunity to have communion with Disciples all across Ohio. When we work, serve, gather together we become a fuller expression of Christ in the world. As Disciples of Christ we share a common table. As Disciples Gathering we are setting that collective table here in Westerville and asking you to be a part of it. We NEED you to be a part of it. Where would we be without the prayers and support of our friends and fellow believers? We need you: to ask good questions, to share our story, to share God's grace. We need your partnership as a collective body of faith. Communion means, literally, to join together with. In this most awesome of responsibilities, let us join together, to make more room at Our Lord's table by setting new tables and making more disciples.

-Rev. Debbie Saxe, Disciples Gathering

A Call to New Church

I was called to New Church because the people I am called to are largely outside the established Church. That's pretty much the whole story. I could tell you the set of circumstances that led me to this specific project, Fringe Community, or to my amazing ministry partner, Rev. Ellen Huffman to the amazing support we have had from so many ministers and leaders inside established churches. I'm really grateful for our particular project, the support we've received, and for Ellen. I learn a lot from her. We are growing together. We are growing with everyone we work and worship with. Neither Ellen, nor this particular project, nor the folks supporting us from established congregations are where this calling comes from though. This calling to New Church comes from having been on the outside. God was there with me, with the others I met outside of established Church. There was joy there. There is joy there. And anxiety causing chaos. And freedom. And God. We, and I mean that "We" sincerely, we are scared about the decreasing numbers in the congregations built with sweat and tears and sacrifice. We have looked for fixes to bring "the unchurched", "the dechurched", and "the young" back into Established Church. But mostly they don't need to come in. They're finding God outside. If we want to be with them we have to go outside too. God is calling me through them. Not to abandon my loved ones inside Established Church, to create some new "inside", or to bring folks "back in", but hoping that the folks "inside" will come "out", and that the folks "outside" will be able to see folks "inside" as family. Unity through Diversity. That's what calls me to New Church.

-Rev. Seth Stout, Fringe: A Community Growing

I am here for vacation

I knew that God had great plans for me and my family, but never imagined that it would include becoming a New Church Planter.

On June 2004, my husband and I came to Ohio to visit his family and enjoy a time for ourselves. One of the first things that I said to him was: “we are here for vacation, not to stay, only for vacation”. And I said it because he is very attached to his family and I knew they will try to convince him to move. We were very well in Puerto Rico; we had our jobs, our house, and very active in our local church. Never in my mind I thought that all this was about to change. Here we were at Ohio, having a great time. And every day I said to my husband: we are on vacation. Until the day I went to a bible study at West Boulevard Church. I met Pastor Pete Cascio, and the greeting that he gave me was: are you the new pastor? And I said, no, I am here for vacation. But he insisted, you are the new pastor, so I tried to ignore him. In my mind I was thinking, he has to be crazy, me a pastor, na!

During the bible study something happened that changed my life. I heard the Lord speak to my heart: “for all this I have prepared you”. I got scared; I started to panic, and tried to say to myself, ah! You are just imagining things. But God insisted: “For this I have prepared you” I shared it with my spouse, and we prayed. It was a big move, a huge decision. There was a lot to lose but if it was his plans, amen!

Soon everything started to unfold, God took control of every detail, and on September 2004, we were here, in Ohio with only four suitcases, leaving everything behind. What I thought was a loss has turned to be an unbelievable blessing.

God has done great things in our ministry, it has been hard, but I wouldn't change it for the world. And, no, I am not on vacation, I am doing God's work and I am loving it.

-Rev. Vanessa Rivera, Misión Cristiana Nueva Vida

Why Give to New Churches/New Wineskins

One recurring question among members of existing congregations is why should struggling congregations divert resources to help fund new churches? Many of our members wonder whether this represents good stewardship of time, talent and resources. Unfortunately, too many people believe that the best outcome for their local church will come from directing all available resources to the expenses of their particular congregation. Sadly, this same logic is used in discussions of special offerings which support the Regional Church, General Church and new congregations.

The truth is that we, as individuals and congregations, are members of a larger team. No individual member of any team can be victorious without the support of the rest of the team. As a covenant network of congregations in mission together, we have declared that we see the value of working together to strengthen each other and our region. Innovative ministry in any of our congregations enhances the ministry afforded to our congregations across all 88 counties. Our new congregations are able to test many new and exciting programs and outreach programs without fear of upsetting current members, violating their constitution or the threat of declining tithes because of disagreement or lack of understanding.

When we look at Jesus he used the image of a banquet to illustrate this idea and today we would use the idea of the “pot luck”. If we envision every congregation and every approach to ministry as another dish at the pot luck dinner, we can see the cumulative value of having more and new congregations. The greater the range of choices, the more impressive the buffet is. Besides meeting the needs of those with varying appetites, there is now the choice to try something different, and even something that one has never heard of. Helping others is a win-win approach for all those involved: new churches, established churches, the Christian Church in Ohio, the Kingdom of God and those who need to know the saving power of a second chance.

-Rev. Irvin Green, Interim Pastor of First Christian Church of Cuyahoga Falls

My Passion for Evangelism!

There is a deep spiritual hunger in our world. People are looking for spiritual answers. There are people who are desperate for what we have as Disciples, “the love of God as experienced in the church of Jesus Christ”. Whether we believe it or not, the world is far more ready to receive the Good News, than most believers are ready to share it.

So, I have always had a passion for evangelism. Evangelism is simply sharing the joy of our faith. I have become convicted that we must be intentional about reaching out and inviting persons into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

We are in the midst of a great mission field. The church in the 21st century must be a missionary church. What do effective missionaries do? They go to where the people are. A missionary church start new congregations! Starting new congregations is the most effective evangelism strategy in reaching people who need the good news of Jesus.

The Disciples New Church Ministry Office in our denominational headquarters reports, “Churches that engage in starting new congregations will actually find their life strengthened. Engaging in mission is a key to stopping decline and starting to grow. The first benefit that comes is a transformation from “survival mentality” to “mission mentality”. This transformation comes as God’s Spirit enables the members of existing church to see the vision and take action.”

As a regional church, we have launched a special evangelism campaign entitled “New Wine Skins”. This special effort will extend the evangelism ministry of the congregations of the Christian Church in Ohio by launching new congregations in areas where there is a need to reach new people for Christ. As we collectively join in this mission, there will be fresh pouring of “new wine, new life” into the ministry of each of our established congregations.

Today, Jesus commissions each one of us as his followers to Go and make disciples. That is what evangelism is all about. To move out of our church buildings, our worship services, our Bible studies, and our small groups and make it a priority to reach out to “un-churched” people on their turf so that the love of Christ can influence their lives. We are called to Go!

Rev. Dr. William H. Edwards, Regional Pastor & President