

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

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

Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

Articles from the Congregationalist, 1958-1996

Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor

CONTENTS

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
Stoudt, John, "Are We Still Protestants?" October '61
Commission on the Ministry. "What is a Congregational Church?" November '69
Bohman, George. "What Congregationalism Means to Me." July '77
Wilson, Robert. "Local Autonomy in a Time of Centralization." August, '78
Moe, Ronald. "Congregationalism in the March of History." August '88
Alexander, John, et al. "A Message to the Churches." April '85
Rouner Jr., Arthur. "The Congregational Way as a Call to Pilgrimage for the American Church," 2 parts.
October, December 1989
Larson, Arlin. "Portland as Seen from the Wilderness." August '93
Hall, Lloyd. "Denomination or Association? What Matter is How We Serve Society." June '94
Bailey, Steven. "To Be or not to Be? Religious Mainstream is Denominational." February '95

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
Bailey, Harold. "The World-wide Campaign Against Religious Freedom." January '60
Bachelder, Horace. "Whither the Ecumenical Movement?" April '60
Bradshaw, Marion. "Essentially Congregationist." January '61
Butman, Harry. "The Brave Music of Mission." September '63
Conn, Howard. "Congregationalism's Contribution to Christian Unity." October '63
Conn, Howard. "Congregationalists and the Ecumenical Movement." September '65
Hanko, Charles. "The New Protestant Church?" January '66
Couch, Walter. "Who Speaks for the Church?" June '66
Gwaltney, W. Malcomb. "Faith is the Source of Freedom." June '66
Conn, Howard. "Independency in an Ecumenical Age." February '67
Butman, Harry. "A Candle in COCU's Darkness." January '68
Steece, Arvel. Review of *The Ecumenical Mirage* by C. Stanley Lowell. October '68
Swanson Jr., Neil. "Report from Uppsala." October '68
World Christian Relations Commission. "A Statement of Ecumenical Intentions."
June '87

FREE CHURCHES

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
Butman, Harry. "The Vicinage Council." March '65
Steece, Arvel. "Deacons, Dodos, Dynamics." March '73
Gerhart, Louis. "The Executive Committee and its Chairmen." June '74
Gray, Henry. "Town Meeting, Church Meeting, National Meeting." November '74
Gray, Henry. "American Youth and the Christian Church: Including the Background and Development of Pilgrim Fellowship and Hope." January '76
Ream, Norman. "Ordination Services: Caricature or Holy Event?" April '86
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

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Safe-guarding individual freedom with Congregationalism

by George V. Bohman, Ph.D.

In the February *Congregationalist* on this page, W. Thomas Keefe referred to the seeker-ideal that has become central to the religious thinking of many Congregationalists. Perhaps the historic thread which supports the seeking concept of our order lies in the idea of a covenanted church. As early as the Salem Church, great covenants have encouraged individual thinking and interpretation of God, Jesus, and scriptures while in the words of Pastor Robinson seeking "yet more light and truth." Although the New England colonial establishment severely limited the exercise of such rights, for the past century or more, dogmatic credal statements, whether in covenants or by-laws, have diminished in our churches. Yet, as late as the 1930's, model by-laws which were adopted in many churches included the text of the Kansas City Statement of Faith as if it were a creed.

Clearly, Congregationalism today puts a primary emphasis upon its freedoms. As a fellowship, the individual church cherishes full power to govern itself, subject only to corporate controls. Obviously, the rights to call or dismiss its ministry, elect its own officers, and utilize monies and property are significant in themselves. Some would join a church to avoid interference of a religious hierarchy in matters of ministry, money, and property. However, the members most likely to be irritated by such interference would be officers and committeemen directly involved. Surely, for each individual member there is more significance than polity itself in the autonomy of free churches. Freedom, for what?, becomes the real question.

Hierarchically organized churches tend generally to set up statements of dogma or creeds as standards or norms of belief for their people. In some, a Constitution prescribes doctrine, and requires sacraments such as baptism. Although the National Council did adopt the proposed Kansas City Statement, neither it

nor the General Council claimed or exercised power to prescribe a creed. In our churches, power such as this clearly resides in the local church but even there it has rarely been used in modern times to exclude or expel members. The nature and use of communion or baptism is a decision the church can and does make. No wonder that in the charters of several major denominations we, like our pre-revolutionary forebears, "snuffed the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze."

More than this, for years we Congregationalists have prided ourselves on our "doctrinal hospitality" and have invited persons with widely varying understanding of the nature of God, the universe, and the Christian faith to join our fellowship. Yet even today we have given more lip-service to this attitude than effort to implement it. What the ordinary member needs and deserves as a consequence of belonging to a free Congregational church is positive encouragement in the use of his individual freedom to seek, hold, and revise in the light of new understanding his religious philosophy.

First, if any implied or stated restrictions still exist in either a church covenant or in portions of by-laws, should not such documents be carefully re-examined and repeal of restrictions upon the full freedom of individuals to study, think, and believe for themselves in religious matters be considered?

Second, more attention needs to be given by the whole membership to the information and attitudes presented to classes for new members, especially for youth. The custom is to defer largely or completely to the presumably expert knowledge of the senior minister about the scriptures, Biblical history and criticism, church history, and the nature of Congregationalism. Depending upon the quality of his education in religion and theology and his experience in Congregationalism, he will bring wise leadership and instruction. Frequently, he receives valuable as-

sistance from Congregational laymen devoted to the ideals of religious freedom. Here, the deacons have a strong responsibility but the whole church needs to be concerned and vigilant. Is the potential member encouraged to study religion and then formulate a tentative religious philosophy that is really his? Is he urged to keep studying and to revise his beliefs as he learns—truly a lifelong process? Does he understand how much is left for him to fill out, beyond a brief and general covenant which may assert his belief in God, his commitment to the two commandments of Jesus, and his obligation to the fellowship of Christian believers?

Third, the outlook presented to the membership class should govern the entire program of teaching and learning in church school and youth groups as well as in preaching.

Finally, if we are to maintain a fellowship of churches which is based on the expectation and guarantee of the right to hold diverse theological views, we must ask of each other the fullest respect for the continued, reasoned search for and constant reevaluation of the nature and elements of our faith as individuals. More than this, how can we use without dogmatism the differences in such a way as to enrich our experiences together?

In these four ways, a Congregational church may help each member to put into practice the freedom which characterizes our peculiar religious Way.

During the Thanksgiving season, will we match our thanks to the Pilgrims for the initiation of Thanksgiving with our concern for the active preservation and furtherance of our freedoms in religious life?

Dr. Bohman is a former Moderator and a former chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Association.

Church Members

How one church has dealt with the problem of removing inactive members from their roles.

by the Rev. James Beinke

Henry David Gray, writing about membership in the Congregational Church, states that "the fundamental requirement for membership in a Congregational Christian Church is sincere Christian conviction and honest desire to live in fellowship with others as a follower of Jesus Christ."¹ When such conviction and desire are absent, membership in a Congregational Christian Church smacks of cheap grace and cannot stand against Arthur Rouner's conviction that membership in a Congregational church must be difficult to achieve. Rouner believes that becoming a member must be "a time of decision, a time of study, a season of prayer, an act of commitment."²

The Constitution of The Glenolden Congregational Church requires that any person desirous of admission to full membership make the following statement of faith and its associated vows:

1. I love Jesus Christ and accept Him as my Lord and Savior.
2. I will seek to live the Christian life as it is revealed to me in the

The Rev. James Beinke is pastor of Glenolden Congregational Church Glenolden, Penn.

New Testament.

3. I will be loyal to this part of Christ's Church and support it by my service, my gifts, my attendance, and my prayers.

Furthermore, those seeking membership must enter into covenant with the local Body. In many cases the covenant is similar to the Salem Covenant of 1629, which states:

We covenant with the Lord and one with another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us.

Congregationalists pride themselves on freedom of individual conviction, but it must be remembered that Congregational freedom has as its condition the keeping of the membership vows and the owning of the covenant with its stress upon continuing in fellowship with the gathered body, hearing and searching the Word in this fellowship and acting in a manner consistent with God's revelation.

Not all people continue to meet the test of membership. One of the most unpleasant tasks facing any church is updating the membership rolls. Often, the unpleasantness stems from a fuzzy understanding of the relationship between the word 'member' and the word 'church'.

Although the world tends to define

church as either place or organization, Scripture reminds us that we are not primarily "in the church (as an institution), but we are ourselves and collectively the church."³ The people who are collectively the church perceive it in a variety of ways. For some, it is 'that place on the corner'. For others, it is both 'place' and 'people'. For most, the church is that peculiar mixture of people (both now and then), memories, feelings and place, which together make up the perception which we call 'Church'. Therefore, the removal of any name from the active membership roll is bit like carving out a part of one's history.

Even though Jesus warned the Church that it cannot expect to be comfortable in His service (Lk 21:12; Jn 15:19), necessary changes to membership status often remain unresolved because resolution would bring discomfort to the church. Removing from membership persons who have not honored their vows, regardless of reason, is guaranteed to produce maximum discomfort. Members often remain on active status long after failing to qualify because the congregation lacks the courage to demand commitment. Removing a person from active membership status for lack of commitment is an act of confrontation for all parties.

In removing a name from active membership, the church experiences death in the family, accompanied by a sense of failure. 'Death by cancer' confronts the church with its own imperfection as a Body of Christ, its own negligence in attending to and nurturing its members. With the

tion (the composite of talent which provides the potential for its members to do the work of the ministry).

The church as an organism is called the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:4,5 and other places). The people who make up the church are everywhere characterized as being

God. Members of the church are also characterized as "brethren." Believers (the church) are all equal before the Lord and are expected to share community life together as a spiritual community.

Paul's letters indicate that there is no such thing as a Christian who is not in community. Jesus sent out His disciples in groups of two and three, stressing the need for community.

Scripture shows that all believers have been baptized. F. F. Bruce states that the idea of non-baptized believers is just not entertained in the New Testament. To be a member of the church, one must have been baptized and be seen to meet the family description. Thus, we are given a strong identifier of church membership: A baptized believer who gathers in community with other believers because of a strong family orientation.

Jesus often talked about membership in terms of Christian fellowship "What we owe one another" is how James Montgomery Boice describes it.⁴ In speaking to the church, Jesus said we are to love one another. This command is echoed throughout the New Testament (Jn 13:34-35; 15:12; Rom 13:8; 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9; Five times in 1 John). Love is an *action* word . . . not a sentiment. An active member will consistently demonstrate loving inter-action with the body.

Active members of the local congregation will be seen in service to one another. Service is an outgrowth of love. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet he said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). Persons who seldom interact with and who do not serve one another within the body fail to meet Jesus' test of membership in the community.

John Stott writes, "Certainly without some such common concern and service, the fellowship of any Christian group is maimed."⁵

Another mark of an active member in a local congregation is burden bearing "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Persons who are elderly, homebound or otherwise unable to be physically present in church are still able to fulfill this requirement of Scripture. However, persons who by their absence do not meet this test cannot be considered to meet scriptural requirements for active membership.

Willingness to forgive one another is a true mark of membership in the body. The Bible abounds in refer-

The church is described as the company or community of the elect, founded on the good pleasure of God.

updating of membership rolls comes the realization that some members have slipped through the cracks unseen, unremarked and uncared for. Others are gone because of unresolved anger and hurt.

However, Jesus warned that no matter how well the church feeds and nurtures the flock, many will fall away. If the Church is to legitimize its claim to be Christ's Body on earth, it must periodically cleanse and purge itself of those persons who clearly remain outside membership parameters as revealed by Scripture.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each record the parable of the sower. Jesus taught the parable by saying that all those hearing the word will last in the long run. Satan takes the word away from those who do not understand it (the seed sown on the path). Others believe for a while and then fall away when the going gets tough (the seed sown on rocky soil). Still others (the seed sown among thorns) get caught up in the values of the world and let their desire for 'self' fulfillment and material comforts choke the word and thereby produce no fruit (Mt. 13:2-23; Mk. 4:1-20; Lk. 8:4-15).

Scripture uses a rich broth of language to describe the Christian church member. The first requisite for membership in the church is that one must be a Christian. The title 'Christian' assumes two things:

- 1) That one has corporate solidarity with Jesus.
- 2) That one has corporate solidarity with the church, which is His Body (See: Rom 6:6; 8:17; Gal 2:19; Eph 2:5-6; Col 2:12; 2 Tim 2:12).

This means that the church is both an *organism* (a communion of believers bonded by the Spirit to one another and Christ), and an *organiza-*

tion (the composite of talent which provides the potential for its members to do the work of the ministry). Scripture nowhere entertains the idea that one can be a member of the church and remain away from the body. The church (and therefore its members) are closely tied to the concept of marriage. The church is called the Bride of Christ in Ephesians 5:21-32 and Revelation 19:6-9. Scripture consistently condemns those who do not keep the marriage vow.

As an organization the church is likened to a temple or God's household (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). Again, this implies continued fellowship as a gathered body.

The church is also described as the company or community of the elect, founded on the good pleasure of God.

For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Eph 1:4).

God's elect . . . have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father . . . (1 Peter 1:2).

But you are a chosen people . . . a people belonging to God (1 Pet 2:9).

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory (2 Timothy 2:10).

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).

For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Members of the church (those who are believers in Christ) are portrayed as sons and daughters—Children of

ences. Christians are not immune to troubling moments which threaten the peace of the church. However, a Christian who leaves the church in a snit is clearly in a state of rebellion against God's will for us. Persons who refuse to forgive must be disqualified from active membership in any church which takes seriously its call to be the Body of Christ (See Eph 4:31-32 and Col. 3:12-13).

Perhaps the most destructive practice of Christians today is pretending not to have problems. Some people have fallen away from the church because the church has set up an unreal image in which it is thought that to have faults is unacceptable. Although James 5:16 state that we are to confess our sins to one another, few churches have an atmosphere where this is possible. There is a conspiracy of silence. Some members leave in disgust over the hypocrisy of it all. The church should examine itself and, if at fault, confess its sin and correct its own hypocrisy. The individual Christian will likewise undertake a constant personal self-examination. There are godly persons in every church who are experienced

activities do not meet the scriptural test of membership.

Finally, church members are to comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18). Members for whom the church is a convenient place to pay their respects to God at Christmas and Easter, who primarily use the church as a place to get something instead of a place to give comfort, are by definition, failing to meet the scriptural test of membership in the body.

The New Testament uses the word 'fire' to characterize the fellowship of the church. If the church is to experience real "body life," it must demand an active, burning fellowship. Christians are to have been baptized "with fire" (Lk 3:16). Jesus spoke of people being "salted with fire" (Mk 9:49). The Church was born as the disciples experienced "tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them" (Acts 2:3).

If we take seriously God's word concerning the character and makeup of the church, we must admit that there are names on the active membership roll of most churches which ought not to be there. They are the people who consistently break their vows

Jesus bestows only the right to "become children of God . . ." (John 1:16). To 'become' implies continued activity. We have shown that scripture consistently witnesses to the fact that 'becoming' is absolutely linked to active membership in the Body of Christ.

If Scripture is to remain our authority in matters of faith and practice, membership in the Congregational Way must be limited to those who consistently strive to meet biblical standards. We must continually ask if it is possible for the church to represent Jesus as Lord while requiring of its members less than one percent (1%) attendance at corporate fellowship and worship.

In many churches, able-bodied members need **never** worship with the body as long as one financial contribution is made within a two year period, yet those persons who could worship at church but choose not to are publicly claimed by the church to be fully qualified as active representatives of the Body of Christ, active disciples of Jesus and practicing ambassadors of the Good News. We must ask ourselves if we truly represent the Body of Christ, when as a test for active membership, the church demands no more than a monetary contribution once in two years.

Adherence to a scriptural definition of membership confronts those whose words and deeds show a true lack of commitment to the local body. Adherence offers protection to the faithful servants who are physically unable to attend. For all others, adherence provides an atmosphere of consecration and dedication, enabling the continued blessings of the Spirit. Adherence strengthens the church, that the Lord's work might proceed in good fashion. In true Congregational manner the reader is encouraged to think on these things. □

Believing on the name of Jesus bestows only the right to "become children of God . . ."

Christian caregivers and can be trusted to listen, discern, encourage and exhort.

Scripture states that Christians are to instruct one another (Romans 15:14). This is hardly possible unless Christians are actively in community with one another. The purpose of instruction is for Christians to become equipped for ministry. Scripture states that one becomes equipped by listening to the Word as it is preached and taught in the church. An active member will be found building up the body toward unity in the faith. An active member works toward unity in the knowledge of the Son of God. Active members work together to achieve maturity, seeking to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. So says the Word of God in Ephesians 4:11-13. Persons who willingly withhold their presence from the church and its preaching/teaching

to the local congregation and to God. They are characterized by one or more of the following:

1. A lifestyle which denies one's love of Jesus Christ and acceptance of Him as Lord and Savior.
2. A lack of loyalty to this part of Christ's Church.
3. A lack of service to this part of Christ's Church.
4. Minimal or no financial support of this part of Christ's Church.
5. Attendance patterns which reflect minimal commitment to this part of Christ's Church.
6. A lack of prayers offered on behalf of this part of Christ's Church.

Such people mock the Congregational Covenant by taking lightly their vow in the presence of God to "walk together" (emphasis mine) in all His ways . . ." (Salem Covenant of 1629). Believing on the name of

1. Henry David Gray, *What It Means to be a Member of a Congregational Christian Church* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1981), p. 3.
2. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life* (Milwaukee, WI: Hammond Publishing Co., 1972), p. 49.
3. Hendrikus Berkhoff, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 395.
4. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 4 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), vol IV: *God and History*, p. 169.
5. John Stott, *One People* (London: Falcon Books, 1969), p. 9.

Resident Aliens

Find New Direction for Christian Witness

by the Rev. Dr. Noel D. Vanek,
Minister, the Church in the Gardens, Forest Hills, New York

The Church in the Gardens is a mid-sized Congregational church located in the middle of the busy borough of Queens, New York City. As pastor, I find that we are facing head-on the post-modernist American "mainline" church dilemma. Are the churches and their members firmly "in" (but not "of") the world our Congregational heritage helped shape here in the United States (which most of us have felt quite comfortable with, even powerful in—until recently)? Or today are church members better described as "resident aliens" and the church as an "alternative society" separate from, and a Christian witness to, a society gone haywire in its extreme secularism and values relativism?

This key question underlies the work a commissioned study group undertook last year to reexamine the meaning of membership in our congregation. The group explored how Christians at the turn of the millennium can come to a fuller grasp of our identity in the church. Certainly membership in a Congregational church ought to help provide clues, and meaning. But we discovered that membership in the church seemed increasingly irrelevant to many regulars in our worshiping community, both member and non-member alike.

Why is identity an issue at all? An increasing consensus of scholars depicts the state of the late twentieth-century North American church as being caught between a role of cultural dominance that has now ended and the increasing public relegation to the realm of private opinion. No longer do mainline or Congregational Christian churches enjoy either overt or covert influence as caretakers of values, judgments, and moral trends in our nation. By and large, we in the mainline church have accommodated ourselves to this marginalization, accepting the place society has offered in ex-

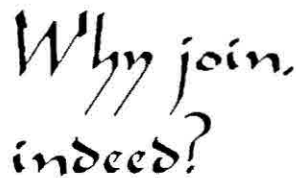
change: a voluntary association of like-minded believers who exist for the perpetuation of our private opinions. The larger society "tolerates" our peculiarities as long as we don't make a nuisance of ourselves. A problem becomes apparent, however, when one compares this image of a voluntary association of private opinion with the dangerous memory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ contained throughout the scriptures. The message of and about Jesus was conceived of as good news for the whole world, including the public life of this world God so loved. Today's North American church fails to capture the power of this good news when it is imaged as a voluntary association for the furtherance of private be-

lief. When the power disappears from the image, so does its ability to create identity. People begin to wonder, "Why join?"

Why join, indeed? In our consumer society it is all too easy for many to take part but not sign up on the dotted line. At our congregation we discovered this to be true for four out of ten regular visitors who worshiped with us frequently. Increasingly we hear people saying, "I can be a perfectly good Christian without becoming

a member. After all, membership is just to keep the institution going ... all those committee meetings. I don't really want to get involved in that part of it."

Searching for clues to making church membership more meaningful again, the study group discovered a curious pattern in our Congregational history. Over the centuries, what was required for people to become members in Congregational churches fluctuated between relatively easy and relatively difficult standards. In periods when the church particularly thought of itself as being a people called out of the world to represent the truth of the Gospel back to that world, membership demands were greater. We all recall that the early



Why join,
indeed?

Pilgrims and Puritans required public testimony of a personal saving religious experience for membership. But in eras when the church's self-image was that of steward of Christian values for the culture, the "walls" between church and society became more permeable. Then membership requirements slackened in the attempt to influence both the individuals and institutions which surrounded it.

Taking this historical discovery as a guide, we asked ourselves, "What time (for the church) is it?" The answer for our congregation in our context seemed pretty obvious to the study group as a whole. It is time to make the church, and members in Christ's church, stand out, and apart, from the general culture around us. Today's world of radicalized relativisms calls forth from us a more clear and particular witness about who Christians are, what the church is called to be, and who we in fact worship. Once this determination was made, the study group went on to make several recommendations to the church's Board of Deacons concerning how the distinctiveness of membership in Christ's church can be better represented to potential membership candidates. The two most important recommendations were the adoption of a members' code (later renamed Member's Commitment) and a lengthened, reworked orientation class for new member candidates.

The Member's Commitment is in the form of a pledge which members will strive to live up to. It depicts in concrete, realizable terms a vision of the Christian life.

The Member's Commitment will be given to potential new members for their use in understanding what it means, personally, to become a member of the church. As developed by the Study Group, it does seem to critique or put limits upon this "right of private judgment" claimed by so much twentieth-century Congregationalism. To be a member of a church, the code suggests, is to accept some norms beyond private judgment for behavior. In effect, the code states that to be a member of a Congregational Christian church is not to hold oneself up as a Congregationalist, but as a Christian. This assumes, of course, that there are certain agreed-upon canons of Christian conduct, an assumption that could be hotly debated.

The second recommendation the Study Group made concerned the training offered for new members. Instead of the current one-evening seminar, the Study Group suggested a six-session series, to cover basic theological assumptions, local church history and structure, and personal sharing. The proposed process would present a range of material from Biblical views of the church and the Christian life, to denominational and local church history, to parish survival skills. Ample time is envisioned for helping the membership class become a "group," since most studies indicate that one of the most important bonding points of new persons into churches is acquaintance with others in a similar

situation. The last session involves both new member candidates and Deacons (in equal numbers) in a mutual faith-sharing, story-telling exercise. This not only adds a touch of personal risk and testimony to the experience, but brings us closer to fulfilling the intent of our church Bylaws, which state that new members must join with the approval of the Diaconate. If they haven't met, they cannot give any kind of informed consent!

Member's Commitment

As a member of this church, I pledge myself to:

- Live my Christian faith seven days a week, not just on Sunday mornings.
- Try to follow Jesus' commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself."
- Take care of myself: to balance my physical, spiritual, social and intellectual needs, allowing myself to receive from others as well as give to them.
- Support my church with my prayers, money, presence at worship, and effort.
- Commit myself to grow spiritually by something I do in my personal life, away from the church.
- Strive to do something which helps make the world a better place.
- Try to live my life by the trustworthy ethical guides given us in the scriptures as, for example, the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus.

This past spring, two Deacons and I wrote the initial draft of our New Member Candidates curriculum. It received a trial run in April and May, and played to warm reviews. The final, personal story-telling session turned into one of the most moving two hours of listening and empathizing I have ever experienced in the church. I think it's also important to note that I attended only three of the six sessions. The course is designed to be led primarily by laity. Looking back at our study and recommendation now, it seems to me that what we did in fact was to emphasize the discontinuity between the Christian life in the congregation of the faithful, and the world around us.

What image of the church does this convey?

Much of the "hot" debate in theological circles this past decade has centered on whether the declining old main-line churches will continue to be "liberal" in their stance toward society, or whether they will adopt a more "sec-

See *ALIENS*, page 23 ♦

tarian" outlook. The liberal church continues its self-understanding in the role of caretaker of society's mores, ethics, and values; the sectarian church thinks of itself more as called "out" from society, to be a witness to that society. The chief image that has surfaced to describe the new sectarian vision of the declining mainline churches is that of exile. Like the Israelites in Babylon, the formerly dominant mainline congregations are keenly aware of the losses they have sustained. They await a new identity which only God can give them. And in the meanwhile, in-between period, they wait and form themselves as a more clearly "alternative society" to the arrogance of the secular and increasingly amoral society around them. The sectarian vision of the mainline church lifts up exile as the role of congregations in today's world that has no true interest in the truth of the Gospel, and "resident alien" as the image of what Christians are called to be as members of that exile community of faith.

In retrospect, I wish we would have been even braver in questioning some of the tacit assumptions of voluntary associationalism which creep into the structure of the church. In our congregation the Bylaws set up a two-tiered status of membership: there are members, and then there are voting members. To vote you must pledge and have been around for at least a year. I'm not at all sure now that these requirements, practical though they may at first appear, have anything at all to do with living out the Christian faith in covenant with others in Christ's church. Especially in a multi-cultural situation like ours where many new persons come from faith traditions and cultures quite different from the middle-class, educated, WASPy assumptions built into our structure, these Bylaw requirements have the effect of puzzling and/or alienating many newcomers. We discussed, but did not challenge, these gate-keeping standards in the Study Group. I know now that they must be addressed directly, even if to do so will be painful. There is always much work that lies ahead of us if we are to grow to resemble a community of disciples more than a civic group.

Our study together concluded, in effect, that whatever else our church may be, we should begin to look different from the dominant structures of society around us. Christian membership in our church should help mold each individual through the power of the Gospel as experienced in community, to be a tangibly different kind of person—a person of faith. ■

Rev. Vanek, who recently received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, serves on the NACCC Communications Commission, and on the Editorial Advisory Board of The Congregationalist.