

# Transylvania and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)



## Religious History of Transylvania

The Virginia Assembly in the spring of 1780 adopted a charter establishing Transylvania Seminary in a vast region of western Virginia named Transylvania, from the Latin for “across the woods.” The school was to be public and thus free from sectarian influences. Presbyterian ministers, however, being among the most educated leaders in the region, took the initiative in establishing the college. Classes were first held in a log cabin in Boyle County, and in 1789 the school moved to Lexington.

In 1818, Horace Holley, a Unitarian minister, became president of Transylvania—with its law and medical departments—and the university began to prosper. Academic and moral standards were raised, new instructors were hired, and overall quality improved. However, opposition to Holley’s Unitarian views increased, and just as Transylvania was ready to challenge schools in the East, religious controversy and lack of Kentucky legislative support blighted the school’s hopes.

Holley resigned in 1827 and Transylvania declined. In 1841, the Methodist Church took over academic administration, but because of sectarian opposition the school continued to falter. In 1848, Transylvania discontinued its association with the Methodists. During the Civil War, the school struggled to survive, and for a time its stately Old Morrison building was used as a hospital for troops on both sides of the conflict.

## History of The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

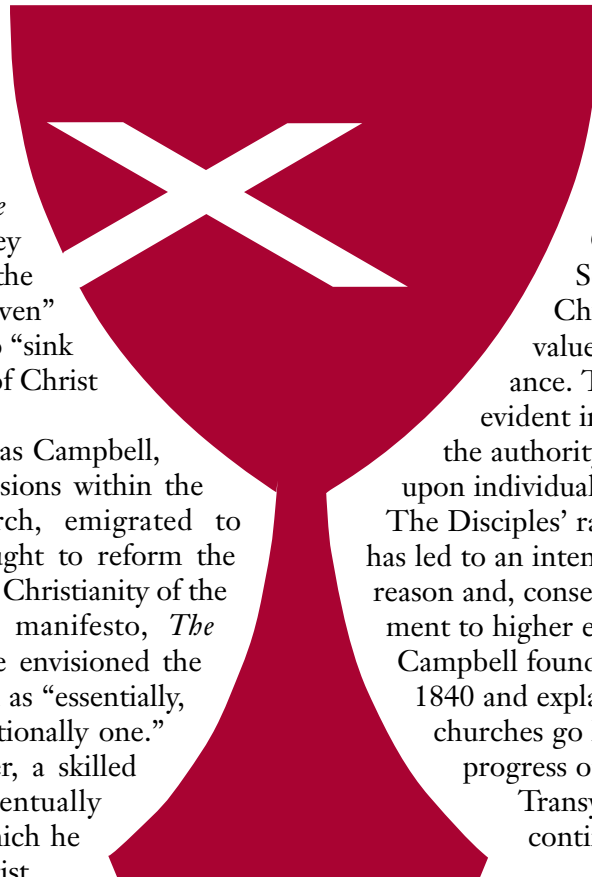
The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—one of the largest Protestant denominations founded in this country—was born on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century and dedicated to the quest for Christian unity. The church’s dual name characterizes both its history and its beliefs.

Barton W. Stone, ordained minister of the Transylvania Presbytery and host of the 1801 Cane Ridge Revival, and four other ministers renounced the name “Presbyterian” and took the name “Christian” in 1804. In their notable document, *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, they argued that the Bible is the “only sure guide to heaven” and expressed the desire to “sink into union with the Body of Christ at large.”

A few years later, Thomas Campbell, disillusioned with the divisions within the Irish Presbyterian Church, emigrated to America in 1807. He sought to reform the church by returning to the Christianity of the New Testament. In his manifesto, *The Declaration and Address*, he envisioned the Church of Christ on earth as “essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.” Campbell’s son Alexander, a skilled speaker and writer, eventually headed the movement, which he called the Disciples of Christ.

The process of union between the Christian and the Disciples movements began with a handshake between Stone and “Raccoon” John Smith, a representative for the Campbells, on January 1, 1832, at Hill Street Church in Lexington, Kentucky.

Professing “no creed but Christ,” the beliefs of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are dual in structure. The double name underscores the church’s bond with the universal church as well as its distinct identity as a body within the larger church. Founded to promote the unity of the church and based on faith in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the Scriptures, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) values both diversity and tolerance. This emphasis is particularly evident in the Disciples’ stress on the authority of scripture yet insistence upon individual freedom of interpretation. The Disciples’ rational approach to religion has led to an intentional linkage of faith and reason and, consequently, a strong commitment to higher education. Alexander Campbell founded Bethany College in 1840 and explained that “colleges and churches go hand in hand in the progress of Christian civilization.” Transylvania University proudly continues this tradition.





## Transylvania and the Disciples

In 1837, the Christian churches in Kentucky established Bacon College, which moved from Georgetown to Harrodsburg in 1839 but closed in 1851 due to lack of funding. In 1858, Bacon's charter was amended to establish Kentucky University. Its board of 30 curators was required to include 20 members of Kentucky's Christian Church.

Kentucky University was initially quite successful, and in 1860 Transylvania made an offer of merger. Later, during the Civil War, the Union Army seized Kentucky University's buildings, including its library, and the loss prompted the union with Transylvania.

In 1865, the state legislature moved to consolidate Kentucky and Transylvania universities to establish an agricultural and mechanical college to be named Kentucky University. The architect of the merger was John Bowman, who envisioned a great state university based on American and Christian ideals. Bowman, an active Disciple, helped establish the College of the Bible in 1865 to educate Disciples ministers. Kentucky University's colleges of law, arts, and sciences also opened that year, and the proposed agricultural and mechanical college opened in 1866.

The Agricultural and Mechanical College became the State College of Kentucky in 1878, the State University of Kentucky in 1908, and the University of Kentucky in 1916. In 1908, The College of the Bible separated to become Lexington Theological

Seminary and Transylvania continued as a church-related institution.

By 1915, Transylvania had been renamed Transylvania College, and the provision that two-thirds of the board must be Disciples had been discontinued. With enrollment down immediately after World War II, however, Transylvania sought to re-establish the confidence of the Disciples Church, since the school's destiny and chartered mission depended upon Disciples support. Frank A. Rose, a Disciples minister, became president of Transylvania in 1951 and amidst financial crisis asked the church to make substantial contributions.

In the 1960s, the college's name was changed back to Transylvania University as a lasting tribute to the school's rich heritage. Continued ties with the Disciples of Christ also reflect this heritage and emphasize an association that remains deliberate and meaningful. In the 1990s, a student-led Disciples on Campus (DOC) group was formed to respond to students' needs for spiritual growth. In response to the Disciples' need for ministers, Transylvania initiated TRANSY & TEAM (Totally Excited About Ministry) in the fall of 1993. This annual gathering at Transylvania is the first national event for high school students who are exploring the ordained ministry as a vocation.

Entering the new century, Transylvania's official mission statement recognizes the Disciples' role in the University's distinguished history and affirms that Transylvania and the Disciples share the ideals of tolerance and freedom of inquiry that are consistent with the Disciples heritage.

