

Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

Articles from the Congregationalist, 1958-1996

Readings in the History and Polity of the National
Association of Congregational Christian Churches

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Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor

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INTRODUCTION

THE "CHURCH"

Congregationalism is founded on the idea that Christ called his followers into churches, particular communities of believers gathering regularly for worship and service, not into a Church, a national or international organization superior to local congregations and mediating their relationship with their Lord. The very name of the movement, Congregationalism, derives from this conviction.

- Clinchy, Russell. "Why the Congregational Churches Should Live." November '58
Gray, Henry David. "The Constitutional Question." June '59
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Alexander, John, et al. "A Message to the Churches." April '85
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ECUMENISM

The NACCC was founded in 1955 just as the wider ecumenical movement gained full force. While "ecumenical" in the sense of openness to a wide variety of beliefs and practices, "Continuing Congregationalism" defined itself in opposition to all centralization and bureaucratization. How then can the NACCC be part of the wider Christian community?

- Gray, Henry David. "Congregational Catholicity and Ecumenical Exclusiveness." December '58
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Swanson Jr., Neil. "Report from Uppsala." October '68
World Christian Relations Commission. "A Statement of Ecumenical Intentions."
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Churches of the NACCC are not the only "congregational" churches. Kindred spirits are found among Unitarians, Baptists, Disciples, the Community Churches, and others stressing the autonomy of local congregations.

- Pavy, Roy. "A Free Church Movement." April '65
Bellingham, Richard. "Creative Independency." February '69
Steece, Arvel. "What Do you Mean, 'Free Church'?" June '70

ASSOCIATIONS

A Congregational church is not merely independent. Active fellowship with other churches is fundamental. The small size and geographical dispersion of the churches of the NACCC rendered the traditional local and regional fellowships problematic. Tensions also arose between churches continuing to identify with a regional association and those identifying most closely with the National Association, which has no formal connection with the regionals.

- Bohman, George. "The Place of Associations in Modern Congregationalism." May '65
Steece, Arvel. "Polity Evolution and the Future of Congregationalism." March '75
Bellingham, Richard. "Regional Fellowship: A National Concern." February '89

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Early Congregational churches were distinctive in being made up of self-conscious believers, "visible saints," not merely residents of the parish or community, and furthermore, not only believers but believers who could demonstrate proof of their conversion. Membership requirements no longer set Congregationalists apart, but new concerns have arisen.

- Bohman, George. "Safe-guarding Individual Freedom With Congregationalism." November '74
Beinke, James. "Church Members: How One Church Has Dealt with the Problem of Removing Inactive Members from Their Roles." October '88
Vanek, Noel. "Resident Aliens: Find New Direction for Christian Witness." December '96

ASPECTS OF CHURCH LIFE

- Butman, Harry. "How It [*The Congregationalist*] Started." August '62
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Gray, Henry. "American Youth and the Christian Church: Including the Background and Development of Pilgrim Fellowship and Hope." January '76
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McKendrick, Mary. "Ambassadors: Becoming a part of the CCC/NA's Effort to Serve Churches Proved a Challenge Many Were Proud to Assume." April '88

HISTORICAL ROOTS

Where do we come from? Contemporary Congregationalism finds its roots in three places. One is Jesus' promise to be present "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name." The second is symbolized by the ship Mayflower, which bridged English Separatism and colonial New England Congregationalism. Third are the struggles within the Congregational family resulting in the formation of the United Church of Christ on the one hand and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches on the other.

- Gray, Henry David. "From Yesterday into Tomorrow." February '58
Howard, Irving. "Covenant Theology and American Thought." February '58
Gray, Henry. "The Savoy Declaration of 1658." September '58
Rouner, Arthur Jr. "A Message from Savoy." 3 part series, November 59 - January '60

Davis, Royal. "The Saybrook Platform: A Warning." October '58
 Shelly, Maynard. "The Undying Fire of the Reformation." October '67
 Stubbs, Harry. "On Recovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Church Order," 2 parts. October '68, June '69
 Abercrombie, A. Vaughn. "The People Behind the Founding of the NACCC." November '78
 Burton, Malcom. "Letter" in response to Abercrombie. Fall '79
 Bohman, George. "Four Centuries of Congregational Growth." April '85
 Bailey, Steven. "Most Important Document: American Congregationalism Based on Cambridge Platform of 1648." December '92
 Rouser, Arthur Jr. "I Saw Them in the Flesh: Hotel Fort Shelby Recollection." July '95
 Alexander, John. "Forward Through the Ages ... At the Call Divine." July '95
 Bailey, Steven. "Reclaiming the Puritans." July '95

THE MINISTRY

Congregationalism has a distinctive view of the clergy as ordinary believers delegated narrowly defined responsibilities for preaching and teaching, while sharing common concerns about such things as qualifications, training, placement, and the ordination of women.

Barrus, Alvan. "The Growth of the Lay Ministry." March '65
 Abercrombie, A. Vaughn. "The National Program of Pastoral Supply." March '65
 Buchman, Richard. "Pastor, People, and God." May, '65.
 Butman, Harry. "Moderator's Statement at the Ordination of John K. Tremaine." February '66
 Britton, Erwin. "A Congregationalist Ponders the Matter of Ordination and the Ministry," 2 parts. October, November '75
 Witzel, Tom. "Laity Arise." June '77
 Brown, George. "In Between Ministers," June, July '81
 Voss, B. Margaret. "Unfinished Business." October '81
 Woolsey, Mary. "A Shared Ministry--A Shared Life." October '83
 Jensen, Mark. "Looking at the Future of the Congregational Ministry." October '89

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The NACCC does not have its own theological seminary, nor, because of its small size, is it in a position to open one. Yet it maintains a commitment to "learned ministry." How can its clergy receive the proper education? How can they learn the peculiar traditions and practices of the Congregational movement?

"Pioneering in Theological Education." November '62
 Steece, Arvel. "Continuing the Tradition of an Educated Ministry." January '65
 Ream, Norman. "Do We Need a Theological Seminary?" June '70
 Currey, Cecil. "Congregational Theological Education: The Future." May '73
 "C.F.T.S Story." October '74
 Clark, Harry. "CFTS is THE Source: The CFTS Story." February '90
 Shultz, Leslie. "Exciting Opportunity: Lay Ministry Training Program Announced." October '93

SOCIAL REFORM

Congregationalists have been in the forefront of social reform, from the establishment of democracy in the New World, to Abolition, to the Social Gospel. The NACCC, however, defined itself in opposition to the type of church-related reform which became prominent in the twentieth century. How can Congregationalists maintain their prophetic consciousness and yet avoid violating local autonomy and personal freedom of conscience?

Clinchy, Russell. "Comment and Reflection." October '65
 Ream, Norman. "A Relevant Religion." June '66
 Conn, Howard. "How Express Our Social Concern?" January '67
 Butman, Harry. "Classical Congregationalism and Social Action." March '68

Tennies, Arthur. "Church Leaders as Activists: Good or Bad?" October '71

Conn, Howard. "Christian Conscience: A Plea from Some Members Within a Congregation." October '71

Lange, William. "Washington Gladden Society: A Response to the Social Justice Debate." Summer '79

INTRODUCTION

How do the churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian churches understand themselves? In many ways they are typical of other mainline Protestant churches. A person comfortable with the worship at a Presbyterian, Methodist, Christian or United church would most likely be comfortable worshipping with Congregationalists. Congregational clergy receive their training in seminaries sponsored by many denominations. When, however, it comes to polity, church organization at the national as well as local level, Congregationalists have distinctive ideas.

It began with English observers of the Protestant Reformation, such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrows, who believed there was another step to be taken. This was a return to the type of organization envisioned by Jesus Christ and reflected in the earliest New Testament writings, especially the book of Acts and Paul's letters. These early churches were diverse, autonomous, lacking central authority, and required a high degree of commitment. To these English Reformers the shape taken by the Roman Catholic Church was more that of Caesar's empire than of Christ's kingdom. The newly formed Church of England, while independent of Rome, seemed compromised by its retention of a similar structure.

At great risk to position, property, and life, the English reformers set about to "purify" the Church of England. The more radical reformers formed unauthorized "Independent" or "Separatist" congregations. Many fled first to Holland and then to the British colonies in North America. As founders of a new society in America the Pilgrims and Puritans entered a new phase with the authority of government behind rather than against them. This new position as the established church of the New England colonies posed new challenges regarding questions of church membership, tolerance of religious diversity, and the relationship between religious and civil authority.

With the passage of an American Constitution embodying a "separation of church and state," the expansion of the frontier, and the waning of evangelical fervor, Congregationalists gradually lost the dominance they enjoyed in colonial New England. Losses were exacerbated when one wing, the Unitarians, split off to form their own denomination. Questions of denominational identity and cooperation across regions came to the fore. By the end of the nineteenth century Congregational churches had moved away from Calvinism, embraced modern ideas about science, and, while local autonomy was still affirmed, put a national structure into place.

The founders of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (1955) reacted against what they perceived as an un-Congregational centralizing trend which would deny basic Congregational convictions about the church. A proposed merger of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church into a "United Church of Christ" would result in a more centralized "presbyterian" system. Proponents saw it simply as a more efficient form of organization which would retain essential principles.

When the great majority went with the new United Church, the “Continuing Congregationalists” were left with redefining themselves and Congregationalism (a name which the majority, tellingly, did not retain). Many of their reflections on Congregationalism in the twentieth century are recorded in the NACCC’s *Congregationalist* magazine. This book contains a selection of those writings. They are arranged by topic, and within topics chronologically.

Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

ASSOCIATIONS

The Place of Associations in Modern Congregationalism

Professor George V. Bohman
Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan

At Cheyenne in 1961, Dr. Harry R. Butman declared that "Our great battle for the coming years is the re-discovery of fellowship."

In the statement of Fundamental Principles by Henry M. Dexter many years ago, appear such sentences as:

"All such (Congregational) churches being equal sisters of the great family of Christ) owe to each other sisterly esteem, fellowship and cooperation in the common work of the Lord.

"Such fellowship requires that the advice and countenance of other churches be sought and gained by means of an Ecclesiastical Council. . . ."

"The cooperation of these churches in the common work of the Lord requires that they devise and prosecute wise methods of joint action."

The 1865 Platform, Parts III and IV, advocated the formation of both occasional and stated councils of our churches, pointing out that "Stated conferences of the churches have been greatly useful in prompting zeal and Christian activity in making the gifts of one church subserve the edification of others." In addition to advising such conferences and associations, the Platform specifically endorsed "Associations of Ministers."

*"The frequent consultation of ministers with each other, so that the watchmen may see eye to eye, is of great importance to the efficiency in their work; and the formal association of pastors, not excluding other ministers, for mutual counsel and helpfulness in an arrangement which has been greatly blessed of God for the welfare of the churches and the advancement of religion."**

*I have quoted indirectly these sources from Vaughan Abercrombie, *THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY OF FAITH AND ORDER*, a tentative draft of a manual of Congregational principles and practice drawn from the best sources.

The Need in Our Time

On such bases as have been outlined above, the Churches which were members of the National Council and General Council generally formed, or had earlier formed, a variety of state and local associations and conferences. The formality of organization differed with the size and geographical homogeneity of the Churches as well as the nature of the joint tasks which were to be undertaken, but it may be fairly said that in each case these groups of Churches and ministers nurtured a sense of "others in the work" among Congregationalists.

Two kinds of needs were met. First, associations provided a *place* for each Church in a fellowship of like-minded Churches, a place of equality without ecclesiastical control. Frequently, this listing of membership in an association has been called *standing* in the fellowship, a status varying in value from Church to Church. However, the status of

the member Church as a "congregational Church" was not deemed to originate with such standing in an association; rather, the association gathered to itself those Churches which possessed truly Congregational characteristics as determined by the minimum standards of the other members and which further wished to be members of the association. Still other Congregational Churches, of course, chose to remain outside any association as a stated council, as Congregational Churches had lived for the first two centuries.

Second, associations provided a place for ministers and most associations came to be described as *associations of Churches and ministers*. This place of ministerial listing, likewise, has been called *standing* in the fellowship. As with the Churches, the standing of *ordained* ministers originated, however, with the acceptance of a call, on which the Church may have sought the advice of a council of the vicinage or of the whole association sitting as a council. In any case, once the minister was ordained and called, the association, having as a whole or through the committee which examined his credentials and verified his pastoral office in a Church, voted him into its fellowship, thereby saying to Congregational Churches generally, "He is one of us and we recommend him to you."

When the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches was formed, the founders recognized that a nationwide association could not afford the more intimate and neighborly fellowship that was the essence of local associations, either for Churches or ministers. Above all, the idea of "national standing" was repugnant to many Congregationalists. Yet the founders knew that in the transition of our Churches from associations that might become part of another denomination, new associational relations might be slow to form, so Article II of the Articles of Association of the National Association read: "in case of necessity to do and perform all functions ordinarily and customarily performed by Congregational Christian associations." Under this rule a few

ministers have been temporarily listed as having standing in the National Association, but individual action by the Executive Committee is required for each case and it has been expected that as rapidly as local associations are available, the minister's standing would be placed in one of them.

It is now nearly ten years since the National Association was formed and nearly five years since the United Church of Christ came into being. During this past year, most local associations dominated by merged Churches have been transformed into associations of the United Church.

What of the standing of Churches and ministers outside the merger? Here, we note that in several areas of the nation there are not yet local associations in the true Congregational tradition, though there are numerous loose fellowships of individuals or of Churches and individuals.

New Associations and Conferences

There are notable instances of new associations. In Michigan, we formed the Southeastern, Western, and Central associations about three years ago. These range in size from five or six to fifteen Churches each. Each was formed for the membership of *Churches and ministers*, though voting rights vary. Each is prepared to give ministerial standing, as that is ordinarily described. Each also provides full opportunity for cooperation among its member Churches in matters such as religious education and youth programs, men's work and women's work, missions, and Church and pastoral counselling. Each participates, upon request, in councils for ordination, installation, and recognition of ministers, grants licenses, and accepts students for the ministry "in care of association." Each association meets formally twice a year. Here the need for fellowship and cooperation is recognized and met. In Michigan we also have, because there are three associations, the Michigan Conference of Congregational Christian Churches, the *de facto* successor for

our Churches of the original General Association of Congregational Ministers and Churches of Michigan, formed more than 123 years ago. In the Articles of Association of both the Southeastern Michigan Association and the Michigan Conference, the stated purposes of the fellowship correspond closely with the statements in the articles and constitutions of the earlier organizations of Congregational Churches and ministers and every effort is being made to carry on the cherished tradition.*

In the Southeastern Michigan Association, the tradition of regular ministerial meetings is carried on monthly by a minister's meeting for fellowship and to present formal papers and discussions of their mutual problems.

In a number of other areas somewhat similar formal local associations of Churches and ministers have been created. Most of these associations also provide for non-voting associate memberships for the individuals who are loyal Congregationalists but still hold memberships in merged Churches. Yet, these associations are not fellowships of individuals. They are traditional Congregational Christian *associations of Churches and ministers* and are composed of a core of voting delegates and ministers of the member Churches.

Should not each area in the nation, even if only two or three Churches are within reasonable driving distance, form such associations to perform the essential functions of Congregational Churches in Fellowship?

Should not ministers feel a further responsibility for their fellows within a hundred or two hundred miles or more by arranging regular meetings together?

The long battles over the merger are mostly past and decisions have been made. Now let us fully implement the on-going course of Congregational fellowship with local associations of Churches and ministers.

*A great deal of credit is due to the Rev. Mr. Malcolm K. Burton and others for research into the early history of Michigan Congregationalism. Copies of the current Articles of both the Michigan Conference and Southeastern Michigan Association will be procured for any who inquire of this author at 1014 Edgewood, Royal Oak, Michigan.

Historically Congregational Christians have thought of their means of ordering their church life as dynamic rather than static. John Robinson counseled his flock to follow him no further than he followed Christ but ever to follow Christ. Robinson observed that the Calvinists and Lutherans remained where Calvin and Luther had left them. Robinson's reminder that the Lord had yet more truth and light to break forth from His Word is heralded as a motto of religious progress in both polity and theology. The Congregational Way is a pilgrimage of development. Just what course is that development likely to take in the future? In an attempt to answer that question it might be helpful to review some past developments.

How to actualize fellowship has been a continuing dilemma for Congregational Christians. Congregationalism is neither isolationist separatist independency nor is it connectional pseudo-presbyterianism. It is a middle way between separatism and presbyterianism. It is difficult to maintain this course. Frequently Congregationalism has sought expression nearer to separatism or presbyterianism depending upon the temper of the times and ecclesiastical circumstances.

National unitary churches have a hierarchical structure in an ascending order from the congregation. The Methodists have district, conference, jurisdiction and national conference. The Presbyterians possess presbytery, synod, and general assembly. Whether by accident or design the

Polity Evolution and the Future of

CONGREGATIONALISM

by Arvel M. Steece

fellowship agencies of the Congregationalists evolved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into association, conference, and national council. A non-hierarchical fellowship of churches developed structures parallel to those of the hierarchical churches. Ecumenical awareness encouraged such parallelism and Congregational leaders impatient with the sometimes tedious processes of consensus creation sought the authority possessed by their colleagues in similar circumstances within the hierarchies of other denominations. Key laymen and ministers were convinced of the wisdom of this course of action and the Congregational Way was abandoned for connectionalism by those who developed the United Church of Christ. The opponents of that development reacted by appealing to the separatist portion of our heritage for the most part. Isolation is not the answer.

The Congregational Christians who find fellowship in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches have an opportunity to create new agencies to overcome isolationism without succumbing to the allurements of connectionalism. We encourage diversity and variety. We need intermediate fellowship agencies beyond the local churches which are more accessible than the National Association. We have an opportunity to break out of past patterns which have led Congregationalism every two or three generations into con-

nectionalism. Aside from the situation in Michigan where for a variety of reasons we have a state conference we should concentrate on local associations and even if we experience great growth not be tempted to re-establish state conferences.

Local associations are the creatures of the churches and they are adaptable in number of member churches and in geographical boundaries. In areas of high density population with many churches, the associations will be of more limited geographical area. Where there are few churches of our order situated at greater distances from one another, associations will serve larger areas.

Experience during the past decade leads us to believe that while two or three churches may form an association, six ought to be considered minimal if one hundred per cent are active. Practically an association ought to have sufficient member churches to provide an increasing number of people with leadership opportunities and responsibilities without burdening anyone. No church delegation ought to have to travel more than two hours one way to reach the meetinghouse of sister churches to share in programs. Recalling the nineteen forties and fifties some of us remember associations of thirty to forty churches which were able to sustain a variety of programs of mutual helpfulness. Their size was sufficient to provide resources for fellowship programming and yet not too great to preclude the average member church from entertaining association meetings periodically.

Some local associations may encompass an entire State. Other associations a portion of

one State or depending upon geographical considerations, ease of travel, etc. more than one State. The associations are delegate bodies since they are created by the churches. If ministers are to be delegates they are to be elected by the churches they serve. Otherwise they are as welcome as other visitors from the churches and have voice without vote. As fellowship occasions association meetings are always open to visitors from the churches. The various Congregational Clubs and regional fellowship meetings to which individuals may belong with varying degrees of formal relationship may well function as fellowship agencies. Whereas in the past Congregational polity evolved in a quasi-hierarchical structure association, conference, and general council paralleling presbytery, synod, and general assembly, we need not repeat the process. The Congregational Way has a future as it fellowships through local associations and the National Association. Within local associations the local churches may recover the vicinage council as a vehicle for expressing fellowship and help in a variety of situations. Local associations with effective programs will furnish an increasing number of people with the experience and training to equip them for service on National Association commissions and so enlarge the pool of talent and leadership available to provide the followers of the Congregational Way with adequate leaders.

The local association is a means of providing fellowship among the churches and developing programs of mutual interest in Christian education, youth work, missions, etc. Local associations which include a heritage lecture in every annual

and semi-annual meeting possess a vehicle for educating the membership of the churches in the distinctive features of the Congregational Way. Since the local association is a creature of the churches, it is not a judicatory or an ecclesiastical court. If this is kept in mind there should be no concern about its ever becoming a presbytery.

As Congregational Churches return from sojourns in a connectional church many of them opt to remain independent for they do not know what to join. Our local associations may well extend friendly invitations to fellowship clearly defining the voluntary nature of our organizations.

The cluster concept in current ecumenical ecclesiology is but a variant across denominational lines of the small association with an added factor of an authority foreign to associations as we know them.

Our local associations are flexible and adaptable and should find ad hoc committees and task forces effective means of engaging the churches in specific programs to meet the particular needs of the churches in nurture, mission, and outreach.

The Congregational Library in Boston continues to be an archive of deposit and record for our churches relating to ordinations and installations. Local associations should also deposit copies of their records, programs, minutes, etc. there and additional copies might well be placed with the West Coast Congregational Library in Los Angeles, and in the State Historical Society Library of the particular State in which the association is located.

Dr. Steece is minister of the First Congregational Church of Bennington, Old Bennington, Vermont.



REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP A NATIONAL CONCERN

by
Richard K. Bellingham

Delegates at the Green Bay National Meeting will recall the discussion about holding biennial national assemblies instead of annually as we do now. My feelings were not strongly disposed one way or another. But the issue of *regional* fellowship was raised in the debate and this *does* bear serious attention.

I have served two churches, First Congregational of Millinocket, Maine (from 1969 to 1975) and Atkinson Memorial, Oregon city, Oregon (since 1975) that were both members of the National Association but which virtually never sent delegates to the annual assembly. Interestingly, for one reason or another, neither of these churches were connected with their state or regional fellowships prior to my ministry with them. Millinocket became actively involved with the Congregational Council of Maine during my ministry there. And though this was only a recent affiliation, it was the only real denominational experience for those people for a number of years. It did, however, become the stepping stone to their now regular attendance at the national meetings. In other words, though Millinocket had long been a *member* of the National Association, it was not until it had first cultivated *regional* fellowship with Congregationalists that it began an active participation at the national level.

Similarly, Oregon City, though a charter member of the National Association, was not a member of the Pacific Northwest Association of Congregational Christian Churches prior to my arrival. This we soon remedied. And though our regional fellowship dates back only to 1975 (compared to the 1955 national affiliation), it is the Northwest Congregational contact that remains the only live one for Atkinson Memorial Church. Only twice since 1975

(and I don't know how long *before* that) have we managed to get *lay* delegates to the national meeting.

It must be appreciated that only once has a national meeting been held in the Pacific Northwest (at Tacoma in 1974), and another will not be held until 1992 in Seattle. The closest the other meetings have come have been Fresno and Estes Park each about 1000 miles away for most of us. To say that the national meetings are rotated through the regions "ain't necessarily so". Not all of us live in the Northeast, Midwest or in southern California. But the very regions of the country for which regional fellowship is easiest to come by are the very same regions that can most easily host and avail themselves of *national* fellowship meetings. This can probably be remedied only by some type of "share the wealth" approach.

Let it be known that our Northwest Association includes churches as far apart as Idaho, Montana and Alaska as well as Washington and Oregon. Still these churches do manage to get to most of our Northwest meeting though about half virtually *never* get to the national meeting. Regional Fellowship is that important.

A little history is in order that both explains Atkinson Memorial's loss of contact over the years with the National Association, and also illustrates what happened to a very promising enterprise in regional fellowship that withered away for lack of national encouragement. I speak of the North Willamette Association formed in 1948 by five continuing Congregational Churches in the Portland area. This was an ecclesiastical association in

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every sense of the word. Not only did it meet twice a year for nearly a decade, and maintain youth work, but it assisted with ministerial licensure and ordination. I, myself, was "in care" with North Willamette while attending seminary. But it was a time when Congregational Churches in the Midwest or elsewhere continued with their UCC sister churches in the hope that the UCC would not come to pass, and to avoid appearing "schismatic" while the issue was still "in the courts". So North Willamette was told "we like what you're doing but we can't follow your example". Ministers retired, my father, too, eventually, and the churches of the Association were left with no place to turn for leadership. Without support from other parts of the country, this splendid regional fellowship fell apart, and only Atkinson Memorial survived because its minister, Horace Bachelder, was far from retirement.

In the meantime, Congregationalists in Seattle, Spokane and Tacoma were still awaiting the results of the United Church final vote before setting their own course. Consequently, Pacific Northwest Congregationalists were late in reviving the continuing movement in their region. Had, however, there been as strong a regional movement *across* the country as the North Willamette had been in the early 1950's, the National Association would have been stronger. Unfortunately, North Willamette did not have the "critical mass" without similar movements to relate to elsewhere.

National fellowship is not simply an annual assembly of delegates. That is the frosting on the cake. Fellowship is a *network of relationships*. Harry Butman very aptly pointed out that the Congregational Churches existed in fellowship from 1648 to 1852 without a single overall assembly to bind the constituency during all those years. The churches were related through pulpit exchanges and through regional associations and periodic councils for advice, ordination or installation. The Congregational polity is a *horizontal* network of church to church in varying and sundry connections with sinews reaching in all directions across the land. It is not some overhead umbrella that holds us together. The national meeting is a wonderful time for me to meet my old friends from all over the country. But is it that for all our local members? They need more immediate vehicles of fellowship.

I envisage a national *network* of relationships. One year let our Pacific Northwest Congregational

Association join forces with churches in Wyoming and Utah. Then our Idaho and Montana members might be closer to the center instead of having to travel to the "edge". Another year let us combine with the Congregationalists of Northern California simply for more and more of us to know each other. Other associations across the nation can similarly pair off one year with a neighbor to the north or east, another to the south or west. (Examples: southeastern Michigan with Ohio; central or west-central Michigan with Midwest, etc.), but not always with the same partners year after year. We are talking about *networks* not masses. And it cannot be repeated too often - the Congregational polity is one of horizontal networks.

Of course a problem arises - the naughty word "money" that arose several times on the floor of the discussion about biennial assemblies, and was vigorously batted down by others. In the west, at least some of these meetings, I envisage, must take place in a "no man's land between Congregational churches, or close only to very small churches not able to host such a meeting. Arrangements must be made at a distance. Quality programming is needed that will justify attendance at such meetings. We are talking greater costs than are currently being spent in the Pacific Northwest at any rate. I quite understand the Executive Committee's voiced concern about such costs. If such ventures are undertaken where most needed, some sort of "share the wealth" approach will be inevitable. Either "National" will be spending time and effort on such arrangements or else the regional churches involved will be financing it to the degree that it might come out of resources previously sent to "National". These are not, however *costs* but *investments*. The Congregational Churches are strong (at least comparatively) in the Northeast, the Midwest, and southern California. But if we are to talk about national fellowship, we are going to have to think *nationally* with all the *regions* that compose a nation. And when I speak of regional fellowship, I mean regional fellowship in the *national* context, encouraged, supported, assisted, and cheered *throughout the country* by those already enjoying a surfeit of fellowship within their own region. Strong regions will produce nationwide strength, and more will learn to come to "National" once they have negotiated something not so far away. At least that's how one whose ministry has been in the "sparse" areas sees it. Walk with me and I think you'll agree.