

Church of God (Seventh Day) is

Worshipping on Saturdays, rather than Sundays, is just one distinctive feature of The Church of God (Seventh Day), which held its first services in Utah last week.

The church also does not believe in observing traditional holidays like Christmas, Easter and Lent, said Bill Burks, lay leader. Several other of its doctrinal beliefs are also unusual among Christian churches.

Services of the new Utah congregation are held weekly in the Bible Baptist Building, 20 W. 27th South, with Sabbath School at 10:30 a.m. Saturdays and worship at 11 a.m.

Although the church is new to Utah, the parent church body is 100 years old this year. Headquarters of The Church of God (Seventh Day) are in Denver, where the church publishes the magazine "Bible Advocate," one of the oldest continuous church publications in the United States. Burks said the church has about 5,000 members in the United States, about 70,000 worldwide.

He said church members believe that the Sabbath should be observed on the seventh day, from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. "We feel there is not sufficient evidence in the



Bill Burks

New Testament to justify changing the day to Sunday."

Burks said they also believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God. "We believe the Bible is the infallible teaching and contains complete revelation for the plan of salvation and the will of God for

man.

"We recognize there are some problems with the manuscript," he added, so "we try not to emphasize those areas of the Bible that are of doubtful origin."

Unlike most other churches, the group believes that the Lord's Supper should be kept only once a year. "We believe it is an ordinance given by the church as a memorial of Christ's death," Burks said. On the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, which falls in the spring, members partake of wine and unleavened bread, and also wash each other's feet.

Another unusual belief is that the dead are neither in heaven nor in hell, but are in their graves in an unconscious state. Burks said members believe the dead will be resurrected in the last days, some at the time of Christ's coming and some later. "At the present time the dead know not anything."

Many Christian religions believe the Christian's ultimate goal is to go to heaven. "We believe Christ is going to return and set up his millennial kingdom here on this earth," Burks said.

is unique in more ways than one



Churches in the news

Finally, he said, the church does not observe Christmas, Easter, Lent or Halloween. "Many of these days, although they have been Christianized, are of pagan origin."

Burks said that in the book of Deuteronomy, it is recounted that heathen nations served their gods in certain ways. "God said to Israel, 'I don't want to be served in that way. Don't take their practices and apply them to me.'

"Christmas is one of the most blatant," Burks said, as a resurrection of the Roman holiday of saturnalia. The symbols of the tree, holly wreaths and yule logs predate the birth of Christ by about 4,000 years, he said, when they were used in celebration of the winter solstice.

Symbols of Easter such as egg painting and bunnies were actually fertility symbols as part of the spring festival of the vernal equinox, he said. And on Halloween, children dress up as ghosts and goblins.

"We don't want to be involved in these practices and apply them to the life of God," Burks said.

Burks said the Church of God movement started about the 1860s in Missouri, Iowa and Mississippi. The church was officially organized in Stansbury, Mo., 100 years ago.

The magazine now called "Bible Advocate" was originally known as the "Hope of God," and later the "Sabbath Advocate."

The church offices were moved about 18 years ago to Denver, where the church operates a publishing house and also a seminary. Overseas, the church has members in Latin America, the Philippines, India, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Although U.S. growth was stagnant for many years, Burks said, the church is now increasing its outreach and trying to double U.S. membership in the near future.

About 11 people attended the first service last Saturday. Burks said in the future he plans to start a Bible study group. The church also hopes to get a pastor, although currently

the denomination does not have enough pastors to serve all congregations, so many churches are led by lay leaders.

Burks said he is trying to get the "Bible Advocate" distributed as widely as possible by making it available in such places as laundromats, where people will see and read it. "I have increased magazine subscriptions by about 300 percent."

He said services basically consist of a Bible study and sermon based on teachings of the Bible. "No way are we politically activist."

Burks said he was a member of the Worldwide Church of God but broke away from that church when he didn't agree with what it was doing. He then became affiliated with the Church of God (Seventh Day). When he moved to Utah, he wrote church leaders in Denver asking if they would like a church established here, and they eventually asked him to try to get a congregation going.

Burks, an Idaho native who moved all over the nation as an "Air Force brat," spending most of his life in Texas, had a local radio program on KBBX gospel radio for about three months. He said he had to give that up when it became a choice of the radio program or getting a local church. He said that in the future he will probably go back on the air.