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Church merger built on trust

Posted January 1, 2012



Congregation members meet one another during the first joint service of Unity Christian Church in Radford in November. The church officially merged today. Photo by Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

“God is building a new church in Radford — come and see.”

For the last several months, a banner with this slogan has been attached to the front of First Christian Church, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) located in east Radford. Across town is another church of the same denomination called Radford Christian Church. Each is over 100 years old and has a long history in the city.

But today these two churches have unified to form a new church — Unity Christian. When the clock struck midnight on New Year’s Eve, the old churches dissolved and Unity Christian is now officially established. Today they are scheduled to hold their first service

as Unity Christian, complete with a processional through the city, a ceremony and a reception. It hasn’t been a simple process. Nearly two years of planning went into the merger, and almost every member of both congregations played a role to make the merger possible.

“These are not just things that happen because we want them to,” Unity Christian’s leader Rev. Gina Rhea said. “A lot of work has to go into them.”

Some of the people involved in the merger wanted to tell the story behind it – as a testament to what can happen when groups of people let faith guide the way to such a decision.

A state of decline

Alban Shumate has attended Radford Christian, located in Radford’s west end, since he moved to Radford 64 years ago. He married his wife, Phyllis, 20 years later and she became a member. Each has held active roles in the church, particularly in the past four years since they retired. They both remember when the bible school classes were 125-150 people in the late ‘50s, and many children were involved. There were so many people, Alban Shumate said, that the classes lasted for two weeks.

As time went on, members started to move away and things began to dwindle down, he said. As the group got smaller, it took less time to teach the material and the sessions were shorter. Later the classes got cut down to one week, then to three days. The last session, which was two or three years ago, only had seven children.

He said that membership declined gradually over the last few decades due to factors such as job changes and people moving. But the steepest decline happened in 2000, when 19 members died over a period of a year and a half.

“I would walk in church and it just felt lonely because I missed them,” Phyllis Shumate said. “You’d look around and you’d just see a few people. I still loved the church, but the attitude really did change.”

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About two and a half miles east sits First Christian. They have a larger budget and a bigger church, but that doesn't mean they are immune to the problems Radford Christian faces. While the number of paying members has gone up since 1990, the number of people regularly attending services each week has gone down; only one-third of the congregation is in the pews every Sunday.

A research report titled "A Decade of Worship in American Congregations: 2000-2010" compiled by Faith Communities Today shows that First Christian and Radford Christian are not alone in their struggles.

The average weekend worship attendance dropped by 17 percent over the last decade, with one in four congregations having fewer than 50 people in the pews each Sunday, according to the national report. The report also found that the decline affected virtually every kind of congregation. According to First Christian's yearbook data, its average worship attendance dropped by 25 percent since 1990 and hasn't reached over 100 participants in seven years.

Radford Christian had a full congregation many years ago, congregation member Becky Moore said. When her father started attending around 80 years ago, he had to sit on the windowsill because every pew was taken up, she said. Now the average worship attendance is between 30 and 35 members.

The report found that worship attendance didn't just shrink; it also aged. The number of participants over 60 increased and the amount of participants between 18 and 34 decreased.

In a survey of 104 members of First Christian, 61 percent were over 50. Of the 50 Radford Christian members surveyed, 72 percent were over 50.

Phyllis Shumate said that some of the families who left Radford Christian went to churches where there were more activities and mission trips for the kids.

"Losing the young people and not getting them back — that hurt us more than anything."

The economy took a toll on many congregations' finances, the survey also found; 80 percent of the American congregations surveyed reported their finances had been negatively impacted by the recession.

According to their yearbook data, First Christian's income dropped by almost \$20,000 since its peak year in 2006, with a projected income of \$125,000 for 2011. Revenue numbers were not available for Radford Christian. There was a drop in income when membership fell, Alban Shumate said, but the church came up with enough funds whenever they needed it.

Coming together

In April 2010, Rev. R. Wayne Calhoun Sr., the minister of evangelism for the Disciples Home Missions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), held a two-day symposium for First Christian and Radford Christian to talk about the possibility of a merger.

In his presentation, Calhoun said that 67 percent of Disciples of Christ churches are stagnant, declining or dying. Both churches felt the urgency to discuss a merger after his visit, Rhea said.

A union between First Christian and Radford Christian was suggested several years prior, but was not acted upon. After Calhoun's symposium, trustees and elders Gary Tilley and Sid Johnson of First Christian contacted Alban Shumate about merging. In June 2010 they met to have preliminary discussions.

The discussions were successful. The two churches kept in contact and voted to move forward with the merger. They started making some of the first decisions, knowing they had a longer journey ahead.

The congregation selected Unity Christian as the name for the new church. They set a goal to hold their first service on Jan. 1, 2012 and decided that Rhea would become the minister.

After looking at their income, they realized they didn't have enough funds to build a new church. They agreed to turn First Christian, located on Tyler Avenue, into the new site for Unity Christian. It is expected that many more churches will unify into one in the near future, and Unity Christian could be leading the way for their denomination.

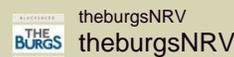
At their 2001 General Assembly meeting, members of the Disciples of Christ adopted a 2020 Vision. The plan contains priorities for the congregations to focus on before 2020, one of which is transforming 1,000 current congregations.

If Disciples of Christ churches were to continue operating the way they are now, Calhoun said that around 1,000 of the approximately 3,700 congregations would close their doors by 2020. Had First Christian and Radford Christian not merged, Calhoun said both likely would have declined further and eventually shut down.

"A hundred years ago, maybe the community of Radford could probably support two [Disciples of

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Christ] churches, and that's why two are there now," Calhoun said. "A hundred years later, it would make more sense for the two churches to come together. They could probably serve the community better collectively than either of them could separately."

Calhoun said there are around 230 churches in the transformation process, and that Unity Christian will be one of the first examples of a successful transformational church.

As the process continued, the churches began to meet more frequently. They started holding a joint service once a month, which later grew to twice a month, switching off locations with each service. They also began combining some of their other activities, with both churches participating in First Christian's Trunk Or Treat and Radford Christian's Hollyberry Fair.

Oct. 30 marked the last Sunday that Radford Christian and First Christian would worship separately. The congregations met at Radford Christian for the two months prior to the launch of Unity Christian while First Christian was being renovated.

While most congregation members were on board immediately, Phyllis Shumate said there were a few skeptics. She said they resisted the change because they wanted the church to stay the way it was, but later knew that was unrealistic.

What goes into a merger

The churches kept meeting regularly and made some key decisions. "It is not business as usual for these two churches anymore," Calhoun said. "They have embarked on a very different future and a very different path than the path they were previously on."

According to Calhoun, there isn't a better person to lead the way through this change than Rhea. He described Rhea as a pioneer and a trailblazer. When Rhea became the minister of First Christian in 1979, she was one of the first female religious leaders in Radford.

Now Rhea finds herself in another pioneering position, as the leader of what will be one of the first transformational churches in the denomination.

During her sermon on Nov. 6, Rhea mentioned Alban Shumate, First Christian board chairman Cindy Stump and Tilley specifically. Throughout the process she said she stressed that the change must come from the congregation, and she said that they worked hard to make sure the merger would happen.

But even with the help of nearly the entire congregation, it wasn't an easy task.

"There's a lot more to it than people think," Rhea said. "There are just a lot of details that go into it, and we have to be careful when we do it."

Before they could move forward with any of their plans, the congregations had to establish governance. The churches compiled and passed a constitution and by-laws.

A large part of the constitution and by-laws dealt with deciding the governing structure of the church and choosing who would serve the first terms in office capacities.

The churches also had to look at their financial health and create a new budget.

Both churches completed an audit to ensure their financial health before beginning the process, Stump said. They also had to account for their endowments and savings and make sure that deeds of trust were transferred. They hired an attorney to make sure everything was done properly.

According to budget the congregations approved, First Christian's projected income is \$140,563; if successful, it will be the third-highest income the church has seen since 1990, according to a handout provided by Stump. Radford Christian is expected to bring in \$58,250. With these factors considered, Unity Christian's income projection is \$198,813. The congregations passed an operating budget of \$198,813 as well.

Even though the churches started combining services, they had to keep their collection plates separate until they officially became Unity Christian.

First Christian hired an office assistant for the rest of the year to add and update files and help take care of the additional paperwork. They've even had to change the name and order information for supply orders on things from toilet paper to communion supplies.

First Christian's building also underwent several renovations to prepare for Jan. 1. Some of the changes are aesthetic, such as replacing old windows and updating the entryway. Other renovations will make the church more comfortable and accommodating, such as adding padding to the pews and shortening some pews to make room for wheelchairs and motorized chairs.

Both churches also took inventory and decided what will stay in the new building, what will be added and what will go. Alban said they will still display memorabilia from Radford Christian and First Christian to preserve their history.

What's next

The congregation must now implement the plan and work out any kinks that occurred in the process.

Calhoun plans to visit Unity Christian for an in-house retreat to continue working on the transformation, including establishing core values and developing a mission.

"It doesn't always work quite that well, but these folks have done a marvelous job and it's exemplary," Calhoun said.

Calhoun said that Unity Christian's success is a testimony to the leadership within the church, especially Rhea.

While Rhea will be the leader through the first years of the transformation, she likely won't continue for much longer. She plans to retire in the near future, probably in three years to align with how long some of the board will serve.

Rhea said she would like to see someone with a transformational mindset who will attract a younger generation take over. She has faith that the church will be okay when she retires. After all, she said, God has been with them every step of the way.

"No human being could have orchestrated what is going on between our two congregations — the love that is growing, the joy that is bubbling up, the hope that is emerging," Rhea said in one of her sermons. "It is clearly God's work."

The congregation plans to increase their recruiting and youth education efforts, including adding more programs and mission work. Rhea said she is planning a big mission project for the congregation that will strengthen bonds and unite the members.

Their goal was to marry, join and unify two churches into one, Tilley said, and many feel that they have been successful.

"It's been a really good experience," Moore said.

"And there's more good to come," Rhea replied.

By [Arielle Retting](#)
The Roanoke Times | 381-1671

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