

Mission

An Oral History

By Bob Turner

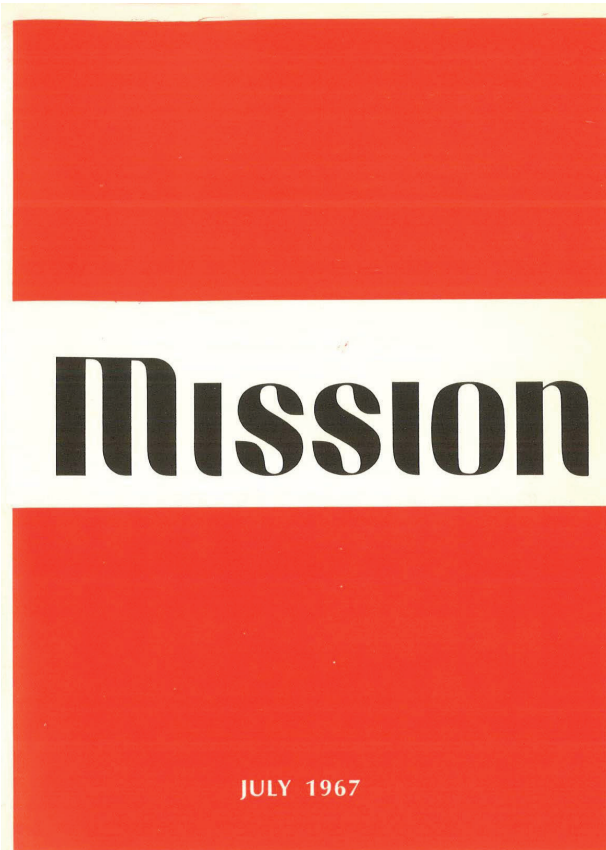
with Dwain Evans, Don Haymes,
Richard Hughes, Victor Hunter,
Warren Lewis, and Thomas Olbricht

I learned of *Mission* when I was a student at Harding University ('00–'04) and have been going back and reading its articles ever since. *Mission* was unique—sort of *Sojourners* meets *Village Voice* meets *MAD Magazine*. It was smart enough to provoke a theologian but accessible enough to put on your coffee table; classic enough to attract intellectuals in the 1960s but avante garde enough to get picked up by a college kid a generation later. It was unquestionably the literary counterculture of Church of Christ periodicals for two decades.

A major reason I love *Mission* is my interest in Churches of Christ and our participation in the American Restoration Movement (or Stone-Campbell Movement). It should be noted that many of the people who call it the Restoration Movement frequently panic whenever it moves. But since the beginning, our group has found identity in two concepts that necessitate movement: restoration and unity. Restoration admits that something is broken and unity concedes that something is divided.

That said, part of this identity was lost in some places during the twentieth century. The voices that articulated a plea for an aggressive, nimble discovery of what it meant to be God's people were occasionally drowned out by those more interested in restoring the church of their childhood. Among some, at-

tention to peripheral issues took precedence over pursuit of the mission of God, the ministry of Jesus, and the work of the Spirit in schools, cities, and churches.



Yet the fact that Churches of Christ still remain a relevant and, in some places, vibrant place of faith attests to the fact that significant attempts were made during the twentieth century to ensure that the plea for restoration still demands rapid, active movement. There were many forces that secured this future, but one of them was *Mission*. Yes, *Restoration Quarterly* was more scholarly. The *Gospel Advocate* enjoyed more subscribers. *Firm Foundation* was more well-known. Yet it

can be argued that none of these journals entered the mailbox with the same bravado as *Mission*.

Unquestionably, there were flaws. The issues could be uneven, with some articles aimed at scholars and others at popular audiences. And to what degree *Mission* ever found its true purpose was debated even among its own board. We might question its tone, which sarcastically exaggerated the faults of some church leaders and their theological positions, while flat-out lampooning others. But *Mission* mattered in a way that set it apart from other journals. It was sushi on the menu of Cracker Barrel. Some would love it. Others would hate it. But everyone would notice it and form an opinion. *Mission* may not be the best journal to come out of Churches of Christ, but it is one of the most polarizing.

A few years ago, Greg McKinzie (editor of *Mission Dei* journal) approached me about celebrating the 50 years that passed since the launch of *Mission*. After a few ideas were proposed (and quickly trashed), we decided that *Mission* simply needed its story told. So, we went straight to the ones who remember that story best. This history of *Mission* is told by six of *Mission's* recognizable figures: Dwain

Evans (DE), Don Haymes (DH), Richard Hughes (RH), Victor Hunter (VH), Warren Lewis (WL), and Thomas Olbricht (TO). Each of these individuals served different roles that gave them each a different perspective. In what follows, I interweave quotations taken from various exchanges with each of them, at times even letting them finish each other's thoughts. While I've tried to appreciate the context of their words, the selection and arrangement is, of course, interpretive. Think of it like a Documentary Hypothesis of sorts. My hope is that combining their distinct viewpoints in this way will represent the fascinating history of *Mission* in their own words. We were grateful that they were generous with their time and truly loved hearing their stories about *Mission*. Hopefully you will, too.

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RH The mid- to late-1960s was a time of intense ethical and moral ferment in the United States. The Vietnam War was raging with horrendous reports on television every night,

the Civil Rights movement was in full swing as well, along with a variety of other concerns including environmental concerns and gender equality. But Churches of Christ were, for the most part, deaf and dumb on all these pressing moral and ethical issues.

DH About these things we could read little in the periodicals of the Churches of Christ, except for those who thought that any demand for racial, social, economic, and political equity was inevitably a “communist plot.”

DE There was very little integration, women were afforded no leadership roles, much of the preaching was void of grace, and there was almost no interdenominational participation.

WL Everything was either “liberal” or “conservative.”

DH The Church, whatever it was, appeared to be primarily interested in the Church, in the

perpetuation of itself as an institution and the preservation of its power and prerogatives.

WL People who did careful reading of the text and came up with answers different from what “the preachers” typically came up with were labeled “liberals.”

TO Some of us believed that a new sort of journalism was required to attract new readers.

DH In 1965, after much discussion of the need for a periodical that would speak to the Churches of Christ and their mission in the world in the twentieth century. . .

TO We wanted a “coffee table” type journal.

DE We were willing to tackle themes that no other brotherhood journal would touch.

VH . . . critiquing the idea of restorationism as a theological method, pointing to other ways of being more “faithful” to biblical texts and their purposes, almost all social/ethical issues,

movement within the whole church rather than the “one true church,” etc.

WL We were struggling against a dogmatic reading of Scripture, influenced by traditional Churches-of-Christ orthodoxy, in favor of a text-based one.

DH Dwain Evans asked me to write a prospectus for that project, which he then took to Walter Ellis Burch.

DE Walter Burch and I pulled together a group to get it started.

TO I went to all the early meetings and talked a lot to Walter. Dorothy, my wife, was employed to keep circulation records and do the mail-out through the first several years, and we mailed the journal according to the schedule out of Abilene.

DH In the ensuing discussions with those who would become the early supporters and supervisors of what would become *Mission*, any

formal contribution that I might make was clearly unwelcome, although I received frequent, blow-by-blow accounts of the negotiations as they proceeded.

TO Walter and others were interested in recruiting those open to new directions and channels of communication.

DH Among those who gathered to plan and assemble and support what would become the monthly periodical, “mission” obviously meant, primarily, some kind of evangelism aimed at the acquisition of new members of the church.

TO We were more interested in a general theological message that was attractive and readable.

DH The first editorial board drew heavily on people who had actual experience in getting a rag out and paying the bills. Walter Ellis Burch, a journalist turned public relations/develop-

ment consultant (also a preacher!) was a natural.

RH The editorial board early on was, indeed, composed of academics, especially from Abilene Christian.

VH There were academics, preachers, business people, etc. From the beginning.

TO Walter thought that the profs. among us were more open to change and more influential.

DH The board of trustees was more heavily weighted to preachers than to academics, although some of the preachers were also academics.

DH From July 1968 Roy Bowen Ward became editor-in-chief and Ray F. Chester managing editor—an academic and a preacher, but Roy was employed outside the cocoon of the “Christian” colleges.

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Christian colleges had an interesting relationship to *Mission*. Most of its early editors had attended one, and some were employed by them. But that didn’t mean the relationship was easy. William Thomas Moore once suggested that Disciples didn’t have bishops, but instead had editors. During the era of *Mission*, it might have been said that we didn’t have bishops, we had Christian college presidents. This power structure would be a formidable ally and opponent for *Mission*. But what was the relationship? Were the colleges supportive of *Mission*?

VH Helpful in the early years.

TO I don’t know that any of the colleges were supportive of *Mission* so as to provide funds or space. They were—*tolerant* might be the word.

DE We had an excellent response from Bible faculty.

VH But as time went on and *Mission* became a target, faculty members were unable to con-

tinue on with *Mission* if staying on with some of the colleges.

DH For the most part, as a matter of institutional policy, the “Christian colleges” were, I think, trying to appear neutral, neither endorsing nor opposing *Mission* in public. Because several Abilene Christian College professors were members of the *Mission* board of trustees, the professional schismatics and their periodicals immediately demanded that these professors repent and recant.

RH Critics of *Mission* put enormous pressure on ACC (at that time it was Abilene Christian College) to pressure members of its faculty who served on the *Mission* board to resign from the *Mission* board.

TO Some involved in *Mission* were anti-establishment, some were not. Frank Pack, J. W. Roberts, Everett Ferguson, probably Don Sime, etc. were not anti-establishment.

DH Roy Ward offered James D. Bales¹ a regular column in *Mission*, in which all of his views could be expressed. JDB wrote that “my answer must be in the negative.”

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Many characterized *Mission* as being anti-establishment. Who was the establishment? How did *Mission*’s relationship to this establishment play itself out?

WL The establishment were theologically uneducated preachers and a few marginally educated professors in the Christian colleges.

DE ... the *Firm Foundation* and the *Gospel Advocate*.

TO ... essentially located among leaders in Henderson, Nashville, Fort Worth, Louisville, Shreveport, Montgomery, etc.

¹ Professor at Harding College.

DH As for the “establishment,” it was indeed real, if somewhat amorphous. Dwain Evans and Walter Ellis Burch were always determined to enlist “Batsell” and his like in their projects, although they rarely if ever succeeded.

VH: *Mission* was prophetic as well as pastoral in its approach . . . a hard balance to achieve . . . both anti-establishment while at the same time looking for more faithful ways forward.

TO They claimed to stand in the “Old Paths” which they did but these paths often were not as long-grained in the movement as they thought: for example, the fundamentalist views that developed in the 1910s regarding inspiration, evolution, the involvement of women, etc.

VH To address anything at all that called for rethinking and actually engaging the theological/missional tasks was to risk opposition during that time.

WL These “preachers” in north Texas and Oklahoma and elsewhere were the ones who demanded that R. B. Sweet withdraw my book *The Lord’s Supper*, of which 4,000 copies were burned as heretical in Austin.

TO After about five years John Stevens, ACU, asked his faculty members to resign from the board.

DE That did not take very long.

TO Only one said they would not resign, and that was J. W. Roberts. He had a heart attack and died not long after, however.

DH By June 1970, the board of trustees had expanded, including business executives like Arthur L. Miley and Glenn Paden (by that time, Dwain Evans was also in business as a Paden partner. In that meeting of the board of trustees, J. W. Roberts and Frank Pack (by letter) objected strenuously to the editorial

direction that *Mission* had taken, blaming the editorial process.

TO Some on the board wanted a more focused journal especially on race relations. They thought a move to a single editor sympathetic to their hopes was the answer. The board was divided on the matter and created something of a stalemate.

DH As a compromise, Thomas Olbricht and David Stewart moved to suspend the editorial board for one year.

TO David was not on the editorial board but was influential. He and I decided to end the stalemate by not having the editorial board function for a year. The move was made to appoint Roy Bowen Ward editor.

DH That decision broke the constraints of the cocoon and offered new possibilities for *Mission*.

TO New coterie of leadership developed among the younger churchmen such as Walter, John Allen Chalk, Dwain Evans, etc.

DE By this time, I had gone from being the “fair haired boy” to persona non grata in Churches of Christ.

TO They began to write more, but perhaps especially encouraged others to write such as Gary Freeman, and Dudley Lynch.

DH We may say that, from the first, some readers loved what I wrote, and some readers hated it.

TO These authors were less respectful of older leaders, such as Reuel Lemmons, W. B. West, Jr., J. D. Bales, Don Morris, the Wallaces, etc.

VH I found those associated with *Mission* and writing for *Mission* open, loving, and believing the claims of “truth seeking” in Churches of Christ at that time . . . a real hope for change, renewal, and continuing conversion.



Mission began as a polarizing voice within Churches of Christ. Interestingly, the message that disturbed other journal editors, concerned readers, and some college administrators also galvanized another group—a cadre of readers hoping for change within and outside of the church.

RH I probably did not become aware of *Mission* until I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa in the fall of 1967.

DH It is difficult to think of any work published in *Mission* that broke truly new ground in the “real world” of 1966–1987, although much of what *Mission* published might seem startling, even shattering, in the parochial context of what had been permitted among Churches of Christ.

TO The role of women, and racial and social problems especially along with more liberal views on evolution, inspiration, etc.

DE Race, Holy Spirit, the leadership of women.

RH I was drawn to *Mission* at that time precisely because it was addressing the really pressing social and moral issues that seemed to consume the nation at that time.

DH Serious, if cautious, adult discussion of human sexuality, including homosexuality and abortion, set *Mission* apart from other periodicals among Churches of Christ, along with real advocacy of the rights of African Americans and other “minorities,” as well as women of all ethnic groups.

TO I had worked hard to build circulation and involve others on the board. We built a fairly respectable list of subscribers, as I recall, somewhat above 4,000 at one time.



As with all things in life, timing is everything. The journal’s emphasis on shaping the future of Churches of Christ during

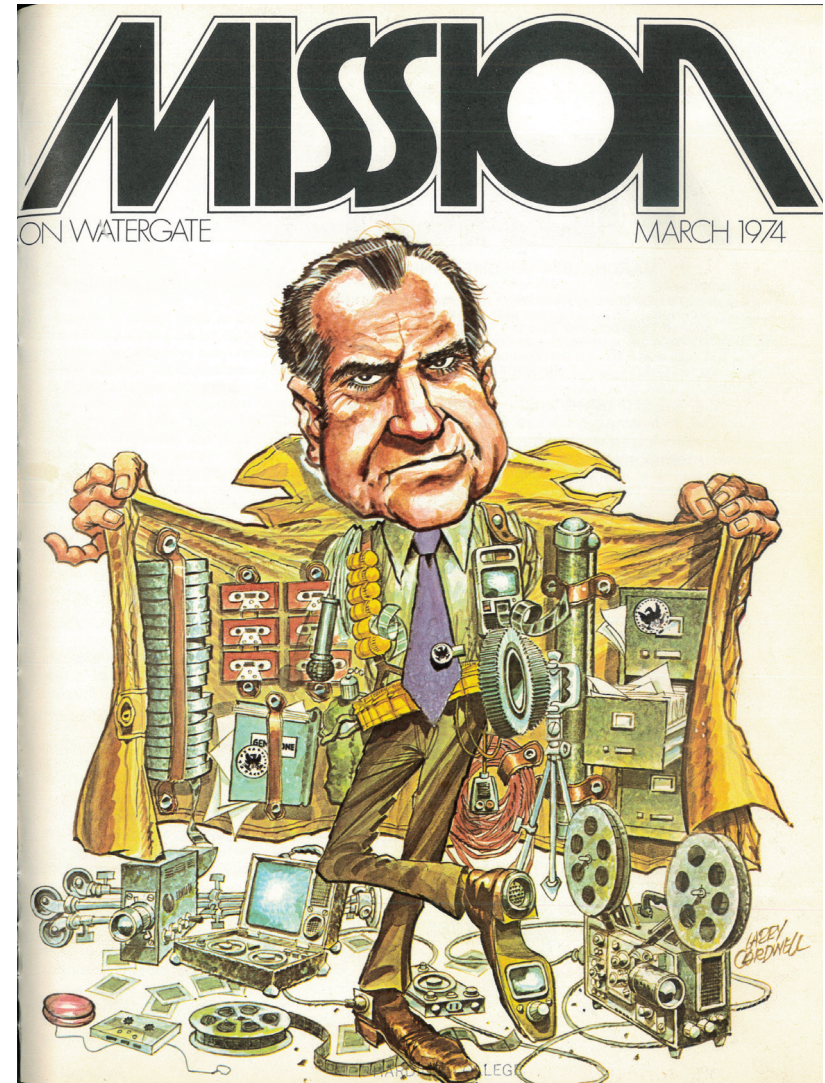
the late-60s gave way in the 1970s to a questioning of its preoccupation with right-wing politics and larger questions about the relationship of the people of God to the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and other key events and pressing social concerns. *Mission* never planted any wiretaps in the Watergate Hotel, but let's just say they were perfectly ready for President Nixon's moment of shame.

WL Remember Larry Cardwell's cartoon of "Nixon, the Flasher"?

RH The cartoon that Vic Hunter ran on *Mission's* cover when he was editor—a cartoon showing Richard Nixon holding his trench coat open and there, hanging from hooks all over the inside of his trench coat, were tapes for tape-recording.

DH The response to Larry Cardwell's masterful caricature of Ol' Slippery amazed me at the time.

RH That cover clearly was a slap at President Nixon and his secret White House recordings, and readers got the message.



DH ... one-third of the subscribers dropped away because of Larry Cardwell's March 1973 cover.

RH My memory is that *Mission* lost half of its readership over that cartoon.

VH Not really surprising.

DH ... but it taught me that a significant number of folk among Churches of Christ, even readers of *Mission*, cared more about their identity as "Americans" of a particular political persuasion than about their calling as disciples of Jesus.

TO The decline in subscriptions because of the Richard Nixon cartoon was mostly some board member's undocumented throw-away remark. Dorothy was then keeping the subscription lists, and it didn't happen. Subscriptions were declining. Every time we let up on promoting subscriptions they declined. Nothing was being done at that time to shore

up the subscriptions. About that time, however, those who were going to be mad over *Mission* made themselves known.

VH The leaning of the Churches of Christ at that time was toward the political right. Some colleges and spokespersons sort of made a living out of the anti-communist/anti-socialist/anti-left thing. At Pepperdine a huge window picture of Nixon surveyed the campus from the window of president of the university. And Americanism (nationalist views) and Christianity was pretty well married in a lot of quarters.

DE It would be no different today. In my judgment, a huge majority in Churches of Christ are dedicated members of the Republican Party. I believe this to be true even in our progressive Churches of Christ.

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The question of whether or not someone dropped their subscription because they disliked something in *Mission* might ignore a larger distinction that *Mission* held among journals at that time: a lot of people subscribed to *Mission* because they didn't like it. And others subscribed because they loved it. And still others just wanted to read it to see what was in it. *Mission* may have been imagined as a niche project, but it grew to something larger. It was popular and polarizing. Being aware of *Mission* and having a strong opinion about *Mission* were basically synonymous.

TO Many people I knew were critical of *Mission*. This was true of most of my relatives. It soon became the case that even the run of the mill preachers criticized *Mission* even though they knew little about it just because their conception was that it was supposed to rock the brotherhood boat.

DH Carl Stem loved "Christ of the Gospels,"² as did Roy F. Osborne; Thomas Olbricht wrote

² Don Haymes, "Christ of the Gospels," *Mission* 2, no. 6 (1968): 168–73.

to Roy Bowen Ward, "For my part, I thought Haymes's article very biblical, which surprised me." Tom didn't know me. . . . Frank Pack was enraged—especially since, as a member of the board of editors, he had not seen the manuscript; he would not have printed it. We may guess that Roy, once Frank's student, knew that. . . . Roy published responses from Frank and Cecil May, Jr., asking me to respond, which I did formally, but not politely. Nevertheless, in after years, I had friendly relations of mutual respect with both Frank and Cecil. I think they genuinely recognized the justice of my original observations, once the fevers of surprise had cooled.

WL The editorial policy and personnel following Roy Bowen Ward was more oriented towards poetry, politics, and "women's issues." This had a tendency to dull the theological edge of the magazine.

RH I became editor of *Mission* late in 1979—well after the turmoil that had consumed the na-

tion in the mid- to late-1960s, and I wanted to do what I could to build some bridges back to the mainstream of Churches of Christ, or at least to those segments of the mainstream that were open to connecting with us. So the very first issue that I edited—a special issue with the date “Winter, 1980”—carried a banner that announced the theme of that issue: “Special for Ministers: Of Preaching and Books.” Compared to *Mission*’s reputation up to that point, this issue was decidedly conservative. And within just days after that issue had gone out in the mail, Roy Bowen Ward—one of “LeMoine’s boys” who, along with Abe Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, had done his doctoral work at Harvard, who at that time was teaching at Miami of Ohio, and a man held in very high regard—wrote a note that simply said, “Cancel my subscription!”

DH Roy Lanier had some predictable remarks about “The Silence of the Scholars”³ in *Firm Foundation*. Jack Pearl Lewis hated the piece, which he took personally, and had some as-tringent asides about it in an address to a Restoration Quarterly gathering at the AAR/SBL (while I was listening outside, having arrived too late to get in).

TO I think some of the satire of brotherhood leaders, positions, and right-wing theology and politics unnecessarily offended several of the readers.

DH Jack and I became good friends. He is a disciple of Jesus, and a remarkable intellect. There is no one like him now, and perhaps there never was.

VH I believe it was 1973 or ’74. I was asked to speak at an ACU elders workshop on Christian journalism. A difference was drawn be-

³ Don Haymes, “The Silence of the Scholars” *Mission* 8, no. 3 (1974): 70–85.

tween what journalism is in order to maintain its integrity and PR or house organ materials. It was a good try by ACU. After that, *Mission* was pretty much persona non grata.

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Mission had many successes. It should not be assumed that *Mission* got it right on every issue, though. While *Mission* might have anticipated where the broader culture would land on some key social issues, it was still vulnerable to missing a speck in its own eye. With this in mind, I asked if there were topics that *Mission* leaders wish had been addressed—or wish they had addressed differently.

RH I'm not sure that there are any areas I wish had been addressed differently. I thought at the time—and still believe—that *Mission* filled a great need and performed its duties well.

DH The relation of the kingdom of God to the human political order should have been thor-

oughly, critically engaged; the tools to do that were already in place, but few were ready to use them.

WL I suppose, perhaps, we managed to touch the hem of the garment of racial issues.

DE Carl Spain's lecture at ACU in 1960 had a powerful influence in causing churches to abandon segregation. We should have addressed the theological differences between the black church and the white church and pointed to solutions. Out of that, seminars composed of prominent leaders in both churches might have paved the way for rapprochement.

DH That conversation could have transformed our understanding of war and peace and race relations, as well as the drift of many white members of the Churches of Christ into what we can now see as white nationalism and economic Darwinism, resentful of all that is Other.

DE . . . there was no reconciliation between the black and white churches and mainline churches remained essentially Anglo.

DH We could and should have entered into a productive dialogue about the work and ministry of women among the Churches of Christ, moving beyond the political rhetoric of “rights” toward full personhood. A few articles by and about women that focused on the exercise of their gifts and the achievement of their human potential rather than on domesticity tested the barriers; they were too few. *Mission* came to its end with an able woman as editor, and that could be said to be truly a breakthrough, although the journal died.

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In 1986, Richard Hughes penned, “Now More Than Ever.” That essay made the case for *Mission*’s sustained publication because of the cultural need. The question of *Mission*’s rele-

vance was one faced by its board and other donors as interest waned, subscriptions declined, and contributors grew tired.

DH *Mission*’s paid subscriptions remained near 2,500 through the economic distresses of the 1970s, and only began to fall in the Reagan era when “self-esteem” and “feeling good” and longing for a “simpler time” overcame any sense of mission in the world and any inclination to search for meaning and to understand the suffering of humankind in all its complexity.

TO But to keep up the circulation of *Mission*, or any sort of fringe journal for that matter, requires lots of time and effort. Those leading *Mission* at that time seemed to think that the sort of journalism they liked would sell itself.

DH By the mid-1980s, the “new” had worn off, and *Mission* could no longer be a focus of attention in a changing culture that was bring-

ing to an end the fascination with periodical literature among Churches of Christ.

DE Our main financial support came from the trustees. I think there was a general weariness.

TO I thought unless someone was willing to put lots of funds into *Mission*—and I didn't know of anyone who wanted to do this—that it could only drag along. The editors were worthy people, but not circulation promoters. With all that in their hands it wouldn't survive.

WL *Mission's* place in history, like its theology, was contextual. There was a time and place for *Mission*. Its work had been done and it was time for new voices which certainly did emerge. So *Mission* was true to its vision and theology, even in its ending.

RH I wasn't directly involved in the closure of *Mission*.

WL Regarding the end of *Mission*. I really know nothing about it and had nothing to do with the decision.

TO I wasn't disappointed because I hadn't been involved in *Mission* for a long time.

RH Looking back, I realize we have needed it more than ever. It was the only progressive voice in the Churches of Christ that was widely heard and read. *Integrity* performed a similar function, but didn't have the readership.

TO Richard Hughes had some good historical questions, but few people were on the same page with him.

DE We had enjoyed a great response.

WL Somebody jokingly said, "We declared victory and closed up shop."

DE I think we were too successful.

RH I myself felt at the time that *Mission* was still needed.

TO Our churches too had become more introspective and not too concerned with what was going on elsewhere. We were losing our sense of being an aggressive “non-denominational” growing body.

DE By then, mainline churches abandoned “Word Only” and embraced grace and the Holy Spirit. Women’s issues had made a little progress but that was not enough to carry the journal.

RH I do recall many of the board members saying they felt that *Mission* had served its purpose, that it was a child of a certain age, and that it had contributed to at least some change in the CofC.

DE We were members of a different fellowship, one that was more grace filled, one that affirmed the power of the Holy Spirit in our

lives, one that affirmed the ministry of women in the church as our own editor⁴ so powerfully demonstrated. As she said in our final issue: The writer of Ecclesiastes affirmed and a modern song popularized the truth that for everything “there is a season.” And she made it clear that there is a time for “letting go.” That time had come for *Mission*.

WL Mission Accomplished.

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⁴ Bobbie Lee Holley.

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