

FCC VISALIA, CALIFORNIA JOINS DHF

THE STORY IN BRIEF:

On Sunday, October 23, the congregation of First Christian Church of Visalia, California voted to leave the Disciples of Christ denomination and join Disciple Heritage Fellowship.

The process began as some in the congregation realized the denomination was moving in directions they could not and would not follow. Concerns had been raised about the denomination over the years, but the opportunity for several members to attend the Disciples' General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, moved the congregation beyond concern to the desire to make a decision.

During the decision process, Doug Harvey was invited to come and share DHF's perspective on both the denomination's direction and on the value of joining DHF. The DoC Regional Minister and several representatives also held informational meetings at the church.

The congregational meeting had well over 90% participation by eligible voters, and the final vote was over 70% to both leave the denomination and to join DHF. The actual vote was 120-47.

Mike Messenger is pastor of FCC. We welcome him and the congregation into the DHF family!

INSIGHTS: INTERVIEW WITH THE PASTOR AND BOARD CHAIR AT VISALIA

On November 2, 2005, Doug Harvey interviewed pastor Mike Messenger and Board Chair Tom Lewis of the FCC of Visalia, California over the phone. The following are excerpts from that conversation

Doug: What were your major reasons for the decision to leave the Disciples of Christ denomination?

Mike: There were a lot of issues that had been going on for decades, but the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was the issue of Jesus Christ and "who do you say that I am." When the denomination came out with a stand that Jesus was one of many ways, and that it was morally and ethically wrong (to claim Jesus as the only way of salvation), that was insulting to us. The statement that we're morally and ethically wrong to say Jesus is the only way or to believe that, that was it. (See Editor's Note at the end for text being cited here)

Another primary issue intertwined with the first one is biblical authority. In fact, I asked a couple of people point blank, "Then is Jesus morally wrong when he says in John 14:6, 'I

am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the father except by me?” Of course, the response we would get from that is that the Bible is not the ultimate authority.

So to me the answer was two-fold, the issue of who Jesus Christ is as the redeemer of all mankind and also the authority of Scripture.

Tom: There has been some frustration by some of our leaders for years. We just disagree with some of the direction and the “progressive” attitudes of the denomination.

What really kicked it off for several people, and me in particular, was Report 0518 that was adopted by the General Assembly this past June. According to that report, our piece of the diversity, which is that Jesus is the sole source of salvation, is said to be morally, ethically and spiritually wrong.

Doug: What about your motives for joining DHF, which is a very distinct decision?

Mike: A key for me came when another pastor asked me, “When you leave the denomination, if something happens to you, where are they going to look for a pastor?” I’d never really thought about that, to be honest. We do have, in our tradition, distinctive worship styles with communion at the center of our worship. I thought, if the church leaves the denomination and down the road needs another pastor, where are they going to find a pool of ministers that come out of our tradition and would continue the traditions on which we’re founded and have faithfully followed for 148 years.

I’ve personally been aware of Disciple Renewal and DHF from its inception. I’ve always appreciated having what I would call a voice of reason, a voice crying in the wilderness in our denomination. I could say I’m not the only one seeing problems here. It’s been a source of comfort to know you guys existed and were fighting the good fight.

Since leaving the chaplaincy and going into the civilian parish I’ve had in the back of my mind, “Why don’t we join DHF?” That was before we even thought about leaving the denomination. But in Northern California, probably the most liberal Region in the DoC, it’s like when they say “DHF,” they spit. Like something foul was just in their mouth. I guess I was a little intimidated by that. We’re a conservative church, but if we associate with DHF that’s just going to make things more vitriolic around here. But I finally quit caring what they think. I’m tired of being insulted, I’m tired of listening to heresy.

Tom: Several people in this church have been aware of DHF. As Board chair I wasn’t even aware of you until almost the time of the board decision, interestingly enough. And it was at the time of our board resolution about leaving the DoC that someone tacked on at the end that we could affiliate with the Disciple Heritage. There are a number of people in this church who strongly believe that if you leave the denomination you just wilt away, you disappear and become dust in the wind. It’s a real strongly held position. But by realigning ourselves with somebody with similar theological positions we would not lose that family support system.

Doug: You two have helped lead this church through a difficult time of decision. Looking back, would you have any advice for others who might be heading into a similar process? I know it was a painful process in many ways...

Mike: It's a liberating process.

I would say two things to others:

One is that the pastor of a church really needs to start teaching on the fundamentals of the faith. The denominational folks love to claim they're being faithful to our heritage, but when people are exposed to the facts, they aren't being faithful at all. To Campbell, Stone and the others, the Bible was authoritative, and to these (DoC) people it's not any more.

The other big thing is checking your polity and by-laws.

We actually consulted a lawyer to be sure our deed of trust, our by-laws and our articles of incorporation were totally free and clear. We were about 99% sure, but wanted make 100% sure they didn't have any possibility of coming back and taking our property. We wanted peace of mind on this issue before making a decision.

By chance we just changed our by-laws at the beginning of the year. I had no idea we were going to leave the denomination this year. Our new by-laws have a clause that says you can't just come in, once the board makes a recommendation and sets a date for a congregational vote, and vote on that matter. (Editor's note: The Visalia by-laws require a person to be active in giving and/or attendance during the 90 days prior to a congregational vote being called for)

Another related issue is knowing what your by-laws say about the percentage you need for this kind of decision.

Tom: A chapter of your book says it: "Prepare."

What I would suggest is that you wake people up to the attitudes and the positions of the denomination so that they are aware of them. More people need to understand, truly understand, where the leadership of this denomination is, and realize it is fully entrenched. It isn't a seasonal change like Republicans and Democrats, they've really taken over and they're there from top to bottom.

I think a quote by one of our members was rather telling. He said, "I'm 65 years old. I'm old enough to make a decision based on my experience, what to listen to, what piece of the (DoC) diversity I want to listen to and act on, which one of those reports and resolutions I can ignore and say, 'Oh, that's just them.' But what about my grandchildren? My grandchildren don't have that experience and don't have that ability, and if they're being taught wrongly, they're going to learn that, and I don't want them to learn it." I think that made a difference to several grandparents in this church.

Doug: I know it's a little early in the process, but what does it look like the impact on this congregation is going to be?

Mike: One thing I've been emphasizing is that for the most part, nothing we do is going to be all that different. We're still a Christ-centered, biblically based church. Our worship is going to stay the same, the name's going to stay the same. The only thing that going to change is we won't be in fellowship with people who, quite frankly, in my opinion, are heretics.

So, after the vote, in some ways, there's absolutely no difference. It's like we had this major buildup to the vote, and afterwards, OK, life goes on. But that's the point I've been making to people, nothing we do here is going to change, we just no longer have to endure the insults of those who claim to be tolerant and diverse, we no longer have to respond to their solicitations for money, we no longer have to feel obligated to go to all these different functions and listen to the heresy and the insults again. We've been freed up that way.

But I think there's something that you can't gauge in human terms. There's a spiritual dimension to this whole thing. Like Paul said, "What fellowship does light have with darkness?" People said that last Sunday they felt a completely different spirit in our worship service. There was a freer, more joyful experience. This has been truly a liberating experience spiritually, emotionally and physically.

Tom: From a numbers standpoint, I would guess we are losing 10% of our people and 5% of our budget.

From a people position I think we are more focused with people who have like theology. We are more focused with people who are going to participate in the church and contribute to the church. And I think that there's an energy about the church right now because we've gone through the process. I think the theological level of understanding of this church is much higher because of the process. We've had to. Our reason for leaving was simply theology. It wasn't, "Those nasty guys up there are terrible." We left because they believe this and we don't. And a lot of people didn't understand that position. By the time we got through explaining it, everybody agreed.

Doug: Anything else you'd like to add?

Mike: I personally believe we're in the end times. Whether that's a fact or not, the point is that there is something interesting going on throughout the mainline denominations. There is a separating of the wheat from the tares that's going on in the church in America. I really think that the FCC of Visalia has an obligation, not just to jump off a sinking ship so we're safe, but to ask how we can help others come to this point. Because we truly believe that the DoC is an apostate church and that there are a lot of good people in there who are either ignorant or blinded to what's going on, we feel an obligation to help people see what's going on. I don't think a true Christian should have fellowship with an

apostate church. It's gone beyond the fact that we want to get out. Now what can we do, how can we help facilitate others, educate others to get to this point.

DoC people might say that we're sowing seeds of discontent. We're sowing seed, but it's not discontent, we feel. You don't know whether to laugh or cry, but when they're saying that Jesus is not the only way and it's an affront.

When I talk to people in our community, their mouths just drop open. They say, "And you guys need to debate whether to be part of this?" I've been with the DoC for 25 years. It's kind of like the proverbial frog in a pan of water. You and I are used to a certain amount of this stuff by virtue of our daily dealings with it, like with the homosexuality issue. That was never the defining thing to this church, but for me personally, it totally goes against Scripture, and that is a big issue. We made our stand on Christ. It's interesting, because if I tell other people they're ordaining homosexuals in the DoC, they reply, "You're still a part of that?"

In fact, it's hurt our church's growth, the fact we've been associated with the DoC. Although we're a conservative church, there are people in this town who had an interest in this church, but when they found out that we were associated with the DoC, that ended the discussion. One lady who works in a bank downtown, was asked, "Oh, you belong to that church that ordains gays." So we were guilty by association.

But you've to ask yourself, why were tolerant of that anyway?

Tom: I really think that the driving force for me personally was the fact that here is a denomination that prides itself on diversity which then takes our piece of the diversity and calls it morally, ethically and spiritually wrong. It's just appalling to me. And then they come back and say you don't really have to follow everything that comes out of the denomination. Well, if I'm morally, ethically and spiritually wrong, I can't ignore that.

Editor's note: The General Assembly business item cited several times in this interview comes from the 2005 DoC General Assembly item 0518, entitled "Report Concerning Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement." The particular statement referenced in that report is this: **"We affirm it is morally, ethically, and spiritually wrong for any person, group, or religion to claim exclusive access to God, God's love, grace or salvation. When Christians and others have made such claims to exclusivity, much suffering and degradation has often been the result."** The report was received by the Assembly and commended by a further resolution (1519) for "teaching and study" and several follow-up actions by denominational agencies.