

THE CONGREGATIONAL
CHRISTIAN WAY OF
INTER-CHURCH
FELLOWSHIP

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To

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Howell D. and Josephine Davies

John W. and Elizabeth Claxton

Harry W. and Anna Johnson

Arthur A. and Elizabeth Rouner

Joseph J. and Lucille Russell

Max and Lucille Strang

James E. and Elizabeth Walter

and

*so many other dear and remembered
modern "lovers of the largest
healthful religious freedom."*

FRONTISPICE
Adventure in Liberty
Gaius Glenn Atkins (1947)

If one stands far enough away from the massive and entangled action of Protestantism, he sees throughout its course a growing quest for realization of the independence of the spirit-guided Christian life, both in theory and in practice.

Protestantism was bound by the very genius of it, when the right time came, to try the experiment of the liberty of the Christian [individual] with all its implications and issues, completely and at all costs.

Now no historian of the Congregational Christian way dares to say that in Leyden [Holland] or New England Plymouth or Massachusetts Bay was the predestined issue of the Protestant Reformation, or the heirs "of all the ages, in the foremost files of time." But it is true that historically the American Congregational Christian Churches have made the Congregational way of exercising the liberty of the Christian more consistently central than any other of the denominations whose polity is Congregational.

The polity itself, as one sees it in its entirety, has always been a means to an end: the right and duty of the church member to administer his own church business with a direct control; a minimum of ecclesiastical machinery; willing obedience to majority discussions; and a disciplined respect for the right of the minority.

Congregationalists believe this to be necessary to the liberty of a Christian [person], and whatever else is built must be upon this foundation.

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PREFACE

The manual, HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER A CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH *, was restricted to the primary concerns of those engaged in gathering and ordering Churches of the Congregational Way of faith and polity. It dealt briefly, but not adequately, with the roles of Ecclesiastical Councils, Associations, Conferences, and national and inter-national bodies in modern Congregationalism. In the postscript I declared my intention to write about such matters in a companion manual.

Not just because "a promise made is a debt unpaid," but because the need for such a helpful guide is greater now than ever, I have put together this small collection of gleanings from history and our recent practices in inter-church fellowship.

The Congregational Way consists of two main principles, (1) the autonomy, or self-completeness of each local Church, and (2) the communion or voluntary fellowship of all churches. This manual seeks to deal in theory and practice with this second principle, in the hope that our Churches may more fully enjoy the fruits of their voluntary associations, and increase their resources for mutual helpfulness

(* HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER A CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH, A.V.Abercrombie, NACCC, 1966, 1986)

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and service to the human family.

The author has had the kind assistance of several of his Congregational Christian colleagues in gathering and refining this text. In many instances their suggestions have been included in their words without giving credit for their contributions. My sincere thanks are extended to Edward Adams, Earven Andersen, John Alexander, Stephen Bailey, Richard Bellingham, George Bohman, Carol Burton, Harry Butman, Harry Clark, Leslie and Evelyn Deinstadt, Trudi Edwards, Michael Halcomb, Lloyd Hall, Eunice Haskell, Mark Jensen, Clifford Schutjer, Fred Rennebohm, Arvel Steece, James and Elizabeth Walter, and Kenneth Ubbelohde, many of whom have read, corrected and improved upon the contents and format; but they should not be held responsible for any final errors or inadequacies. Those whose writings have been gleaned from the CONGREGATIONALIST are acknowledged in the footnotes. Their invaluable contributions are deeply appreciated. As in all other aspects of the author's life and work, Charlotte Abercrombie has been deeply involved as dearest friend, mentor and companion in this enterprise.

A. V. Abercrombie,
Marco Island, Florida, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the great organized religions of the world began when common people responded to leaders whose experience and wisdom called others to discipleship.

This generalization may be fairly applied to Judaism and Abraham, Moses and the Prophets, to Buddhism and Gautama, to Islam and Mohammed, or to the followers of Confucius and Lao-tze. Although the origins of Christianity can be traced to many emerging forces in the Ancient World, the sayings of Jesus, and his example in life, death and undying life have remained the primary factors in the development and spread of the religion of his disciples.

Congregationalists have always looked upon their Churches as "gatherings of believers", "of those who have begun to love with Christ's love:"

"You are my friends...I do not call you servants, for a servant does not know what his lord may have in mind. I have called you friends because everything I have learned about good living I have made known to you in words and by example... Learn to trust our Father-God; trust also in me... I have given you all of my sayings so my joy might remain in you, and that your joy may be full. Come, live by my words; follow my

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example in life and in death." *

These, of course, are paraphrases of Gospel texts, but certainly are true to the spirit of Jesus' words. They are typical interpretations of most Congregationalists who have tried to follow the Master's "New Commandment" that they should love one another as God had loved him, and as he had loved his first disciples. Friendship, with a merciful God, friendship with our Master-teacher, and friendship with each other - these are marks of any fellowship of believers, or any Church of the Congregational Way of faith and order.

Our Pilgrim forebears took to heart Pastor John Robinson's advice in his farewell sermon: "Remember", he said, "there is always more light to break forth" from the wisdom of God. Since then, most Congregationalists have taught that each generation should express its beliefs in its own time and in its own terms; and that each believer should be assured of the right to hold his faith as dictated by his own conscience under God.

Like devotees of the other great religions, our beliefs also begin with discipleship; but Congregationalists can never be content until their individual faith is matured through

(* HIS EVERLASTING WORDS, AVA, 1981)

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voluntary fellowship in autonomous local Churches which are in voluntary fellowship with other Churches.

In 1865, some 500 leading Congregationalists met in Boston, and declared, among many other significant pronouncements:

"It is the chief end of man to Glorify God and to share his joy; and of of the world to be a place for the nurture of souls thus fulfilling their end. The church on earth embraces all who have begun to glorify and enjoy God. ... But, being the body of Christ wherein he dwells and whereby he works, it is also the means of its realization. ... Furthermore, every Church must needs embody its essential idea in its organization, and be a brotherhood [or a sisterhood] in form as well as in spirit, or its organization will be subtly, or perhaps very openly, counterworking its work. Its very organization should be the birth of a love which annihilates caste, and sense of hierarchy." *

In HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER A CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH, (**) the implications of the above call for a local Church "governed by the consent

(* Pages 209-210, NAT'L COUNCIL, 1865, American Cong'l Ass'n, Boston, 1866)

(** AVA, HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER A CONG'L CHRISTIAN CHURCH, NACCC, 1986)

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of the governed" are spelled out in detail. In this book we will try to make clear the wider implications of the Congregational Way as they apply to our voluntary ways of creating and maintaining meaningful inter-church fellowship.

The authors of the 1865 Report on Ministerial Education of the National COUNCIL of 1865, characterized Congregationalists as "lovers of the largest healthful religious freedom." They spoke of our *polity* as a part of our *theology*, and that "the glorious liberty of the sons of God", and "the freedom with which Christ has made us free" should not lead us to anarchy but to ordered fellowship. They restated the principles of our ecclesiastical procedures and practices as being integral with the ends of character building and social cohesion which they sought, and which we modern Congregationalists also seek to attain:

"It is the just glory of our churches that they are of all churches the most truly catholic. This arises from the fact, that according to the teachings of Christ and the apostles...we have placed vital Christianity, the renewing and saving power of the gospel and the cross, first and highest in our religious system, and have made modes of worship and forms of administration subordinate to life... It has appeared to us, that, of all [people] on earth, [Christians] are most likely to be capable of self-government; and

it has seemed that the freedom and responsibilities of self-government must tend to develop individual Christian activity, and to make church membership a real commitment of each disciple to a practical and working piety. We cannot but think that our principles, as sanctioned by reason and Scriptures, are, for our own sakes and our children's, worth maintaining; and also, that, faithfully maintaining them, we shall exert a most salutary influence on the large bodies of consolidated churches with which we come in friendly contact, in the way of infusing in them a more liberal spirit than naturally belongs to their own systems, and by some sort constraining them to respect the rights of individual believers and those of local churches. With these views of our [faith and polity], it appears to us as a sacred trust [transmitted] to the children of the [Pilgrims and] Puritans for the good of the churches of all names, not less than for their own. *

The author and other contemporary students of our heritage are not recommending that Congregationalism be returned to where it was a century ago; but we are affirming our need to know the philosophy of the Congregational Way of faith and order; that we need to rediscover its fundamental principles and practices, and their meaning for these times in fulfilling our responsibilities to ourselves and the human family.

(*Pages 169-170, NATIONAL COUNCIL 1865, Report on Ministerial Education, American Congregational Association, Boston, 1866)

The Congregational order is grounded in voluntary but specific disciplines which are the responsibility of every local Church, and every voluntary association, regional, national or international. These external bodies have been created by the Churches, and the Churches have assigned to them the tasks of fellowship and service essential to our common mission at home and abroad. Government "by consent of the governed" implies an understanding of parliamentary rules and the rights of the minority. To these ecclesiastical and democratic disciplines the reader is now invited to turn his thoughts, in the hope that we may better build upon the experience of our forebears, and broaden the vision of freedom for ourselves and our posterity.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Duty of Association

The word *ASSOCIATION* in Congregational Christian history has been not only a noun designating a specific organization, but more fundamentally, it has been a noun-verb standing for a deliberately dynamic and ongoing fellowship of local Churches and ministers "of the vicinage." Hence, the historic phrase, "the duty of association" has been held to be equal in importance to "the right of autonomy" in classic definitions of Congregationalism.

Therefore, as we reflect upon the place of dynamic fellowship in the life of democratically organized Churches, we need to understand how they have been able to avoid the limitations of sterile independency. Where other polities have relied upon bishops, canon laws, and paternalistic successions to create catholicity, and to maintain ecclesiastical order, we have chosen to depend entirely upon voluntary "association in Christ" to be both the guiding principle of our common life, and the basis of our polity and cooperative activity.

Whatever organizational techniques we may have come to use, these are secondary to *association*, and are

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justifiable only insofar as they help to create voluntary fellowship and maintain cooperation "to the glory of God." Ecclesiastical Councils, Conventions and Conferences, standing committees and elected officers, paid secretaries and *ad hoc* commissions are tools which the Churches have found useful in expediting the practical demands of the duty of association.

As in our local Churches, so also in our Associations of Churches and Ministers, "Where two or three are gathered together" it is expected that Christ will be "in their midst." The presence of the spirit of our Master-Teacher is our true joy, and our assurance that things shall be done "decently and in order." But the initiative for our gathering and working together comes not from external authority, but, because of our freedom, it must arise in us as a sacred duty.

Early believers "in the largest possible religious freedom" used three words to indicate the scope of the duty of association in inter-church relations: *communion, edification, and helpfulness*. Obviously, local Churches ought to be beloved communities of memory, hope, mutual helpfulness, and service; and they can be in spite of all of the tensions which modern society generates in them. The graces of patience, forbearance and kindness

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will do their perfect work, for the fruits of the Spirit are still available to those who yield to the Spirit's leading.

The *communion of the Churches* requires a conscious cultivation of arts and crafts of fellowship over and above the duties mentioned in the covenants of many local Churches. Leonard Bacon raised a question relevant to our present conditions in the debate on the Boston Council Polity Report (1865):

"Do we believe in the importance of the communion of the churches one with another, as that idea has been developed and applied in the experience of the two hundred and seventeen years that have elapsed since the Cambridge Platform was formed (1848)? Do we believe in it? I do, for one; and I believe in it so firmly that I will have nothing to do with any body...any denomination of Congregationalists in which that principle of the communion of the churches one with another, and their responsibility to give account of their proceedings one to another in all matters of common interest, is not recognized and acknowledged." (Pg. 452, NAT'l Council, '65)

Dr. Bacon went on to refer to the various acts of fraternal comity, correspondence, and helpfulness which he and the other authors of the 1865

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Polity Report had itemized, such as "professing a readiness to interchange each with the other all reasonable acts of Christian courtesy and love", in "giving and receiving advice", in "giving and receiving help", and in "consultation and co-operation for each other's edification and prosperity, or for the common interest of the gospel."

Surely as the democratically ordered Churches in our contemporary fellowship go forward they ought not to be satisfied with any lesser standards of orderly self-discipline than those Dr. Bacon so clearly articulated.

The word *edification* was dear to our early and latter "Fathers [Sisters] and Brethren," as they liked to refer to one another. No one ever defined the word better than Dr. Henry Martyn Dexter:

"All the processes of Congregationalism naturally tend...to stimulate the mind, to enlarge the views, to enrich the experience, to deepen the sense of responsibility, and to broaden the whole humanity... Congregationalism trains and then trusts the people... It educates them to feel - that humanly speaking, God has left the work of reconciling the world unto himself through Christ to them... And it is only the natural result of the normal processes of Congregationalism that her children should preeminently grow in

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grace and in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus." (Page 134, H.M. Dexter HANDBOOK, 1880)

The edifying effects of traditional inter-church communion, like asking and giving counsel, in sharing practical experience, in various acts of helpfulness toward Churches needing help from others, and in conferences and consultations for strengthening techniques in teaching, or organizing Church activities, or encouraging growth in devotional or spiritual welfare are time-tested accomplishments in our history.

The word *helpfulness* was not used by our forebears in a narrow sectarian sense, for they gloried in their Churches' reputation as the mothers of reformers, prepared to send out leaders unrestrained by preconceived ideas of worship and work, and zealous to go forth, blazing new trails of thought and service in the dark corners of the human mind and of the good earth. As they declared on Plymouth Burial Hill in 1865:

"It was the glory of our Fathers that they applied (the principles of the gospel) to elevate society, to regulate education, to civilize humanity, to purify laws, to reform the the Church and the State, and to assert and defend liberty; in short, to mould and redeem, by its all-transforming energy, everything that belongs to man

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in his individual and social relations."
(Pg. 563, Walker, CREEDS ETC., 1893)

What did the 19th Century Congregationalists do? They accepted the challenge of their own rhetoric:

"[Fathers and brethren], shall we deal lukewarmly, coldly, and in a worldly spirit with the [opportunities] before us? Shall we not in such cause, pour out our wealth like water, and give our sons and daughters to the work, as freely as patriots gave their sons to their country, and offer our own selves as freely as our adorable Redeemer gave himself for us?" (from the 1865 Council sermon by Dr. Julian M. Sturtevant)

What did they do? They raised three quarters of a million dollars to augment the work of the Congregational Building Society, and went out to double the number of Congregational Churches from 3,000 in 1865 to 6,000 in 1912. They threw their full support to the Home Boards and the American (Foreign) Board, and endowed them with missionaries and millions. And they took the lead, or provided the funds, or joined the ranks of fellow citizens in establishing free libraries, hospitals, schools and social agencies from Boston to Seattle, and from Duluth to Corpus Christi. And the fact that none of these free institutions bears the name "Congregational" (except one)

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is a tribute to their "grand peculiarity," as they said, "of holding the gospel, not merely as a ground for [their own] salvation, but as declaring the worth of man by the incarnation and the sacrifice of the Son of God." (Page 563, Williston Walker, CREEDS AND PLATFORMS ETC, Scribners, 1893)

Since the formation of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in 1955, much has happened to give proof that the Churches which have chosen to remain Congregational wish to go forward in the spirit of Robinson, Bacon, Dexter and Sturtevant:

"We must make this ecclesiastical question one of principle, otherwise we can not be efficient laborers for the evangelization of this continent and the world. If our gifted and strong young men regard the present and confused and anarchical condition of religious society...as necessary and inevitable; if they are taught that there is no question of principle at issue between the Protestant denominations, and that all which a pastor can do is, in the general rivalship of churches, to build up his own as well as he can, by the power of his eloquence, the attraction of his own social character, and the social influence which he can gather round him, and by the excellence of his organ and his choir without any appeal to principles and convictions of the people, - I say, if strong and vigorous-minded young men see that churches are to be built up by such influences as these, they will see little attraction in the pastoral office, and seek some other profession..

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"Let us have done with all this. Let us bring before our minds the grand conception of a continent to be overspread with a network of Christian institutions. Let us, with devout earnestness inquire what ecclesiastical system is the fittest instrument for achieving this great result; and when we have chosen it with full conviction, we shall wield it with hearty good will; we shall see and feel the giant obstacles that oppose us; but we shall believe that the spirit of God is strong enough to overcome them. We shall not be intolerant or exclusive... We shall have principles to defend, and we shall defend them, and we shall put our brethren of other denominations on the defense of theirs...Fathers and brethren...any polity is worthy of being advocated and defended thus, or it is not worthy of being adhered to at all." *

(* Pages 50-51, NATIONAL COUNCIL 1865, American Congregational Association, Boston, 1866, from the sermon by Dr. Julian M. Sturtevant)

CHAPTER TWO

Gathering and Ordering Churches

In this chapter we will review the historical role of the Congregational Way of inter-church fellowship in gathering and ordering local Churches.

By now the reader may have become annoyed by the consistent capitalization of the "C" in referring to local Churches. As we have said elsewhere, and we will say again and again, Congregationalists insist that the first principle of our order is the autonomy, or self-completeness of the local Church:

"(For Congregationalists) there is no church other than the (local) church organized for government; that no (outside) censure, or admonition, or excommunication, no ordination of a minister, no inauguration or deposition of church officers can be had by any other authority than that of the particular local church. That is the first principle out of which our whole moral system proceeds."
(Leonard Bacon, from the proceedings, Pg.452, NATIONAL COUNCIL, 1865)

In the first four chapters of HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER ETC., we considered in detail and one by one the steps normally taken in gathering and ordering

a Church of the Congregational polity:

"(1) A number of believers are gathered. (2) A covenant is written, or chosen and "owned" by all, ordinarily in a public service of worship. (3) A Constitution and Bylaws are prepared, and presented to a Church Meeting for adoption by the membership. Any procedures necessary for legal incorporation also must have formal approval by the "Church in Meeting." (Chapters I-V, AVA, HOW TO GATHER ETC., NACCC, 1986)

In the preceding chapter of the present book on page 3 we read Bacon's eloquent defense of our polity's second fundamental principle, "the communion of the Churches one with another", which, "added to the first, makes Congregationalism... It is the definiteness with which we hold (to the fellowship of the Churches) which makes us one body, and which gives us power to recognize one another, and to act together as a common body in mutual confidence..." (See also pages 74 and 75 in HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER ETC.)

The primary, and the most significant procedure in our inter-church communion is the Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage, whereby the local Church invites its sister Churches to meet by Pastors and Delegates to give it advice and to recognize its existence by the asking for and receiving "the right hand of fellowship."

This traditional use of local councils in the asking, giving and receiving advice stems from the belief that the Churches of Christ, though distinct and equal, are, nonetheless, united to Christ as integral parts of his one visible catholic church on earth. In both the Cambridge (1648) and the Boston (1865) Platforms our forebears declared themselves duty bound to "maintain all practical communion with all other portions of the church universal," and that "other acts of communion are especially due [to and from] Churches instituted and governed according to the Congregational polity." *

It has become axiomatic that in Congregational Christian Church affairs "nothing shall be done in a corner in the dark." The Churches in a given vicinity, because they are spiritually and socially inter-related, owe it to one another to avoid, by open and orderly consultation, every appearance of laxity, and to forestall any occasion for wrongdoing or scandal.

For example, the risks involved in the formation of a new Church are great indeed, and to take these risks without first seeking the prayerful counsel and advice of sister Churches is to fly in

(* See pages 41-45, PLATFORM 1865, Ecclesiastical Polity, the Government and Communion practiced by the Congregational Churches in the United States, Congregational Publication Society, Boston, 1872)

the face of common sense; hence the need for an orderly procedure of inter-church communion and mutual helpfulness whenever new Churches are constituted:

"When a competent number of Christian brethren propose to unite in a church covenant, and desire to be recognized as a church in the more intimate communion of the Congregational churches, the ordinary and most orderly method of obtaining such recognition is by an ecclesiastical council invited (by the new church) for that purpose by their letters to a convenient number of churches, especially of churches in the near vicinity. Having given to that Council, when assembled, a satisfactory statement of their faith and order, and of the reasons for their becoming a distinct church, together with sufficient evidence not only of their Christian Character, but also of their fitness in respect to gifts and numbers for performing the duties of a church, they receive as a church the right hand of fellowship extended to them by the council in behalf of all the churches." (Page 51, PLATFORM 1865, Cong'l Pub, Soc, 1872)

The following outline for organizing a Church, and calling an ecclesiastical council for constituting a Church is taken from the PASTOR'S MANUAL of 1895. Some minor changes have been made to adapt these

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suggestions to modern circumstances and to shorten the text:

THE ORGANIZATION OF A CHURCH

"Preliminary meetings are held to consider the propriety and possibility of such a step.

"To the meeting to take formal action should be invited all who have expressed their willingness to take part in such a movement. They should elect a chairman and clerk, and after prayer, should by vote decide to proceed to take steps toward the organization of a church. Committees should be appointed to draft or recommend a form of Covenant, Constitution and Bylaws, to secure the letters of those proposing to come from other Churches, and the names of those proposing to [join by] confession of faith...

"At a later meeting the reports of these committees should be heard, and if necessary, amended by vote and approved, to take effect upon the constitution of the church.

"From this point on these members may proceed to complete their organization, electing officers and publicly entering into covenant with each other, receiving new members on confession of faith, and soon thereafter calling a council to review the proceedings to date, to recognize the church thus organized, and to receive it into fellowship of the (Congregational) Churches.

"All such ecclesiastical councils are

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called by persons or Churches seeking advice and by them only." (Boynton's 1895 PASTOR'S MANUAL)

The following form of a LETTER MISSIVE, calling a council for the Constituting of a Church is taken from the same 1895 PASTOR'S MANUAL.

(Note: An optional paragraph has been added should a Church wish the Council to baptize and receive new members as part of the public service of the Council.)

"TO THE _____ CHURCH
in _____,

Dear (friends):

The Great Head of the Church having inclined a number of believers here to think it their duty to become associated as a Church, they respectfully request you to meet, by your Pastor and delegate, in Ecclesiastical Council at....in this place on next, at.... o'clock, . M. to consider the expediency of the course proposed by them and advise in reference thereto; and should the formation of such a Church be deemed expedient, to assist in the public services appropriate to its formation, constitution and recognition as a Church in voluntary fellowship with its sister Churches.

(We also respectfully request that provision be made for the baptism and reception into membership of a number of friends upon the confession of their faith during the service.)

Wishing you grace, mercy and peace,

We subscribe ourselves,

Your brethren in Christ,

..... Committee of those
..... proposing to become
..... a new Church
..... (et. al.)

Place Date

List here all Churches and honorary guests invited, (name them all, and state whether or not honorary guests shall be given the right to vote.)"

The 1895 Manual suggests an agenda for a constituting council and an order of public service where the RESULT OF THE COUNCIL may be announced amid prayer and thanksgiving:

"1. The Council is called to order by one of the older brethren of the vicinage who reads the letter missive, and calls for the nomination of a moderator, who is then elected either by acclamation or by ballot.

"2. Prayer is offered by the Moderator, after which a scribe is elected.

"3. The scribe gathers the names of pastors and delegates, and prepares the roll of the Council.

"4. If a majority of the churches invited

are present, (or the number required in the letter missive are represented), the Council reviews the proceedings of the new church organization, and the prospect of sustaining it. The articles of faith and/or the covenant adopted as its basis, the Constitution and Bylaws, and the letters of dismission [if available] from the churches with which any have been formerly connected are examined by the Council as a whole or by committee.

"5. If these proceedings, statements, and documents are satisfactory, upon a motion (seconded, and discussed) it is so voted.

"6. If so directed by the letter missive, the Council by committee listens to the religious experience of those persons who desire to unite with the new Church on confession of faith, and those approved on report of this committee share in the further proceedings with those whose letters have been approved.

"7. At this point the minutes of the Council scribe may be read and approved so far as written and the scribe and moderator authorized to complete and sign them at the close of the public service.

"(If the public service of constitution is to be held at a special hour and separate occasion, a recess is now taken until the time appointed.)

"8. The public service should be properly opened with the reading by the scribe of the proceedings of the Council thus far

(announcing the result, the advice given, and the decision to "proceed with the Church" in the public service.)

"9. If the Council has been asked in the letter missive to receive new members on confession of faith, the articles of faith and/or covenant are read or assented to [or recited in unison with the congregation] by those approved for membership. Such persons as have not been baptized now receive the ordinance. A brief address with the right hand of fellowship may be given if desired.

"10-15. Prayer of Constitution
Hymn
Sermon and/or addresses
Communion, (if desired)
Hymn
Benediction

"16. Dissolution of the Council
(Sine die)

"Notes: (a.) A full copy of the records, signed by both the moderator and the scribe, should be placed in the hands of the Church Clerk, to be filed, and a copy spread upon the records of the Church; and (b.) copies for safekeeping and historical record should be sent to the scribe of the local Association of Churches and Ministers, and to all key denominational offices and the Congregational Libraries." *

(* George M. Boynton, PILGRIM PASTOR'S MANUAL, Congregational Publishing Society, Boston, 1895)

CHAPTER THREE

Vicinage Fellowship and Ecclesiastical Councils

The following "EPITOME OF CONGREGATIONAL POLITY" was adopted unanimously by the National Congregational Council, Boston, 1865:

"First, The principle that the local or Congregational Church derives its power and authority directly from Christ, and is not subjected to any ecclesiastical government exterior or superior to itself.

"Second, That every local or Congregational church is bound to observe the duties of mutual respect and charity which are included in the communion of churches one with another; and that every church which refuses to give an account of its proceedings, when kindly and orderly desired to do so by neighboring churches, violates the law of Christ.

"Third, That the ministry of the gospel by members of the churches who have been duly called and set apart to that work implies in itself no power of government, and that ministers of the gospel not elected to office in any church are not a hierarchy, nor are they invested with any official power in or over the churches." (Page 464, NAT'L CONSL. COUNCIL 1865)

The task of fleshing out these principles was assigned to a distinguished committee which made its report in The Boston Platform with an introductory comment:

"The authority pertaining to any exposition of our polity, by whatever assembly, is wholly unlike the authority which is claimed for canons enacted by... assemblies of clergy and delegates which assume to govern the particular congregations under them... The National Council at Boston had no legislative power to ordain a new constitution for the churches; or to promulgate any new rules; and no judicial power to establish precedents which inferior courts must follow. All that any such Council can do is to enquire, deliberate, and to testify..." *

Just one example of the diligence of the delegates and their Platform Committee is their statement of the "principles and specifications of the Communion of Churches:"

"I-Although churches are distinct, and therefore may not be confounded one with another; and equal, and therefore have not dominion over one another; yet all the churches ought to preserve

(* See Page 8, PLATFORM 1865, Ecclesiastical Polity, The Government and Communion practiced by the Congregational Churches in the United States ... by Elders and Messengers in National Council, Boston, 1865; Cong'l. Pub. Soc., 1872)

church communion one with another, because they are all united to Christ as integral parts of his one Catholic Church, Militant against the evil that is in the world, and Visible in the profession of the Christian faith, in the observance of the Christian sacraments, in the manifestation of the Christian life, and in the worship of the one God of our salvation...

"II-The communion of churches with each other is manifested in various acts of fraternal comity, correspondence and helpfulness:

1. In mutual recognition; one organized congregation of Christian worshippers acknowledging another to be a visible church of Christ, and each professing a readiness to interchange with the other all reasonable acts of Christian courtesy and love...

4. In the dismission and reception of members, when for any sufficient reason, they pass from one church to another.

5. In giving and receiving advice when one church desires counsel of another, or of many others.

6. In giving and receiving help; as when one church gives of its members that another church may be supplied with officers; or when one church receives outward support from the

contributions of another, or of many others.

7. In consultation and co-operation for each other's edification and prosperity, or for the common interest of the gospel.

8. In giving and receiving admonition; as when there is found in a church some public offence which it does not discern, nor neglects to remove; for though churches have no authority over one another than one apostle had over another; yet one apostle might admonish another, so one church may admonish another, without usurpation; in which case, if the admonished church refuse to hear its neighbor church and to remove the offence, it violates the communion of the churches." *

In America, since the gathering of the first "Churches of Christ", as they named themselves, the communion of the Churches was carried on by orderly *ECCLESIASTICAL COUNCILS*, described in great detail in the Boston Platform, Chapter II, pages 46-57. Following are some of the traditional assumptions and policies upon which councils are called, conducted, and concluded (AVA summary):

I-Councils of churches of a

(* Pages 41, 42, PLATFORM 1865, Cong'l Pub. Society, Boston, 1872.)

vicinity on any matter of common concern are essential to the communion of the churches.

II-Churches invited (normally by the local church) to assist in a council are represented by pastor and delegates chosen by them for the particular occasion...but in the council, there is no distinction of authority between pastor and other delegates.

III-In ordinary cases a council should be made up of churches in the near vicinity, but if a council is called to advise in some personal or parochial controversy it may be expedient for a church to include more distant churches rather than exclusively from those near at hand.

IV-A council is to be called only by a church, or by an aggrieved member or members in a church which has unreasonably refused a council (an *ex parte*) council, or by a competent number of believers intending to be gathered into a church...

VI-Councils ordinarily consist of churches invited and consenting; though sometimes individuals whose advice or aid in counsel is deemed important are personally invited (with or without vote as designated in the *LETTER MISSIVE*). After being called to order, no church or person can be added to those specified in the letter missive, nor,

for the same reason, can the council act on any other matters which are not distinctly stated in the letter missive.

VI-Councils are not to be called in cases of light moment, and are proper only in matters of common interest such as relations of fellowship between churches; the relations of members or pastors and churches; the reputation of the brotherhood of churches as effected by acts or conditions of a church; or matters of general interest to or mutual helpfulness in the cause of Christ. COUNCILS ARE IN NO SENSE COURTS OF APPEAL THAT THEY MAY ALTER OR RESCIND ANY ACT OF A CHURCH...

VIII-The council, when assembled, organizes itself by the choice of moderator and scribe, that its proceedings may be orderly and deliberate, and may be duly written down for the use of those whom the result concerns...Having properly deliberated, and made its decision, the council is forthwith to be dissolved; and the scribe is to convey a copy of the proceedings and advice to the parties concerned.

Detailed procedures for the Ordination or Installation of a Minister are illustrated in Chapter VI, page 46, in *HOW TO GATHER AND ORDER ETC.* In Chapter II, page 15, of this present manual the details for conducting a council in the gathering and ordering

of a Church are illustrated. Councils for other purposes are based ordinarily upon the same Congregational principles and democratic rules of order.

Below is a list of the usual matters for which Churches have sought and seek advice from sister Churches by Letter Missive calling ecclesiastical councils:

1. for the Ordination and/or Installation of a Minister and Induction to the office of Pastor and Teacher. (See also Chapter VI, pages 48-69 in HOW TO GATHER ETC., for detailed description of Councils for Installations and Ordinations.

2. for the DISMISSAL of a duly installed pastor, not only so things may be done in good order, but also so its sister Churches may share in the joyous review of his/her past stewardship and extend the pastor Godspeed in a new call to service or a well-earned retirement.

3. for advice in how to finance and build a new building, or in refinancing burdensome land and property obligations.

4. for prayerful advice and spiritual help in bringing peace to a divided fellowship or aggrieved members.

5. and for matters of general interest to Churches of the vicinage or

in the promulgation of the gospel at home or abroad.

(NOTE: Copies of the minutes of such councils are on file in denominational offices, and are available in old manuals and in the archives of the Congregational Libraries from coast to coast:

Congregational Library, 14 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02108.

National Association Library, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, 53154-0620, (NACCC office).

West Coast Congregational Library, First Congregational Church, Los Angeles, California, 90020.

CHAPTER FOUR

Local Associations of Churches and Ministers

Unlike Ecclesiastical Councils, local Associations of Churches and Ministers are "standing" bodies which have a continuing organization with bylaws, officers and regular meetings.

In the early days of New England, Churches and ministers, together or separately, formed groups for fellowship and mutual helpfulness. Like the doctors and lawyers, ministers met to encourage one another, and to provide a minimum of "standing" among their peers, and in neighboring communities.

Churches, in the Colonial period, engaged in periodical pulpit exchanges, sponsored informal meetings with neighboring Churches for worship and fellowship, and invited members and friends to participate. They also began to have regular meetings to which pastors and specified "messengers" were delegated to consider matters of common interest between deacons, or trustees, or leaders of women's groups. In time these informal gatherings became structured into Associations of Churches and Ministers. This practice became a general pattern as Congregational Churches were gathered in more and more of the States.

No better understanding of the nature and structure of local Associations is available than the descriptions drawn from actual practice during the study made by the "COMMITTEE ON FREE CHURCH POLITY AND UNITY", 1954, and its sub-committee headed by Dr. Henry David Gray:

THE ASSOCIATION *

"10. An Association of Congregational Christian churches is a voluntary fellowship of churches, or churches and ministers. The large majority of Associations are unincorporated. All meetings are composed of delegates (or "messengers") from the associated churches. A good number extend membership to all ordained Congregational Christian ministers who hold standing in the association. Most Associations are geographically contiguous.

"11. An Association ordinarily meets at least once a year. The chief business relates to questions concerning church or ministerial membership. In addition addresses are given, [often] by representatives of conferences, missionary boards, or other agencies of Christian life and work beyond the local church. Worship, fellowship and mutual counsel, and sometimes common action form the substance of the Association meeting.

"12. An Association meeting attracts the attendance of delegates by virtue of (a) the sense

(* See pages 42-44, REPORT, FREE CHURCH POLITY AND UNITY, General Council, 1954)

of responsibility to attend on the part of the local church, (b) the fairly common rule (frequently unenforced) that ministers must annually report to the Association in person or in writing in order to retain ministerial standing, (c) the strength of the program, and (d) the need for fellowship in areas where Congregational Christian churches are few in number. Attendance varies widely, with a majority of the churches represented at most meetings.

"13. An Association elects its own officers, establishes its own rules of procedure, writes its own constitution, is the custodian of the membership and credentials of its ministerial members, may hold and administer its own property, establishes its own rules for membership, chooses its own paid personnel (if any), plans its own program, and orders all its affairs...

"15. The Association, acting on the advice of its credentials committee, and in response to a local church, makes provision for the reception of churches into its membership in the Association, for the care of candidates for the ministry...[and] for the transfer of ministerial standing from Association to Association...

"16. The Association receives into fellowship as a Congregational Christian Church a group of Christian people who have [by a duly called ecclesiastical council] constituted themselves as a congregationally organized church with (a) a constitution [and bylaws], (b) a roll of members, (c) officers, (d) a [covenant], or statement of faith or purpose, (e) a stable business condition, and provision for adequate leadership...

28.

"18. The Association may withdraw fellowship from a local church for spiritual and moral reasons, [but it would be unwise to do so without the advice of a duly called ecclesiastical council].

...

"23. The Association examines, [usually with the advice of its credentials committee, with special emphasis upon their understanding of Congregational history and polity], applicant ministers whose standing is in non-Congregational Christian church bodies, and accepts them into membership unless there are strong moral, spiritual or educational reasons for doing otherwise...

"26. The Association is one of the chief means of communication between the churches and the wider agencies of fellowship...[in cooperation] with state conference leaders, and with educational, missionary, service or other wider agencies of the churches..."

Although the above statements were made before the formation of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches of the United States, they were not matters of dispute among our Churches. The Churches which chose to remain Congregational following the formation of the United Church of Christ continued to use tried and true principles and practices in organizing new local Associations. *

(* See, for example, the Articles of Association of the Michigan, Mid-America or Cal-West Associations.)

29.

See Appendix, Page 103, for a typical Constitution [or Articles of Association] for a local or general Association of Congregational Christian Churches and Ministers

CHAPTER FIVE

Ministerial Standing

A Congregational Christian minister's standing rests fundamentally in his membership in a local Church and in the love and respect of the members of his congregation; but his professional standing is certified to and recorded in his status as a member of a local Association. His peers are called upon to testify as to his competence and fidelity as a pastor and teacher. They are his source of ministerial fellowship and intellectual companionship; and together with their Churches they must take responsibility for the nurture of candidates for the ministry in their midst.

In foregoing chapters quotations have been taken from Pastor's Manuals written before the turn of the century by learned authors like Dexter and Boynton. They were followed by other noble interpreters of free church polity both in theory and in practice. These Manuals have been and still are great sources for nurturing both ministers and laymen in the Congregational Way of faith and order.

Ministerial standing was but one part of their subject matter; and with inspiring clarity they explained our traditions and methods of freedom in

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30.

belief and fellowship. In the bibliography, we have listed the Manuals of Charles Sumner Nash (1909), William E. Barton (1916), Charles Emerson Burton (1936), and Oscar E. Maurer (1947). These all dealt specifically with the history of and the principles upon which Congregationalists have trained, ordained, and maintained a learned ministry.

Guided by these earlier great students of free Church practice, the following descriptions of ministerial status and standing in Congregational Christian tradition were published by a commission of the Congregational Christian Department of the Ministry in 1953.

The terms "In Care", "Licensure" and "Ordination" are discussed with the generally accepted standards applied then, and now, in the Associations of Congregational Christian Churches and Ministers which chose to remain Congregational.

THE CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN MINISTRY *

"I- IN CARE OF ASSOCIATION

That with reference to taking candidates for the ordained ministry *In Care of Association* the

(* from THE CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN MINISTRY, a Handbook of Standards, etc., Congregational Christian Department of the Ministry, N.Y.C., 1953)

following information, standards and procedures... are to be commended to the appropriate Association committees for the ministry.

1. Definition of status. In Care of Association is the status given a candidate for the ordained ministry by vote of an Association of churches of one of which the candidate is a member. In conferring this status, the Association extends fellowship and counsel to the candidate, and certifies to seminaries and to any other officially concerned, that the person is a candidate for the ordained Christian ministry.

2. Attainment of status:

a. The prospective candidate makes his desire to become an ordained minister known to his pastor, who offers personal counsel and who advises as to subsequent procedures.

b. Upon recommendation of pastor and church, the Association Committee on the Ministry examines the prospective candidate as to character, aptitudes, and Christian experience; and if satisfied with his qualifications recommends him to the Association.

c. Upon these recommendations, and, wherever possible, the personal appearance of the prospective candidate, the Association votes to take him In Care and to offer its friendship and counsel through a pastoral advisor designated by its Committee on the Ministry.

d. The candidate shall then receive an "In Care of Association" credential card and his

name and date of receiving status shall be recorded with the Association.

II- LICENSURE

That with reference to the granting of Licensure to candidates for the ordained ministry of our churches the following information, standards, and procedures... be commended to the appropriate Associations and to all pastors, and all candidates for Licensure.

1. Definition of status: Licensure is the status through which a candidate in training for the ordained ministry of our churches is certified by the Association as qualified to preach the Gospel, and as a licentiate to serve a church.

2. Attainment of status:

a. Ordinarily this status is achieved at an appropriate time during the candidate's seminary course, and as a first professional step toward his ordination.

b. In exceptional cases where, by reason of age or other considerations making a full seminary course as a prerequisite for ordination unlikely or impossible, and if willing to continue theological studies, a candidate is certified by the Association as qualified to preach the Gospel and serve a church as a licentiate, and licensure may be granted.

c. In no instance does Licensure, (or Ordination for that matter), confer the right to administer the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. According to historic

Congregational practice, a licentiate (or qualified layperson) may be requested by vote of the local church in and for itself alone, to conduct these services.

d. In all instances it is assumed that the candidate for Licensure is ready to do everything in his power to meet the educational qualifications for ordination, preferably through an accredited seminary.

e. Whenever possible Licensure should be granted by the Association that has the candidate In Care.

f. If the candidate is in residence at a seminary far from his home Association, he should request his home Association to support his application for Licensure to the Association in which the seminary is located, with appropriate information concerning his church membership, his record of Christian character and activity, and any official connections with the home Association.

g. The committee on the Ministry of the Association granting Licensure shall require from the candidate in personal interview or examination: evidence of church membership; of graduation from an approved college; of commendation from the candidate's home church and/or Association; a transcript of college credits; a transcript of seminary credits to date; a statement of purpose in entering the Christian ministry and/or a statement of maturing Christian faith; a written sermon; evidence of knowledge of Congregational history, polity and current program

and practice; evidence of ability to lead in public worship and to perform the other duties required of a licentiate who is serving a church.

h. Licensure is granted for a period of one year.

i. The licentiate shall then receive a credential card [or certificate], properly signed and dated by the appropriate officers of the Association.

III- ORDINATION

That with relation to ordination the following standards be commended to the appropriate Associations, to all pastors, and to all candidates for ordination.

1. Definition of status: Ordination is the recognition, by a church and an ecclesiastical council, of God's calling of a man or a woman to the ministry; and of the competency of the candidate, under God's continued grace and guidance, to preach the word, and to render the pastoral and administrative services required of a minister serving a church, a missionary board, or another church-related organization.

2. Attainment of status:

a. It is assumed that members of our churches seeking ordination will normally have received the counsel and guidance of their home churches and Associations through the successive stages of being In Care of Association, and being granted Licensure during the seminary course, and will approach ordination with a full consciousness

of the requirements and the responsibilities as well as privileges of this status.

b. A candidate for ordination should be prepared to furnish an examining [ecclesiastical] Council of Congregational Christian Churches, the following materials, statements, or evidences of qualification for ordination: a certificate of graduation from an accredited college and from an accredited seminary; a transcript of seminary credits; a statement of purpose in desiring ordination to the Christian ministry; a statement of personal growth in Christian experience and of personal faith at the time of examination; a written sermon; evidence of knowledge of Congregational Christian history, polity and current programs and practices; evidence of ability to lead in public worship, to administer the sacraments and to render the pastoral and administrative services required of a minister serving a church."

Below is a form of "certificate of approval and commendation of Candidate for the Pastorate to the churches," by an Association of Churches and Ministers as suggested by Henry Martyn Dexter in his *HANDBOOK OF CONGREGATIONALISM*, Congregational Publishing Society, Boston, 1888:

This
that _____, having _____
himself/herself to the _____
Association of Congregational Churches and
Ministers for inquiry as to his/her
qualifications for the Gospel Ministry; and having
been this day carefully examined by us with regard

to the same; and having satisfied us of his/her good and regular standing in a Christian Church, of his/her reputable and faithful personal character, his/her sufficient literary and theological attainments, the purity of his/her motives in entering the ministry; and the reasonable probability, with God's blessing, of his/her success therein, is hereby approved by us, and commended to the Congregational [Christian] churches, as one whom we believe to be fitted by character, talents and attainments for the sacred office.

In testimony whereof we have directed this certificate of his/her Licensure as of (date of Licensure) - or of his/her Ordination (date of ordination) and our approbation to be signed by our Moderator and Scribe; with the understanding that (LICENSURE ONLY), unless revoked for cause, it will be valid for one year from the date thereof.

_____, Moderator
_____, Scribe
Date _____ Place _____ "

Note: Member Churches in the National Association, and Associations of such Churches are invited each year to provide, voluntarily, such statistics as they wish to have published in the annual YEARBOOK. Important in these reports are the names of all ministerial and other staff persons in local Churches, and the roster of Ministers, Licentiates and those In Care of Association.

Below are the products of some

years of prayerful study of ministerial standing by Commissions on the Ministry of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. This work had its beginning in a declaration made at the Cheyenne, Wyoming, Annual Meeting in 1961, and culminated at the Southfield, Michigan, Meeting in the 1966 addition to the National Association Articles of Association Bylaw IX:

STANDING AND ORDINATION

"1. In accordance with the historic and accepted practice of congregational bodies exterior to the local Church of making lists of the names of those who have ministerial standing in our Churches as ordained pastors and teachers and other ministers... the National Association shall prepare, maintain and publish such a list...coded to indicate their current status.

"2. The presence or absence of the name of a pastor or minister on this list shall not be construed as either conferring or denying ministerial standing. The act of recordation shall be a mere acknowledgement of the fact that he/she is the pastor or minister of a member church...

"4. The National Association has no power to ordain, censure, or depose a minister, or to sit as a council of reference in such cases...

"5. Ordination is the right and business of the local Church, but the following statement of

things commonly held among us is germane to the purposes of the National Association as stated in Article II of the Articles of Association.

(a) The local Church being complete under the headship of Christ in all spiritual power has, and shall retain, the inalienable right to ordain. The local Church may call an ecclesiastical council as an expression of the fellowship of Churches, but it shall be remembered that ordination is by the local Church.

(b) Ordination by the local Church is valid and sufficient, but it is conducive to orderliness and continuity of record that the fact of a minister's ordination be listed with a larger body or bodies. This may include a local association of Congregational [Christian] Churches or the National Association. In the case of the National Association, such listing shall be done under the pertinent provisions of the Bylaws." *

(* Page 208, 1987 YEARBOOK, National Association Congregational Christian Churches)

CHAPTER SIX

Pastoral Relations

The voluntary procedures and practices of the Congregational Way of faith and order are difficult to explain to those who "enjoy the comforts" of "revealed and hierarchical religion" (to borrow a phrase or two from Winston Churchill). The questions most disturbing to those accustomed to "appointments to charges" and "approval of pastoral calls by bishops or presbyteries" are these: (1) How does a Congregational Christian Church find a minister?, and (2) How does a minister find a Congregational Christian Church?

We will make a long story as short as possible from Colonial days until the Council of 1886. Pastoral relations were managed by "word of mouth", so to speak. Churches needing pastoral leadership would enquire of neighboring pastors or knowledgeable laymen, leading to local or more distantly available candidates who might be interviewed or consulted by letter.

The most likely of these candidates would be observed by members or friends of the Church without a minister. Then, if warranted, arrangement would be made to have the chosen candidate invited to conduct a service in some nearby Church, so that elders and committee

members might hear him preach and have an interview with him in a neutral environment. If the candidate seemed acceptable to the visiting elders and members they would invite him to preach in their vacant pulpit, and recommend him to the Church-in-meeting for a formal vote on issuing him a call.

The same informal procedure was followed by a minister seeking a Church. If a Church inquired of his interest in a change of pastorate, probably on the recommendation of another minister or knowledgeable laymen, he would indicate whether or not he was available for consideration. If a minister learned of a vacant pulpit, and desired to make a change, he would, with discretion, ask a respected brother minister to recommend him as a candidate. To make a direct appeal for consideration was generally considered to be in bad taste, and might work against one's prospects for being considered, and damage the reputation of ministers who followed this course.

By the time of the National Council of 1886 there were Congregational Churches from Maine to California. More ministers were needed than they could locally train and ordain, especially in developing Western territories. The informal system was just not adequate to the task of finding ministers. Lay officers of Associations, local and general, theological seminary presidents, professors, deans, traveling

missionaries and visiting dignitaries all became involved in a voluntary and unofficial "pastoral placement" enterprise.

William E. Barton described the state of mind that led to the decisions made at the 1886 National Council:

"The Council of 1886 was the beginning of a new order of things...Rev. Alonzo Quint of Massachusetts and others, stood for a representative body in each state which should be responsible [for pastoral matters and the keeping of records of ministerial standing]. Rev. Henry M. Dexter, [also of Massachusetts] opposed these brethren with all the eloquence and ardor which had expressed themselves in his great books... The vote, however, was decisive [to make membership in a Congregational Association essential to good and regular standing: that is, to get one's name listed in the National Yearbook]."^{*}

The Churches in New England, responded by setting up The New England Board of Pastoral Supply, an independent corporation with a board of directors elected by the general and local Associations of Churches. Provision was made to engage an Executive Secretary and to provide an office in Boston where current dossiers of both Churches and

(^{*} Page 403, William E. Barton, THE LAW OF CONGREGATIONAL USAGE, Advance Publishing, Sublette, Ill., 1916)

ministers seeking connections could be kept in good order. This Board was conceived in the highest ideals of non-paternalistic help to Churches and ministers, and it tried sincerely to do whatever it could for those outside of New England who sought its assistance.

The good offices of the Secretary were made available by interview or "by post", with the understanding that all services of the Board were to be provided without prejudice, and without infringing upon the independent actions of either Churches or ministers. The Board of Pastoral Supply was faithful to its charter from its establishment until it was dissolved by the United Church of Christ.

The Illinois general Association, in cooperation with other Midwest local and general Associations, set up a similar office. In time the Associations on the West Coast cooperated in a similar venture. These offices continued their assistance to Churches until about 1959, when they merged their activities into the state and regional Conferences of the United Church of Christ.

While these "Pastoral Relations Boards" were coming into being, general Associations all over the country were becoming what were called "State Conferences"; and they, too, began to engage Executive Secretaries, variously

named: Presidents, Superintendents, and Conference Ministers. These officers were provided with Conference staffs, and offered services in pastoral relations as well as their missionary and conference program activities. Most of these offices accepted the standards of the New England Board of Pastoral Supply and defended its policies respecting the independence of Churches and ministers as fundamental to maintaining the Congregational Way.

Dr. Barton, writing in 1915, concluded, prematurely, that "from [1886] very nearly everything that Dr. Dexter had written about Associations became obsolete." Dr. Barton and others expected that the National Council would become "a council of reference" in matters of ministerial relations; but the Churches never allowed the National Council, or its successor, the General Council, to assume such a role, nor to infringe upon the powers of Churches and ministers to control Church and Ministerial Standing in their own local Associations. (Pg.404, Law of Cong'l Usage)

As Continuing Congregationalists say, "the old denomination" never did succeed in providing the Churches with a truly nation-wide program of orderly pastoral record keeping and the exchange of current pastoral relations information. Lists of pastoral changes were published in national magazines and

Conference bulletins. Ultimately a General Council Department of the Ministry was formed; but the old networks augmented by the pastoral relations Boards and the Conferences continued to operate down through the years until 1960.

One of the first responsibilities of the small staff of the National Association, formed in 1955, was to assist in the pastoral relations of Churches and ministers not intending to enter the United Church of Christ. The Division of the Ministry, as it is now called, began a program of pastoral supply on the principles of the old New England Board, but on a national scale.

Its compilation of dossiers about Churches and ministers is maintained strictly on a voluntary basis. It does not recommend ministers to Churches, but makes available current information about ministers and Churches to those who request it. It is not a "placement bureau", but a clearing house of vital information for Churches seeking ministers and ministers seeking Churches.

The late Dr. John W. Claxton, distinguished past Secretary of the Pastoral Relations Office, described its functions as being "one of assisting in the process by which Churches seeking ministers and ministers seeking Churches may be enabled to know of each other, thereby giving God's will for

each the opportunity to find expression." (Pg.14, CONGREGATIONALIST, Mar, 1965)

So, day in and day out this Pastoral Relations Office in Milwaukee, is giving valuable assistance to pastors and Churches. The staff is especially helpful in counseling pastoral committees at the beginning of their quest for a new minister in those procedures which have been found wise and prudent by many other Churches in like situations. Its Secretary is Dean of the Foundation for Theological Studies, assisting students in pursuing their chosen seminary programs. He is subject to a board of directors elected by the National Association in Annual Meeting which approves all standing policies of the Foundation.

Continuing Congregationalists can be grateful and proud that the National Association has been competent to provide our growing fellowship with a truly national program of pastoral supply.

(Note: Those interested in the history of the Board of Home Missions, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Etc., see Chapter IX, and also read Chapters XV-XIX in Atkins and Fagley, HISTORY ETC. These universally respected institutions described therein, and now controlled by the United Church of Christ, compiled a record of two hundred years of creative missionary and humanitarian service at home and abroad, and accumulated 160 million dollars in endowments.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

Regional Conventions and Conferences

A Baptist wit once described a Congregational Christian "Conference" as "a Baptist Convention with a fancy Methodist name."

The truth in this comparison lies in the fact that our Conferences and Baptist Conventions are both gatherings of "messengers" from free local Churches, convened in the interest of common needs and aspirations, but without power to legislate for, or to limit the cherished autonomy of the Churches to which the Conferences and Conventions belong.

A Methodist Conference, on the other hand, is a corporate unit of a national Church, to which all local (note) "congregations" belong. The Methodist Conference consists of the clergy and representatives elected by districts. Conferences actually own and control all properties of the congregations in their jurisdictions. Methodist Conferences are empowered by a national constitution of the denomination to tax local congregations with "conference claimants," to ordain clergy, to supervise in its jurisdiction the over-all program of the National Church, and to assign pastoral "charges." Our Conferences have never been able to do any of these things.

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Ordinarily, when Congregational Christians say, "the Conference," they are referring to the offices and officers of an organization which has been created by the Churches' delegates to an annual State Convention. The "Christian" partners of our national fellowship, which was consummated by a merger in 1931, continued to call their state and regional bodies "Conventions."

The State or (regional) Conference directors, staff and standing committees are the "business end" of the Conference Annual Meeting, and their on-going services for the Churches are (or ought to be) carried on solely on the principles of freedom in voluntary fellowship.

The Congregational Conference, then, is not a CHURCH above the Churches. It is, as the Yale-Omaha Constitutional Commission said of our then General Council, "a church-body...spiritually the organ of the churches, and therefore morally responsible for the fostering and expression of the substantial unity of the churches in life and work." (See minutes of Omaha General Council, 1956)

What is a Conference? It is an instrument for furthering inter-church fellowship and mutual helpfulness; it is a means of church extension, a method for distribution of charitable and

49.

missionary gifts, and one of the several ways of providing advice in pastoral relations; it is an agency for the creation of new societies of social and missionary outreach.

Since the formation of the United Church of Christ, Churches which chose to remain Congregational, and to continue in their traditional voluntary relationships, have been unable to establish Conferences except in states like Michigan where there are a large number of continuing Congregational Churches. As more and more Churches are gathered in other parts of the United States, the following excerpts from the REPORT of THE COMMITTEE ON FREE CHURCH POLITY AND UNITY (pages 26 and 27) may be of future help when new Conferences are formed. This portion of the Report was also compiled by Dr. Henry David Gray:

THE STATE CONFERENCE

"28. The state conference is an administrative agency of the churches responsible to an annual meeting of delegates from the churches and a board of directors...elected at the annual meeting of delegates. The responsibilities possessed by the conferences are such as have been given them by the churches which created and maintain them.

"29-31 (passim). The state conference [is headed by a person who is actually an executive secretary] (sometimes differently titled),

elected by the annual meeting delegates. He/she is responsible for general oversight of all of the Conference-wide work for the churches, and is often assisted by a professional staff... He/she represents the churches at denominational and inter-denominational gatherings...with which our churches are associated... He/she also serves as the liaison person for the churches in relation to governmental and private agencies engaged in social-humanitarian or educational work...and is expected to give special advice and help in.. church extension, missions, aid to weaker churches, social [relations], ministerial placement, investment of funds, holding of properties not under local church control, fellowship and other matters of area-wide concern.

"32. The state conference has no authority over the local churches. Its present relation to the churches [was] well described by [the late] Dr. Charles C. Merrill as follows, 'This many sided work is carried on without a book of discipline or a canon law, or a government. There is a minimum of authority. There is a maximum of fraternity. It is a fine illustration of what may be called free cooperation...' *

"33. The state conference is a vital link in the organizational programs of the fellowship of Congregational Christian Women, the Laymen's Fellowship, and the Pilgrim Fellowship for youth; the promotion of national and conference missionary objectives, the calling of meetings for study and inspiration, the holding of retreats, camps or conferences constitute

(* Dr. Charles C. Merrill, THE STATE CONFERENCE, Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1946)

[its main program functions].

"34-35. The state conference is financed by endowments and gifts, but chiefly by the voluntary giving of local churches. 'Goals' are suggested to churches by some conferences, but no church is known to have been refused full participation in the life and work of the conference because of failure to pay per capita, apportionment, or other monies... The churches retain the right to give or to withhold financial support... [So,] the state conference receives [the voluntary] support of the local churches for the purpose of carrying out specific objectives. Its stewardship in the monies given to it is governed by these objectives..."

"37. The Association [and *not* the Conference] is the only universally recognized credential-holding body among us... [Conferences and Associations 'recognize' each other], but this recognition means voluntarily accepting the responsibility for consultation and cooperation [between them] in their respective spheres." *

Since the formation of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, whenever general Associations or Conferences have been formed, the traditional principles and practices outlined above have been approved and followed by Churches, local and general Associations, and Conferences.

(* Pages 26,27, REPORT, FREE CHURCH POLITY AND UNITY, General Council of Congregational Christian Churches, N.Y.C., 1954.)

CHAPTER EIGHT

National Councils and the National Association

The Albany Convention, 1852

The first "national" meeting of Congregationalists was held in 1852 in Albany, New York. It was called to deal with the plight of our churches in the Midwest who were being hampered by an agreement made with the Presbyterians in Connecticut in 1801. In essence the Presbyterians agreed to stay out of New England if we would remain east of the Hudson River.

Times had changed by the 1820's and 30's as whole congregations of Congregationalists were moving out as far as Iowa. We could no longer carry on the earlier commitment. Our pioneering Churches and pastors were needing financial help and wished to abandon the so-called Plan of Union of 1801. The Presbyterians recognized that the arrangement was unworkable, so the Albany Convention, called in 1852 by the New York General Association, declared the Plan of Union at an end. It also raised \$61,891 toward helping "the churches at the West," and set up a committee which was, in time, to become the Board of Home Missions.

The ending of the Civil war and the challenge of Reconstruction motivated

many Congregational leaders to call for a national meeting:

"A new sense of mission was being born in the thinking of the Congregationalists. They had survived the Civil War struggle feeling that the principles for which they had pioneered, had been blessed by God, and though they were a small people, yet their ideas had emerged victorious in the strife. This sense of mission, crowned with victory, grew mightily and the new life demanded new expression." *

The Boston Council, 1865

The call for the Boston meeting went out from the Northwest (Illinois) and New York general Associations. Delegates came from Maine to Oregon, some 500 of them, to update their policies, their polity, and to rise to the post-war challenges for education and great religion from Northeast to South and West. What they said was only exceeded by what they did to implement their vision of a new world for all races through the Gospel and those who profess to believe in it. The reader has already become aware of some of the resolutions of the Boston Council. The inspired and inspiring sermon, the learned papers and well researched reports, the thorough-going discussion

(* Page 198, Atkins and Fagley, HISTORY OF AMERICAN CONGREGATIONALISM, Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1942)

and the far-reaching findings and recommendations for the future of the Churches and the Nation were unparalleled in American religious history. The Boston Council was not intended to become a standing organization, so it was adjourned *sine die*.

The National Council of 1871

The first National Council of the Congregational Churches, was organized at Oberlin, Ohio in 1871. According to Atkins and Fagley, it "was the result of the normal growth of national consciousness." We must leave it to the reader to follow the whole story of the creative life of our denomination. We cannot rehearse here the history and significance of this first triennial meeting which ultimately led to biennial gatherings of representatives of some 6000 churches from coast to coast until the formation of the United Church of Christ (1957-59).

It will best suit our purpose if we simply quote from the documents of the successive organizations of our national bodies which have emphasized the principles of our voluntary inter-church fellowship which are articulated in them: *

(* See Atkins and Fagley, also CONGREGATIONALISTS IN AMERICA, Albert E. Dunning, J.A. Hill Inc, N.Y. 1894)

Preamble, National Council, 1871

"The Congregational churches of the United States; by elders and messengers assembled, do now associate themselves in National Council... to consult upon the common interests of all of the churches, their duties in the work of evangelisation, the united development of their resources, and their relations to all parts of the kingdom of Christ

"They agree in belief that the right of government resides in all local churches, or congregations of believers, who are responsible directly to the Lord Jesus Christ, the One Head of the church universal and of all particular churches, being in communion one with another as parts of Christ's catholic church, have mutual duties subsisting in the obligations of fellowship.

"The churches, therefore, while establishing this National Council for the furtherance of the common interests and work of all the churches, do maintain the Scriptural and inalienable right of each church to self-government and administration; and this National Council shall never exercise legislative or judicial authority, nor consent to act as a council of reference. *

The Purpose of the General Council, 1931

"The purpose of the General Council is to foster and express the substantial unity of the Congregational Christian Churches in faith, purpose, polity and work; to consult upon and

(* Pages 572-573, Williston Walker, CREEDS AND PLATFORMS OF CONGREGATIONALISM, Scribners, 1893)

devise measures and maintain agencies for the promotion of the common interests of the kingdom of God; to cooperate with any corporation or body under control of or affiliated with the Congregational or Christian Churches or any of them; and to do and to promote the work of these churches in their national, international, and inter-denominational relations, and in general so far as legally possible to perform on behalf of the united churches the various functions hitherto performed by the National Council for the Congregational churches and by the General Convention for the Christian churches..." (see 1932 YEARBOOK, Cong'l Christian Churches, The Gen'l Council was organized June 27, 1931)

The Nature of the National Association

"The National Association of the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States of America is composed of churches which cling to the simplicities and liberties of the Gospel. In these days when so many Protestant churches, lured by the dream of one great church, are fleeing from freedom back into medieval authoritarianism, Congregational Churches are looking even farther into the past. Congregationalism did not begin at Plymouth or Leyden, or in Scrooby or Norwich or London; it began in Galilee where Jesus taught a group of disciples that wherever two or three were gathered in his name, he was in the midst of them. It is to the ideals of simplicity and freedom in Christ that our free church cause is dedicated." *

(* From the Call sent out by the Committee for Continuation of Congregational Churches and the League to Uphold Congregational Principles, 1955)

Accordingly, at a meeting in the Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit Michigan, November 9th and 10th, 1955, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches was launched, with 102 present, the same number as there were passengers on the Mayflower in 1620.

Below are excerpts from an early pamphlet inviting churches to consider membership in the National Association:

"The basic aim of the National Association is to provide a fellowship for Congregational Christian Churches which intend to maintain the Congregational Way of Faith and Order.

"It provides a national Annual Meeting of churches by delegates assembled, in which, by one church one vote, all business affairs of the Association are transacted. Hospitality and a balanced program of worship, study and inspiration are provided for adults, for high school and college youth.

"It assists Churches, both members and non-members, in finding a minister through its Division of Pastoral Relations.

"It provides a Missionary Society through which every dollar is used for its intended benevolent purpose - administrative and promotional costs being underwritten by the general fund, [now called 'The Fund for Shared Ministries'].

"It maintains a national headquarters in

[Oak Creek] Wisconsin.

"It provides a Church Building and Loan Society.

"It helps Churches to develop Christian Education programs which fulfill the purposes of individual Churches, and special materials for teaching the significance and principles of the Congregational Way of faith and order.

"It provides a program of high school and college youth, including annual national meetings, work camps and pilgrimages abroad.

"It shares stimulating suggestions for women's, men's and young adult groups.

"It publishes a mature religious magazine, THE CONGREGATIONALIST, and numerous books and pamphlets on the Congregational Way.

"It helps to gather and support new Congregational Christian Churches.

"It makes provision for ministerial training through a unique Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies which gives guidance and financial support to candidates for the Congregational Christian Ministry."

For details about the National Association, see the annual YEARBOOK. In it are historical information; the Articles of Association; descriptions of Divisions and Commissions; and directories of officers, member Churches, Ministers and lay workers.

CHAPTER NINE

Societies for Education, Missions and Social Betterment

Americans, from the beginning, have been able to rise to new opportunities without waiting for some official order, or to get permission from some higher authority than an individual's conscience or a group's decision to act. This characteristic was pointed out by de Tocqueville in a chapter titled "Of the Use Which the Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life:"

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They not only have commercial...companies in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds - religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive, or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found establishments for education, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; and in this manner they founded hospitals, prisons and schools. If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society..." *

What Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the America of 1831-32 had its

(* Page 114, Vol.2, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry Reeve Transl., Collier, N.Y, 1900)

beginnings in the character of the Pilgrims and the Puritans - the Congregationalists, and the other pioneering innovators of a growing civilization unencumbered by inflexible norms, rigid traditions or limited horizons. In truth, in the 1830's these pioneers were only beginning to make their economic, cultural, humanitarian and spiritual impact upon this continent, and in time, upon the whole world.

One of the most significant uses of the freedom to form societies, and to create institutions can be illustrated by the colonial Congregationalist's emphasis upon education. Albert Dunning has a chapter, "Education," in his classic work on Congregational history:

"Wherever, in any land, groups of Congregational churches have arisen, institutions of learning have been planted among them. The Puritans believed in the necessity of an educated ministry, and of an intelligent laity...therefore... [they] originated free common schools which have spread throughout the land... But our fathers were not satisfied with primary education for their children. Six years after they settled Boston they founded Harvard College [1636]... In 1647 the Massachusetts General Court enacted a law that every town with fifty families should provide a school where children should be taught to read and write; and that every town with one hundred families should provide a grammar school with a master able to fit young men for college. Thus early were the foundations of our educational system laid with its three grades of school..."

"When it was felt that the time had come for a second college in New England, a company of Connecticut Congregational Ministers in 1700 took the initiative, gave [Yale College] its first donations and decided what should be its character and aims. The original corporation consisted of ten Congregational ministers... Its eight students in 1702 [had] increased to two thousand two hundred and two in 1894...It has trained young men (and since 1892 women also) of every religious denomination, and [like Harvard's] its thousands of alumni are to be found in all lands, in all departments of professional and business life and government." *

A similar story of "grass roots" initiative and voluntary cooperation could be told about Dartmouth NH (1770); Williams MA 1793); Middlebury VT (1800); Bowdoin ME (1802); Illinois IL (1831); Oberlin OH (1833); Marietta OH (1835); Olivet MI (1844); Grinnell IA (1847); Beloit WI (1847); Berea KY (1859); Ripon WI (1851); Washburn KS (1865); Fisk TN (1867); Howard DC (1867); Talladega AL (1867); Atlanta GA (1869); Tougaloo MS (1869); Carleton MN (1870); Drury MO (1873); Doane NB, (1873); Colorado CO (1874); Yankton SD (1881); Pacific OR (1854); Whitman WA (1882); Pomona CA (1889); Rollins FL (1885); Piedmont GA (1897).

(* Page 363, CONGREGATIONALISTS IN AMERICA, Albert E. Dunning, J.A. Hill & Co., N.Y., 1894)

Dunning takes special care to detail the development of academies and colleges for women beginning with Bradford MA (1803); Ipswich MA (1828); Adams NH (1823); Abbott-Andover MA (1829); Wheaton MA (1834); Mount Holyoke MA (1837-1888); Lake Erie PA (1847); Smith MA (1875); Wellesley MA (1875); and Mills CA (1880). Most academies and colleges west of the Hudson were co-educational from their inception.

Dunning also retraces the founding and growth of theological schools which sprang up from the voluntary efforts of Congregationalists and their supporters: Andover MA (1708); Bangor ME (1816); Yale CT (1822); Hartford CT (1833); Oberlin OH (1835); Chicago IL (1858); and Pacific School of Religion CA (1869).

Behind these distinguished educational institutions were the voluntary and non-paternalistic generosity of many societies, local, regional and national; for example, the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education in the West. This was a combination of two earlier societies, and by 1892 it had merged with a third, which resulted in the formation of the denominational Education Society. This body continued its beneficent work as the Christian Education Division of the Board of Home Missions until it was merged with a similar "instrumentality"

of the Evangelical & Reformed Church." *

By 1910 there were so many societies appealing to the same 6000 Churches, that the National Council undertook to help coordinate their promotional activities to the great satisfaction of both the societies and the Churches. There was a staggering number of these societies such as the Congregational Home Missionary Society, The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, The American Missionary Society, The Boston and New York Tract Societies, The Congregational Publishing Society, the Congregational Building Society, the Sunday School Union, and the Sunday School Extension Society, to name but a few. A "Committee of 19" was appointed in 1910 "to examine present conditions and recommend to the National Council such simplification and consolidation of the home societies as shall seem most expedient." By 1913 a plan was agreed upon and received amid prayer and thanksgiving:

"Permit me to affirm that putting our denomination in effective play through the readjusted institutions is just as much a spiritual task as prayer and preaching... Nor are we to be deterred because of the fear that such adjustment will throw our denominational interests into the hands of ecclesiastical politicians... Every local church, free and independent in its pulpit and

(* See also Chapter XV Atkins and Fagley, HISTORY OF AMERICAN CONGREGATIONALISM, Pilgrim Press, Boston 1942)

in its pew, is a law unto itself...[but] there is no reason why the autonomy of the local church should destroy the Congregational denomination... Congregationalism never hesitated to match a necessity with an efficiency... The adjustment of a principle, so far from being an abandonment, is the accentuation of it. It is efficiency, or exit for Congregationalism." *

These words of the Moderator, Dr. Nehemiah Boynton, and the flamboyant remarks of the preacher, Dr. Charles E. Jefferson, carried the day, and the report as a whole was adopted. Similar consolidations and innovations were accomplished in 1925-1931. From then on the churches were to hear little from any societies but, instead, from the Board for Homeland Ministries, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the National officers and staff. More and more the State and Regional Conference officers looked to the New York and Boston headquarters for guidance in their promotion of the consolidated "Christian World Mission."

Continuing Congregationalists were able to observe the end results of this consolidation, when, after 1940, the heavy hand of the ecumenically minded "ecclesiastical politicians" armed with fanatical zeal, and the proceeds of millions in endowment income, brought

(* Page, 319, HISTORY OF CONGREGATIONALISM, Atkins and Fagley, Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1942)

about a merger of the General (National) Council and the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ (1957-59).

The above summary has just touched the surface of the Congregational Christian Churches' phenomenal success in promoting education, Church extension and missions in the United States. Volumes have been written about a record of two centuries of creative contributions of our Churches through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, not only in evangelism, but also in literacy programs (e.g. Frank Laubach), youth work (e.g. Christian Endeavor, founded by Charles E. Clarke), in secondary and higher education, in building hospitals, medical and agricultural stations, and cultural, social welfare and disaster relief agencies around the globe. For further study of these and other accomplishments of our voluntary methods of missionary outreach, education and evangelism readers are directed to the Bibliography, page 109.

Since 1955 the newly formed departments of the National Association began, as did the National Association itself, because of individual and group voluntary action. The National Association was created by two *ad hoc* societies of individual Congregationalists: The Committee for the Continuation of Congregational Christian Churches and

The League to Uphold Congregational Principles. A new Missionary Society was formed in 1954 by individual incorporators, (John Alexander, Howell Davies, Palmer Edmunds, Neil Hansen, Gladys Kennedy, and Max Strang), as a neutral agency through which Churches could funnel gifts directly to causes which they chose to support. Likewise a Church Building Society, and the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies grew out of the consecrated interests of individuals whose leadership and guidance brought them to life, until they became sheltered in the care and keeping of the Churches to which the National Association belongs. The nature of these now "Divisions" of the National Association, and the various other active elected "Commissions" are described in the annual Yearbook.

There is one other aspect of our Congregational heritage and history which needs to be taken into account here, for it has been a subject of discussion, and some controversy ever since the Cambridge Platform of 1648. It has to do with one aspect of the relation between the Churches and social betterment - that is, "*social action*" by Churches or bodies created by the Churches. The authors of the Boston Platform in 1865 surveyed the earlier platforms, considered the behaviour of our Churches and Church members before, during and after the Civil war, and wrote the following ON THE RELATION OF

THE CHURCHES TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT, AND THE
CONFLICT OF LAWS:

"...3. With matters exclusively political [churches] as such have no concern... But with matters of morality and religion... in the testimony which [churches] give for God, have much to do. Especially in a free commonwealth where the government proceeds continually from the people, the [churches] are bound to testify, in their discipline and in their teaching, against [inhumane] laws and institutions, not fearing to apply the truths of Scripture...whatever the conflict between...[the laws of Christ] and the institutions and uses of society... Thus the moral sense of communities and nations must be corrected and enlightened, and must be made to advance with the progress of the [churches], till Christ shall be honored in all lands." *

Atkins and Fagley's HISTORY has a chapter on the subject, "The Growth of Social Concern." It traces the relation between Congregationalists and the problems of society from Plymouth Rock until the formation of the "old denomination's" Council for Social Action at Oberlin in 1934. Just to mention the names of Horace Bushnell, Lyman Beecher, Leonard Bacon, Washington Gladden, Richard Storrs, Lyman Abbott, George A. Gordon, Henry Ward Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stow is to call up memories of the early anti-slavery movements, the underground railroad, and

(* See pg. 40, PLATFORM 1865, Congregational Publishing Society, Boston, 1872)

the sacrificial contributions toward reconstruction of the South in which our preachers and people participated with religious conviction, and genuine social concern.

What was wrong for a denomination of free Churches to have a Council for Social Action? What was wrong was that nobody in New York, Boston, or Timbuktu can have the wisdom, let alone the right, to speak for the Churches, or any of their members on matters of social concern. They might helpfully try to inform and inspire Churches and their members about social issues. They may legitimately discuss the various alternative solutions to social problems; but when they set up a listening post in Washington, and lobby in behalf of the Churches and their members, then they can expect the kind of revolt which was manifested in the General Councils of our old denomination in the forties.

Ever since the formation of the National Association we have debated the question, "How shall our Churches and their members express their legitimate social concerns?" At the end of this chapter we have listed a number of the fine articles which have appeared in the CONGREGATIONALIST on this subject. None is more constructive than the summary by Dr. George V. Bohman of a seminar held at the Pomona Annual Meeting, in 1979; following are excerpts from his report,

SOCIAL JUSTICE, THE PANELISTS' VIEWS:

"Not since 1968 when Moderator Rev. Malcolm Burton provided a seminar, 'The Role of Our Churches in Human Conflicts' has the National Association held an open discussion of its role in social concerns. This year, Moderator Rev. Norman Reem asked Rev. Douglas Lobb to chair a panel which included four leaders with [different] interests and viewpoints:

"Rev. Ralph Pritchard and Mrs. Jane Scanland spoke largely of their rich experience in social projects. During some 30 years as pastor, Mr. Pritchard has become involved personally on city and state committees and has taken active leadership, sometimes in cooperation with his and other churches, in attempts to improve community life and keep his church abreast of issues and problems.

"Mrs. Scanland's interests have ranged from local church programs for aid to the needy and senior citizens to Laubach literacy projects, both local and nationwide.

"Mr. Pritchard hopes some agency of the NA, such as a sub-committee of the Commission of Religious Education, might organize and disseminate information on major [social] problems and issues which churches are studying.

"The broader, philosophical background of Christian concern for a spectrum of social issues was well analyzed in the talks of Attorney Walter Davis and Rev. Mark Jensen.

"Mr. Davis pointed to problems of definition of such terms as 'social justice', 'social concerns,' and 'human rights' and called them 'buzz words' and 'launching pads for rockets'.

He contended that many topics under these headings are generally secular rather than religious. However, he favors open and free debate and said, 'You can't be a Christian and not have views on social issues.' He objected to decisions on such issues in church [bodies] by vote, arguing that such votes split the Christian fellowship, and further, that a vote is not a real personal commitment. Christian ethics, he said, requires Christian concern expressed through action which, in his judgement, is generally not appropriate for a church body.

"Mr. Jensen... pointed out that Congregationalists [historically] have dealt with issues both liberal and conservative, mentioning Jonathan Mayhew's sermon on 'Unlimited Submission', the abolitionists, women suffragettes, child labor and many other issues of the 20th century... 'We cannot suggest that some [issues] are political and some religious...all concerns are religious,' said Mr. Jensen... He favors periods of open discussions on current issues at NA meetings to increase the knowledge we can take back to our churches so we may not be like ostriches with our heads in the sand regarding the relationship between our churches and social problems. He would favor some commission or committee to help furnish [such] information...

"In the question and answer period...one question brought out the plans of some Congregationalists [including Rev. Terrence Johnson, Rev. James Lyons, Rev. Barven Andersen, and Rev. William Langel] to form a voluntary 'Washington Gladden Society' which might relieve the NA of responsibility for compiling and furnishing information...on social issues.

"All told, the session supported continued programs on social issues at NA meetings. All agreed, it seems, that the NA should not revise its stand against resolutions and votes on such issues." *

In the American and Congregational tradition, following the 1979 Annual Meeting the Washington Gladden Society was formed, and it remains a positive and helpful adjunct to our inter-church fellowship.

Some CONGREGATIONALIST Articles on Social Concerns:

THE CHURCH IN THE SOCIAL ORDER, Norman S. Reem, June, 1966
HOW EXPRESS OUR SOCIAL CONCERN, Howard J. Conn, January 1967
WHAT SHOULD CHURCHES BE DOING ABOUT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS, W. Thomas Keefe, February, 1974
INTRODUCTION TO LAUBACH LITERACY, Jane Scanland, Jan, 1979
THE CHURCHES, THE DRAFT, CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION, AND MILITARY REFUSAL, Chap. Paul Weisershoff, Dec., 1980
WASHINGTON GLADDEN SOCIETY, a Response to the Social Justice Debate, William C. Lange, Summer, 1979
WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT HUNGER, Mark P. Jensen, August-September, 1982
RELIGION'S STAKE IN A FREE ECONOMY, Edmund A. Opitz, March, 1983
THE COURT'S SLIPPERY WALL BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE SEPARATION, Donald E. Boles August-September, 1983
PERSPECTIVES: POLITICS IN THE PULPIT, Norman S. Reem, and Arthur A. Rounier Jr., December-January, 1983-84

(* From page 14ff, THE CONGREGATIONALIST, Summer, 1979, article by Dr. George V. Bohman, and reprinted in Vol. 1, No. 3, page 68 of GLAD TIDINGS, the publication of the Washington Gladden Society.)

CHAPTER TEN

International Congregational Fellowship

Editorial Note: Since there is no one better qualified to review the history of international Congregational Church relations than Dr. Harry R. Butman, the author asked him to prepare this chapter, including, of course, a description of the nature and program of the present International Congregational Fellowship and the Congregational Assembly of Youth. Dr. Butman agreed, and enlisted Dr. Arvel M. Steece to collaborate with him to insure accuracy of dates and other historical details:

Formal relations between international bodies of Congregational Churches were late in coming. The first assembly of the International Congregational Council was held in London in 1891. Later meetings were held at irregularly spaced intervals: Boston, 1899; Edinburgh, 1908; Boston, 1920; Bournemouth, England, 1930; Wellesley, 1949; St. Andrews University, Scotland, 1953; Hartford, 1958; Rotterdam, Holland, 1962; Swansea, Wales, 1966; Nairobi, Kenya, 1970.

World War II was the cause of a 19 year gap in meetings, 1930-1949. At Swansea in 1966, the United Church of Christ, no longer considering itself exclusively congregational, united with

the Alliance of the Reformed Churches throughout the world and holding to the Presbyterial Order. In Nairobi, this body became the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational).

The formation of the United Reformed Church in England (1972) found a number of English and Welsh Churches remaining true to the Congregational order. There was a strong feeling that the loyal Congregationalists in several countries should seek to create an instrument of global fellowship. Accordingly, a meeting was held in Chislehurst, England in 1975, attended by 15 Congregationalists from 6 countries. This little group chose a name - The International Congregational Fellowship (I.C.F.), approved a statement of things commonly believed by Congregationalists, and called for a meeting to be held in London in 1977. Dr. John Alexander of the U.S.A. and Mr. David Watson, of England were chosen to be co-chairmen of this good work. This initial I.C.F. conference was featured by a communion service according to Congregational usage, held in Westminster Cathedral for the first time since the days of Oliver Cromwell.

The second quadrennial Conference was held in Bangor, Wales, in 1981, and the third in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1985. The fourth will be held in Leyden, Holland, in 1989. Dr. Harry R.

Butman was the first single chairman. He was succeeded by Dr. R. Tudur Jones. Dr. Manfred W. Kohl is the present (1988) incumbent. The Congregational Federation of England, The Union of Welsh Independents, and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches of the United States, while not organic members, are the principle supporting bodies of the International Congregational Fellowship.

The nature of the I.C.F. may be seen in brief excerpts from its articles:

"...Whereas, the foundation principles of autonomy and the fellowship of the Churches, stemming from the Lordship of Christ, proclaimed in Scripture and historically held in many nations, ought to be continued in living usage,

"Therefore, an international body, based on the historic truths and spiritual principles stated above, was formed in London, England, July 9-16, 1977...

"...The members of the I.C.F. are those Congregationalists and other persons sympathetic to its principles who attend a Conference."

From these excerpts it will be seen that at present the International Congregational Fellowship is a fellowship of individual Congregationalists, not of Churches; but in Leyden an amendment will be proposed, which, if approved, will enable local Churches and

regional and national bodies of Churches to become members. In part, this amendment is being proposed by those who wish to allow an international youth group to be a formal participant in the work of the I.C.F. This group "The Congregational World Assembly of Youth, (C-Way)" is largely the creation of Dr. Henry David Gray, and its first meeting took place in Braintree, Massachusetts, in conjunction with the Beverly Conference.

In the decade from 1975 to 1985, the I.C.F. has grown from a small gathering of 15 persons from 6 countries to a flourishing fellowship, with 343 Congregationalists from 25 nations attending the Beverly Conference. The inherent strength of the principle of inter-church fellowship ensures "that the Churches of the Congregational order, although geographically scattered and weakened by externally imposed schisms, will not die in isolation nor despair, but will continue to be an ever growing witness to the world of our voluntary Way of Faith and Order."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ecumenical Relations

The word "ecumenical" in our era has become a metaphor for inter-church and inter-religious understanding, fellowship and cooperation.

The Congregational Christian Churches have been at the forefront of every movement toward religious tolerance, and united action in bringing the forces of great religion to bear upon the needs of humanity. Their declarations of the unity of all Christians and people of goodwill, and their charitable and missionary enterprises during the last century and a half witness to their "ecumenical" commitment.

The late Malcolm King Burton, distinguished pastor and faithful defender of the Congregational Way compiled a history of the relationship of the Congregational Christian Churches to Ecumenical Movements in the United States, which is a section of the 1954 REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON FREE CHURCH POLITY AND UNITY, excerpts from which follow:

"This study could well begin from the very beginning of our Congregational order in the sixteenth century. However this particular chapter of our report will deal only with the story as it has developed in this country since

1865. 1865 is chosen...because...the famous Burial Hill Declaration [was read by leaders of] the Boston Council on the hill in Plymouth where the Pilgrim Fathers were buried:

'Affirming now our belief that those who...hold 'one faith, one Lord, one baptism,' together constitute the one Catholic Church, the several households, though called by different names, are one body of Christ; and that these members of his body are sacredly bound to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, we declare that we will cooperate with all who hold these truths. With them we will carry the gospel to every part of this land, and with them we will go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.'

'We rejoice that, through the influence of our free system...we can hold fellowship with all who...act efficiently in the work of restoring unity to the divided church, and the bringing back harmony and peace among all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.'

'Thus recognizing the unity of the church of Christ in all the world, and knowing that we are but one branch of Christ's people, while adhering to our peculiar faith and order, we extend to all believers the hand of Christian fellowship upon the basis of those great fundamental truths in which all Christians should agree...' (page 564, Walker, CREEDS AND PLATFORMS ETC., Scribners, N.Y. 1893)

The Polity Committee Report continues:

"The Council which thus expressed itself on Burial Hill was followed in six years by the

National Council Declaration in Oberlin, 1871:

'...We wish, in this new epoch of our history to remove, so far as in us lies all causes of suspicion and alienation, and to promote the growing unity of council and of efforts among the followers of Christ... We especially desire, in prosecuting the common work of evangelizing our own land and the world, to observe the common sacred law that... we do our work in friendly cooperation with all those who love and serve our common Lord.' (page 575, Walker, CREEDS ETC.)

The Polity Report continues:

"We venture four comments:

"1. A careful reading of the minutes of the General Council through the years will show how often and how fully [these declarations] were endorsed and repeated down to our own day.

"2. Beginning in 1886 the National Council (changed to "General Council" in 1931) began the practice of establishing a committee, and in time, a Commission on Inter-church Relations and Christian Unity. It [was] repeatedly charged 'to cultivate friendly relations with other bodies of Christians for the sake of those relations in themselves, and in the hope of consummating further [unions]...'

"3. What has been the result? There have been ten approaches or attempts for some kind of union between our churches and other bodies. Only two of these have been successful, namely, our union with the Evangelical (German) Protestant Church in 1925, and with the Christian Church

in 1931. [This Merger was celebrated at Seattle by the Council which broadened the scope of their vision of world brotherhood]:

'We believe in making the social and spiritual ideals of Jesus our test for community as well as for individual life; in strengthening and deepening the inner personal relationship of the individual with God, and recognizing his obligation and duty to society... recognizing the sacredness of life, the supreme worth of each single personality and our common membership in one another - the brotherhood of all. In short, it means creative activity in cooperation with our fellow human beings, and with God, in the everyday life of society and in the development of a new and better world...' (page 60, Atkins-Fagley, HISTORY)

"4. While the paragraphs preceding have often emphasized what may be called the [spiritual] and organic expression of the ecumenical movement, we may also say that our churches have taken an equal interest in [its] federative and cooperative expressions. Notable indeed has been the contribution which men and women of our order have made to [local, state and national] federation [movements] and in [active] cooperation... The participation of our Congregational Christian [laity and ministers] in the formation and continuing work of the [Federal and] National Councils of Churches has been impressive. [Likewise] the American section of the World Council of Churches, and indeed the World Council itself owe much to the devoted and inspiring leadership of (past and present) Congregational Christians [and their churches]." (POLITY REPORT)

With the consummation of the merger

in 1957-59, Churches which chose not to enter the United Church of Christ ceased to enjoy or were deprived of the privilege of participating directly in their former Boards of Home and Foreign Missions, their Associations and State Conferences, and also in the State, National and World Councils of Churches.

But Pilgrims and Pioneers always have to pay the costs of freedom which are part of the Nature of Things. Old adventurers like the late Professor Marion J. Bradshaw surveyed the terrain before the Churches which hoped to remain heirs of the Congregational Christian tradition:

"The nature of Congregationalism and of Christian unity are up for fresh consideration by Congregational Christians. Their current discussions (1954) have special reference to the respective rights of local churches and of national bodies. They have a particular interest in ascertaining whether, without ceasing to be Congregational, their churches may merge with a corporate national church to form a United Church of Christ. Because this Congregational body [the General Council] has been among the least sectarian of the free church groups, and because it has furnished so much of the personal leadership for cooperative Christian activities, the problems which grow out of merger efforts serve to illuminate the predicament of all free churches..."

"Fresh consideration of the place of unity in the hierarchy of religious values has become an indicated necessity for Christian thought. This subject should be further studied without subtly substituting our private preference for Gospel prayers [...]" that they all may be one...]. While I claim no private access to the mind of Christ, I do hold in mind his caution that zealous religionists would put others to death, sincerely persuaded that in doing so they were serving God. Acquaintance with his teachings makes me deeply distrustful of every controversial appeal to the will of God when religious men disagree.

"No other religious service can be an adequate substitute for love of God with our minds. This does not mean that Christian unity and church union are merely intellectual problems. All competent consideration brings recognition of the prime importance of other factors. But it should be equally obvious that no emphasis on the importance of heart, habit, will, or racial origin, should be allowed to conceal the fact that fresh thinking is indispensable." *

Younger scouts like Richard K. Bellingham surveyed the uncharted ecumenical territory and reported:

"An ecumenical goal to be truly universal must necessarily operate through organizational structures which permit a free enterprise of diverse approaches to worship and work. No instrument of cooperation that attempts to define the faith and discipline of each church, or every

(* Marion J. Bradshaw, *FREE CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN UNITY*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1954.)

relationship of church to church, as general and innocuous as its terms may be, can truly be in the interest of lasting unity... The terms of unity or cooperation must permit the freedom of creative and divergent impulses and insights...

"Likewise, a conception of and an impulse toward unity which makes of itself an article of faith, and equates any contrary tendency with evil or sin is nothing more or less than a new absolute dogmatism. Separation must remain a live option for at least a portion of the parties to an inclusive union, as a corrective to the fallible actions of any monolithic structure. Modern Congregationalists, like their forefathers, do not glory in separation as an end in itself, but realistically admit that at times it is the only alternative to intolerable conditions...

"In short, like our forebears, we commend to all who would participate in a union of churches, or in cooperative efforts of churches, the principles of the congregational order, to the extent that conscientious use can be made of them. This is neither presumptuous nor ridiculous. The unparalleled record of our churches in denominational unions and cooperative ventures is evidence that the congregational order, rather than being a foe of church unity, is its heartiest ally and firmest foundation." *

The churches which decided to continue in the Congregational Way have founded and funded their hopes for

(* Richard K. Bellingham article in *AVA, THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY OF FAITH AND ORDER*, published by the National Association Commission on the Ministry, 1962)

freedom in fellowship, and their dedication to cooperation and unity amid diversity in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

In the present state of the church union movements, most of which assume that further organic unity is demanded, free Church members are faced with both an individual and an organizational dilemma. The late distinguished editor of ADVANCE, Dr. William E. Gilroy, addressed the individual's present predicament:

"... the [person] of independent mind and heart does not subscribe easily or formally to creeds... is not strong on authority, especially when he/she tests authority... by a standard of essential Christianity. Yet (such) are responsive to the New Testament; are consecrated to the Master; love the fellowship of other churches that love the Lord; and see life in terms of the redemptive processes of God's grace...; [they resent] man-made and metaphysical tests, but want to be among the Christian community, and not outside the pale... The Congregational Christian fellowship has a place for such individuals, both in its ministry and its membership.

"The independents stand before...the ecumenical movement. What is it going to do with them? It either has to leave them out, in which case the resulting organization is not ecumenical except in name; to force them to a compromise which they probably will not make, or will make to their own loss and that of religion; or to plan specifically [a] form of organization and

conditions of fellowship that will include them." *

Dr. Howard J. Conn has spoken eloquently to the organizational side of the ecumenical dilemma before all congregationally governed Churches: Baptists, Universalists, Quakers, Congregationalists and numberless others:

"The dilemma of Congregationalism is how to serve the grand idea of church government brought with the Mayflower, and at the same time to accommodate to the new awareness of Christian unity that has emerged in the twentieth century;... one alternative stresses the value of identification with the larger body of the Christian Community, whereas [another] seeks to influence this whole community through distinctiveness of a particular emphasis... In the midst of this tension [we must] hold fast to Christian goodwill, tolerance, and understanding until some new advance can reconcile [these] two viewpoints as parts of a better synthesis..."

"We are all strangers and Pilgrims who need one another in our common search for God's truth. We must remember the heritage of three centuries which we share together... The Pilgrim Fathers worshipped in quiet simplicity, 'without the mixtures of men's inventions.' They left the elaborate ceremony, ecclesiastical dignity, and connectional counsels to others. When hampered by those who wanted more institutionalized religion, they waited in the 'center of the stillness'... and heard [God] speaking to them...commanding them to [walk] in new loyalty [to] his truth as

(* William E. Gilroy, in THE GOSPEL, THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY, General Council Publication, 1938)

shown in the face of Jesus Christ.

"Beyond controversy and dilemma we would witness today to the joys of such an open walk with one another and with [God]." *

(* Dr. Howard J. Conn, THE DILEMMA OF CONGREGATIONALISM, pamphlet, National Association, Congregational Christian Churches, 1952)

Notes: Rev. Malcolm K. Burton's books will remain standard classics on Congregationalism's ecumenical relations; and all of his works are in at least 25 seminary and college libraries, including his DESTINY FOR CONGREGATIONALISM, and DISORDERS IN THE KINGDOM, His Part II, DISORDERS IN THE COURTS is soon to be published in a limited edition by his esteemed widow, Carol B. Burton, and copies will be placed in the several libraries.

Dr. Henry David Gray has also provided a virtual library of classic works on Congregationalism, and countless pamphlets and articles in the CONGREGATIONALIST of which he was one of its most distinguished Editors. His CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIPBOOK, and THE MEDIATORS are invaluable fruits of his historical knowledge, and his rich spiritual experience.

Dr. Arthur A. Rouner Jr.'s THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY OF LIFE is also a well known classic. Less known but equally significant is his THE FREE CHURCH TODAY, (New Life for the Whole Church).

Authors, titles, publishers and dates of all of the above mentioned books are to be found in the Bibliography beginning on page 109.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Congregationalism and Theological Diversity

The theology of Congregationalists has been like an ellipse with two foci - one of them strict Calvinism, and the other a Bible centered Universalism. Down to the present day our fellowship has held within it Churches and Ministers with views covering the whole theological spectrum.

Although the Pilgrims and Puritans called themselves Calvinists, and truly believed that they were, the latent democracy in Holland and in England bred in their consciences a spark of humility and tolerance of the kind expressed by Pastor John Robinson's farewell admonitions as remembered by Edward Winslow: ;

"... He put us in mind of our Church-Covenant... whereby wee promise and covenant with God and one with another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known from his written Word: but withall exhorted us to take heed what we received from truth, and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth, before we received it. For, saith he, *It is not possible...that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.*" *

(* Page 404, CONGREGATIONALISM AS SEEN IN ITS LITERATURE, Henry Martyn Dexter, Harpers, N.Y., 1880)

When Henry Ward Beecher was giving his famous lectures to Yale theological students, one of them asked, "Can we pass by the schools and construct our own theology, or... shall we have...for a corner-stone that system which is called Calvinistic?" The wise Dr. Beecher answered:

"If you had asked me whether you ought to follow that system which is Calvinism, I should say, No. But if you ask whether you ought to follow that system which is called Calvinism, I would say it is very well to follow that... For instance, I consider myself to be Calvinistic, you know, in this way: I believe what John Calvin would have believed if he had lived in my time and seen things as I see them. My first desire is to know what is true; and then I am very glad if John Calvin agrees with me, but if he don't [sic], so much the worse for him. While I accept the work that God did by him in the interpretation and in the systematization of truth, ... yet it seems to me that I have the same Lord Jesus Christ that John Calvin had, the same Paul, the same John, and nothing that hinders me in any way from looking right into their hearts and forming my own ideas of what they were and how they felt, just as he did; with the additional advantage that I have in the light of hundreds of years' unfolding of the Christian Church which he had not, for he constructed his system under the drippings of the old Roman hierarchy. Besides, John Calvin had an inordinate share of intellect and not half his share of heart." *

(* LECTURES ON PREACHING, Henry Ward Beecher, J. B. Ford & Co., N.Y., 1872)

88.

During the Boston Council (1865) the debates and proceedings were tinctured with good humoured references to then current theological differences. So there might be no misunderstandings over Polity, the Minority Report included the following paragraph presented by the Rev. Joshua Leavitt of New York City:

"7. That it is the natural right of the churches, as it is with individuals to form special intimacies, either transitory, or permanent, with those to whom they are drawn by similarity of views, objects and habits; but this should never be allowed to interfere with duties of justice, kindness and friendly aid, which they owe alike to all who are entitled to the name of Christian Churches, irrespective of any peculiarities or differences whatever. As surely as they belong to Christ, the things in which they agree are immeasurably greater than the things in which they differ. As we are all one in Christ Jesus, churches as well as persons, our unity of relation and consequent duties of fellowship with all depend not upon human volition." (Pg. 437 Nat'l Council, 1865)

There is no better illustration of our acceptance of the "unity of our interchurch relations and their consequent duties", our determination to maintain the honored Congregational tradition of theological diversity, than the colloquy at the Toledo Annual Meeting in 1978 on the subject "Conservatives and Liberals Working and Growing Together:" (CONGREGATIONALIST, Aug., 1978)

89.

Rev. Stephen W. Tucker, a bit apprehensive about the increasing participation by conservative ministers and C.F.T.S. students in National Association leadership positions, raised the question, "When the leadership of our N.A. gets to be more representative of the theological positions in our N.A. Churches than it is now, can [the N.A.] survive?" He submitted that in the past conservatives, like himself, and the liberal majority have worked together, but suggested that in order to continue to do so "there must be more trust in one another than there is now." He called for a more balanced representation of conservatives among the many liberals on the Executive Committee, Divisions and Commissions - a representation reflecting a theological balance in our churches:

"Can we continue to work together? I hope and pray so. We can grow together, for we can learn from our diversity. Our liberal brethren have much to teach us... Listening to what I consider a liberal's heretical theology makes me angry. But it tests me. For I have to say, 'Ok, Steve, if what they are saying is not true, then what is?' And I grow. One is not stretched much intellectually nor spiritually when one is only among like-thinking people.

"There is a hidden (and sometimes not-so-hidden) agenda for most all conservatives; and that is to evangelize the liberal, to have the liberal believe in the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to experience the new birth

that our Lord demands of his followers as expressed in his words to Nicodemus. Perhaps I see this from biased eyes, but I see the conservatives, especially the younger ones, reaching out in love to the liberals more than the other way round. We must reach out in love to one another and [not] throw brickbats at each other.

"The hardest question we must face as a theologically diverse denomination is, "Can we ever truly be united as one body in Jesus Christ... share spiritual life, [and pray together], when we have such...different concept(s) of who Jesus is, [of] the work of the Holy Spirit, and [of] the authority of the Bible?

"If we could all come to the point of seeing and believing ourselves to be one body of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, composed of many parts with different functions, then our NA will continue to grow and prosper, for we will be serving first as Christians and second as Congregationalists...." *

Rev. Clifford E. Schutjer, having spent the first half of his life as a fundamentalist, admitted some irony at being cast as a liberal. He said that the redeeming moment in his life was late in college when, he "suddenly came to know and believe that God, if he was God and in order to be God, could not be possibly as narrow, glum, chauvinistic, limited and picky as I had made him in my belief and practice."

"Let me touch on just a [couple] of the distances and causes of resentment that I feel

occur from time to time between myself and my fundamentalist and/or conservative brothers and sisters. [1] One has to do with what appears to me to be the inability of many evangelical conservatives to keep from trying to intrude upon my own personal relationship with God...that evangelistic compulsion (albeit a fervent, loving, prayerful, and concerned, compulsion) even when it is more subtle and smooth (seems, nevertheless,) arrogant, unloving and destructive.

"[2] Another area [of] misunderstanding is the matter of the Christian life-style. Some of us liberals become so frighteningly secure in God's grace and forgiveness, or maybe develop such a ravenous taste for God's forgiveness, that we go forth and live in a way that we require an awful lot of it. On the other hand, conservative Christians often seem to wander along the very edge of a 'neo-pharisaism' where righteousness is heavily counted in [negatives].

"We need to face the fact that there is a problem between us with the Bible itself. The liberal takes exception to the 'proof-texting,' and the conservative feels that he has run up against a lack of reverence of belief in the words of God. This is something in which we probably have to recognize the difference and live with it; agreeing to disagree...

"The fact is we really do need each other as a presence for balance in our Christian response and witness. The liberal, sometimes tending toward seeing salvation as only a social reality rather than a personal experience...needs the presence of conservatives living it another way or he will tend to carefully forget the whole

personal dimension of salvation and redemption.

"And the conservative [may] tend to make salvation only a personal cataclysmic experience, while finding it easier to see the social order as 'lost' and as the realm of the demonic; [so he too,] needs someone jabbing his [limited] perspective. Hopefully, the conservative at my side will help keep me from giving the whole doctrinal store away for the sake of surface unity, and I hope my presence and fervor will keep the conservative from hardening the doctrines and beliefs into divisive instruments of exclusion....

"I think our NA is turning out to be a really exciting spiritual laboratory. We are demonstrating this can be a healthy, Godly tension rather than a fearsome or destructive one.*

Because Stephen Tucker and Clifford Schutjer were so wonderfully explicit, and so thoughtfully kind in their articulation of their complementary roles as self-styled conservative and liberal examples of the theological pluralism of the National Association, the Historian (at that time) ventured in a letter to the editor to comment upon another aspect of that pluralism - an aspect which has also made a constructive contribution to the vitality of our fellowship:

"Among us for generations have been those who are content to be called, simply, disciples of Jesus. These, call them universalist, if you will, are aware of the various 'faiths' declared to

have been 'once delivered to the Saints.' They have not, however, felt called to make an arbitrary choice between them. Having found it possible to live humanely without absolute certainty, they have come to accept relative certainty as a sufficient ground for their spiritual pilgrimage. The comforts of being known 'by one's fruits' and 'to believe for the very work's sake' are highly recommended standards in the Gospels.

"Many Congregationalists are disciples of Jesus because their common sense experience has led them to a profound commitment to the spiritual instructions and the winsome personality of the historic, crucified, and ever present Master of mature, humane character and life. They, too, sense the unique companionship of all who build their interpersonal and societal relationships on the democratic form, and the shared mutuality of spirit which Jesus commended to the Twelve.

"These universalists, too, have heeded the Master's counsel to 'consider the lilies'; and from nature's generous dependence upon both female and male, they can sense the creator's mother-father heart, and know the race as children of a loving and eternal parenthood. Like good earthly parents, the infinite sources of our lives seem not to be at odds over the nurture of the human family. Therefore, to seek the perfection of our parentage in being kind to the unthankful, and seeing to it that the sunshine of our lives falls upon the evil and the good, ought certainly to be a human top priority. In like manner, so ought it to be an obligation for us to give nourishment, like that which we constantly receive, to both the just and the unjust.

"Such grace and tolerance are not limited to those of any tradition or orthodoxy; in fact, they are spiritual gifts available to any sensitive person 'with eyes to see', as the Gospels put it. To seek, to find, and to improve upon every procedure by which to awaken ourselves and others to deal creatively with the spiritual environment - the complex of humane (or divine) attitudes, values and commitments, which, although unseen, are as real as cells, atoms and stars - is the common concern of disciples of Jesus of all theological persuasions. And, of course, on the highest authority, we can be confident that those who are hungry for, and seek after righteousness shall find it." (CONGREGATIONALIST, Sept. 1978) (AVA)

The theological diversity of Churches to which the National Association belongs will continue to serve us well, and be a fruitful example among the world's religious denominations, so long as (1) our conservatism does not become hard-shelled literalism, or (2) our liberalism mere sentimentality, or (3) our universalism sheer relativism. These pitfalls need never trouble us if we continue to maintain the present creative tension of healthy cooperation and competition in an atmosphere of humility and kindness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Congregationalism and "Pluralistic" Societies

In his HANDBOOK OF CONGREGATIONALISM, (1880) Henry Martyn Dexter wrote enthusiastically about "The Advantages of Congregationalism." He reached a high point in eloquence when he declared, "Congregationalism has advantage over all other polities in the United States, in that it more exactly than any other comports with, and favors, our republican form of government.":

"Historically [Congregationalism] was the mother of the nation. The seed principle of a Congregational church is the republican principle of the State. And being itself a democracy, its natural training of its members is as much better to the use of making them good citizens of the nation as the discipline of a merchant ship is kindlier than that of a machine shop in fitting sailors for a [life at sea]. In educating its members to think for themselves, a Congregational church educates them to be intelligent voters in the State. In schooling them to accept and discharge more or less weighty responsibilities, it prepares them with some good fidelity to bear the burdens of the commonwealth. To say that the aristocratic or monarchic polities especially befit the American idea of

a State is to proclaim grapes of thorns and prophesy figs from thistles." (CONGREGATIONAL HANDBOOK, Harper's, N.Y., 1880)

Presbyterian readers of Dexter's figures of speech might have chuckled at his choice of the word "republican"; for, in fact, their polity is a representative form of government, as is our American system when we get beyond the level of the town meeting. An American citizen, however, has a direct representation in the federal government through his congressman. The presbyterian system allows only indirect representation through its presbyteries, the way state legislators used to elect U. S. Senators. Hence, the presbyterians claim too much in their alledged similarity to the federal government, which is accountable to the people, rather than to the States.

Certainly Dexter intended to point out that Congregationalism insists on carrying the "democratic" ideal to its limits, and seeks to have even its regional, national and inter-national bodies responsible to local Churches and their members. He liked to say, "Congregationalism trains and then trusts the people." and against that point there is no valid argument.

Pluralistic Societies

America is a kaleidoscope of many

pluralistic societies, and when Dexter called Congregationalism the mother of the nation he was tracing in his mind the course of voluntarism which has grown out of the church meeting and the town meeting, and democratized to some degree every institution born and evolved from Plymouth Rock to Diamond Head. And these societies, and America itself, are "pluralistic" because of the principle of government by consent of the governed, coupled with the principle of freedom under law. Living, as he did in the "Old Colony," Dexter knew that the Mayflower Compact had in it the fruits of religious freedom and the seeds of political and social liberty.

The First Principle of American Life

Down through the centuries, Congregationalists, consciously or unconsciously, have held to the dogma that the late Professor Dr. Ralph Barton Perry so well made clear:

"Democracy is founded on truth. It is the one form of human society which is not only not afraid of truth, but looks to truth as its ally. But truth, in the original and only defensible sense of the term, reflects the nature of things, and is adapted to the permanent environment of human life..."

"America is fortunate in its economic, racial and climatic diversity and

enjoys a unique opportunity of preserving national unity without cultural impoverishment. Americanism... this sense of tolerant inclusiveness... consists in a common creed of diversity, adopted by each individual and group because of liberty enjoyed, and because of the fructifying intercourse of multiple liberties." *

What then is the ruling principle underlying our liberties? It is the principle of cooperation and competition under law!

American democracy not only allows almost unlimited opportunities for cooperation, but also prescribes and insists upon competition - competition in law-making, competition in creative enterprise, and competition in search of truth. Such competition is required by the Constitution, but the limits within which that competition shall take place are defined in our codes of law and legal precedents. Our bi-cameral system of legislation, the separation of legislative, administrative, and judicial functions, and the provision for local, State and National jurisdictions, prevent the crystallization of power in any one organ of government. Our anti-trust, fair trade, labor, pure food and drug laws, set legal limits within which

(* Pages 641-42, PURITANISM AND DEMOCRACY, Ralph Barton Perry, Vanguard n.y., 1944)

economic competition may go on. And in the realms of ideas, attitudes and values, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion are guaranteed, making competition in search of truth an obligation upon us all. Monopolies, whether governmental or economic, or ecclesiastical are forbidden here. American democracy is founded upon the truth, for in its structure it recognizes both the material and spiritual concerns of human nature, and provides grounds for development of the self-responsibility of every individual citizen.

Freedom of Religion and the Separation of Church and State

The Constitutional provision for the free exercise of religion, and the clause against the establishment of a state religion have taken two hundred years of thought and litigation to arrive at precedents which have maintained freedom for individuals and Churches alike. Likewise, serious breeches of the separation clause have been avoided. We may expect continued evolution in this search for ideal interpretations of the constitutional implications of civil government and freedom of religion in American life.

By now, then, we ought to know that any religion, let alone the religion and ethics of Jesus, cannot operate in a vacuum; for human beings are bound to

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make creative judgments upon every form of social organization. If authoritarian churchmen on some Church and State issues seem not to be reluctant in supporting social changes which favor their purposes, Congregationalists - (with or without the capital "C", for we are legion in this free land) - need not be lukewarm in their support of the social forms in which our free Churches have their fullest life. The American social order, based upon the principle of freedom under law, has provided the most fertile soil for the culture and spread of the Gospel which the world has ever known.

There will be no end to cold wars, nor hot wars, nor poverty, nor tyranny, nor oppression, until the nations of the earth, by the grace of God and self-discipline, have found the way to world order through law, - the kind of law which is not forced upon people against their wills. American Christians, both laity and ministers, must remain alert to the dual nature of their mission in the world; for we must not only preach the Gospel of the Sermon on the Mount, but we must also actively proclaim the principles of this tolerant pluralistic social order under which the Gospel has continued to do its liberating work among more than 200 million who, 'though far from perfect, are still free to grow, and in cooperation and in competition to

101.

discover "the good things God hath yet to give" his children everywhere.

The authors of the Boston Platform made these wise observations about the RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT, AND THE CONFLICT OF LAWS:

"If the law of the land requires any man, under whatever penalties, that which the law of God forbids him [in good conscience] to do; or if it forbids him to do what the law of God requires, it is better to obey God, rather than men... Yet, inasmuch as the Scriptures require of every Christian soul subjection to existing powers of the civil state... the duty of loyalty to the government, of conscientious obedience to every law which does not positively require what God forbids or forbids what God requires...is a duty of religion which the discipline of the church must honor and maintain." (Pages 38-40, PLATFORM 1865),

Benediction

(from the Cambridge Platform. 1648 *)

"The Lord Jesus commune with all our hearts...so his kingdom may come into our Churches in Purity and Peace. Amen. Amen."

(* Page 202, Williston Walker, CREEDS AND PLATFORMS OF CONGREGATIONALISM, Scribners, 1893)

APPENDIX

A Typical Constitution for Local or General Associations

Local Associations of Churches and Ministers have been historically, and are now, standing organizations of delegates and pastors elected by local churches for fellowship, mutual helpfulness and service. Most meet twice a year, and enjoy a varied program of worship, inspiration and consultation. Guest speakers often are representatives of missionary societies or denominational agencies. Associations remain the only repositories of ministerial professional standing.

General Associations, historically, were the forerunners of State or regional Conferences, with broader concerns than local Associations for home and world-wide missionary, and educational projects. They were committed to furtherance of Congregational polity, but specified in their constitutions that they should never "exercise legislative or judicial authority nor consent to act as a council of reference over Churches, ministers or members."

Churches which chose not to join the United Church of Christ (1957-59) gathered new local Associations wherever such Churches were in close proximity to one another.

In areas where free Churches are long distances apart, the General Association pattern has been followed, requiring regular, but less frequent meetings which are more easily scheduled by local Associations.

Below is a typical constitution of either a Local or General Association of Congregational Christian Churches and Ministers:

ARTICLE I NAME

The name of this organization is the _____ Association of Congregational Christian Churches and Ministers.

ARTICLE II PURPOSE

Its purpose is to promote fellowship among the Congregational Christian Churches of the _____ area, to quicken their spiritual life and advance their common purposes.

ARTICLE III MEMBERSHIP

This Association shall be composed of the Congregational Christian Churches of the area by delegates assembled and of such other churches as may be elected to membership.

ARTICLE IV OFFICERS

The officers of this Association shall be a Moderator, a Vice-Moderator, a Scribe, Treasurer, and an Auditor. They shall be chosen at the Annual Meeting to serve for one year or until

their successors are elected. So far as possible, the Moderatorship shall alternate between laymen and ministers. Any vacancy in office between elections shall be filled by the Executive Committee.

ARTICLE V COMMITTEES

1. Executive: The officers and the chairmen of standing committees shall constitute the Executive Committee which may be called together at any time by the Moderator and shall be called at the request of any two of its members.

The Executive Committee is empowered to initiate and implement plans for carrying out the purposes of the Association not otherwise provided for, subject to revisions by the Association.

It shall serve as the Program Committee and arrange for the time, place and program of Association meetings and issue the calls therefor. The Pastor of the entertaining church for meetings shall be an ex-officio member of the Committee.

2. Nominating: At a meeting preceding any Annual Meeting, a committee of three shall be elected which shall nominate the officers and the chairmen of standing committees, among other nominations from the floor, at the Annual Meeting. (Members of the Nominating Committee itself shall be nominated from the floor.)

3. Standing Committees: These shall be committees on Ministerial Standing; Religious Education and Youth; Missions; and Evangelism. Other committees may be appointed at the pleasure

of the Association. The members of the Standing Committees, with the exception of the Ministerial Standing Committee, shall be appointed by the Executive Committee, who shall also determine the size of the Committees.

The ordained ministers whose standing is in the Associations shall constitute the Ministerial Standing Committee.

4. All standing committees shall make reports at the Annual Meeting and on such other occasions as their activities may demand.

ARTICLE VI MEETINGS

1. Regular: The regular meeting shall be an Annual Meeting in _____, and a _____ meeting in _____ (if any). The churches shall be notified of meetings at least one month in advance.

2. Special: Special meetings may be called by the Executive Committee any time during the year. Churches must be given two weeks notice in advance, but no business proper only to the Annual Meeting shall be proposed or voted upon in a special meeting.

3. Representations: In all meetings of the Association each church may be represented by _____ official voting delegates, one of which shall be the pastor, and as many non-voting delegates as it may desire.

4. Quorum: A quorum shall be representation from one more than half of the number of the churches in the Association.

ARTICLE VII COUNCILS

[In some Associations, provision is made for a member Church to ask the Churches and the officers of Associations to constitute an Ecclesiastical Council, provided delegates from Association Churches make up a majority of those invited to the council. When so convened the council shall be governed by Congregational usages applicable to Ecclesiastical Councils.]

Vicinage Councils: Every church in the Association retains the inalienable Congregational right to call an Ecclesiastical Council composed of such churches and individuals as it desires, whether they belong to this Association or not. The Association respectfully requests that the records of all councils be recorded with its Scribe.

ARTICLE VIII MINISTERIAL STANDING

All matters having to do with ministerial standing, including In Care of Association, Licensure, Ordination and Installation shall be under the guidance of the Ministerial Standing Committee. It is recommended that churches and ministers seek the advice and council of this committee.

ARTICLE IX FINANCES

As may be necessary, the Executive Committee may call upon each Church to contribute voluntarily to the needs of the Association, estimated according to membership.

ARTICLE X AMENDMENTS

This constitution may be amended at any Annual Meeting by a two-thirds vote provided notice of the proposed changes is given in writing to the churches one month in advance of the meeting.

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