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From new roofs to replacing furnaces, from remodeling a building to new construction, I imagine many of us have been involved in a church building project of some kind or another. Out of curiosity, raise your hand if you've been part of a church undergoing a building or repair project.

Central Christian began on October 22, 1878 as a group of women met in the home of Mrs. Frances Stillman—that's 139 years ago from last Sunday! By Christmas the first building was erected on the corner of Middlebury and Monroe "lighted by two chandeliers and heated by two coal stoves which warm the building nicely." The building was sold for \$500 in 1883. The congregation rented space until a new church was built six years later in 1889. After outgrowing that church, in 1897 they purchased a lot on the triangular corner of West Lexington, Vistula, and Fifth Streets and moved the church building and renovated it.

Eventually they purchased the property where we now exist, with the cornerstone placed on September 13, 1925 for the first portion of



If You Build It
October 29, 2017

Rev. Dr. Douglas Crípe
Central Christian Church, Elkhart & First Christian Church, Mishawaka

our building. The cornerstone for the sanctuary was set on November 23, 1952—that's 65 years ago next month. (*see FCC insert)

We stand in a long line of church buildings:¹ the oldest church still standing on its foundation in Indiana is Little Cedar Grove Baptist Church organized in 1797 in Franklin County. The oldest established church is St. Francis Xavier parish formed around 1734 in Vincennes.

That seems like a long time ago, but the first church built in U.S. territory dates back to 1521 in Puerto Rico, the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista. If we search on the continental U.S. for the oldest church we find ourselves at San Miguel Mission in New Mexico, built around 1626.

But we can go back even further to the ruins of oldest church in the world, from Syria dating back to 235 AD.²

If we travel back about 1200 years earlier than this first church, we come to the story of Solomon building the first temple, documented in 1 Kings. It was a huge project, taking seven years to build,

Little Cedar Grove Baptist Church



St. Francis Xavier Cathedral



Cathedral of San Juan Bautista



San Miguel Mission



Dura-Europos Church



Solomon's Temple



1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13

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with timber shipped from Lebanon, about 100 miles away. Solomon's father, King David, had wanted to build the temple, but the project didn't get underway until his son Solomon began.

The Bible describes the dedication of the temple as a magnificent event, with the elders and many people gathered. A procession included the Ark of the Covenant, which was a large box that represented God's presence among them and contained the two stones tablets of the Ten Commandments.



When I look back at all the buildings that followers of God have created, I sometimes wonder why we've spent so much time and energy and expense to create these structures, for God surrounds us wherever we are. Those who built the first temple thousands of years ago felt God lived in the Ark of the Covenant and needed more than a box, so they built a magnificent building for God to reside. We realize, however, that God is not confined to one building or location, but permeates the entire universe—from the innermost part of our

hearts to black holes that created recently detected gravitation waves 3 billion light years away.

Maybe we create our worship spaces to reassure us that God is here in this place, for we can't grasp the vastness of God's broad existence. Or maybe the walls of our sanctuaries remind us that God protects us and offers us a place of safety in the midst of the stormy parts of our lives. One writer wondered,

is your place of worship a place where people of different colors, genders, ages, sexual preferences, or abilities share the same pews? Is it a place where the cries and coos of children are holy noise? Is it a landing place where disciples then go out into the world to do God's work? Is it a place where God's covenant with the world is proclaimed, and God's love is honored and accepted with humility and grace?³ Isn't that a wonderful vision of the church—a place where everyone is welcome, even those with whom we may disagree. We don't have to believe or



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act or look alike, for God's world is filled with so much variety, like the multitude of colors of leaves falling from trees.

The church has become filled with even more variety over the past 500 years since the Protestant Reformation, an anniversary we celebrate this month. Five hundred years ago this weekend a German monk, Martin Luther, felt change needed to occur in the church. He created a list of 95 things that needed change, and then he nailed the list to the church door. The list criticized the sale of indulgences; a practice the church said would supposedly lessen people's suffering after death and would help them get into heaven. Luther emphasized it's what God does through Jesus that gets us into heaven, not the exchange of money.

Luther also translated the Bible into the language of the common people so they could read it for themselves rather than the Latin language church leaders used. Rather than placing the hierarchy of the church in control of one's faith, Luther wanted to create more freedom, giving

Christ's followers the opportunity to learn and deepen their faith themselves.

Luther's views ignited a fire of change within the church, opening the possibilities for great variety in theological understandings of God, a variety of translations of the Bible, and a diversity of ways to express ourselves. From the Reformation through hundreds of years emerged Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Methodists, Baptists, and many more, and yes, eventually even Disciples of Christ. We're all the same family tree, grounded in the roots of God's family. Through the hundreds of years church folks haven't always agreed about everything, as was the case with one particular church in

a small town in Tennessee that had a place of worship with a sign in front that read: "LEFT FOOT FAITHFUL CHURCH." A student had passed by it many times, chuckled to himself, and wondered about the meaning of the name of the church. Finally, one day, waiting for his bus, the student asked somebody in the town



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about the significance of the rather unusual name for the church. It seems that a number of years ago, there had been a split in the local congregation, which practiced foot-washing. An argument broke out over which foot should be washed first. And the group insisting on the left foot taking precedence finally withdrew and split off to organize its own church and named its congregation accordingly! "LEFT FOOT FAITHFUL CHURCH."⁴

In spite of arguments and divisions during the Reformation, the idea of freedom of religious expression eventually wove its way into much of the church and into the beginning of our nation.

Thankfully we Disciples have learned how to disagree without being disagreeable, for we can agree to disagree and still be one church. We realize the large variety of religious expression reflects the vastness of God's being, for God goes beyond all our understandings and ideas, transcending our human understandings. And yet, through Jesus, we have come to catch a glimpse of God, a reflection of

God's loving nature and compassionate forgiveness, uniting us as one church.

That's why the many people who have gone before us have built this beautiful place, for they knew that if they built it, that generations of people following them would continue to experience God's presence in this place. May we continue to listen to God's voice among us and reflect the light of Christ, not only as we gather in this place, but in each place we go this week.



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*FCC insert

First Christian was organized in 1843 with two elders and three deacons—one of the first four churches in Mishawaka. Early members met in homes or a schoolhouse until gathering in a small meetinghouse in 1853 on Lincolnway and Spring Street. They dedicated a new building on February

23, 1896, a modern Gothic style with a large chandelier containing 32 lights.

Construction began on our present building in 1971, with the dedication service held on December 19, 1971. Next year we celebrate our 175th anniversary!



¹

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_oldest_churches_in_the_United_States#Indiana

² <https://www.theworldorbust.com/the-oldest-churches-in-the-world-1chaim/>

³ Clergy Stuff, Program 1 2017-18 , September 10, 2017 - December 31, 2017 Worship Resources, p.70.

⁴ Hodgins, Michael. 1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers (Kindle Locations 2017-2024). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. (Adapted)