

The Southwest Central Legacy

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Central Church of Christ

In 1903, the first congregation of Churches of Christ began in Houston. In late 1917, members of the Heights and First congregations met to plan for a new centrally located congregation. On the first Sunday of 1918, the music hall of Thos. Goggan Co. became that new congregation's meeting place, later followed by the hall at the Chamber of Commerce, and finally the banquet hall at the City Auditorium. This movable gathering became known as the Central Church of Christ.

The members soon began a building fund, purchased a lot at Drew and Albany, and built their first building, opening in April 1924. Central had 69 members. Within a few years, the congregation leased a two-story house next door for classrooms. In 1935, they built another building for the growing church. By 1938, membership had passed 300. Around this time, the elders began looking elsewhere for a completely new site.

Central had many far-reaching ministries during the 1930s: working with students at Rice University, assisting the poor of the neighborhood, and starting the very first regular radio Bible class by Churches of Christ.

It seems that nearly everything started happening at once in 1939 and 1940. First, the congregation secured the entire 4100 block of Montrose for a new physical location. Second, Burton Coffman, who would become one of the best-known ministers in Churches of Christ, joined the work of the congregation.

Moreover, the church branched out into missionary work as never before. In 1940, Central supported mission partners in Boston, Australia, Mexico, China, and Southern Rhodesia. The congregation also worked among Houston's Hispanic population.

In 1941 the congregation moved into its first building on Montrose, and by 1945, when membership passed 800, two separate services were necessary to accommodate everyone on Sunday mornings. That same year, the second and third units of the Montrose location were completed and utilized, and plans were being made for still further additions. The final construction project was completed on December 7, 1947.

Despite such a gigantic building program, Central spent more money than ever for actually teaching the Gospel. In 1946, in addition to local efforts, ministers were supported in New England, Australia, Colorado, Mexico, and New York State. Considerably more than half of the congregation's budget went to teaching efforts. Receiving enthusiastic support were the Herald of Truth radio broadcasts, first beamed nationwide in 1952.

In 1951, all eyes were on Mexico as a church building in Monterrey was finished. More than 100 Central members attended opening services over the Labor Day weekend in Monterrey. In 1952, Agustin Figueroa, supported by Central, became the first full-time minister of a church in

Mexico City. Also, work was finished on a dormitory and classroom building at Torreon Bible School.

In Houston, Central also participated in church planting. In early 1950, the Riverside Church opened (later known as MacGregor Park), with most of its first members from the Central congregation. In 1955, Central members played a significant role in starting another Houston congregation – Southwest. That congregation began worshipping in 1956 with about 100 Central members among their number, including elders, deacons, and a minister.

Central established two new programs during 1955. One was a new educational department for shut-ins; the other was a "Dial-a-Daily Devotional" telephone recording.

After many months of planning, the congregation purchased a lot for the Christian Home for the Aged in 1957. The first building filled with residents almost immediately, and a new 78-bed quickly addition went on the drawing boards, opening its doors in December 1965. A third extension was soon constructed after that.

Another type of personal ministry – the cottage meeting – became especially popular around 1957. Associate minister Jule Miller prepared colored filmstrips and corresponding lessons. In less than 18 months, 59 persons were baptized.

By the time Central moved into the 1960s, its mission work included Torreon, Monterey, and Mexico City, Mexico; Salzburg, Austria; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Caracas, Venezuela; Ibaraki, Japan; and US works in Houston; Bellville; Buffalo, Wyoming; Westfield, New Jersey; Manhattan, New York; Herald of Truth, several Bible chairs, and homes for children and the aged.

A "Training for Future Service" program, later called the Houston Institute for Biblical Studies, had also been started. It provided college-level courses on church leadership and Bible subjects in evening classes for local area adults.

Members worked in the Drew Street Mission teaching Bible classes daily to different age groups and helped to provide clothing, food, furniture, medical attention, and counseling to inner-city residents. Central also contributed \$10,000 toward the construction of the A. B. Bruce Religion Center on the University of Houston campus, thereby securing the perpetual right for Churches of Christ to maintain an office and teach on campus. Central, Southwest, and Southwest Central have been involved in that campus ministry ever since that time.

Southwest Church of Christ

Southwest Church of Christ had its origin as a mission project of Central. Planning began in 1954 for an expansion in the southwest part of town.

In May 1956, on a Wednesday night, the first meeting was held with members sitting on boxes in an unfinished auditorium, now the Fellowship Hall, illuminated by construction drop lights. 110 attended the first service. That first building included the current fellowship hall, kitchen, room 111, and some storage areas. The congregation opened with 3 elders, 25 deacons, and Paul Easley as its first minister. Easley had been an associate minister at Central.

Growth spread rapidly. The first facility expansion began during that first year, with the quick addition of classrooms (now the current office complex).

The membership in 1957 reached nearly 500. A two-story education building was constructed in 1958. In 1959, the membership required 3 Sunday morning worship services with 2 Bible class periods and 2 Sunday evening assemblies, with an additional Bible class time.

The congregation continued to flourish numbers-wise, so plans were made for the current auditorium, the supporting nursery, and more classrooms. \$250,000 in bonds were sold out in 12 days in October 1959, and the building officially opened in 1961. One innovation was the size and scope of the nursery. At this point in the history of Churches of Christ, nurseries were not widely accepted, nor their ministry valued.

Southwest helped start new congregations, too. They sent members to the Sharpstown church in 1960 and the Westbury church in 1963, and it had a part in the formation of the Clear Lake church in 1963. Southwest envisioned growth in the Northeast United States, so it supported Bob Scott to begin a church in Albany, New York, in 1962. Several members moved to Albany to assist in the new work.

In 1960, Jule Miller joined the congregation as Minister of Personal Evangelism. There were 125 baptisms that year. Bible School grew to over 600 in 1961, 95% of worship participants. The first homecoming happened in 1960, with 971 attending.

Highlighting 1965, the Christian Child Help Foundation was founded in conjunction with other congregations, led by Central and Southwest Church. Ministry at the Medina Children's Home and the Drew Street Mission further illustrated the congregation's care for children.

A large metal building at the back of the property was built as a Service Center. It originally stored and renovated donated goods, which were distributed to offer relief to persons in moments crises, such as hurricanes. Through the years, it has served in a variety of capacities, including classrooms for elementary school grades, medical missions storage, and as a youth room.

In 1972, Southwest began a ministry to the neighborhood known as the Southwest Christian Day Care and School. This day care continued until 1987, and at one time, it was the largest licensed day care facility in Harris County, serving 140 children each day.

Three homegrown missionaries were supported during the 1970s. Terri Hoch married Adrin Fletcher and were supported in Edinburgh, Scotland. Mary Banister served in Germany, where she subsequently married Carl Drehsel. She was an administrator with Pepperdine University's Heidelberg campus. Glynn Langston (a current missions partner) has been supported in France and Ireland, and now ministers through Braille and the short-wave radio around the world.

Following a visit by Dr. Henry Farrar in 1977, Southwest became involved in the work of the African Christian Hospitals Foundation. Southwest became a storage and forwarding agent for donated medical supplies to hospitals in Nigeria, Ghana, and Haiti. Through the years, the church sent members to work at a hospital near Aba, Nigeria.

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In March of 1983, Mother and Daughter, Central and Southwest, joined forces to form the Southwest Central Church. The idea of a merger had been discussed for the previous 4 years, as the philosophies of the two congregations were compared and numerous studies were conducted concerning their futures. Precipitating the final decision came when Southwest's preaching minister resigned around the time the Central church property was put up for sale to retire the significant debts of the Christian Home for Aged. The merger of the two congregations seemed an ideal solution to the needs of the both groups.

The new congregation's immediate outreach was the Churches of Christ Medical Center Chaplaincy, now called Lifeline Chaplaincy, which has become the premier chaplaincy ministry of Churches of Christ. Southwest planted seed planted in 1982, and the first chaplain arrived in August 1983. Through its ministry, Lifeline Chaplaincy cares for the spiritual and physical needs of patients, and the organization is instrumental in providing training to ministry students from Christian universities. In 2005, the ministry spread to Dallas, later followed by Ft. Worth and Central Texas.

In 1984, the church embarked on a new journey to transfer ministry responsibilities from deacons to Ministry Teams. Over the next 5 years, this transition resulted in the church having no formally recognized deacons but a host of diligent and empowered volunteers who served according to their giftedness. At the same time, the Elders began moving more to shepherding responsibilities, establishing a Finance Team and an Administrative/Legal Team to handle those specific details.

Concerned with numerical decline, in the early 1990s, SWC conducted church growth analysis, led by a leading expert in the field. However, SWC rejected the recommendations to move and become a homogeneous suburban church, in favor of becoming more like the surrounding neighborhood and ministering to the people in its immediate area.

The church opened its eyes to the community who lived at its door, who may not have shared its own cultural background, but were children of the Living God nevertheless, just like the members of SWC. The strongest ministry the past few years has been toward the neighborhood, and the congregation has come a long way toward recognizing, appreciating, and valuing persons from varied walks of life. SWC has accepted the challenge of urban ministry.

The 1990s thus became an era of outreach to neighborhood youth. The Southwest Central youth ministry provided mentoring, tutoring, jobs, and an intergenerational summer camp in Colorado known as Rock Cleft. A scholarship fund was established for youth who would otherwise be unable afford higher education. During this decade, that the church came to look more like the neighborhood around it.

The church has offered Neighborhood Enrichment Seminars to spread the aroma of Christ across the area. It has hosted Alcoholics Anonymous, exercise programs and book clubs. It participates with area churches in the Braes Interfaith Ministries, an ecumenical food pantry. Members volunteer with the Hospitality Apartments, which provide free housing to patients and their families who are in the Texas Medical Center for extended stays. Members also support the inner-city ministry of the Impact Houston Church.

Since 2003, Wednesday night assemblies center around Café Grace. The church lobby became a sacred area where individuals share their lives, pray together, and study together. For a while, English as a Second Language and FriendSpeak, programs to help new English readers develop their reading and pronunciation skills, attracted immigrant students from the neighborhood and the Texas Medical Center.

Discussions concerning the ministry of women in the Kingdom of God had been going on among at SW and SWC for many years. Former elder Roy Willbern wrote a small book in 1977 entitled *Who's In Charge Here Anyway?* Willbern asked questions about church leadership, concluding with a chapter that sought greater public involvement by women. Minister Steve Sandifer published his book – *Deacons: Male and Female?* – in 1989 which studied the roles of female deacons in the early church and the supportive attitudes of restoration leaders toward women leaders in general. SWC ministry teams had utilized gifted women since the 1980s, and after many years of Bible studies and discernment, women began serving publicly during Sunday morning worship services in early 2004.

Many other things about this church could be mentioned – the countless cups of water offered, the random acts of kindness, the letters and calls of encouragement, the VBS's, the mission trips, the Homecomings - but these serve to highlight the 90 years of ministry in the name of God.

Southwest Central is a special place made up of special people who love the Lord with all of their hearts and who seek God's will in their lives.

Addition, written in Feb. 2022

In the last 15-ish years, much has happened – good and grief alike. We have undergone further changes, including to our building. Hurricane Ike in 2008 made sure of that, ripping off part of our roof, flooding our auditorium, and destroying our fixed pews.

But God, who prefers flexible seating anyway, gave our leaders wisdom to reimagine the room, and we reconfigured it to a flat floor and brought in movable chairs. As a result, we have a fully adaptable space. And adapt we have.

In the years since Ike, it's been used for worship services and fellowship meals; community meetings and hosting Rice students; Halloween events and Christmas Cantatas; Wednesday night bible studies and Thursday morning ecumenical gatherings; a place for silent prayer and a sanctuary for children who need help with homework, or just need a friend.

SWC's people have evolved and reshaped, too. Persons have come and gone, and many have passed away. We no longer have 800 members, 2 separate worship services, and dozens of missionaries we monetarily support. We are much smaller in numbers and less financially secure. Yet in our trimness, we are more nimble and open, and we're certainly no less willing. We are also grateful that previous generations at SWC paid off the building debt here so today's group can focus elsewhere.

The baptismal waters have continued to stir - sinners, saints, and angels stepping into the waters of grace. We have women who preach and serve as shepherds, we have children who

share the bread and the cup of Christ, we have men who work diligently behind the scenes, and we have others who are learning what it means for them to follow Jesus.

Long time beloved minister Steve Sandifer retired in 2014, after 30-plus years of care and devotion. Current minister Steve Sargent has tried his best to carry the blessed baton that was passed on to him, continuing to serve the people entrusted to this church, as ministers before him so did.

A recent and ongoing pandemic, meanwhile, has shaken us to the core. It's like we've been hard pressed on every side, weight and stresses alike, and not just financially. Even so, we are not crushed; we've been perplexed, but we are not in despair; hurt, but we are not abandoned; struck down, but we are not destroyed.

None of this is from us, of course. In fact, we carry this "let light shine out of darkness" message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. What is happening here...is God's incomparable power in us and through us and in spite of us.

We do not know what the next chapter of this story will yet be, who or what God will entrust to us next. We don't know if the building as we know it now will cease to exist, if it will be turned into something else, if it will be re-innovated into expanded space for more community. Maybe we'll return to the fellowship hall and sit on boxes underneath construction lights again. Who knows?

But here's what we do know: the Kingdom of God, as one of our current Shepherds tells us all the time, is very near. In that nearness, God will make a way. When there seems to be no way – God will make a way. God is not out of ideas. Jesus is not confused. The Holy Spirit is not out of breath. Of this, we are sure.

We - as our SWC ancestors taught us when massive growth happened and when long-dreamed plans collapsed - we will discern with listening ears when to speak, when to wait, and when to act. We will trust, as another one of our persons remind us, that God will lead us.