

Foreword

Some of my most cherished memories revolve around the Rosen Heights Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas. My uncles, J. Willard Morrow and Bennett Morrow, were preachers for the congregation as far back as I can remember. Each Sunday morning at some point in the worship service, there was what we called the “Children’s Song” when all the little ones would go to the front of the auditorium and usually sing “When We All Get to Heaven” with the entire congregation singing along with us. To this day, more than 70 years later, I silently give thanks to God for the Rosen Heights Church of Christ each time the church sings this song. I will always love that church for the influence it has had on my life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, a minister of the word, a foreign missionary, a university Bible professor and administrator, and Christian writer and editor. As a matter of fact, I have had a lifelong love affair with the Church of Christ wherever I have found it throughout the world.

This love affair, therefore, has made it difficult for me to understand why anyone would want to leave the Church of Christ. When I have had personal conversations with some who have left, I have been stunned to hear them describe the churches in which they grew up or the churches they chose to leave. Their experiences were so different from mine that I found it difficult to believe we were even talking about the same church. I have heard others who stayed and did not leave express feelings similar to mine. Why would anyone want to leave Churches of Christ?

Flavil Yeakley and I became friends after we both had been preaching for a number of years. It has been a special pleasure to work with him as a colleague at Harding University in Searcy, Ark.; attend the College Church of Christ together with our wives who are also friends; team together on some writing projects; and frequently discuss our mutual joys and concerns about happenings within Churches of Christ.

I have concluded from our countless conversations that Flavil and I

both have many sweet memories about childhood religious experiences that were intertwined with loving family and friends who encouraged our commitment to Christ. At the same time, we are not naïve. Growing up as we both did within families that were on the front line of local churches and brotherhood issues, we know that we have never been able to become precisely the church that existed in the mind of God from before the creation of the world. We know from years of personal experience that every congregation can have its problems and challenges – even sometimes a dark underbelly – that should not exist. Despite its shortcomings, we both love the Church of Christ because of what it stands for and because of its desire to follow the teachings of God’s Word and imitate the example of Jesus Christ.

Flavil Yeakley, however, likes to get to the bottom of things. He wants to know what has motivated some people to leave Churches of Christ so those of us who have stayed can make whatever corrections that may need to be made, clarify any misunderstandings that exist, and do a better job of presenting ideas and practices that we believe are non-negotiable.

In this book, numerous character traits of Flavil Yeakley come to the surface. He is courageous, full of curiosity, open-minded, committed to truth, willing to listen and learn, and a peacemaker. He has made a genuine effort to find out from anonymous respondents why they left the Church of Christ. Although their answers are sometimes difficult for a lover of the Church of Christ to hear, Flavil pays close attention and offers comments that are thoughtful and kind. He deals with subjects like instrumental music, the role of women, church leadership, marriage and divorce, and other serious doctrinal questions such as who will be saved and who will be lost.

Even though we may not fully agree with every one of Flavil Yeakley’s answers, or we may wish he had said something in a slightly different way at times, we should all be grateful that he has opened a dialog with people who used to be a part of Churches of Christ and chose to leave. They are our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends and associates. We continue to love them. Our prayer is that Flavil Yeakley’s efforts in this book will contribute to reconciliation and the unity for which Jesus prayed.

– *Howard W. Norton*
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Preface

The study reported in this book has its limitations and its strengths. If it were possible to do a random sample of those who have left Churches of Christ, we could know how much confidence we could have that the sample was truly representative of all those who have left Churches of Christ. This survey was not like that. Its greatest strength, however, is in the richness of data produced. My somewhat educated guess is that the reasons given in this study for leaving Churches of Christ are not very different from what we would find if we could interview all those who have left Churches of Christ. Such interviews with the whole population of former members would not likely generate any new categories of reasons. The way to judge the accuracy in this kind of study is to compare the reasons these former members give for leaving Churches of Christ with what you have observed among people you have known who have left Churches of Christ or what you have observed in various congregations.

This study is a report of some reasons given by some former members explaining why they left Churches of Christ at some time in the past. That is history – not prophecy. It tells a little about what was. It does not tell what is now or what will be in the future. A different kind of research will be needed to focus on present trends and project what may happen in the future. I do not know of any reliable data from studies being done. There is, however, some anecdotal evidence that church leaders should consider seriously.

People who work with the current generation of high school and

college-age members of the Churches of Christ are reporting that a majority of them do not expect to remain in Churches of Christ after they graduate and are more independent – that is after they are no longer being supported by their parents. Some who teach at Christian colleges and universities report that a majority of the Bible majors in some of their classes do not expect to stay in Churches of Christ after they graduate. More research will be needed to see if these anecdotal reports accurately represent a larger group of members.

In this book you will read what some people who have left Churches of Christ say about their reasons for leaving. If you respond to their stories in the way I did, you may wonder what you would have done if you had been in their situation. I have never been in their situation. If I had been, I might have had options they did not have. I think that I would make a serious attempt to change things before deciding that I had to leave. I live in a county with more than 30 Churches of Christ. If I could not change things in the church where I am a member, I have plenty of other congregations where I could go. If there were no other congregations within reasonable driving distance from where I live, I think that I would plant another congregation. But I know from experience how difficult church planting is.

I was the first full-time church-supported minister in three new churches and helped three other mission churches become self-supporting. As I look back on these domestic mission, church-planting efforts, I am amazed at how much God was able to do in spite of me and all the mistakes I made.

Starting a new congregation is not a viable option for most members of the Churches of Christ. Transferring membership to another area congregation is not an option for people in places where there is only one Church of Christ within reasonable driving distance. Moving a family in order to find a better congregation might not be a viable alternative. Perhaps going to a Christian Church with the “instrumental brethren” or to an independent community-type church is the least objectionable alternative for some people. It is not for me to say. God did not appoint me as the judge of these people who left Churches of Christ.

It is not my purpose to condemn the people who responded to the “Why I Left Churches of Christ” survey. My hope is that church leaders will learn important lessons from listening to those who have left so that they can do a better job of ministering to those who have not left.