

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

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

THE “CHURCH”

WHY THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES SHOULD LIVE

The Rev. Russell J. Clinchy, D.D.

Forest Hills, New York

The interesting report in the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY* for August 13th, describing the meeting of the International Congregational Council at Hartford, contains statements by several speakers which need comment from those who are dedicated to the continuation of the Congregational order of church life.

I write as one who transferred from the Presbyterian to the Congregational ministry in 1923, but not because I denied the validity of the Christian witness of Presbyterianism. No one could do that. I did so because I sought a greater measure of freedom for my mind and spirit which I believed could better be found in the Congregational Way of freedom from ecclesiastical authority. The experience of these years brought such opportunity and content, as I know it has for hundreds of others who made the spiritual pilgrimage, that I believe I must continue in it and help to keep its witness alive in the world in fellowship with those who will also continue to feel the same way.

The report stated that the addresses presented at that meeting contained these statements: that autonomous churches, associated freely for fellowship but uncontrolled by any ecclesiastical direction, are inadequate to meet the need of the world or to make ethical decisions; that Congregationalists face directly the possibility that they should die so that the greater Church may live; that freedom to obey Christ may, in certain times and places, mean presbyterial or episcopal forms of church government; that the leaders of the Congregational Churches are now engaged in a struggle to bring into being a United Church of Christ despite the rear-guard attacks of a small group of purists and literalists.

These statements, and others like them, looking toward the gradual creation of a United Protestant Church are made by men of the highest personal integrity and Christian conscience. I honor the devotion with which they hold their views. However, I happen to be one, among many others, who disagrees with the thesis upon which these statements are founded, and especially to the plans they propose for the disappearance of the Congregational witness of the fellowship of individual members and individual churches, and the replacement of this witness by the creation of an ecclesiastical organization of a United Church.

Other Churches Do Not Plan To Die

I disagree, first of all, because I see no need for the advocacy of the death of the Congregational order of church life, or of a transfer of it into one of the other church orders, when there is not the slightest suggestion that either of those should also perish, and when there is no indication that either of them intends to do so.

On the first Sunday of July, I attended the great and spectacular service of worship of the Lambeth Conference in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. This was the gathering of 313 bishops from all the churches of the Episcopal (Anglican) communion across the world under the invitation of the mother church, the Church of England. It was a tremendous and moving expression of devotion, majesty and power. While there I did not hear the bells of the Cathedral tolling for the death of the episcopal order of

church life. I hope no one ever will.

Last May, two of the branches of the Presbyterian Churches of America joined their corporate bodies into a new United Presbyterian Church, with the confidence that the third branch would soon enter that union to complete Presbyterian unity and power. The report of that event was not phrased as an announcement to be published among the death notices.

During the same month, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, to my mind the greatest member of the Presbyterian family, refused to ratify a report suggesting union with the Church of England which would include the acceptance of the place and rule of bishops in the Presbyterian order. I know many of the Scottish ministry and lay people personally and I am sure that they do not desire the dissolution of that Church which has infused into the life of Scotland so much of its integrity and character. Who is there who would desire the end of Presbyterian history and witness?

In the light of this reality, why should the leaders of the third valid order, the Congregational, implore its members to desire and work for the death of its vital and creative witness, or to submerge it into the continued pattern of one of the other two. Any individual member or church may transfer from one to another of the orders freely. But why should they demand that the other members of their order be forced to follow them through compulsion?

The Distinctive Witness of Congregationalism

But the great reason why the concept of the Congregational Way should not die or be absorbed into the organization of an entirely different system rests in the positive declaration of its merit and its creative spirit.

Its genius lies not in a claim to be an ecclesiastical legislature and judicatory which can encompass all minority expressions of the spirit of God, with power to maintain and develop this organization until it rolls onward to the day when it has become all-embracing enough to make all Christians submit to its direction and authority under The One Great Church of Christ. There is one branch of Christianity which makes such a claim, and it is enough.

The Congregational Way is the opposite of that. It takes Christ's words that where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is to be found in the midst of them, to be a valid definition of a Church of Christ. Here will be found what may be best defined by the concept of the presence of "The Inner Light" which is a mystical appreciation — the light which proceeds from the presence of Christ, a Christ Who surmounts all names and creeds and organizations. Each group, therefore, is a church, and, in the sense that truth is that which is ultimate, is a "true church."

But to be a "true" church in that sense, no one church can possess power which would allow it to extend its authority, or the authority of a group of churches, over another. It is amenable to no ecclesiastical judicatory.

To such disciples Christ gave one rule — "And this is my commandment, that ye love one another," not alone in the inadequate definition of that word as it is used in our modern language, but in the depth of all that Christ

poured into the concept. Because they are brought together in that bond of love, the members have been implored by the Apostle to be "kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us."

These words are the charter for service to each other and to all the needs of mankind, but the motivation and the action of such service must always flow from the freedom of the spirit under the concept of the admonition, "freely ye have received, freely give".

Diversity of mind and spirit and interpretation is the cardinal principle of freedom, and so in this fellowship of the Congregational Way there will be found those who would define themselves as fundamentalists, orthodox, unitarian, universalist, evangelical and liberal. This is inevitable for there is no organization in the fellowship which may claim power to refuse ordination or installation to any minister, or membership in a church to any seeker, because one may classify himself in any one of these categories. That was decided once and for all in Congregationalism in 1854 by the failure of the attempt of the ministry of Connecticut to excommunicate Horace Bushnell for what they called his "heresy". Those who now seek truth in their time, as Horace Bushnell did in his, now may find in the Congregational Fellowship a spiritual home.

There are no universal creeds, forms of worship, or manuals of discipline, for diversities of spirit are not only expected but welcomed as the necessary ingredient of the manifestation of the creative spirit of God within the life of man.

Participation in worship and service is extended joyfully to members of all other Christian, and non-Christian expressions of faith in God, even as our participation in theirs is anticipated as a similar blessing. Beyond and above our characteristic forms and expressions and interpretations, the sacramental altars present to all freely the inexpressible meanings of man's longing for "the means of grace and the hope of glory". Surely this is the picture we see as we think of the meaning of The Church Universal.

The same principle holds true regarding social relations, and was recognized as a fundamental Congregational principle by the Board of Review in 1954. It is that among Congregationalists will be found liberals and conservatives—and many variations of these—in the areas of social and political thinking. Each individual will choose his or her area of thought and action, and may become members of commissions or councils or

fellowships to study the problems in these areas. But no one of these groups, no matter whether they be of the left, the center, or the right position, may presume to equate its particular premises or conclusions with Congregationalism, or to speak in its name. Only upon this basis can there be freedom of personal conviction and absence of conformity.

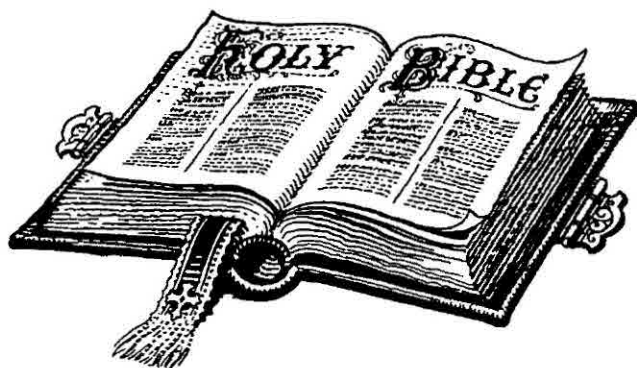
Diversity is a psychological fact as well as a religious one. There can no more be "One Church" than there can be "One School" of Art, or Literature, or Philosophy, or Science. The very idea that artists or writers or philosophers or scientists could possibly be gathered into one school of thought and expression is so preposterous that it can only be met with a smile. And surely that is most true of religion. In Congregationalism this is accepted as a psychological and a religious understanding.

This is not the basis for a waterized, lowest-common-denominator expression of the Christian faith and practice. Bushnell preached the truth as God gave him to see the truth, and by so doing opened windows upon vast new horizons which so many of us now see and live by. But he expected others to have the same fervor to seek the truth, and to give the same devotion to whatever they might find. His travail made it possible for each Congregationalist to form his own statement of faith and to practice his religion in freedom; conscious that if "all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and malice be put away from us" we shall be able to live together as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

All this is the reason why many of us—and the number is constantly growing—are resolved that this vital expression of Christian experience shall continue to live as part of the whole Christian experience.

The freedom for each Congregational church and member to make a decision either to enter the United Church of Christ or to continue in the present fellowship still remains a valid prerogative unimpaired by any action yet taken by the General Council.

Those of us whose churches are now members of the National Association welcome a decision of churches to join with us. We understand completely that each Congregational church now has the right and the privilege of deciding to become a member of any other denomination, including the United Church of Christ, but we also know that the same right extends to those who wish to remain Congregational. To them the doors of the continuing Congregational fellowship are open. The spirit of the Pilgrims, the Puritans, and the Independents is still alive. It will continue to live in the world.



THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

Some Tests

From the New Testament

Dr. Henry David Gray, Hartford, Connecticut

Constitution (Webster's Unabridged)

1. An authoritative ordinance, regulation, or enactment; especially . . . one affecting ecclesiastical doctrines or discipline.
2. The fundamental organic law or principles of government . . . embodied in written documents; also, a written instrument embodying such organic law, and laying down fundamental rules and principles for the conduct of affairs.

Soon we shall be asked to consider a "constitution" for the "United Church of Christ". BEFORE that document is presented to us we do well to consider prayerfully and thoughtfully the basic principles of Church life in the New Testament. Our Congregational forefathers believed they were "completing the Reformation" when they applied to Church "polity" the principles which they found in the New Testament. And if it be said that "We do not live in the first century," let us add that neither did our Congregational forefathers live in the first century. Furthermore, the revelation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ is normative for men of all centuries who sincerely call themselves Christians.

What then are the tests from the New Testament?

Face to Face

First and above all else, the New Testament calls us to worship and serve God as He makes Himself known in Jesus Christ. Test any proposed constitution by this norm. Does it follow the Scriptures by putting aside anything and everything which presumes to tell men what to believe? Does it trust wholly to God's making Himself known to men *directly and personally*? Does it put barriers between men and their Maker, in creed or in aught else? Does it call men to repent and believe the gospel face to face with God, each responsible to Him and to Him alone? Does it ask us to serve an organization or does it invite us to serve God?

Institution or Inspiration?

Second, the New Testament bears witness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of persons and Churches. Does the constitution lay claim to institutional authority, or does it trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in persons and Churches individually? Does it indicate that individual persons and Churches cannot be trusted to find and follow the leading of God's Spirit? (For example, does it set up standard procedures

which would give authority concerning worship, the ministry, education, or any part of the Church's work to committees, boards, or other bodies outside the particular Church?) Does it put its trust in organizational efficiency, size, and power, or does it show trust in the Spirit-awakened zeal and love of the responsible Christian man in the responsible fellowship of the particular Church?

In a word, is the prime principle of the constitution trust in organization or trust in God?

The New Testament Church

Third, the New Testament portrays the Church as the covenanted fellowship of those who dare to be followers of Jesus Christ, gathered into particular Churches in each community, believing themselves to be one in fellowship with all people who shared their common allegiance to Christ as Lord.

In the New Testament the word "Church" always means either the particular Church in a given community, or else the universal fellowship of all Christ's followers past, present, and future.

Does the constitution use the word "Church" in the way in which the word is used in the New Testament? Or are we told that the New Testament usage is not suitable for our day? Does the constitution accept the Scriptural principle that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"? Or does it "recognize" a "Church" only by organizational rules by claim of churchly authority?

Is the constitution as inclusive as the gospel? Is it widely inclusive enough to welcome our Quaker brethren as fellow-Christians? Or does it set up sacramental standards which would exclude them?

Peace and Purity

Fourth, the New Testament calls men to repentance and faith. Jesus said to a forgiven person, "Go and sin no more". Paul urged the Corinthians to guard the peace and purity of life in their Church. Does the constitution provide "national" standards for Church membership? Or does it completely omit all reference to Church membership, thereby clearly recognizing that Church membership is a personal relationship to God and a covenant relationship to a particular Church? Does the constitution provide any *judicial system*? (whether optional or required is not of significance in relation to Biblical principle). Does the constitution provide any means by

which responsibility for the peace and purity of the particular Church can be passed off to any other body? Or does it prohibit such reference to "higher bodies" in recognition of the inescapable responsibility to God Himself which is central in Scripture and in Congregational usage?

Advice and Counsel or . . . ?

Fifth, the New Testament portrays the counselling together of Churches to seek the mind of Christ and give advice in time of need. Does the constitution provide for mere "congregations" which shall support the program of denomination as a whole, on the pretext that the denomination is THE CHURCH? Or does it provide for Churches which shall meet together for advice and counsel? Does the constitution provide for control over the Churches by the General Synod, Conferences, or other bodies? Does the constitution indicate that "counsel" really means "requirements"? Or does it explicitly declare that "counsel" has as much weight as it has worth, no less and no more?

"Congregation" or Church?

Sixth, the New Testament provides many examples of a sisterly relationship between Churches, but no instance of the authority of one Church (even Jerusalem) over other Churches. Does the constitution provide for a name true to the New Testament principle of sisterly relationship of Churches? Or does it indicate an idea like that which obtains in some church bodies wherein the "congregation" is simply a "unit" of the national organization?

Committee-Controlled or God-Directed?

Seventh, the New Testament tells us that Churches, individually, ordained leaders, and that the members themselves took part in the "laying on of hands". Does the constitution claim for the General Synod, Conference or any other body any authority to ordain, license, call dismiss, install, recognize, or otherwise oversee the pastor-Church relationship? Or does it faithfully follow the New Testament principle that this precious relationship is the inalienable choice of a pastor and a people acting under the direct guidance of God, sought in prayer and exercised only in response to His leading? Does the constitution suggest a distrust of the principle of Spirit-directed pastor-Church relationships, claiming that the guidance of the committee (General Synod, Conference or other body) is more to be depended upon than the guidance of God in Church meeting?

Wider Bodies As Agencies

Eighth, the New Testament Churches appear to have been gathered in each particular community by spontaneous groups or by selfless leaders, and the subsequent association of the Churches with each other appears to have taken place in the same way. Does the constitution recognize the wider bodies of Christian fellowship which the Churches have created as agencies for wider work as the Churches commission them to do, or does it undertake to organize the Churches geographically?

The Word Made Flesh

Ninth, the New Testament proclaims the Word made flesh as the Word of God which shall redeem the world. Does the constitution acknowledge the Living Word as the ultimate authority, the Word made flesh today by the inward illumination of the Spirit of God at work in the heart of each individual Christian, and in the meeting of each individual Church of Christ? Or does it indicate that our confidence is to be put in a super-church?

Lay Ministry

Tenth, the New Testament bears ample testimony to the ministry of those who were not ordained. Is the matter of lay ministry in the Churches recognized as an inevitable consequence of New Testament Christianity? Or does the constitution tend to limit the ministry to the "clergy"?

Faith, Freedom, Fellowship OR . . . ?

Finally, the New Testament sets forth principles of faith, life, and work; it is the record of what God did through men responsive to His call. Is the constitution a simple, straightforward statement of Christian principles which calls us to unite in diversity, to adventure for Christ? Or does it cramp and confine the free Spirit of God in Christ's Churches?

ARE WE STILL PROTESTANTS?

Dr. John Joseph Stoudt, Norristown, Pennsylvania

Must the institutional church stand between man and God or can man approach his God directly?

The proposals lately made by church leaders for the creation of a "Reformed and Catholic" church which, they suggest, should be fashioned by organic union of Protestant groups, put into sharp focus an old question: are we still Protestant?

The difference between the Roman and Protestant forms of Christianity lies in the question whether the organization or the experience comes first. Romans assert that the Church — with capital "C" — mediates the experience while Protestants believe that given the experience the church follows. Romans assert that their church, directly deriving from the keys which the Lord gave to Peter, mediates grace through its sacramental and institutional life and that there can be no grace without this church. Protestants, both Lutheran and Calvinist, assert that we first experience grace, become conscious of having been justified by faith, and that from this experience, when shared, the fellowship of Christians comes. Thus Romans assert the essentiality of the organic institution while Protestants believe — or, at least, once believed — that the church is a voluntary society of those who are conscious of having experienced grace.

This distinction has deep implications in the fields of ethics, doctrine and the devotional life as well as in the practical implications of our religious faith.

Furthermore, under the pervasive impact of Ritschlian theology — and no one theologian seems to have had greater practical influence on modern American religious thought — our leaders seem to have become convinced that there can be no Christian faith apart from conscious connection with the organic institution. The key passage in Ritschl is this: "We are able to know and understand God, sin, conversion, eternal life, in the Christian sense, only so far as we consciously and intentionally reckon ourselves members of the community which Christ has founded." While this passage, when taken in its context, is still Protestant in spirit, it has none the less opened the floodgates for a new spirit to emerge, one which is very much in evidence — that spirit which would reduce Christian life to ecclesiastical politics. For when we "consciously and intentionally" reckon ourselves part of the community which Christ has founded, and when this is set up as

the criterion for our full membership in Christ's Body, then, sadly, we have reduced the Christian religion to churchmanship. Instead of a gathering of believers we have created an association of ecumenical engineers.

So, in all seriousness we have to raise the old question again: are we still Protestant? We must pose to the leaders of the great American denominations which still think they are Protestant because they are not within the Roman fellowship, whether they are, *in spirit*, in the tradition of the Reformers? Do they still think that the individual believer knows God's grace first, and then, with others like him, forms a fellowship of those who have shared God's grace? Or, do they believe, in consequence of Ritschlian theology, that there can be no grace except that which comes through and from an institutional church? Or, to put it simply, must the institutional church stand between man and God or can man approach his God directly? This is the issue which separates Roman from Protestant.

Perhaps we stand on the threshold of a new reformation? Perhaps we have come to see the emergence of the great monolithic, centralized religious corporation for which policies are determined by a Board of Directors who then hand them down to the local clergy to peddle to the man in the pew? Perhaps the great protest has died?

But there are still some Christians in this land for whom no ecclesiastical Board of Directors can speak. There are those lonely souls who know from first hand experience that their Redeemer lives.

These Christians do not oppose the increase of the area where the love of God is known, nor do they oppose the ecumenical movement. But they do believe, and that with fervency, that God comes to man without benefit of clergy, that no top-heavy institution of busy ecclesiastics can stand between them and the gracious, saving love of God.

Are we still Protestant? Church leaders may have followed the logic of John Henry Newman without following him back to the bosom of Rome; but there are still those who do believe that the fellowship of believers is founded on the one rock — the Jesus Christ of their hearts.

(Reprinted by permission, from THE MINISTERS' QUARTERLY, Summer, 1961.)

The Congregational churches are those planted on this continent by the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 and those gathered by their spiritual descendants.

In 1931 these churches were merged in fellowship with a branch of the Christian Churches; hence, Congregational Christian. In the middle 1950's many of the Congregational Christian churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ. Some three hundred churches declined to enter this newly-formed denomination and thereupon formed the National As-

sociation of Congregational Christian Churches.

The preponderance of the theological thrust of the Congregational churches has been, through the years, in the direction of liberal theology. However, the theological position of any given individual Church depends on the proclivities of that Church. To say the least, there is no unanimity in theological position among these churches.

Congregational Christian churches are entirely independent and autonomous churches that are yet bound together in fellowship. The individual Church adopts its own covenant and a creed if it so

wishes. Again, the preponderant thrust has been in the direction of devising a covenant but not a creedal statement. Each Church calls its own Minister or Pastor and selects its own benevolences which each supports to whatever extent the individual Churches wish.

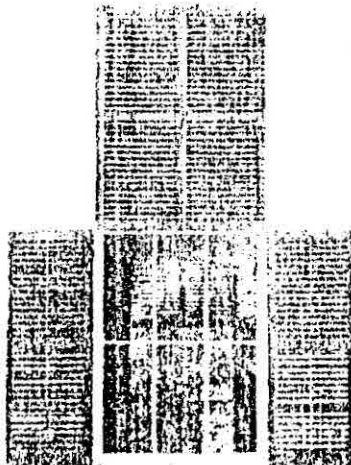
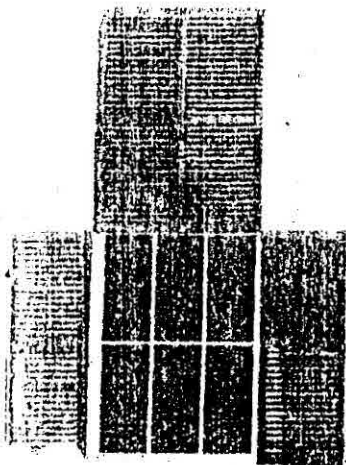
The Congregational Churches of the United States, by delegates in National Council assembled, in Kansas City in 1913 adopted a statement of faith that is known as the Kansas City Statement of 1913. It reads:

"We believe in God, the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness, and love; and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord and Saviour, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore; and in the Holy Spirit, who taketh the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of men. We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of the one true God, and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood. Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting."

If the inquirer be interested, he then seeks out a local Congregational Christian Church, asks to be acquainted with its Covenant and its requirements for membership. If he wishes to accept the Covenant and to meet any other requirements for membership, he then requests membership in the Church, addressing this request to the proper officer of the Church, usually the Pastor.

□

WHAT IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH?



Congregationalism

Continued from page 7

on civil behavior. Most of our decisions, for instance, should be made by consensus rather than voting. We must emphasize our common bonds and heritage rather than differences of the moment. Diversity of theological perspective should be accepted as a positive condition, rather than the opportunity for one view to prevail over another.

The Congregational Way in its contemporary garb has acquired a new and unpredicted role in religion and society. It has become one of the few institutions in our society that is conciliatory in perspective, rather than adversarial.

The Congregational Way should recognize that a church based on love rather than ecclesiastical authority must spread its word more by poetry than by television. Our faith is subtle, personal, not collective or photogenic. While we reject historical determinism in its various guises, we must acknowledge, if not accept, much of the world we live in. We cannot commission another *Mayflower* and escape to a New World, desirable as that may seem at times.

Was the merger controversy an arcane bit of historical trivia? Or, was it really a conflict over the most fundamental issues? I have concluded that the latter position is correct. It was a debate over fundamentals.

We Congregationalists are the loyal remnant, the keepers of the covenant.

*** We have re-discovered the basis of our faith and the basis of our worldview. We should prepare ourselves now for the challenge of taking our message and our example to others.

We are surrounded by hostile forces emanating from the secular world. We cannot keep up with fashion, indeed a church should not be fashionable. We seek order, understanding, and love in a world in which disorder, misunderstanding, and hate are the prime motivating forces.

We must not base our goals as a covenant community on a utopian assessment of human nature. Sin and



"Each of us has a mission . . ."

evil have always been, and will always be, present in history. In large part, our presence is our message. Our national Congregational conclave seeks to make decisions in a way that heals rather than wounds. We accept that the integrity of our culture and the processes by which its values are transmitted from one generation to the next are more important than any

momentary policy objectively righteously obtained.

The Congregational Way is boldly committed to an enlightenment interpretation of history. We reject the idea that "history marches" of its own volition or that we are merely human props in a global morality play. Our fates have not been predetermined by a mechanistic and amoral theory of history. For us, history is ours to make largely as we will. We are responsible today, at this very meeting, for the future of our Way and its culture.

John Winthrop, in a sermon delivered aboard the *Arbella* before disembarking on Massachusetts soil in 1630, spoke to our condition today: "For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so if we shall deal falsely with our God in His work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."

The beauty of the Congregational Way is that for each generation a precious opportunity is offered. We are all citizens of the "city upon the hill." Whether this city will flourish or wither will be decided by this generation in a thousand places and in a thousand ways. Each of us has a mission and responsibility to prove to others that free men and women can make a better society on earth bound together by love and conciliation. Let us, therefore, get on with our task without tarrying for any.

A Message to the Churches

A statement concerning our tradition and our beliefs:

The bed-rock principles of Congregationalism are the autonomy of the local church, the right of private judgment in matters of Bible and belief, and the fellowship of the churches.

Congregational polity adheres to the historic covenant of Salem, 1629, that our churches be gathered communities in which persons voluntarily join in fellowship to support one another in their purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord. Because Congregationalism is an open fellowship allowing for diversity of interpretation of Scripture and doctrine we cherish the affection which binds together persons of differing viewpoints within the ways of mutual tolerance and respect.

The undersigned former Moderators of the NACCC, meeting in Sun City, Ariz., February 14-17, 1985, unanimously recommend to our churches the above statement expressing our Congregational principles and purpose.

We recognize that apart from the above statement there is diversity of theological belief on the part of the ministry and laity within our churches. This has been evident throughout our history, yet we continue to be one fellowship. Our diversity has sometimes been our strength and often our weakness, but we pray and trust that a spirit of mutual tolerance and Christian affection will always keep us in the unity of the spirit and bonds of peace.

We believe that the principles cited above must continually be emphasized and thereby the Good News of Jesus and His Way may be proclaimed in our churches through a positive program of Christian allegiance and service.

We urge all churches and their pastors to inspire and motivate their people to significant Christian life with dignified and meaningful worship services, to develop thoughtful and mature Christian education programs, to promote a loving, open, understanding fellowship among the members and to urge individual implementation of personal faith by service to others in the spirit of Christ.

We are convinced that the Congregational Christian Churches have a promising future that could see substantial growth in numbers and influence by the end of this century. In order to achieve this growth and realize our full potential, we feel it extremely important

On February 14-18, thirteen former moderators of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches met in Sun City, Ariz. to discuss the long range problems, needs, and possible plans for the Association. Regrets and suggestions were received from all who were unable to attend. The group met as an ad hoc sub-committee of the Executive Committee which is concerned about the NACCC in the year 2000 and after. In preparation, each board, commission, committee, and staff member had been asked to think about the needs over the long range. Dr. Appelquist and Mr. Frenz attended as consultants and Dr. Boring was also there as a former moderator. Discussions were lengthy and vigorous. A full report was given to the early March meeting of the Executive Committee.

Herewith is printed a concluding statement for the churches which reflects some of the general thinking which the group desired to present at once for careful reading. Hopefully, it may be a challenge to all who read it.

Dr. George V. Bohman,
chairman

Dr. John Alexander,
secretary for the meeting

to continue our traditional emphasis on a learned and dedicated ministry. Therefore, all necessary steps should be taken to recruit the highest quality young people for this calling and encourage them to obtain the best possible undergraduate and theological training.

We urge our member churches to be thoughtful and circumspect in their choice of ministerial leadership in order that they may preserve our high reputation for integrity. Though we look to ministers and lay officers for leadership, we remind the churches that the seat of authority lies with the congregation in meeting assembled, acting in the spirit of Christ.

We urge our pastors and churches to inform and instruct their members (especially new members) on the principles and responsibilities of the Christian faith, the obligations of church membership and the history and usages of the Congregational Way.

We believe the time is near when the N.A. needs to consider a professional and dynamic public relations program which will broadcast to our own churches and to the public at large, the nature of our free, positive, committed and unique fellowship.

We further believe it to be necessary to consider larger financ-

ing, additional staffing and a more adequate building in Oak Creek in order to properly serve our present churches and those we hope will unite with our fellowship in the next decade and a half.

We reaffirm our obligation and commitment to deepen and extend our fellowship, our goodwill and our desire for essential Christian unity on both national and international levels.

The Congregational Way was first walked in America by the Pilgrims, and we are the custodians of the Pilgrim heritage. Yet while we cherish that heritage, we do not worship a noble past. Congregationalism is a living and growing thing, like a tree with deep roots, a strong trunk, and branches that bud, blossom, and bear fruit. Our prayer is that Congregationalism, planted by the rivers of the living water of the Spirit, may bring forth good fruit in this season, and through all the long tomorrows.

Signed: John Alexander, Richard Bower,
Harry Butman, George Bohman, Marian Luenberger,
Howard Conn, Raymond Waser, Helen Jo Berkaw,
Norman Ream, Walter Boring, Erwin Britton,
Donald Brownell, Paul Miller

What Congregationalism Means To Me

by George V. Bohman

The Editor's request for a brief statement which would answer the perennial questions, "Why am I a Congregationalist?" and "What does it mean to me?" arrived as I was perusing drafts of the dialog being prepared for the annual meeting by Robert Morris and Harry Butman and just as our church's by-laws committee began to explore possible changes in our covenant. These sent me again to the major Congregational histories and documents.

Now, as I type a final draft of my statement, I read the thrilling product of Butman's early morning pen that appears in the spring *Congregationalist*. Let me turn our attention inward to what I believe is the very heart of the answer to the questions. In an earlier article, I noted that the leaders of continuing Congregationalism stopped short of an answer to the query, "Why should an individual member, not involved in denominational structure, find it worthwhile to be a Congregationalist?" In their writings, our leaders seem content to emphasize the free, autonomous church itself.

Because each member of a church is asked to accept a *covenant* as the basis of fellowship,

the covenant is usually a brief, non-credal commitment of members to work together as a Christian church. Ideally, Atkins and Fagley thought the covenant pledged "cooperation and fellowship" for a "definite purpose, not because of peculiarities of belief." However, they recognized that some churches have at times included various amounts of theology and doctrine. More recently, Arthur Rouner, Jr. stressed the non-credal basis of the covenant, calling it a commitment to fellowship which implied an "agreement between man and God" not unlike the Old Testament concept. Historians point out that a reason for brief, non-credal statements during the first century of our churches might be that most ministers and members substantially concurred in long, Calvinist creeds. However, the Salem covenant, written probably in 1629 but certainly by 1636, by which the members "bynd ourselves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth," when read with Pastor Robinson's earlier injunction to the departing Pilgrims that "if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his (than Christ), to be ready to receive it . . . (and that) the Lord had more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word," suggest strongly that both Puritans and Separatists reserved large areas for continuing, independent pursuit of truth by their covenanted flocks.

If we accept Williston Walker's judgment that the covenant still in use by First Church, Plymouth is essentially the wording adopted at Scrooby and Leyden, then from its earliest years Robinson's church subscribed to a most open covenant. After careful consideration, the church at Royal Oak in January, 1977 adopted the Plymouth covenant as the wording best adapted

to this century. It reads:

We, the Lord's free people, have joined ourselves into a church estate, in the fellowship of this gospel, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known, according to our best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost us, the Lord assisting us.

Thus, apparently from the beginning, Congregationalism encouraged the fullest and freest philosophical and scientific investigations of ideas related to religion. The members were bound together in the seeking of truth. Although we know that ministers and deacons further explored the theological views and religious experience of new members, the covenant promise offered little basis for accusations of heresy.

It is no wonder, then, that as early as 1749, Jonathan Mayhew of Boston declared, "We have not only a right to think for ourselves in matters of religion, but to act for ourselves also." Perhaps noting constraints appearing during the Great Awakening, Mayhew continued, "While we are asserting our own liberty and Christian rights, let us be consistent and uniform, and not attempt to encroach upon the rights of others." Clearly, as Atkins and Fagley wrote, non-Calvinist British thought has permeated such leaders as Mayhew. Earlier, the Mathers had turned their curiosity to scientific investigations. Despite the restrictions which some churches wrote into their basic documents during the trinitarian-unitarian controversy of the early nineteenth century, among the remaining Congregationalists there appeared spokesmen for open covenants as attention turned to new scientific thought in biology, archaeology, and later in psychology, physics, and chemistry. An educated ministry, which Congregationalism sought, looked to all sources to shed new light upon the nature of the universe, God, and man.

Nevertheless, numerous Congregational churches still include in their by-laws various archaic credal provisions. Given the individual's right of interpretation, some documents are no more confining than the Kansas City statement of 1913 but their existence in a position of prominence in by-laws, however labelled, is at best to be viewed as an example of social lag, literally unenforceable. If we are in fact opposed to creeds, except as historical *curiosa* along the path of religious growth, we ought to be courageous enough to remove them from any place that suggests they represent an obligation or commitment of members. Morris declared that in the fifties and sixties we "missed the boat" by failing to underline the untenable commitments of theological and doctrinal constraints in the Constitution of the United Church of Christ. Some of us tried but were put off with mollifying words like "testimony."

In 1960, a candid lawyer for the UCC admitted that only those members of the United Church who were involved in the denominational structure might be aware of the new semi-presbyterian restraints upon their freedom. By remaining Congregational, we have protected the full autonomy

of the churches but many have failed to realize the real fruits of free polity. For some, the cause lies in the persistence of credal limitations in by-laws and for others in the influence of ministers who preach and act dogmatic concepts of theology and doctrine with the sufferance of the membership.

What else ought a member expect of his own church?

Our history gives substantial emphasis to religious education. Often, however, in practice this becomes didactic teaching of a combination of ancient dogma, and even superstition, dimly understood either in the pulpit or classroom. The fault lies not in whether the individual's own beliefs at the time may be called liberal, orthodox, moderate, or conservative but in the failure to encourage the search for relevant information and an open, inquiring mind for the search. How deeply are *anti-seeking* attitudes held by some Congregationalists? We hope it is a small minority but witness the unreasoned consternation in letters to *The Congregationalist* on William Edelen's efforts to provoke our thinking about religion in terms of scientific concepts widely known and discussed in universities and theological schools for much of the past century. The least that such data demands is reasoned analysis and extensive reading before it is rejected. How can our members and our young people who seek a religious philosophy be called "Congregational" without being challenged to seek and understand "all his wayes, made known, or to be made known"?

What is each church's responsibility? How can it help its people be "seekers"? Let me suggest a few goals; then *let us hear how your church is putting them into practice*:

- (1) To stimulate the individual's attitude of "seeking."
- (2) To provide a climate of tolerance for each other's views in our pilgrimage to new ideas.
- (3) To provide resources of libraries and materials for religious education that are provocative.
- (4) To provide pastors, educational leaders, and youth leaders who are philosophically and intellectually committed to guide and stimulate the "seeking."

Arthur Wakefield Slaten wrote, "We belong to the believers of the world . . . We belong also to the doubters of the world, who have dared to question and criticize, and evaluate, and seek truth for themselves, who have been destroyers of old systems whose ancient good time has made uncouth. We belong to the builders of the future . . . May we be faithful in our day and generation."

Will not the truly committed Congregationalist, in the best tradition of the past four centuries, use all his powers and resources, all the sources of knowledge and understanding, to seek the truth from day to day, relentlessly, all his life, though truth may change and be added to so that it will always seem to elude any final "knowing"? He will find his joy, not in a secure, dogmatic faith but in a "seeking" faith.

Local Autonomy in a Time of Centralization

A Look at the Congregationalists Who Didn't Merge

By Robert L. Wilson

Dr. Wilson, research professor of church and society at Duke University divinity school, completed this year an independently-financed study of the NACCC. His article, reprinted with permission from Christian Century Magazine, is based on that study.

In November 1955 a group of Congregationalists opposed to the forthcoming merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church met in Detroit. Out of that session came the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Theodore A. Gill, then a Christian Century associate editor, attended the meeting and was not impressed with those who insisted on remaining Congregationalists. He wrote that the people who met in Detroit had come for a conglomeration of reasons, most of which were nontheological, and that their professed fear of an authoritarian church was the result of their not understanding the nature of the church ("Movement or Machination?," *The Christian Century*, November 23, 1955, pp. 1358-1360). The 1950s were years of ecumenical optimism. Any group that opposed what Mr. Gill perceived as the "coming great church" could expect little sympathy.

Almost one-third of a century has passed since that Detroit meeting. It has been a period in which several Protestant denominations have merged, and centralized church structures have been created. Mergers have been accomplished among Lutherans, among Presbyterians, between the Evangelical and Reformed Church and Congregational Christian Churches, and between the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodists. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S. has created large regional synods; some United Methodist annual conferences have merged, thereby forming fewer but larger judicatories. Several denominations have centralized their national agencies.

The group of congregations which refused to become part of the United Church of Christ has continued as the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, a denomination that has resisted the trend toward centralization. This church's experience can provide information on two questions of importance. What are the characteristics of a denomination which refuses to develop a centralized structure

in a period when much of Protestantism has been doing so? What are the prospects for a church based on local autonomy? A study by the J. M. Ormond Center of Duke University divinity school provided information on these issues.

I

In almost a quarter-century of existence, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches has taken on certain distinctive features. The early years were occupied with the task of becoming established as a denomination. This period was colored by the memories of the bitter merger controversy which resulted in the founding of what is now a viable association of churches. Its characteristics include:

1. *Numerical strength.* The National Association is still a relatively small denomination with a total membership of approximately 90,000 persons in some 380 congregations located in 39 states. A large number of the congregations are located in three regions: New England, the midwest (particularly Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana) and California. The rest are scattered throughout the country. The association is about the size of a typical regional judicatory of a mainline denomination (i.e., a synod or annual conference), but it has a nationwide distribution.

2. *Membership growth.* The churches of the National Association have tended to maintain a stable membership—a not insignificant accomplishment in the light of the declines in some denominations during the past decade. There has been some expansion as new congregations have been organized and established congregations have become newly affiliated with the association. Further growth may come by the addition of other established churches. Denominational leaders report an increase in the number of inquiries from interested congregations.

3. *Local autonomy.* A fundamental principle of the denomination is the absolute autonomy of the local church. Congregations are completely independent. A local church may call anyone it desires as its pastor, contribute (or not contribute) any amount of money to denominational causes, remain a member of the National Association or withdraw at any time. This complete congregational autonomy is probably the

group's most significant characteristic. It would not be incorrect to say that the members' adherence to their local autonomy is what holds the denomination together.

4. *Pluralism.* Churches affiliated with this denomination represent a variety of theological perspectives. One person correctly stated that within this communion are congregations ranging from "ultra-conservative to extremely liberal." The National Association might correctly be categorized as a kind of ecumenical movement, at least from a theological point of view.

Some local churches are affiliated with both the National Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association. Others are members of both the National Association and the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. Some 30 pastors also hold full standing in the United Church of Christ and a like number in the Conservative Congregational Christian denomination.

This high degree of pluralism is accompanied by an equally high degree of acceptance of persons who hold differing viewpoints. Without this level of acceptance, it is doubtful that the denomination could function.

The pluralism places the difficult responsibility for the development of a meaningful theology on the minister and laypeople in each local church. There is no churchwide authority to provide the accepted statement of faith to which people can simply subscribe.

For a theologically diverse group, this denomination has been remarkably free from controversy over doctrine. The necessity of getting the church established and the real concern that it might fail may have tended to minimize theological differences. As the denomination becomes more secure, the possibility of such theological conflict should not be ruled out.

5. *Lay-clergy parity.* In probably no other church in America do laypersons and clergy more equally share control. The representative of the local congregation to the denomination's annual meeting may be either a minister or layperson. This is a church in which laypeople are trusted to participate in making decisions in every area of the church's life—a task which they fulfill both enthusiastically and responsibly.

II

What are the prospects for the National Association of Congregational Churches? In its first quarter of a century it has made the transition from being a group of local churches which refused to enter into the United Church of Christ to becoming a firmly established de-

nomination. It has demonstrated that a church which adheres to local autonomy can prosper even in a period of centralization.

The denomination does pay a price for its local autonomy. It cannot as a total church take positions and make statements on the issues of the day. (Many members would consider this inability an asset.) It cannot suggest an amount which might be considered appropriate for local congregations to contribute to benevolences or for the support of the National Association. That decision is left to the local church.

The fear of a centralized authority makes the task of the executive staff difficult. Its role has been compared to "performing on a high wire without a net." Symbolic of the fear of centralized authority is the fact that at the annual meeting the national staff members are given badges labeled "visitor."

The denomination's size is both an asset and a handicap. It is small enough to enable the leaders to know each other well. Thus a genuine fellowship exists among Congregationalists. However, the size of the membership also makes it impractical for the National Association to produce church school literature for all age groups. The clergy are trained in seminaries affiliated with other denominations, and a four-person professional staff based in Oak Creek (Milwaukee), Wisconsin, must provide the whole range of necessary services to a widely dispersed church.

As an organization, the National Association has its share of tensions, disagreements and conflicts. Among its members probably will be found the usual proportion of saints and sinners. Nevertheless it offers the individual and the local church the maximum degree of freedom in matters both of faith and of polity. In a time when the trend has been toward centralized ecclesiastical structures, the National Association has affirmed the viability of the local congregation as the fundamental church unit. It has demonstrated that clergy and laity can share decision-making and that pluralism does not have to result in destructive conflict. It is providing a way by which people worship, witness to and work for their faith. □

Dark Night

*A cat is a neat package.
It lies in a lap
Fitted together like a three-dimensional
jig-sawed egg,
All smooth curves and flowing
insertions.
Hand me the cat:
My contentment needs stroking.*

Dorothy Gjessing
Underhill, Vermont

Congregationalism In the March of History

(Editor's Note: The following article has been extrapolated from the text of The Congregational Lecture delivered by Dr. Moe during the 1984 annual meeting. The asterisks indicate omissions from the original text. The lecture in its entirety, will be reprinted by the National Association and will be available from that office in the future.)

By Dr. Ronald C. Moe

"Thus out of small beginnings greater things have grown by His hand Who made all things out of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light enkindled here has shone to many, yea, in a sense, to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all praise."—William Bradford in The History of Plymouth Colony, chapter 11.

Preparation for my remarks today actually began some thirty years ago under somewhat unusual circumstances. I was part of a high school Pilgrim Fellowship group in a prosperous suburban church in Southern California. As a group, our Fellowship took rather more seriously our Sunday evening ping-pong tournament than weighty theological and social issues. One evening, however, our venerable minister deigned to enter our midst and decided to discuss a serious topic. The topic that had stirred him to descend from his office to be among us was, believe it or not, the proposed merger of the Congregational Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

*** The more he spoke the more disturbed I became.

After much in the way of background commentary he uttered a phrase that has haunted me ever since. He said: "The Congregational

Dr. Ronald Moe is a member of the executive committee of the NACCC. He is employed at the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.



"People may form their own societies . . ."

Churches must be prepared to sacrifice some of their beliefs and institutions because they are out of step with the march of history."

*** I suggest for your consideration that there are presently 3 basic theories of history (or world views) in competition for acceptance.

Organic Theory of History:

The organic theory of history links the past with the future. The past is supposed to influence, if not dominate, the actions of the future. The present and future is viewed as an unbroken continuation of the past.

Enlightenment Theory of History:

The enlightenment theory of history is largely a product of 17th and 18th century Europe that first bore fruit in America. Indeed, as we shall discuss more fully in a moment, it was our forebears, the Pilgrims, who first applied the abstractions of the enlightenment world view to practical effect in writing when signing the Mayflower Compact in 1620.

The fundamental assumption of the enlightenment theory is that in

large measure, individuals, peoples, and nations, are responsible for their own fate. History is to be understood and appreciated but it is not to be the principal guide for current affairs. People may form their own societies, they may begin anew. Reason shall be followed as well as faith. God does not rule earth through the voices of leaders, either anointed or elected.

Determinative Theory of History:

The contribution of Karl Marx in the mid-19th century was to provide a theory of history in opposition to the then dominant enlightenment theory.

Marx argued, as did others, that history has been largely predetermined. History is marching inextricably toward its utopian end when the fundamental nature of man will change: man will cease to be selfish. The role of the leader and political elites, therefore, is to hasten the march of history, not fight the inevitable.

The appeal of deterministic history to contemporary religious leaders has been profound. Religious leaders can secularize their millennial yearnings. A utopian dream on earth can replace the concept of heaven, or life after death. Justification is provided for uncivil acts, even violence, because the end for which the action is taken is deemed "good." The concept of a voluntary compact by which the people commit themselves to a process of decision-making is viewed as a historical trap. If the end has been predetermined, resistance to the inevitable can be rightly characterized as "reactionary" and thus outside the realm of behavior immune from repression.

It can be argued that the ecumenical movement is, in its essence, based on a deterministic theory of history.

My interest and concern today are not so much with Congregationalism

as a polity as with Congregationalism as a cultural movement. We sit here today as heirs of a movement that is now four centuries old. In days of old, this movement and its beliefs were capable of inspiring men and women to risk their fortunes and even their very lives in its behalf. Yet, thirty years ago when the Congregational Way was under siege, there were few who came to its defense. Those few, however, did keep the flame alive and now we must begin to reconstruct our cultural heritage to ensure that we know who we are and where we are going. We are a culture, as that term is generally understood, for we have customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits. As followers of the Congregational Way, we are different.

All societal organizations, if they last long enough, will travel many byways. They will undergo changes and challenges. But every group, if it is to withstand the vicissitudes visited by events, must have a core of reasonably consistent values. Congregationalism has lived now four centuries and while it has had its rebels and theological digressions, certain core values have stood the test of time. If we are to understand ourselves as a Christian fellowship, we should periodically articulate our beliefs. I will briefly outline three core values, and I am sure that there are others, that seem to me to be the link we have to our past and our beacon to the future. The Congregational Way, as you will see, is both subtle and sophisticated.

1. We believe in the individual person as being of supreme moral worth.

This concept is not a platitude. While it may seem an almost self-evident truth to us as Congregationalists, it is a concept that is accepted by relatively few in the world today, either in the political or religious realm. We believe in the independent decider. We believe in the sanctity of the individual's relationship to God. No institution, not even a church, stands between us as individuals and God. If we sin, no institution can absolve us. We must face our God on our own. We do, of course, have much to help us and guide us. We have the Bible, we have the accumulated wisdom of the ages, we have prayer, and we have each

other. Finally, we have God's grace. We are not alone, but we are discrete individuals.

Those of us who believe in the supreme moral worth of the individual are a beleaguered minority. Certainly those churches which are organic in nature do not place great emphasis on the individual. And churches that are deterministic in their world-view tend to emphasize "community" or "society" rather than the individual, indeed the needs of the individual are considered subordinate to the needs of the community or state.



"In large part our presence is our message."

2. We are a covenant people.

The idea of a covenant is central to the Old Testament. It is, in probably over-simple terms, a contract between God and man. The Old Testament is often referred to as the Old Covenant and the New Testament as the New Covenant.

During the 17th century, the concept of a covenant or "compact," the word sometimes used, took on a new political meaning. Political theorists speculated that man must have once lived at some point in a state of nature without societal bonds. * * *

In any case, at some time, according to the theorists, men must have come together to agree to a compact, thereby creating society. Such a compact at once gave freedom and provided bounds to that freedom. * * *

Congregationalism, from its inception, was based on the covenant concept. The first covenants applied to the local churches, but later, as we shall see, the covenant concept had political implications as well. Congregationalists, looking to the Scriptures, harkened to the Book of Matthew wherein Christ says: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." From this notion of the church as people, it followed that if these people covenanted together, before God, they could agree to form a complete church and provide for its faith and order.

Such an idea has profound political consequences for at its root is the assumption that all Christians are equal before God.

The Pilgrim Fathers, before landing at Plymouth, met together and signed the Mayflower Compact, creating by covenant a "body politick" based on the consent of the governed. This Compact, signed "in the presence of God," was an extraordinary event in human history. The Pilgrims were not only creating their "body politick" and assuming responsibility for their fate, they were specifically rejecting the organic theory of history then prevailing in England. This was the first instance in modern history when a political society was started *de novo*, from nothing, based on democratic principles.

* * * * *

3. Congregationalism is based on love, not ecclesiastical authority.

The prime source of authority within the Congregational tradition is the Bible as interpreted by men and women of reason. We covenant together as seekers, not holders, of truth. Each of us agrees in signing the covenant to honor one another's interpretation of the Bible and the historical wisdom of the ages. Each of us, as believers in the enlightenment interpretation of history, take individual and collective responsibility for our lives. Freedom becomes a necessary prerequisite, therefore, for religious growth and maturity.

Congregationalism is a church universal bound together by love rather than ecclesiastical authority. For the Congregational Way to function as a culture, we must place a high value

Continued on page 8



(Editor's Note: The Rev. Dr. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. was Congregational lecturer at this year's National Association Annual Meeting. Because of its vitality and impact, his speech is offered here for the benefit of those of us unable to attend the meeting.)

"The Congregational Way As a Call to Pilgrimage For the American Church"

It is a great honor for me to be here as a Congregational lecturer. Although my whole life in the ministry has been given to trying to work out and recover the genius of the Congregational Way in modern American church life, this is the first time I have been asked to give "THE" Congregational lecture. Thank you for this opportunity and privilege.

Thank you for the honor of being with the National Association of Congregationalists—even back to back with an important constitutional meeting. Boston is my place of birth, and Massachusetts is my home. Long ago, in a little town up the road from Jonathan Edwards' Northampton, my whole life began as a minister. It was the Williamsburgers who made the Pioneer Valley and the Berkshire Hills my home, and that town the birthplace of three of my five children. In Boston, another was born, my charismatic Lizzie. And together, we all went west in 1962—still following the Puritans' "Errand Into the Wilderness."

And I have tried to live it out in Middle America, in the heartland, ever since, and build there, the "beloved community." Trying to build into the heart of an eager people, the genius of our "Congregational Way."

Though 60 this spring, I am my father's son, and to set the record straight, as Congregational

lectures go, and that history not be rewritten, I tell you that my father, who paid dearly in the Congregational fellowship for his defense of free Congregationalism in the courts of Brooklyn and in the Congregational denomination of that day, came to his conviction in his own study, and in his own conscience. The "dominie" of Brooklyn was never anything but his own man, and God's man. And the heritage He gave me, I prize, and have tried, in all the years of my ministry, to live.

I offer this lecture as a reflection on: "The Congregational Way as a call to pilgrimage for the American church."

Perhaps a presumptuous title: nevertheless, I ask you to hear me. The American church, I believe, is in a time of profound transition. The old ties are not holding. The old rules do not apply. The old assumptions can no longer be made. Vast changes have come about within the lifetime of many of us here. Much has changed, I expect, in every valley and every town with a Congregational steeple since I began as a young minister in Williamsburg, Massachusetts over 30 years ago.

In 1962, when I left my second church, the Eliot Church, in Newton, Massachusetts, to go west with my little family to Edina, Minnesota, we were a nation idealistic, ready to lead the world, to battle evil, to transform society into Isaiah's vision of

the Peaceable Kingdom. A torch had passed to "a new generation of Americans"—and we all wanted to "ask not what our country could do for us, but what we could do for our country."

And then came Dallas and the dashed dreams. Overnight something deep changed in the American spirit. A terrible abortion took place. A strange war shaped our soul. And soon we were at war with each other. And we were angry, and we lost patience. And churches began to go under. The debate was too intense. The young ministers were too caught up in ideology and not enough in theology. And they forgot many things—especially Jesus. They made Him only an angry revolutionary, and we were lost.

And the old and the conservative left the churches in dismay. And the young were not attracted. And the church lost, and lost, and lost. Money and people. And, in the 70s it turned inward—to its own pain and personal sorrow and separation, and then to support groups, and counseling, and "letting it all hang out," and venting anger, and then trying to love, but forgetting about prayer, and about evangelism. *Time* magazine, under the title "THOSE MAINLINE BLUES," has documented the 20% loss of the United Church of Christ's membership, and the 25% loss of the Presbyterian Church, and even more, of the Episcopal Church in those years. We have seen a hemorrhaging of membership in the very churches that gave America her roots and her foundation.

It took television preachers and talk show evangelists to challenge us finally, to think about growth again, and mission again. But in the meantime, we found, almost overnight, that it all was up for grabs. As one Lutheran theologian put it, "the whole place was coming loose." And a few years ago a fascinating study by Martin Marty of Minnesota Christians, called "Faith and Ferment," written up in *Newsweek* magazine, revealed that Catholics no longer necessarily go to Catholic churches, nor Lutherans to Lutheran churches. The old authorities do not hold. The prayer books do not bind. The liturgy is no longer law. The ethnic tie is no longer vital. Christians in Minnesota think of themselves as sinners, but not under judgment, as Christians who can put together their own understanding of how they'll see the faith, and work the faith, and, as Christians, who will go to any church or no church as they please, thank you very much—bishops and popes, pastors and priests to the contrary notwithstanding. It is suddenly the day of "do-it-yourself religion." "Pick and choose religion."

Part of the reason appears to be a new search for personal faith, in America, that has led some into tragic cult experiences, and others into new attempts at Bible study, and prayer, and even life in worship. They look for something personal, a humane spirit, for worship that is real, that touches the heart. In short, any religion they embrace must be personal, and it must "work." It must make a difference. We may indeed, be in the early stages, as Billy Graham suggested, of a second "Great Awakening."

People want to be loved, to find worship real, to find a way they can serve. Their expectations are high. And, if their expectations are not met in their own tradition, now they will go elsewhere.

In the meantime, the Catholic Church has felt the winds of the spirit. Good Pope John years ago opened the windows of his church to the new winds blowing. No one knew how profoundly that church would change. Overnight it seemed, the Latin language was gone from the Mass. The Bible came back. Priests needed to relate. A more humane way was brewing. The church began to debate "Holy Spirit versus Holy Church." The Spirit was everywhere being rediscovered. The Pentecostal movement having begun in the Azusa St. Chapel at the turn of the century had blossomed into the Four Square Gospel Church and the charismatic movement.

For some of us, it became clear in the middle 1950s that our own heritage of Congregationalism was a Spirit tradition. Our roots were in a high doctrine of the Holy Spirit—an idea not really understood in the 1950s by either those who promoted or opposed the Congregational merger. But there it was—upheld by the English Congregationalists: the Holy Spirit, the only basis for the idea of the covenant, and of the direct leading of the Holy Spirit in local autonomy and independent churchmanship. The whole source of our freedom and our form, was clearly in the Spirit.

The genius of the Congregational way of church life in America, was and is the direct leading of the Holy Spirit. And if we are open to see, we will discover that in obedience comes freedom. Freedom to love, to experiment, to heal, to express charismatic gifts. The Spirit, though feared by some, is our greatest hope for usefulness and service to people and to the church itself far beyond our doors.

(To be continued)

NOTE: Dr. Rouner's lecture will be concluded in the December-January *Congregationalist*.



Editor's note: The Congregational lecture delivered at the 1989 annual meeting of the National Association by Dr. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. concludes in this issue of The Congregationalist.

The Congregational Way As A Call To Pilgrimage For The American Church

(Continued from Oct.-Nov. issue)

I

Congregationalism's Search for Identity

The problem that confuses late 20th Century Congregationalism in America, and perhaps in the world is *Congregationalism's Search for Identity*. I offer this judgment from the perspective of a once young radical Congregational minister who is no longer young. Yet, I find myself still out of step with the mainstream of my denominational heritage, still viewed as a genial but ungentle critic, and still feeling like an uncomfortable and sometimes unaccepted thinker and practitioner of the Congregational way of church life and ministry.

I have often said I grew up in Justice Steinbrink's courtroom in Brooklyn, where my father, the minister of the Cadman Memorial Church in Brooklyn brought suit against the General Council of the Congregational Churches, to prevent the United Church of Christ from happening, and to preserve the vision and spirit of free Congregationalism. The court case succeeded and the decision favored the freedom of local autonomy in the churches, but three years later was overturned by the Appellate Court. My father lost many friends for his stand. His name, in some ways, made my name difficult to bear. But he was my hero, this courageous man in ministry.

Yet, neither he, nor Douglas Horton of the other side, nor their compatriots, ever really understood the genius of Congregationalism. They cherished its freedom—particularly the freedom to think and believe as he or she pleased. It was on the basis of freedom and rights that they fought each other, and fashioned the new United Church of Christ and this smaller, renegade body, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

All the while, of course, "The times, they were a changin'." Other streams were rushing in America that washed away some of the basic assumptions of the fashioners of the new Congregationalism in America.

The "Ecumenical One Great Church" they either worked for or fought against rapidly became irrelevant, as racial tensions mounted and the Vietnam War divided us, and young Americans took to the streets. The drug culture and the

They saw Congregational distinctives as a vague love of the free spirit and willingness to fellowship with anyone.

search for self of the 70s was no more a congenial ideal for them, than had been the ecumenism and social action ideals which had been the battleground in the late 1940s and 50s for a Congregationalism trying to find its way as an ecumenical pointman for the American church.

Congregational leaders seemed, at least, not to understand the groping of the heart in America that longed to serve, that wanted to change the world, that wanted more than anything else a living Lord Who could be touched and known.

Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism understood it, appealed to it, and have successfully built great congregations and international television ministries based upon it.

United Church leaders talked glibly of "giving members away" denominationally to achieve the greater whole, the Blake-Pike one huge denomination vision. They saw Congregational distinctives as a vague love of the free spirit and willingness to fellowship with anyone. Laudable aims, of course.

Their peculiar temptation was always the siren cry of liberal thought that said "tolerance is what counts, accept everything, make accommodation wherever you can, make bridges to other great world religions, don't judge anyone or anything," even assuming that the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus was "the Christ event" that never really needed to have happened.

It is Christ among the two or three gathered in His Name that makes the gathered community to be the true church.

So the new morality was okay, its sexual style was okay, even its willingness to use death as a means of curing the patient as in abortion and euthanasia was okay. And some present day United Church leaders dream of fashioning the future distinctiveness of that larger house of American Congregationalism as the liberal church form in America, even to embracing a basically Unitarian, Universalist theological stance.

The U.C.C. is tempted to be for everything that comes down the pike—every new thing—in sex, in ethics, in morality, in human policy. Even while a war of the spirit rages within its life as the fellowship of charismatic Christians of the U.C.C. and the People for Biblical Witness of the U.C.C. lift their voices in protest.

Almost a dozen years ago, the U.C.C.'s president, Avery Post, confessed that "the U.C.C. set out to have a faith crisis, but never had it." They needed to deal with the faith issues. Indeed, they were afraid. For it would have made them look at Jesus and at their own early history as a people of the Spirit. The easy thing was to hold to ideologies of protest against government and social conservatism and not face the inner issues of faith that could be so unsettling.

Our own National Association Group of Congregationalists, while generally sharing the liberal theological stance of the U.C.C., had historically invested its fears in the arena of social concern. Out of fear of the controversy that comes when the church speaks out and acts out the Gospel claims on society, we have tended to lift up a high individualism, saying Congregationalism calls its people to act socially and politically only as individuals.

The conservative Congregational conference also eschews social concern, but out of both a political conservatism and a theological conservatism.

What all three American Congregational traditions miss is the great historical identity, the Congregational way has, with America itself, with its essence in freedom, with the spirit of quest, and of journey, and most literally of pilgrimage both as nation and as people of God, which the Congregational way, through the 17th century Pilgrims and their Puritan followers, gave both to America's church life and to its corporate civil life.

This gift of the pilgrims to America came from their biblical discovery that it is Jesus through the Holy Spirit Who creates and gives life to the church. It is Christ among the two or three gathered in His Name that makes the gathered community to be the true church. It isn't the presence of priests or popes that does it, but Christ. And it is the two or three, the congregation, not the individual, who are the focus of church life an pilgrimage. The significance then, is journeying together, hand in hand, in covenant agreement, following Christ. Open-ended, searching, taking people where they are, and leading them into love, and growth, under Jesus' Lordship.

Our churches have a chance to give back to America its Pilgrim forms of worship.

Quite the opposite movement from the authoritarian, liturgical churches who demand assent to a creed, the following of a Prayer Book and Canon law, and submission to a dominance of clergy ordained in a supposed physical "apostolic succession," back through Popes, to the Apostle Peter. It is precisely the sense of groping search for meaning and faith, in an American people confused and lost in the final stages of the New Morality and its vacuous tolerance, and its lack of definition and standards, and its corrupt and hollow emphasis on the self, that creates the evangelical opportunity for classical Congregationalism in these latter days of the 20th century. j

The Congregational way of church life, of pilgrimage, of following the leading of the Spirit—together, as brothers and sisters, is exactly that way of being a Christian that I believe "has come to the Kingdom for just such a time as this." This is the day of "do-it-yourself" religion. The old way and the old denominational loyalties are not holding. Secular, unchurched Americans are looking for a new, more open, more humane, more loving way of being a Christian, and of finding fellowship with other Christians.

The hand held out in comradeship, the open arms of love, the invitation to journey with Jesus and His brothers and sisters, the sense of search, the call to growth, the call to be free from obedience to people in order to be free to obey Christ, is the exhilarating style of faith life among the churches of the Pilgrims. Their identity is in the pilgrim-puritan seriousness about the Bible as Book of Life, in their commitment to open-ended pilgrimage led by the Spirit, in a fellowship of freedom and love that the free way of covenant life makes possible, and in the deep sense of concern for the whole community, and the obligation to serve the community and help to give order and life to the community as the Pilgrims and Puritans did with the colony, the commonwealth, and finally—in Revolutionary days—with the country.

The simple meetinghouse, the loving community, the biblical faith—articulated in sermon—relating to every aspect of individual life and community and national life, and service and mission to the world, all become identifying marks of the modern Pilgrim people of the Congregational Way.

Our churches have a chance to give back to America its Pilgrim forms of worship, its free spirit, its quality of love, its Biblical center, its con-

cern for society, its passion for people, and its commitment to mission—beginning with the town and the nation.

II

Freedom to Search for Faith

A Congregationalism that understands itself offers all people a freedom to search for faith and to be a pilgrim. Having looked at Congregationalism's search for identity, look for a moment at what our churches have a chance to be in our communities.

Individual congregations in America today live by their identity: by how they are perceived by the community, by the sense the community has of whether they love or not, whether they welcome strangers or not, whether they help the community or not, whether they offer hope or not, and help, and a chance to make a new start in life, and have a renewed sense of God's love for them, and purpose for them, and destiny for them.

The American people are terribly put off by churches and by Christians. Their offense is at us, and not at Jesus. It is at rigid, stuffy, formal and forbidding churches that seem not to have either life in them nor the milk of human kindness. They are offended at the sense of self-righteousness and judgment they feel from fundamental theology and from authoritarian, liturgical, legalistic ecclesiasticism. And yet, they want to know Jesus. They are intrigued by Him, fascinated by Him. They want to know the Bible. They want Jesus' love, and the love of the Christian community. They want someone to take them in in spite of their family failures, their adulteries, their sorrows, their sickness, their lostness. And they are looking for churches that will do that.

The American people are terribly put off by churches and by Christians.

The television evangelists were, at least, appealing because they offered acceptance and even love, without asking anything of people—except financial contributions. But in the end, sincere seeking people want to give more. And, of course, the televangelists have let them down.

The searching American has had enough of creeds, and rule books, and church law. And enough of hypocrisy and immorality. He and she

want a real Christ, and real Christians, and real company of Christian comrades. The American is looking hard at the minister in the local church and at the people. Will they hurt him, or help him? Will they reject him, or accept him?

If that church will take him where he is, and allow him to grow, and come to know Jesus, and become a serving, excited, committed person of faith, he is very interested, very curious, and very ready. Ready to consider Christ and the church: particularly this open, welcoming kind of church.

Congregationalists have always been the community churches in America, the churches that wanted to serve the community and the whole world. "We are as a city set upon a hill," Winslow wrote of the early Puritans, "with the eyes of the world upon us." The Great Experiment—in this land. That's why the church I serve is on our Crosstown Highway. Why a number of us have gone to Africa ten times now, in an effort to raise over a million dollars to fight World Hunger. If they can recover their sense of Biblical faith, and the loving Christ, and their own Pilgrim spirit and heritage, many, many Americans will flock to our fellowship and join this Congregational enterprise. The unchurched, the former Christians, the people ready to join again are longing—according to Dr. Gallup's polls and the Faith and Ferment study in Minnesota—for a new, Pilgrim way of being a Christian. What an opportunity for us 1990's Congregationalists!

The searching American has had enough of creeds, and rule books, and church law.

III

The Way of the People's Ministry

Finally and very briefly Congregationalism is, peculiarly, the way of the people's ministry. Don't forget that. Honor that. It is the way where "the priesthood of all believers" is worked out seriously in church life. The church is the "congregation," the people. The people, in "Church Meeting" are the authority in decision making. The minister joins the local church and is simply one of the people.

Congregational Churches call the people to be ministers. No one from outside will step in to rescue them or do it for them. The people minister love to each other, and to all comers. The people

call the professional minister. The people teach, even preach. There is nothing in historic Congregational churchmanship that lay members cannot do—if their fellow members in Church Meeting set them aside to do it. Even the sacraments they may, under certain circumstances, administer.

To have a ministry, they don't have to go through headquarters. The immediate need can be met right here in the congregation.

The church is the "congregation," the people.

I have said that in the church I serve a group of lay people have gone to Africa to learn about world hunger. They have come home to raise often \$100,000 at Eastertime each year to help save an African tribe. Eight times they've done that. The husband of one of the women in the group decided the first year he didn't want to wait, or to just give money. So he has gathered 30 men to feed 300 - 500 hungry people in our own city one night each month.

Two other ministries go out to reach and touch inmates of our federal and state penitentiaries. All conducted by lay people. All the counselors and leaders in our ministry to hundreds of junior high and senior high young people are lay people.

The grief support groups and blended family support groups, and job transition and women's support groups are led by lay people. I believe the freedom of the Congregational Way makes that possible, and invites the people into ministry.

Conclusion

I believe the American Church, like the American people, is in turmoil. Partly perhaps because the Spirit is moving with such power in the land. Something new is being formed. The land is awakening to its deep need for God—for His presence in their personal lives and in all their institutions' lives. They will be looking, I believe, for informal, open, welcoming, exciting, loving, moving, church structures that will give them a channel, some form, for their new search for God. I believe they long to be Pilgrims. And I believe—humbly I hope—that we are the Pilgrim people—offering an old way in a new day—for which they are searching.

I still believe we could join in a partnership across the country to be churches of the people, offering that Pilgrim way.



Portland Seen From the Wilderness

Sees Many Major Accomplishments at CCCNA Meeting

*by the Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson
Congregational Church of Hope, El Paso, Texas*

My remarks come from the wilderness. In part it is because they represent a minority view. It is also, however, literally true. Congregationalists here in the Southwest are few and far between, as is just about everything else. Driving across West Texas you understand why the nation looks to us as its garbage dump for everything from sewer sludge from New York City to nuclear waste from many places. El Paso, where I live, is, for instance, five hundred miles from the next major city in Texas, with little but sand, cactus, and creosote in between.

I will preface my remarks by saying that we Congregationalists save ourselves much grief by lacking machinery for taking up controversial issues. While other denominations rend themselves over abortion, multi-culturalism, inerrancy, ordination of homosexual clergy, and other issues limited only by places for activists to hang their hats, we leave such concerns to local churches or, even better, don't contend with them

at all. Our national meetings are therefore relatively harmonious, stirred up this year only by debates over "Chair" vs. "Chairman" vs. Chairperson, NACCC vs. CCCNA, and "sister" vs. "other." I was on the losing side on all counts but frankly couldn't see that much was at stake.

I would venture that consensus Congregational opinion falls right in the center of mainline Protestantism; we, however, arrive there without the divisiveness. I must at the same time, however, issue a caveat. While we would not want to politicize ourselves as some denominations have, we should also acknowledge that we benefit from their struggles. It is primarily others who wrestle with the great and not so great questions of our age in the light of Christian faith. We avoid divisiveness; we also miss opportunities for cultural creativity and contribution.

That is my real concern. Not the particular issues mentioned. Nor our structure which discourages involvement. I am concerned with the National Association of Congregational



The author cites another first-rate Bible Lecturer in the person of the Rev. Dr. Burton Throckmorton, Jr., Bangor Theological Seminary, who probed the thinking and actions of the Apostle Paul, speculating on what influenced his life and "how his ecstatic experiences were divorced from his accomplishments."

Christian Churches as a movement for the kingdom of God. We often say that the local church is our be-all and end-all. To avoid, however, the self-centeredness characteristic of our human race we must keep the larger goal in mind—the kingdom of God in which all things are subject to God's rule.

Here is the question. It is a genuine question; I really don't know. In what ways are our local churches, our Association, and affiliated organizations reaching out to make the kingdom of God a reality? Put in a different way—in what ways are our local churches, Association, and affiliated organizations engaged with our culture with a view to transforming it?

Historically our contributions to American culture are manifold. From the very institutions of democracy to the growth of higher education to the abolition of slavery and numerous other intellectual and social movements. I attend Congregational Annual Meetings as much for inspiration and direction as I do for fellowship.

Perhaps perfect fellowship is after all the ultimate goal, fellowship with others as well as with God. And perhaps the local church can be an intimation of the fellowship of the Kingdom. In this belief, as in much of our practice, we are much like other denominations. As the ecumenical campus minister at the University of Texas at El Paso I recently attended the New Mexico Annual Conference of United Methodist Church. As many differences as we have with the Methodists' episcopal system, as a practical matter their annual meeting was extremely similar to ours.

Our difference is not so much the emphasis on local churches as it is the responsibility we place on local churches and voluntary associations for our larger mission. Again here is the question: in what ways are our churches engaged with our culture with a view to transforming it? In our opening worship the Rev. Lee Karker got us thinking in the right direction by speaking of Pilgrimage, not of Pilgrims as icons of the past, but as people called by God to chart new territory. In the Congregational Lecture the Rev. Dr. David Gray likewise called us out of ourselves by challenging us to proclaim our message of freedom more actively in the ecumenical arena.

I will not comment on the Annual Meeting as a whole, which I thought was excellent, but on areas of liveliness and movement which stood out to me:

First, was the decision to send *The Congregationalist* to every interested member of NA churches. This will not only generate more support for our magazine but also increase interest in Congregationalism as an idea.

Second, was an excellent promotional effort by **Don Colhour of the American Pilgrim Chorus**, which takes the Pilgrim story in word and song to many places in our country as well as around the world. I became enthused with the idea of the Chorus two years ago in Seattle and hope it might become a musical focal point for our churches.

The Communication Commission's announcement of new efforts to encourage publications by Congregational authors was also encouraging. Not much was done with this at the meetings in Portland, but the idea is crucial if we want to be a denomination of "learned clergy."

Establishing a Family Life in the Church Commission seems like a good step given the many indications of crisis in the American family. With such an emphasis on fellowship and community, the "family of God," our churches should have a contribution to make.

The efforts of Henry Salley in offender rehabilitation which won him the Charles Rush award for minority ministry were exciting to hear about, if even briefly. This is another area of great need, one in which at least one Congregationalist is making a special contribution.

Another first-rate Bible Lecturer and the annual presentation of the Washington Gladden Society also, to me at least, contributed to a sense of Congregational engagement. (But why isn't the Washington Gladden Society more active and better supported?)

Our enhanced relationship with Piedmont College also has many

possibilities, especially if it can transcend the intense local needs felt by most small liberal arts colleges. Perhaps Piedmont can become a focal point of our efforts in education, scholarship, and training.

I saw these encouraging signs of movement, but not nearly as many as there should have been. We must learn to think of ourselves not so much as a fellowship of local churches as a movement rooted in the fellowship of local churches. There should be many efforts by local churches, by voluntary societies supported by Congregationalists, and by our Divisions and Commissions. Where are we active in the arts? in education? in issues of justice? in international relations? in contemporary intellectual issues?

Many denominations have national structures to conduct their outreach. We rely on our churches separately. Maybe we are more actively engaged than is apparent. If so, we need to share the news and support each other.

P.S.: I am troubled by the way we treat our national staff, which strikes me as somewhat demeaning. After attending several Annual Meetings, I have concluded that presenting the Executive Secretary and the Associates as hirelings who must "report" is the rule rather than the exception. They are not accorded leadership roles even though as a practical matter they are often the nexus of our common life, especially for small and isolated churches such as my own. It behooves us to show more respect for the men and women we choose to serve and represent us, and, therefore, for ourselves as Congregationalists. ■

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Back To The Future

First in a Series of Back To The Future articles celebrating our heritage, contemporary role and vision as Congregationalists in the Fortieth Anniversary year of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and the 375th Anniversary of the landing on Plymouth Rock.

Denomination or Association?

What Matters is How We Serve Society

*by the Rev. Dr. Lloyd M. Hall, Jr.
Minister, Plymouth Congregational Church, Racine, Wis.*

Editor's Note: *The question of "denomination" versus "association" puzzles many of us. Dr. Hall attempts clarification in the following article, his main point being that entanglement in semantics does not waive our social responsibilities, as Congregationalists.*

—JBP

The 1865 Statement of Polity reads, "The Congregational Church derives its power and authority directly from Christ and is not subject to any ecclesiastical government exterior or superior to itself."¹ And we read further that a Congregational church is bound to observe the duties of mutual respect and charity which are included in the communion of churches. The twin foci of our way are the autonomy of the local church and the expression of fellowship.

The National Council of the Congregational Churches, established in 1871, was the first structured national expression of the Congregational Way. With the early mergers and the creation of the General Council in 1931 the groundwork had been laid for a new expression of Congregationalism. There was, from that moment on, a tendency toward consolidation and centralization.

Association an Entity

So it was not out of the blue that "Congregationalism B" emerged: that the Association is an entity unto itself and has the power and authority to make decisions for itself as a church would make those decisions. The issue remains whether or not the association is an entity like a church. I don't think that's clear among us. Can we claim that our associations are "churches" of a different order,

the delegates being gathered and bound by covenant?

In the study of Polity and Practice, which was prepared at the behest of the Executive Committee of the General Council, this statement was made: "These bodies," referring to our fellowship assemblies, "are constituted by delegates from the Churches and represent the Churches. The delegates are not merely individual Christians seeking personal objectives or expressing personal opinion, but responsible representatives of the Churches."² We are present as representatives of our churches.

The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches is not an ecclesiastical organization. We have designed Articles of Association which provide an administrative mechanism to do the things that those who own the Association (the churches) want done. The Rev. Dr. A. Vaughan Abercrombie

Continued on next page →

writes of the autonomy of the churches "to which the conferences and conventions belong."³ We are not people who belong to a national (regional, state) association. In meeting, we are delegates of the churches to whom the association belongs!

The Rev. Dr. Henry David Gray writes: "Congregationalists reject all authority save that of the Word of God, the living personal Word, known in the teachings, the work, and the life of Jesus Christ. No man can serve two masters. This is as true of Churches as it is of individual Christians."⁴ He places that in the context of the associational, denominational relationship. Can the church ("local church" is redundant since there is no other) be responsive to Christ and responsive to a denominational structure? Our polity answer is, "no." There is one Master, only one, to whom we can be responsive. We cannot serve both.

Not So Good On Fellowship

To the extent that there are weaknesses of our way they are weaknesses of application. We're good on autonomy but not so good on fellowship. We don't really share among our churches in a caring, loving, supportive, sometimes cajoling way. We haven't been there for one another and we have pretended that coming to a meeting is our fellowship. We need to share seriously on the issues that we face together. We have neglected, unlike our predecessors, the issues of social responsibility. We need to raise up the issues and discuss with one another. We need to decide, as a denomination (and I use the word intentionally because "denomination" doesn't mean structure but is a "tag" by which we—the churches, not the NACCC⁵—can be identified) if we are going to be about imposing behaviors, imposing words—or about winning hearts; and how.

"With us," says Dr. Gray, "church-

manship and discipleship are identical."⁶ Discipleship is not about polity or structures. Discipleship is about doing the work of Christ. We need to consult with one another without the power plays. This is one of our blessings. We can talk to one another about the things of Christ. "Brotherly love, cooperation, mutual council, and devout dedication to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, produced the incredible missionary, educational, societal, and religious work of the Congregational Churches."⁷ We can again let those rise from our churches and, true to our heritage, be the dynamic yeast in a too often failing society. ■



The Rev. Dr. Lloyd M. Hall, Jr., has been a minister for 25 years, the past nine at Plymouth Congregational Church, Racine, Wis. He has occupied several key leadership posts in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, including Moderator and Chairman of the Executive Committee. He currently serves on an advisory committee strengthening Congregational ties between Piedmont College, Demorest, Georgia, and the NACCC.

Notes

1. Walker, Williston, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 1960, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, p. 567.
2. Gray, Henry David, *The Mediators*, American Congregational Center, 1984, p. 455.
3. Abercrombie, A. Vaughan, *The Congregational Christian Way of Inter-Church Fellowship*, 1988, National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, Oak Creek, Wis., p. 48.
4. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 499.
5. The denomination of my church is Congregational, we are affiliated with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and the Wisconsin Congregational Association.
6. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
7. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

Back to the Future

Fifth in NACCC Fortieth Anniversary Series

To Be or Not to Be?

Religious Mainstream is Denominational



□ by the Rev. Steven H. Ware Bailey
Chairman, NACCC
Division for Ministry



The Rev. Steven H. Ware Bailey, minister of the Bushnell Congregational Church, Detroit, Michigan, annually conducts the Boston seminar on Congregational history and polity for students in the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies program.

To be or not to be a denomination is a question many Congregationalists have been asking themselves lately. What must be realized, however, is that this question is by no means a new one. It has been raised before, and Congregationalists' responses have been critical in terms of the success or failure of Congregationalism in adapting to changing circumstances and in relating to the mainstream of American culture.

Denominationalism as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Throughout most of the nearly two millennia of Christian history denominationalism as currently understood has been completely unknown. From the time of Constantine, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christians have identified themselves either as members of the established church, which included the vast majority of the people, or as dissenters, consisting of minority sectarian groups who were generally persecuted, rather than tolerated, by the majority.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformation did little to alter this pattern of church life except to increase the variety of established, state-supported churches, for the majority of Protestants continued to embrace the concept

of religious establishments. Following the schism in Western Christendom, in southern Europe one was either a member of the established Roman Catholic Church or one was a dissenter, while in northern Europe one was either a member of the local Protestant establishment (be it Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican) or one was a dissenter.

The Congregationalist Puritans who settled in North America and dominated the culture of colonial New England replicated the traditional pattern of religious establishments. They set up their churches as the religious bodies to be officially recognized by the state and to be financially supported by public taxation. In the early years religious groups other than Congregationalists were persecuted as dissenters, and in later years, when those outside the establishment were begrudgingly tolerated rather than persecuted, non-Congregationalists continued to be considered dissenters. These

The delay in adopting a genuine sense of denominational consciousness was costly for Congregationalists.

Congregational establishments of religion persisted in New England even after the American Revolution and lasted well into the nineteenth century. The last Congregational establishment to be toppled was that of Massachusetts in 1833.

Meanwhile, the North American colonies and later independent states were on the whole becoming religiously pluralistic societies. The middle colonies especially had religious diversity almost from the beginning so that no single group was able successfully to maintain a religious establishment. And in the south, where the Anglican Church had been nominally established, the presence of large numbers of dissenters (mostly Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists) made it difficult to sustain religious establishments, which soon gave way to the principle of official religious freedom and toleration for all groups.

These policies of religious freedom and toleration created a milieu in which all religious groups existed on a par with one another and were free to compete with each other on equal terms. These conditions of freedom and equality for all religious bodies opened the door to what is known as modern denominationalism, in which there is no established church and each religious group sees itself as one denomination of Christians among others.

In New England this new denominational consciousness was slow to take hold. Following disestablishment the dissenters, especially the Baptists and Methodists, were happy to regard themselves as denominations fairly and legally vying for their share of the religious market. But the Congregationalists (along with the Unitarians of Eastern Massachusetts) continued for the most part to regard themselves as a kind of privileged establishment, the legitimate and respectable ecclesiastical heirs of the revered founders of New England.

The result of this attitude among

Congregationalists was that they were reluctant to view themselves as equals among other religious groups, and so they saw little need to stoop to the level of competing with "inferiors." Clinging to the nostalgia of established privilege, Congregationalists were slow to develop a sense of denominational consciousness. Their failure to embrace a strong sense of denominational identity retarded their ability to compete successfully with other religious groups as Americans moved west. And it really was not until the Albany Convention of 1852, when the Plan of Union with the Presbyterians was officially abrogated, that Congregationalists began to develop a national sense of denominational consciousness.

This delay in adopting a genuine sense of denominational consciousness was costly for Congregationalists. While New England Congregationalists languished in an anachro-

healthy sense of denominational consciousness and eventually set out to proselytize the West, they might have all but disappeared from the religious map of America.

And today there are those who would have Congregationalists once again eschew consciousness as a denomination. But this time, rather than choosing to think of themselves as a kind of quasi-establishment instead of a denomination, Congregationalists are asked to think of themselves as an association instead of a denomination. But the ecclesiastical climate of contemporary American religious culture is that of denominationalism. There are no establishments anymore. The mainstream of American religion consists of denominations. Groups who refuse to be recognized as parts of the denominational structure of the American religious landscape in effect remove themselves from the mainstream of

American religion altogether. Such groups are viewed as outsiders and are categorized as sects regardless of whether or not they call themselves associations.

From establishment to denomination to sect is not the sequence of historical development that should appeal to modern Congregationalists. But it will become reality if Congregationalists separate themselves from the mainstream of American denominational life. Congregationalists were once reluctant to call themselves a denomination, and they paid a considerable price for that reluctance. Today Congregationalists are being called to disassociate themselves from the denominational structure of American religious culture, and if they do so they will once again pay a considerable price.

"To be or not to be a denomination?" is a question that Congregationalists must answer in the affirmative if they wish to continue as respected members of a religious culture to which they have already contributed so much. ■

The ecclesiastical climate of contemporary American religious culture is that of denominationalism.

nistic sense of ecclesiastical elitism, America was turning increasingly Baptist and Methodist, two groups whose sense of denominational identity and religious competitiveness was especially strong. From being the largest religious group in America at the time of independence from England, Congregationalists shrank back to a decided minority status as they were numerically outstripped by several other religious groups. Had Congregationalists not finally acquired a