

THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY CHRSTIAN CENTER
AT OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

by: Jason Swick

In 1963, the elders of the Circle Church of Christ engaged their vision of working with the students on the Oregon State University (OSU) campus with the hiring of John Nicks as the preacher. "One of his original responsibilities...was to develop the campus effort"; a vision that began with "the interest of the congregation and the previous preacher for the church, Jack Lanham."¹ Catching the vision, Nicks constantly shared that, "This is a generation that is searching."

In 1967, an opportunity opened to purchase a two-story house right across the street from the OSU campus and next door to a new dorm being built. Amazingly, written into the deed for this property is a clause stating that it must be used for religious purposes.² Circle Church of Christ quickly decided to purchase the property for \$12,000,

¹ John Nicks, "Full-Time Director to be Appointed," UCC Communique, November 1968, 2.

² Benton County, OR, Oregon Inventory of Historic Properties Historic Resource Survey Form, 7 June 1996, 2. "Should the property cease to be used for religious purposes, it would revert back to the grantor or his heirs." The grantor was John Gortmaker.

jumping at the opportunity to begin ministering to the seeking generation at a location "within the 'ten minute walking circle'" of OSU's campus.³ The University Christian Center (UCC) was now a reality as a ministry of the Circle Church of Christ to the students on the OSU campus.

Immediately, Nicks began fundraising throughout Oregon to pay for the mortgage, operating costs, remodel of the building, and to fulfill a vision of a full-time campus director. Nicks shared his vision with potential and on-going donors, through a quarterly newsletter called the *UCC Communique*. His hope was that by 1969 the UCC would be fully operational on a budget of \$1000 per month.⁴ By the beginning of 1968, eleven Oregon churches were financially supporting the UCC combined with gifts from over 200 individuals who believed in the vision for the UCC.⁵

The UCC began with two purposes: "1) to strengthen those who are already Christians, and 2) to help others

³ John Nicks, "Property Purchased for Center," UCC Communique, May 1967, 1.

⁴ John Nicks, "Statewide Speaking Tour Underway," UCC Communique, May 1967, 3.

⁵ John Nicks, "State Churches Give Support," UCC Communique, February 1968, 3. John Nicks, "Special Gift Made by Church in Albuquerque," UCC Communique, August 1967, 2, notes a one-time \$500 gift from the Fifth and Marble Church of Christ in Albuquerque, New Mexico to support the remodel.

know the Christ."⁶ A five-point program was developed to achieve this. First, was a "concentrated effort to help each Christian student grow in his knowledge of Jesus, to learn what it means to follow Him."⁷ Second, as each student matured they would share their faith with other students. Third, "counseling would be provided to help Christian students and to reach those in need of Christ".⁸ Fourth, students would be trained and involved in Christian service as a way to grow in Christ. Fifth, accredited Bible courses would be offered to "allow for a serious study of the Word."⁹

On January 2, 1968, the UCC remodel was far enough along to open its doors for use on the main floor.¹⁰ The remodel was completed with the facilities in full use by the end of 1968.¹¹ With the completion of the remodel, Nicks focused his fundraising efforts on fulfilling the

⁶ John Nicks, "Comment," UCC Communique, November 1967, 2.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ John Nicks, "Doors of Center Opened," UCC Communique, February 1968, 1.

¹¹ John Nicks, "Fall Activities Underway," UCC Communique, November 1968, 1.

vision of becoming the first full-time campus director in 1969.

This vision continued with the next preacher, Jesse Stevens, who continued in the footsteps of Nicks by combining preaching and being a part-time campus director. During Stevens' tenure, plans and fundraising continued for hiring a full-time campus director as well as adding a Bible Chair element. Once again the limiting factor was obtaining enough monthly donations to support a full-time campus director and Bible instructor. Stevens left in early 1973. At this point, the UCC vision seemed to have become dormant with few activities going on at the building and the doors being closed most of the time.¹²

The vision revived in January 1975 with the arrival of John Sullivan as the first full-time campus minister for the UCC. Sullivan and his wife, Alice, were able to masterfully take the positive elements of evangelism and developing discipleship and mold them within the vision previously casted by John Nicks and the elders of the Circle Church of Christ.¹³

¹² Gregg Strawn, "The Church of Christ in Corvallis Oregon: 1942-1988: A History from Personal Remembrance," submitted to Jerry Rushford at Pepperdine University in October 1988, 28.

¹³ Gregg Strawn, interview.

Sullivan began evangelizing the campus and enjoyed the first official baptism of the UCC on August 24, 1975 "when Pam Semon, a young woman who moved to Corvallis from Ohio, put on Christ."¹⁴ The trend continued as eight people were baptized into Christ the following year followed by eleven in 1977.¹⁵

Starting in the winter term of 1977, the UCC began to experiment with the dual campus ministry and Bible Chair concept as they offered free, non-credit classes under the title "School of Biblical Studies".¹⁶ This developed into classes being offered for college credit in 1979.¹⁷ These classes, called Adult Continuing Education, could be taken for credit or audited with the same expectations for both. The idea was to strengthen students further as disciples of Christ. Common classes offered were New Testament Greek, Evangelism, and various New Testament textual courses. The accreditation for these classes was made possible through a

¹⁴ Strawn, "Church of Christ," 28.

¹⁵ John Sullivan began a register of UCC baptisms that has continued through the present.

¹⁶ John Sullivan, "University Christian Center 1976 Report," Corvallis Courier: A Weekly Publication of the Church of Christ, 2 January 1977(?), Insert, 2.

¹⁷ John Sullivan, "Coming Events," University Christian Center Newsletter, December 1979, 2.

partnership with Columbia Christian College in Portland.¹⁸
Courses continued to be offered through the spring of 1981.

The summer of 1981 brought about two things. First, was the elimination of the Bible Chair element and classes being offered for credit. This was mostly due to a lack of response, with only a few students each term opting to take the courses for credit.¹⁹ The desire for deeper Bible study was present but not to take courses for credit. The second happening in 1981 was a transition of campus ministers. August witnessed the arrival of Gregg Strawn as the new campus minister as well as the departure of John Sullivan. The elders of the Circle Church of Christ noted,

"It is difficult to imagine the University Christian Center without thinking of John and Alice Sullivan. They have been synonymous with the campus ministry for the last six and a half years. Over 75 souls have been harvested in Corvallis during this period."²⁰

The arrival of Gregg Strawn as the new campus minister was an exciting and overwhelming time. Strawn had grown up in the Circle Church and his wife, Pam, had been the first person baptized at the UCC. Strawn was grateful to be

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹ Gregg Strawn, interview, remembering the job description containing a requirement for offering classes for credit on an "as need arises" basis.

²⁰ W.D. Brown and others, "From the Elders," University Christian Center Newsletter, June 1981, 3.

returning to minister with them. Yet, the return was overwhelming as Strawn found himself in charge of hosting the Northwest Evangelism Workshop in addition to preparing for his first year in campus ministry. Both of these being only a few short months away.²¹

Following a successful seminar, Strawn poured himself into the campus ministry and continued to reach out to the lost through "small group evangelistic Bible studies: 'Bible Talks,' and a slate of activities."²² God continued to provide opportunities for fruitful labor as more students were baptized into Christ. The UCC also sponsored a spring retreat in 1982 with some students from Columbia Christian College.²³ This could have been the first joint retreat between the two groups but would not be the last as they continued to gather together off and on in subsequent years. The retreat offered a great opportunity for non-believers and young Christians to "hear about Christ's love, and see it in the attitudes and actions" of other Christians.²⁴

²¹ Gregg Strawn, interview.

²² Strawn, "Church of Christ," 30.

²³ Pam Strawn, "News and Notes," University Christian Center Newsletter, Spring 1982, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

After almost two years as the campus minister, Gregg and Pam were blessed with the birth of their son, Jordan. Shortly after Jordan was born on May 7th, the pulpit minister, Dale Gifford moved. Gregg accepted the call to fill in preaching as the elders searched for a new preacher.²⁵ Strawn combined preaching and campus ministry for the next year and remembers a time of tremendous work, fatigue, yet joy in serving God.²⁶ Finally in 1984, the elders offered Gregg the pulpit position and brought in Dean Petty as the next campus minister.²⁷

Dean and his wife, Darla, arrived in Corvallis in October, just after the beginning of OSU's fall term. Petty spent a great deal of time focusing on relationships through activities that first year. The spring term brought "a progressive dinner luau, a day hike, a trip to Whidbey Island, ...and a day in the sun, at the Oregon coast."²⁸ The school year ended with a five day backpacking

²⁵ Gregg Strawn, "Lights On," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1983, 2.

²⁶ Gregg Strawn, interview, and Gregg Strawn, "Quiet," University Christian Center Newsletter, Winter 1984, 2.

²⁷ Strawn, "Church of Christ," 30-1. Dean and his wife Darla began their work with the UCC in October of 1984.

²⁸ Dean Petty, "News and Notes," University Christian Center Newsletter, Summer 1985, 1.

excursion "into the wilderness of Oregon."²⁹ The trip culminated with the baptism of Linda Raab on June 19th. Summer also brought the departure of twelve graduating students as they moved on to serve God in other churches throughout Oregon and the country. Petty would begin the fall of 1985 with only four to six returning students in the core group.³⁰

Petty kicked off his second year similar to his first by building relationships through multiple activities. These activities were in addition to the regularly scheduled Bible studies and worship times. This method led to an increase of over twenty students at some events that year. Petty continued to enjoy an increase in students over the next few years with eleven baptisms during the 1986-87 school year and a core group increasing to about 25. He was thankful for the increase and quick to marvel at God's timing and sovereignty in bringing these conversions and students.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰ Ibid., 1. Dean Petty, "News and Notes," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1985, 1, defined the core group as students attending two or more activities each week.

³¹ Dean Petty, "God's Time is His Time," University Christian Center Newsletter, Summer 1987, 3.

Early 1986 brought an inspection of the UCC building with some bleak news. The "UCC was gradually dying"³² and needed some major work on the roof, foundation, and furnace. Petty and the Circle Church of Christ responded immediately with a "SAVE the UCC" campaign that resulted in new bathrooms, kitchen, carpet, paint inside and out, landscaping, furnace, roof, and foundation repairs.³³ The UCC had been transformed into a new place and was ready to begin the 1986 fall term of activities with an open house on September 21st.

Petty continued to work in a thriving UCC ministry until August of 1989. Petty had felt God's calling to go back to Hungary where the UCC had done a summer mission trip the year before. He left the UCC for a year of training in Seattle at the Northwest Church of Christ before moving to Budapest, Hungary.

The elders of the Circle Church quickly began a search for a replacement campus minister. Russell York surfaced as the fourth full-time campus minister for the UCC. York was excited and quickly moved to Corvallis in September

³² Dean Petty, "Save the UCC," University Christian Center Newsletter, Spring 1986, 3.

³³ Dean Petty, "Save the UCC," University Christian Center Newsletter, Summer 1986, 3.

1989 with his wife, Kristi, and two kids, Jessica and Jonathan, from Memphis, TN, determined not to miss the first week of classes at OSU.³⁴

York began his ministry at the UCC by developing four goals: Evangelism, Bible study, Spiritual growth, and Fellowship. These goals would provide a focus for all the events and activities the UCC did.³⁵ Interestingly, the core mission of the UCC campus ministry hadn't changed much since it was first cast over twenty years earlier.

York continued to grow the UCC ministry with a record 72 students coming to the "Kick-Off Monday Night Dinner and Devo"³⁶ at the beginning of the fall 1990 term. York also reintroduced credit Bible classes offering transferrable credit to OSU during Fall 1990.³⁷ Once again this was made available through a partnership with Columbia Christian College. York continued to pour his heart into the UCC until the summer of 1994 when he transitioned into a

³⁴ Mark G. Johnson, "Meet Russell York," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1989, 1.

³⁵ Russell York, "Goals," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1989, 2.

³⁶ Russell York, "Fall Kick-Off," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1990, 1.

³⁷ Russell York, "Credit Bible Class," University Christian Center Newsletter, Fall 1990, 4.

preaching position in Colorado.

Wilson Parrish was single and working at Pepperdine in the International admissions office. He began praying for a wife, and an opportunity to minister to college students on the west coast in Churches of Christ.³⁸ As the Circle Church elders began their search for the next campus minister, Parrish's name came up. Frank Cloutier called Parrish and asked him to apply. After the interview, elder Winfred (Wink) Brown commented that Wilson was the only guy to open the Bible during their discussion. On July 16th Wilson married Kristen and on January 1, 1995 they began ministering to college students on the west coast in a Church of Christ.³⁹

The Wilson began with a vision to reconnect the UCC to the Circle Church of Christ as a vital ministry of the church. He understood the importance of a supporting congregation that creatively provided input and poured its heart into a ministry as great as the UCC. Wilson also began to notice that college students were amazingly Bible illiterate, including Christians. They didn't know about the justice and mercy of God pursuing them and desiring a

³⁸ Wilson Parrish, interview, 28 November 2008, Sherwood, OR. Always praising God for answered prayers.

³⁹ Ibid.

relationship with His people throughout the Bible. This developed into a mission as Wilson focused on getting students excited about the Bible. He worked masterfully, weaving the idea that "you don't have to be embarrassed about your lack of knowledge"⁴⁰ into every Bible study. Put at ease, students began to grow in their wisdom of the Bible and their lives began to be transformed.

Parrish continued to minister at the UCC and reach the lost for twelve and a half years. This was the longest tenure of the five campus ministers at the UCC. Towards the end, Wilson began to feel an age barrier between himself and the students. Kristen noted that students had to overcome Wilson being their dad's age and "if their dad was a creep it was even harder."⁴¹ With a desire to reach the lost for God, the Parrish family discovered church planting. On August 1, 2007, Wilson left the UCC to plant a church in Sherwood, OR.

The elders immediately began another search for a campus minister while Gregg Strawn once again filled in as the interim guy. The search continued for a year before Jason Swick was hired as the sixth campus minister for the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kristen Parrish, interview, 28 November 2008, Sherwood, OR.

UCC. Jason and his wife, Amanda, arrived on May 12, 2008 and began building relationships and excitement during the last half of the spring term.

In 1967 during the first remodel of the UCC, John Nicks wrote,

Abraham Lincoln put it well when he said, "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation is the philosophy of the government in the next generation." As we read of drugs, drink, and sex on campus we become alarmed. Alas, all is lost! But really it is not. All of these things, and many other equally disturbing signs, are expressions of a deep hunger and searching. Today's student is searching for the meaning of life. We affirm that personal contact with Christ is the fulfillment of that search. It is, therefore, the purpose of the University Christian Center to make a relevant presentation of Christ on the university campus.⁴²

This vision created a mission to build disciples and reach the lost on the OSU campus that has continued for forty one years. Today, students continue to search for how to be a "person of faith".⁴³ Unfortunately, churches across the nation today are valuing campus ministry work less and less.⁴⁴ Yet, the Circle Church of Christ continues to stand

⁴² John Nicks, "Comment," UCC Communique, May 1967, 2.

⁴³ Donald G. Shockley, Campus Ministry: The Church Beyond Itself (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 69.

⁴⁴ Charles W. Doak, "The National Campus Ministry Association, 1964-94 : A Brief History," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 32 (Fall 1995): 505.

fully behind the UCC as their ministry. They have developed a welcoming, hospitable spirit that draws in seekers and glorifies God as the UCC continues to be a work that strengthens Christians and reaches the lost.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Nicks, "Comment," November 1967, 2.