

**Towards a Ministry of Accountability:
Why we should credential ministers
and why we are afraid of it**

by Rev. Samuel Schaal
Associate Minister for Pastoral Care and Spiritual Formation
First Congregational Church
Wauwatosa, WI

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In November 1996 I sit in a hotel ballroom anteroom in Berkeley, California, waiting anxiously. My name is called. I stand, walk to the door, and enter the small room. There are eight people sitting in a circle, in front of a podium. There is one empty chair; that is my seat, but I am first to preach to this small congregation of four clergy and four laypeople. Each of them have a large file of papers in their laps. It is a file about me, containing the results of psychological testing; evaluations of my hospital chaplaincy; letters from laypeople and ministers who have observed my student ministries, academic records, and my own essays on my understanding of the task of theology and ministry. They know me intimately. I do not, largely, know them at all.

They are the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association. They will examine me and determine if I am ready for ministry, or if I need to prepare myself further, or if I just do not have the gift of ministry, in their eyes. This is the culminating experience of years of preparation. I have got to convince these eight strangers that I have what it takes to be a minister.

I preach my sermon. I sit and answer their questions and we engage in a vibrant dialogue about ministry. After about an hour, we are through. I am invited to excuse myself while they talk about me. I wait. They call me back. I have a “one.” I’m in the club. I have made it.

Now settled in a Congregational Christian church, I am surprised to see that my experience of proving myself, of having to defend my intellectual preparation for ministry and prove my skills in the practice of ministry—that this is not the experience of new candidates coming in to our churches. I attend Vicinage Councils and see that, though grounded in our tradition and a good model of the lateral relationships between sister churches, they do little to really test fitness for ministry. I hear comments from colleagues: “We don’t need a gatekeeper!”

And so in this paper I ask the questions: How can we reasonably assure congregations that a person has been tested to practice ministry well? What process might work? Who does this? Why should we do it?

I begin by summarizing the process of ministerial preparation and credentialing among the three major institutional branches of American congregational heritage: The United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. The UCC and UUA were each in their earlier histories completely congregational. Though their congregational practice was diluted by mergers with non-congregational traditions, it might be instructive for us to understand how they credential and how our process looks compared to them, then draw some conclusions about the process. I will also look into Congregational history to suggest a credentialing model and contemporary NACCC history to suggest how we have lost part of our history regarding this subject.

By “credentialing,” I mean the process of determining if a ministerial candidate’s training, experience and orientation are sufficient to meet the demands of ministry. It is sometimes called “accreditation.” Merriam-Webster defines credential as “something that gives a basis for credit or confidence.” So the foundation of ministerial credentialing is instilling confidence in the office of minister.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) model of credentialing

The UCC’s *Manual on Ministry*¹ is a detailed document outlining the procedures regarding preparation for and authorization of various ministries within the denomination. The processes identified in the manual helps the church “identify roles for itself in recognizing the call to specific forms of ministry to which members believe themselves to be called. Among those roles are helping persons clarify for themselves the nature of their call, guiding and supporting them as they prepare to respond faithfully and effectively to that call, examining them to determine their fitness for a particular ministry, reviewing them and their setting for ministry, and disciplining them when necessary.”²

According to the UCC constitution, all members are ministers, and it is recognized that “God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the Church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required by the Church.”³ It defines those ecclesiastical ministries as ordained, commissioned and licensed. In this paper, I am focusing on the ordained ministries and specifically a non-ordained person preparing for ordained ministry.

Here is the outline of the process from call to settlement:

1. Once a layperson feels a call from God, he or she seeks the recommendation of the local congregation to be “In-Care.”
2. The local church asks the local UCC association (i.e., in this area it would be the Southeast Wisconsin association) for affirmation of the candidate. The association committee (called by various names; in this area it is called the “Church and Ministry Division”) speaks to the local church and decides to proceed or not.

¹ <http://www.ucc.org/ministers/manual>

² Manual, Section 1 of 10, “Partners in Authorizing Ministry, 1.

³ Ibid., 1.

3. The student in care is given the requirements to complete before the ordination examination. A mentor is often assigned to the student to assist in the preparation of these requirements.
4. The candidate submits these materials to the association committee:
 - a. an ordination paper
 - b. sermon
 - c. verification of membership in a local UCC congregation
 - d. verification of in-care relationship
 - e. certification of education and training: a bachelor's degree; a master of divinity degree from an approved seminary; one unit of Clinical Pastoral Experience (CPE), documentation of career assessment data (results of psychological and interest profiling completed by a testing and counseling center chosen by the UCC) ; letters of reference; a ministerial profile completed by the candidate; and a statement that the candidate is seeking a call.
5. The association committee examines the candidate in person. If the committee is satisfied that the candidate meets requirements, it recommends the candidate for ordination.
6. The association committee arranges for an association ecclesiastical council of lay and ordained members. At the council, the candidate presents his or her commitment to ministry and preparation for ministry. If the council approves, the candidate is cleared for ordination, once there is a call.

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) model of credentialing

According to the bylaws of the UUA, the local church has complete freedom to call and ordain who they wish, and the UUA determines issues of ministerial fellowship:

Section C-11.1 Ministerial Fellowship.

Each member society has the exclusive right to call and ordain its own minister or ministers, but the Association has the exclusive right to admit ministers to ministerial fellowship with the Association.⁴

Here is the process from call to settlement:

1. Once a layperson feels called to ministry, he or she contacts a local Regional Sub-Committee on Candidacy (RSCC) announcing intent to pursue ministry. The inquirer certifies that he or she has had an interview with a minister and field staff member, an essay on ministerial aspirations and biography, and information on acceptance to a theological school if that has yet occurred. This places the person in "Aspirant Status."⁵

To move to "Candidate Status" a person must:

2. Complete a career assessment program from an agency approved by the UUA.
3. Complete at least one year of theological education.
4. Agree in writing to: abide by the Rules and Policies of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and not accept any ministerial position other than internships and

⁴ <http://www.uua.org/programs/ministry/mfc/bylaws>

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/programs/ministry/credentialing/preparation/prepstage>

student ministries unless approved by the Ministerial Credentialing Director.

5. Be interviewed and approved for Candidate Status by the RSCC.

Once in candidate status a person:

6. Obtains the sponsorship of a UU congregation.
7. Pursues: a master of divinity degree from an approved institution; an internship equivalent to at least six months of full-time on-site work in an approved church; one basic unit of CPE; and completion of a reading list of core Unitarian Universalist history, polity and practice.
8. Meets with the MFC in one of three locations across the nation, in a process I described in the introduction of this paper. If the MFC determines the candidate is prepared, the candidate is released for ordination at the local church.⁶ The local church is the only ordaining body.

The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) model of credentialing

Our own branch of Congregationalism has attempted to hew much closer to historic Congregationalist practice—in virtually all matters of ecclesiology as well as in the question of the training and credentialing of ministers. We, in fact, have termed ourselves the “Continuing Congregationalists” as we are the only body (excepting of course the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference⁷) who have kept most closely to what we have thought was historic Congregationalism.

The bylaws of the NACCC allow the national association to maintain lists of those in NA churches who have ministerial standing in the local church. The bylaws are clear that this does not constitute authority on ministerial standing: “The presence or absence of the name of a pastor or minister on this list shall not be construed as either conferring or denying ministerial standing. This record is merely a list of pastors and ministers of the member Churches of the National Association.”⁸ The final sentence of Article IX, Section 2 succinctly describes the credentialing process of the NACCC:

“The Association makes no representations as to the fitness or appropriateness of any minister or any member Church.”⁹

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/programs/ministry/credentialing/preparation/requirements>

⁷ In this paper I have concentrated on the three mainline or mainstream bodies of Congregational heritage since that culture most closely aligns with NACCC culture. There is of course the issue of whether the UUA is mainstream or not given their broad theological diversity far beyond Christianity, but the UUA has designed their processes and programs in concert with the Christian mainstream. The CCCC, however, is fodder for future research.

⁸ Article IX, Section 2: http://www.naccc.org/About_NACCC/Articles_Bylaws/Bylaws_of_Assoc

⁹ NACCC bylaws. Also consider these the bylaw in Article IX, Section 4: “The National Association has no power to ordain, censure, or depose a minister, or to sit as a council of reference in such cases.”

So we have no credentialing model. However, we do have a process to guide those called to ministry and we do have suggestions on what education and training are required for Congregational ministry.

A beginning statement is found on the NACCC website: “Congregationalism has a long honored tradition of an educated clergy. Seminary training at an accredited institution is the preferred way for ministerial candidates to receive such an education.”¹⁰

So seminary is only preferred, not required, even given our “honored tradition” of education. That page of the website also tells us of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies (CFTS), “a program of support, both academic and financial, for those wishing to serve NACCC member churches through ordained ministry.”¹¹

CFTS is not required for NACCC clergy hopefuls, but most new candidates for ministry come through the program. (One colleague estimated that four out of five new ministers come through CFTS.) So perhaps the best way of defining the requirements and process for a person seeking ordained status in our tradition is to summarize CFTS requirements (though it must be remembered that they are not necessarily the same). They are:

1. Complete study in Congregational history and polity at the Boston Seminar.
2. Attend CFTS fall seminars.
3. Maintain at least halftime student status and at least a 3.0 grade average (on a 4.0 scale).
4. Submit a transcript of each term’s work to the CFTS dean, who is an executive of the NACCC administrative staff.
5. Complete an internship of at least 1,000 hours in a setting approved by CFTS (and not done in the student’s home church). One unit of CPE may count towards half this requirement.
6. Seek a call in a member church of the NACCC.
7. Complete a bachelor’s degree before entering the program.¹²

Further, CFTS prefers that a candidate is sponsored by a local church. Most candidates are, though in the past some students have been recruited from other denominations while they were in seminary and admitted to CFTS.

Finally, the CFTS board has approved a new requirement to have CFTS students complete a “Readiness for Ministry Exam” that contains three components: a psychological profile (conducted by a third party as yet undetermined); a gifts and talents test, and an examination of Biblical literacy. The results of this test will be the property of the student. So it wouldn’t be kept on file at CFTS, but a call committee might know of this document and ask the candidate about it.

Ministerial candidates are then ready for ordination at the level of the local church, the only ordaining body. It is becoming more common to call a Vicinage Council where clergy and lay

¹⁰ http://www.naccc.org/DFM/Ministerial_Training.htm

¹¹ http://www.naccc.org/DFM/Ministerial_Training.htm

¹² “Affirmation Upon Being Invited for an Interview as an Applicant as a Student of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies,” paper from the CFTS office of the NACCC.

representatives of local Congregational churches gather to ask questions of the candidate, though it is not a requirement for ordination.

Differences and similarities

The UCC and the UUA each *require*, and the NACCC *prefers*, the same essential preparation up to ordination:

- A master of divinity degree
- Studying the history, polity and practice of the faith tradition
- Sponsorship of a local church
- Experience in an internship and CPE
- Career counseling (i.e., psychological) testing (Note: this is approved for use in the NACCC, but not yet implemented)
- Expression of an understanding of ministry

So the only significant difference between the NACCC and its (historically) congregational cousins is the difference in *required* and *preferred*—that is, a way of certifying that all education and training for ministry have been completed and that the candidate exhibits reasonably good gifts of ministry. The UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee and the UCC's Association Council each act as credentialing bodies to ensure that a candidate has completed requirements and displays the gifts and fitness for ministry. We have no credentialing mechanism.

So, is there a problem with our system, or lack of it? Why should we test fitness for ministry?

Problems with the lack of ministerial credentialing

Currently there are only two places in our fellowship where a candidate's fitness for ministry might be tested: CFTS and the Vicinage Council.

CFTS is encouraged but not required for candidates, so one can be ordained without it. Further, even if a candidate has completed CFTS, there is not a structure for reporting (to the church's search committee or the Vicinage Council) the candidate's CFTS record. If the ordaining council asks, the dean of CFTS will respond with what he knows.

The Vicinage Council is a temporary body made up of whoever responds to the ordaining church's invitation. The council is an excellent tool for the local church to ask if sister churches will walk with that congregation to the ordination. It is an excellent tool for establishing and nurturing lateral church relations. It is an excellent tool for helping churches to celebrate the call of a new minister.

The Vicinage Council is not prepared to test for the gifts of ministry as is done in other traditions. As regards fitness for ministry, it can only judge the very top layer of a candidate's fitness. It does not have access to the records of the candidate:

- There are no common procedures for requiring that a candidate's academic record is shown, beyond a copy of the diploma.
- The Vicinage does not have access to the candidate's psychological testing records, if those tests have even been performed.
- The council is biased towards saying yes. They do not act as a dispassionate body whose mission is to help the candidate see the "growing edges" of his or her preparation.

(Lest we think other institutions are likely to take a critical look at candidates, consider: Local churches tend to want to "promote" their members to ministries and cannot always dispassionately judge a member of their own "family." Seminaries will admit those who have basic educational credentials and can pay tuition. CFTS is not required of all candidates for ordination. Only a credentialing body set up to take a critical look at a candidate will likely do so.)

What this means is that we have ministers with uneven academic and practical training. We have ordained ministers who do not have a master of divinity degree. No doubt some of these are fine ministers (while others are not) and I am not calling for their ouster, but we are a learned tradition and we are not living up to our heritage. We have ordained ministers who have little or no education or experience in Congregational heritage, polity and practice. We have ordained ministers who have little or no field experience beyond their local church (i.e., CPE and supervised internship). We have ordained ministers without testing their call.

More problematic is that we have no systematic way to prevent malpracticing individuals coming into the ministry. We have a system which is easier than most denominational systems for those who would take advantage of our congregations: pedophiles, those who have abused sexual boundaries, those who have practiced financial malfeasance.

While I have concentrated in this paper on the credentialing of non-ordained individuals, consider for the moment a previously ordained person transferring from another tradition into our fellowship. We provide an easy entrance to ministry for those ministers who have malpracticed in previous settings. Take the most common example (already in my one-year tenure I know of several): a married minister who has an affair with a married parishioner. Such a minister moves easily from congregation to congregation as search committees don't know how to do all the research needed and even if they do, the very nature of these situations makes it secretive and difficult to uncover. We accept incoming ministers with virtually no questions.

We know from congregational family systems theory (i.e., Murray, Bowen, Friedman) that an organism without clear boundaries is often attacked by parasites. Our ministry has unclear boundaries with minimal testing for ministerial fitness, and is a natural attraction of ministers who malpractice as well as ministers whose competence is compromised. Of course, the tightest system in the world will not protect a church from all ministerial malpractice. But our system is unusually susceptible to ministerial predators.

So we don't have a consistent system to test fitness for ministry and we have left that burden to the local church in our understanding of the autonomy of churches. But it was not always so.

Congregationalist credentialing

By mid-twentieth century, there was a broad understanding of Congregational practice regarding the training and credentialing of ministers. One such guide was Oscar Maurer's *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, written in response to the Executive Committee of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches' 1942 request to "formulate a standard Manual for the guidance of churches, associations, conferences, and ministers in usage and procedure."¹³

Maurer briefly cites the evolution of Congregational ordination from local ordination by the local church only, to the modern practice: "With the development of district associations of churches arose the practice of inviting to membership in the ordination council chiefly or solely members of the association to which the church calling the council belonged."¹⁴ He says ordination might occur at the levels of the local church, the area association or the state conference, but that the ordination occurs in the context of a definite vocational role: usually to the ministry of a local church, but also as "teacher, missionary or official of a religious organization."¹⁵ Note the role of the (district) association:

1. The candidate presents to the committee of the association charged with ministerial standing evidences of his qualifications as listed above. In addition to these, the committee shall require: (1) a written sermon (the committee may choose to hear the candidate preach in a natural situation); (2) a thorough written or oral examination which may include the general subject matter of his seminary course or may concern itself primarily with the candidate's insight into practice issues of a pastor's work, his ability to analyze actual problems, and his resourcefulness in meeting them; (3) an examination on Congregational Christian history and polity.
2. If satisfied with these evidences, the committee votes to recommend the candidate to the ordaining council. A record of this vote is sent to the sponsoring church, which requests the association to meet as a council for ordination, and to the registrar of the association.¹⁶

Going back a bit earlier, consider the standpoint of William E. Barton who wrote *The Law of Congregational Usage* in 1915. All the emphasis is mine:

Is a Diploma a Substitute for Examination? Candidates for the ministry should submit evidences of their scholarship, and particularly of their theological studies, but no diploma or certificate should be accepted as a substitute for *thorough examination* on the part of the churches themselves, *through their accredited representatives*.¹⁷

¹³ Oscar E. Maurer, *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches: A Compendium of Information, Forms and Services* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1947), iii.

¹⁴ Maurer, p. 107

¹⁵ Maurer, p. 107-8.

¹⁶ Maurer, p. 109.

¹⁷ William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage* (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1915), p. 291.

What is Ordination? Ordination is the official act of the *churches in fellowship*, setting apart a member of the church to a designated form of service. Ordination is commonly applied, and in Congregationalism almost wholly limited, to the work of the ministry...”¹⁸

Barton also wrote a manual on Congregational practice, first published in 1910 and revised many times, to codify virtually all aspects of life in the Congregational body. He gives clear descriptions of how Congregationalists of that era organized themselves in local churches, district associations and state conferences and mentions how both the association might act in council. He mentions the historical precedence of having the district association perform ordinations, while saying in the very next article that “no association has any authority over any church...but the associations have come to be the instrument for the expression of the need which the churches feel for fellowship and orderly administration.”¹⁹

Charles Sumner Nash was explicit about ordination being more than just the concern of the local church. In 1909 he wrote:

We should also cease to claim for the local church the exclusive right to ordain. That belongs with the pastoral, not with the Kingdom theory of the ministry. The right of every church to invite any man to officiate as its pastor is not to be denied, nor its right to call a council or ordain a candidate. The Congregational churches may, indeed, prefer to retain this method of getting at the ordination of new men. But let us discharge our minds of the fiction that the meaning of this method is that ordination is the prerogative of a single church, a sacred part of its wonderful autonomy, while the cooperation of other churches in ordination is social courtesy and a good display of church fraternity. It is time to hold and practice the larger idea that the Congregational church – Congregational churches, if the phrase is preferred—provides itself, or themselves, with a ministry. The ordination of a candidate is the act of the Church at large, performed by the churches of a Vicinage acting coordinately and presenting not a single church but the denomination.²⁰

Nash goes on to say how this sounds heretical and nuances how the association of churches must have a say in who is ordained, though the local church may continue to ordain anyone it chooses. The question is whether that ordination is “for temporary services in its own pulpit”²¹ (i.e., local ordination) or wider ordination in our fellowship of churches. In my mind, the question is between individual autonomy and communal relationship. Whether or not we agree with Nash on ordination specifics, he points to our need to work as a community in determining who will be fit (credentialed) to serve as a candidate for ministry in our local churches.

I am not arguing for associational ordination. But there is clear historical precedence in our fellowship to empower bodies beyond the local church to attend to those issues that affect the

¹⁸ Barton, p. 209

¹⁹ William E. Barton, *Congregational Manual and Rules of Order* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1927), p. 128.

²⁰ Charles Sumner Nash, *Congregational Administration* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), pp. 66-67.

²¹ Nash, p. 68

larger fellowship of churches. So we might ask, is determining fitness for ministry a concern of merely the local church, or the larger fellowship of churches?

Associational credentialing

In early Puritan and Congregational history, ordination was at the local level and one was re-ordained at each settlement. This system did not last long and we shifted to a system of “once ordained, always ordained.” This system is the dominant system used by virtually all Protestant bodies. The previous system worked all right when ministers tended to stay at one church during their lifetimes. In our current world, modern life is such that ministers have many settlements during their career and so a system that ensures that credentials can travel makes sense. It has been said among us that one way out of this is to return to the local ordination at each settlement, but this would make our system even more of a lone ranger system, would not solve our problems of encouraging healthy ministry (which is the positive way of saying how to weed out malpracticing ministers) and would be completely out of step with the wider Christian world. And, perhaps most notably, it would diminish the act of ordination since it would be seen as “merely” a local ordination. Finally, it would be even more severe evidence that we choose independency over relationship and that we follow a perverse form of Congregationalism.

Steven Peay says that though we think we are acting as continuing Congregationalists, our national structure has actually created a new form of Congregationalism. He recalls Douglas Horton’s articulation of “Congregationalism B” where organizations within the fellowship of the former General Council of Congregational Christian Churches (such as the General Council itself as well as other groups and committees) operate in a similar manner to the local church, free to operate as they will and controlled only by their own members. What Horton termed Congregationalism A was the historical Congregationalist ecclesiology that affirmed the autonomy of the local church in relationship with other churches at the regional (association), state (conference) and national (General Council) levels. In Congregationalism A, these associations, conferences and councils are controlled by local churches.

Peay says that as the merger became imminent, the churches that later formed the NACCC feared that having any ecclesiastical structures might hurt the lawsuits then in motion:

When it became clear that the merger movement was going to proceed, those dedicated to the continuation of Congregational polity assembled first at the Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit, Michigan (1955) and then at the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (1956) to form what became the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. While it was clearly the intention of these dedicated people to preserve the classical way of the Congregational Churches, the result of their effort was yet a third way, Congregationalism C, if you will.

Part of the difficulty, or so it seems, is that the structure of the NACCC was devised within the extant structure of the Congregational Christian Churches. Its design was as an association of churches to promote the Way as it then existed. Those present at the Wauwatosa meeting were warned by Reverend Malcolm Burton that setting up parallel

ecclesiastical machinery would jeopardize future lawsuits. Reverend Harry Johnson, the first executive secretary, supported Burton by pointing out that by such action the “Continuists” would lose “our legal status as Congregationalists” and would forfeit “all possibility of our own legal defense.” However, when the merger proceeded and the United Church of Christ was formed, there was no accommodation of the polity structures into the already extant NACCC.

Where Congregationalism B extended fellowship to the point that it destroyed the distinctive Congregational understanding of local church autonomy, Congregationalism C has extended the freedom of the local church to the point of damaging the necessary fellowship implicit in the Congregational tradition.²²

So our present structure was created in part out of fear that we would lose the lawsuits, which we lost anyway. We are stuck in a time warp.

Consider also the comments of John Claxton, the Associate Executive Secretary for Ministry of the NACCC as reported in the minutes of the annual meeting in June 1966:

Citing the dangers of “a church acting too quickly and without proper investigation in calling a minister who is unknown to them, and frequently one of whom your Pastoral Relations office has never heard,” Dr. Claxton stressed that “the time to get information about a minister is before the man is called—not afterward.

“I feel impelled to return to an emphasis I made a year ago,” he continued. “I refer to the necessity of having the cooperation of our associations at the point of establishing a man’s fitness for and standing in, our ministry. Occasionally I hear comments from within our Fellowship as to the dangers of centralization. But tell me how your National Office can do its work meeting the needs of our Churches and ministers, unless each association is performing its necessary functions with respect to this area of our adventure. And some of your associations are not yet doing this as it needs to be done. (Underlining in original.) Let me illustrate:

“Our office is responsible for certifying ministers to all branches of the Military Chaplaincy. When a minister of whom I may know little or nothing applies to Chaplaincy acceptance ... I naturally turn for assistance to his brother ministers in the association to which he might be expected to belong. If I do not get assistance promptly, the minister in question is displeased ... our whole N.A. image suffers.”²³

Claxton made these comments in the context of a larger than normal influx of new ministers coming into the NACCC from other traditions, with few processes in place to ensure that they were good ministers. Interestingly, I am told that at this annual meeting is when the bylaw I earlier quoted (Article IX, Section 2) was voted into the national bylaws.

²² Steven A. Peay, *Beyond Congregationalism C: A Study of Ecclesiological Evolution*, presented to the Derry, N.H. Symposium, Nov. 2000. Online at http://www.naccc.org/Cong_Way_Series/Derry%20Symposium/Derry_Sym_Page_6.htm

²³ Minutes of the June 28-30, 1966, annual meeting of the NACCC, from archives of the NACCC offices.

There was so much concern at the time of merger for autonomy that we codified fear of national authority and we forgot our history of regional, or associational, cooperation in matters that affected all churches and *the credentialing of ministers is at the top of that list of concerns, or should be*.

So even in early NACCC history there were voices worried about credentialing, while we were busy passing bylaws to stop credentialing. That leaves us with a structure that is still fighting the Civil War.

Disorders in the kingdom

The UCC merger was a long, bitter, bloody, hurtful struggle. The blurb from the dustjacket of Malcolm Burton's historical account of that struggle, *Disorders in the Kingdom*, suggests our emotional response to the difficult merger years: "The merger was the product of manipulation, misleading assurances, and frequent cover-ups."²⁴ We in the NACCC walked away from that experience limping. And in the initial structure of the emerging NACCC, that emotional reaction played out in material ways.

Out of that experience we have learned to be independent. Out of that experience we have learned to distrust authority. Though increasing numbers of us came into the NACCC after, even long after, those bloody years, the systems and culture (both formal and informal, explicit and hidden) of our fellowship have been marked primarily by independency.

So our response in the emotional context of our fellowship has been to not trust authority, and at times to not trust each other. The bylaws of our fellowship, in the section earlier quoted regarding "Standing and Ordination" show this fear of authority in spades. Interestingly, there is no language in our bylaws about ministry, no language about the leadership of Christ. In the Articles of Association, concern for freedom and fear of compulsion color the preamble, invoking "freedom" before invoking "Christian" and "Christ."²⁵

Even though the merger wars are now 50 years old and on the local level we frequently enjoy good relations with our UCC colleagues, we are operating in a system marked by fear, independency, by a fetish for freedom above all else.

There *are* disorders and they are in *our* kingdom. We ourselves have become disordered—dissected from our historic order. Fear, not faith, has guided our thinking about ministerial credentialing (as well as a host of other issues).

Christ as gatekeeper

²⁴ Malcolm K. Burton, *Disorders in the Kingdom* (New York: Vantage Press, 1982), dustjacket flap.

²⁵ http://www.naccc.org/About_NACCC/Articles_Bylaws/Articles_of_Assoc.htm

One might say that Christ should be the gatekeeper of our ministry. Indeed, that is so. Jesus Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 5:23b) and should have first place in this issue as in all things. So what can we theologically say about Jesus Christ as the true gatekeeper of our ministry?

Jesus Christ does not work ethereally in the world. Jesus Christ is not a disembodied spirit who works outside the incarnational realm. The Christian Way is an incarnational way, for we dare to share the experience of God become human. We are the Body of Christ and Christ works among us. Christ mediates our human lives. To say we should not be concerned with determining fitness for ministry because it is too political, because we have to encounter the messiness of human community, because we know that bodies of human beings are prone to sin and error and so therefore, we shouldn't allow our brothers and sisters in faith to hold each other accountable as regards fitness for ministry, is to deny the incarnation among us. As regards determining fitness for ministry, we have, indeed, become dis-incarnated.

And if we are afraid of holding each other accountable in fitness for ministry, why have even any requirements for ministry, if Jesus Christ, working not through the human creation, is actually controlling all of this? If this is the case, we can be assured that a person hearing the call of God is really hearing the call of God and not the narcissistic call of the human ego. We can be assured that God will give that person all the tools he or she needs in ministry and just save all that graduate school tuition. Should we, then, trust whoever says they hear the call of God and not test that call? Is this the way God works in our classical understanding?

It might be said that the local church *is* the Body of Christ and the local church through its calling process and Vicinage Council (if there is a council—it's not required) provides an incarnational model. While the local church is the Body of Christ, it does not exist independent of other churches. Such a church may be a church but it is not a *Congregational* church. From the Cambridge Platform onward, our history is explicit that, especially in matters that affect the broader fellowship of churches, the churches exist in relationship to each other.

Towards a credentialing model

I have tried to establish:

- How other bodies of American congregational tradition have approached the issue of ministerial credentialing.
- The weakness in our process.
- That we need some method to test fitness for ministry so that ministers are held accountable to the practice of healthy ministry.
- That in our history up to the UCC merger, we had such a model.
- And that in our fear of authority following the difficulties of the merger we dropped credentialing, all the while proclaiming we were continuing Congregationalist tradition while we had really invented a new kind of Congregationalism.

Where to go from here? I would suggest the following as a beginning:

- Regional associations create credentialing committees composed of lay and clergy leaders from that district/state whose purpose is to ensure that candidates (including ministers transferring in) have meet all educational and training requirements.
- Standing should be held in regional associations and the credentialing committee could oversee the process.²⁶
- That our national office provide resources and guidelines for these structures and provide *active and proactive* nurturing and leadership in helping to create vital regional associations. (This would hold much promise far beyond credentialing. One of the things perverting our sense of wider community is our lack of consistent regional structures and processes beyond local churches.)
- That in areas where our churches are less populous, there be some sort of associational structure created that would work.
- That the tradition continue that only local churches may ordain. A local church may ordain anyone of its choosing. The regional associations determine who is to be fellowshipped. If a church ordains someone not properly credentialed, that ordination is automatically a local ordination and the credentials do not travel beyond that congregation.
- That previous ordinations, even those whose candidates did not meet all the requirements, be grandfathered in.
- That we create resources and programs to train and license lay leaders and lay ministers. This recognizes that some small churches may not be able to retain a fully credentialed, ordained minister, and encourages the gifts of those in our churches.

Finally I would ask: What is the purpose of our ministries? To provide a free-range venue where we can do what we want with no accountability, or to be concerned to protect and nurture God's flock, the gathered people of God in our churches, the Body of Christ?

As regards the issue of maintaining the quality of our ordained ministries, for 50 years we have *not* been Continuing Congregationalists, but instead we have been *Frontier Congregationalists* and we cannot minister to a 21st century people without a strong, able, educated and empowered ministry. To do that, we must test for fitness of ministry.

We must move our ministries from independency to relationship.

²⁶ Prior to the merger, it was common for a minister's standing to be held in regional associations. After the merger, standing was usually held in the local church. As with credentialing, ministerial standing is a concern of the wider community of churches. Standing could be said to be the ongoing credentialing of the ordained minister since part of the process of standing should be the power to discipline the minister when the minister malpractices. In both the UCC and UUA models, the credentialing bodies also determine ongoing fitness for ministry if problems develop. Steven Peay has earlier argued for standing to be held in regional associations in "And the gifts were that some should be...pastors and teachers: A Consideration of the Ministerial Office and 'Standing' in Light of Congregational Ecclesiology," a paper presented to the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society, Sept. 16, 1999.