

Oregon Christian Convention Celebrates Centennial of Tabernacle

"HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION"

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1991 marks the celebration of a significant milestone for members of Christian Churches, Churches of Christ, and Disciples of Christ in the State of Oregon: the centennial of the Turner Memorial Tabernacle, home of the Oregon Christian Convention. And the milestone is also a foundation stone.

**"Like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation."
(I Corinthians 3:10)***

According to an old hand-copied statement found among the mementos of Alvira Scott of Lebanon, Oregon,

The tabernacle is a monumental building. The framework is constructed of heavy timbers, bolted together with wooden pins, the whole amply and substantially braced. It is seated at present for 1,500 people, but there is room for 500 more seats. An ample platform, with committee and office rooms make it one of the finest convention halls in the state.

The tabernacle is a testament to the abundance of Oregon's natural resources a century ago. Huge timbers spanning incredible distances were secured to their supportive pillars by still-visible wooden pegs. Pew benches were constructed in twenty-five foot lengths of knot-free lumber, without joints, and with minimal bracing. With exterior dimensions of 110 X 160 feet, interior space sufficient to shelter the entire population of most of the nearby rural Oregon communities, and a roof that soars to a breath-taking peak above the twenty-foot high walls, the old barn-like structure speaks volumes about the vision and skill of its builders. One struggles to imagine the engineering

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expertise necessary to raise the superstructure by means of ropes, pulleys, and teams of horses. The foundation on which these tons of structural timbers stand gives testimony to the "master builders" of a century ago. The building is built on a foundation of boulders--an estimated 450 of them--a few of which can be seen around the perimeter of the building. The tabernacle's roofline, even after a century of catastrophic wind storms, periodic flooding, and inevitable settling, appears to be as straight and true as it was the day it was built.

**"You are members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."
(Ephesians 2:19-20)**

Architecture has a way of revealing the mind of the architect. Those Oregon pioneers believed in the past. The "foundation of the apostles" was not simply a nostalgic glance at a remote origin. The apostolic foundation was laid in Scripture, and that foundation was still the reliable determinant of a church's responsibility and the measure of its success. They built an unapologetically simple and straightforward structure, grand in scale, expressive of a faith that the gospel itself was simple when stripped of human traditions and interpretations, and straightforward in its proclamation of Jesus' ultimate reign over every other authority and power. On the pinnacle of the tabernacle's twin towers they placed metal globes representing earth's hemispheres, and in huge, artistic script over the original front entrance, and arching around its great rose window, the words of Mark 16:15: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." That was the sweeping pioneer vision of the past, present, and future: that God in Christ had reached to touch all humans with redemptive love, embracing every creature into the household of God.

"If what has been built on the foundation survives,
the builder will receive a reward."

(I Corinthians 3:14)

The centennial celebration of the Turner Memorial Tabernacle at the 139th annual Oregon Christian Convention, held June 25-30, 1991, will be a celebration of survival. The old structure still stands, though one tower blew down in the Columbus Day storm of 1962, and the evidence of time's passing is everywhere unmistakable. The hope is that the old window shutters can be removed so that people, many for the first time, can see the interior illuminated by natural sunlight streaming through the weathered, century-old glass windows. Of course, it was built without electric wiring and lights, but, from the first, "light shone in the darkness." It was built without a sound system, but the rafters have echoed with the sound of church business conducted and good news proclaimed. It was built without a baptistry, but many have been immersed in the clear waters of Hill Creek that loop around the tabernacle on three sides. The original furnishings did not include song books or a musical instrument, but the melody of two thousand voices harmonizing in hymns of praise must have brought heaven near. In 1891, there was no running water, no heating system, nothing on the bare wooden floors except perhaps fresh Oregon sawdust. But there was a platform, and there was a pulpit, and there was a story to tell of Jesus and his love.

"For he looked forward to the city that has foundations,
whose architect and builder is God."

(Hebrews 11:10)

On the tabernacle grounds stands a granite memorial to the Oregon pioneers of the Christian Church who established the first of our congregations west of the Rocky Mountains in 1846. In it was placed a message which

included these words:

Gathered here on the tabernacle grounds at Turner, Oreg., . . . we send greetings to you fellow pilgrims When you, yet unborn, read this message, we, the senders, shall have all passed to the Land of the Dead. But will you not think of us as mingling with you? And as your songs of praise ascend to the Father, may the echo of our voices, coming across a century, join the chorus. And oh dear Father, may the years that intervene bring progress to the world. Not that progress in the invention of more deadly means of destruction of human life, but progress in spiritual life in the hearts of mankind, that will make for a better world.

The day will yet come when the old tabernacle will succumb to the ravages of time, but the foundation on which it is built remains firm, and the promise of a world redeemed by the love of God in Christ will have been carried forward by those who have come under the gabled roof of a pioneer cathedral to celebrate the life that is to be, in "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."