



Principles and Practices:
The Congregational Way of the Churches of the National Association
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Introduction

Churches which find themselves exploring the possibility of establishing a new ecclesiastical relationship or establishing such a relationship for the first time, will want to know something about the church bodies with which they might affiliate. The purpose of this primer is to broadly outline the forms of church organization (church "polity") and then to say some very specific things about how one of those polities is observed among the Churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

Once the polities are set forth and their distinctions made clear, it should be apparent what form most closely resembles the one you know. History has shown that most polities, in practice, flow from their pure expression either in the direction of authoritarianism or independency - or both. So it should not be surprising if you discover that your Church has characteristics of two or more of the basic systems. The first question to be asked is, "Which polity would be most beneficial in opening my Church to the will and presence of God?" Or, on the personal level, "In what form of Church organization can I best meet God?"

A Comment on Church Organization

A form of organization which came into being very early in Church history is one we call episcopal. In an episcopal church body, the authority rests with bishops (from the Greek episcopos) who derive their authority from being ordained by predecessor bishops (traditionally in unbroken chain to the Apostle Peter). As direct ecclesiastical descendants of St. Peter, they carry that same measure of authority. It is exercised in the formulation of creeds, the ordination and placement of clergy, the opening and closing of churches, and other matters. Each local congregation is part of the larger Church and subject to its authority. Some observers suggest that when there is one bishop who can exercise authority over all the other bishops, the polity should more accurately be called monarchical.

Since the rapid growth and development of the Christian Church took place in the context of the Roman Empire, it is not surprising that a major portion of Christendom, to this day, observes a polity which parallels the Roman government. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century led to a weakening of the power of the episcopacy in some places so that, today, the range of episcopally ordered churches extends from the nearly monarchical position of the Roman Catholic Church, through such denominations as the Episcopalians and Methodists, to the loosely episcopal forms of some contemporary Lutheran bodies.

Another of the great polities is also identified by a word from the New Testament: presbyterian (from the Greek presbuteros, or "elder"). In this form of church government, the building of authority begins within the local congregation. The congregation selects a group of "elders" who have broad authority over the affairs of that congregation. It is from the elders that representatives are drawn who move to ever higher levels of authority (regional, state, national). In each instance, the "representative" body exercises authority over the inferior units. Ultimately, it is in some national or international body where the authority rests for the development of creedal statements, church priorities, and at least de facto control of the properties and monies of the churches. The training, ordination, and placement of clergy is sometimes relegated to a subordinate authority but remains outside the realm of the local church.

The modern history of presbyterian churches begins at the time of the Reformation when Protestant reformers sought relief from the abusive power of the ancient hierarchy but remained convinced that "order" required the retention of some authoritarian structure. Presbyterially ordered churches look to the higher bodies to guard against the excesses of independency. As also in the episcopal churches, clergy are not members of the local congregation but "belong" to some higher body; while each congregation represents one unit of the larger whole.

The remaining great polity receives its name from its only unit of ecclesiastical authority, congregational. In this form of church government, there is no authority outside the local church except for Christ himself. The Church (local congregation) is complete within itself and fully capable of determining all matters including the details of its statement of faith, the selection and (if needed) the ordination of its clergy, and the stewardship of its own properties and resources.

In the classical expression of American Congregationalism, this self-government (autonomy) has not been without ecclesiastical relationships. Churches of the congregational order have joined in voluntary fellowship with other Congregational Churches. Within that fellowship there is the practice of seeking and giving advice; seeking and giving support. A fellowship (or Association) of Churches has no authority over any Church.

The purpose of this presentation is to set before you the ways in which congregationalism expresses itself in the Church and through the structure of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

Fundamental Principles

Simplicity, sincerity, and service are some of the fundamentals which provide the dynamics of the Congregational Way. But all is built upon the foundation provided by the following three foci, which are interrelated:

A. Christ is the head of the Church

To say what is so obviously self-evident is to respond, as our Pilgrim parents, when they said that neither King, Pope, nor Archbishop is the head of the Church. But it is also to affirm that no connectional judicatory is to be ranked above the local Church, for here is where Christ has promised to be present "whenever two or three gather in His name." We are unapologetic in our emphasis on the local Church for such a community of faith is complete under God in both spiritual authority and ecclesiastical power. Congregationalism is a way of church life (or form of church polity) that rejoices in the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth in whom and through whom God is "reconciling the world." It is this emphasis on the autonomy of the local Church under the Lordship of Christ which provides that special dynamic we call Congregationalism.

B. A gathered fellowship of believers is the Church

For the English Separatist, the Church was a voluntary company of Christians, made up only of believers; united by a mutual covenant to walk in the ways of the Lord, known or to be made known to them; meeting for worship regularly in the same location; and endeavoring

to follow the teachings of Christ, demonstrated in love toward God and neighbor. Our polity is not a matter of mere organization but also a matter of spirit and life. We affirm the New Testament definition of the church complete in its local manifestations as a gathered fellowship of Christ-followers. Ours is a way that seeks to bring together persons of independent mind and heart who, by both profession and life, are attempting to translate the teachings of Scripture into action, as disciples of the Master. In that context and with equality, respect for diversity, and individual responsibility, we endeavor to become a "family of families," and beloved community of encouragement and service to others. For us there is no Church other than the local Church.

C. The Church in fellowship with other like-minded Churches

Our understanding of the New testament Churches is that they entered into fellowship with one another out of mutual respect. At no point do we find the Churches relating to each other out of dominance or submission. For us, the freedom of the local Church must always be linked to fellowship with other Churches in our way - whether for worship, outreach, or the offering of counsel. It is this voluntary fellowship that marks the difference between Congregationalism and independency. Local autonomy must always be combined with fellowship born of love, not law, as the foundation for cooperative activity. In this way we are enabled to avoid the limitations of a sterile independency as we meet together for communion, edification, and helpfulness. We regard such mutual and voluntary fellowship as vital to the Congregational Way. To be involved in the wider fellowship of churches, whether it be local, state, or national association, does not make a Church more a Church; but lack of fellowship certainly can make it less than it could be.

Covenant, not Creed

Churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches are never bound to subscribe to a statement of faith drafted by a national (or international) body. There is strong New Testament support for the conviction that we, as disciples, are called to belief "in" Christ and not to subscription to any particular list of things "about" Christ.

It is in the prayerful seeking of Christ's will and the ongoing exploration of Holy Scripture that we discover authenticity, perspective, and understanding. Lacking a national catechism, it is not surprising that there is a wide spectrum of theological position among Congregationalists. This variety has served us well as we work together, from our varying perspectives, to discover new light coming from God's Holy Word.

Since we are bound neither by ecclesiastical structure nor by creedal profession, what is it that identifies the Churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches? Each Church is a group of Christians who regularly meet and worship together and who are bound to one another by a covenant. The words of the covenant may be borrowed from an historic Congregational Church or may be original to that particular congregation. The covenant may be very brief or somewhat expansive. In any event, the covenant of the Church is the promise of the members to "walk together" in seeking to learn and to do the will of Christ. We make a promise to one another and to God that we will be mutually supportive in all of life's contingencies, that we will work together to serve God in our time and place, and that this mutuality is what calls our Church into being and gives it legitimacy.

Some Churches elect to use one or more of the historic creeds as an expression of their common faith. Some Churches have included a "statement of faith" in their constitutions. Even when that is the case, the details of those creeds or statements are but reflections of what the members of that congregation believe and are neither binding on the other Churches nor stand as "tests of faith" for those desiring to unite in covenant. The recent 150 years or so of Congregational history have embraced a high regard for individual conscience within the framework of the Church's covenant.

The Sacraments

Following the Protestant tradition, Congregational Churches observe two sacraments:

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

While most of our Churches practice the baptism of infants (usually anticipating a Covenant Class for early teens), the tradition of believer baptism is honored among us and may be the rule for individual Churches or certain families within a Church. Similarly, while "sprinkling" is the most common form of baptism, pouring and immersion are not unknown. Each Church will make its own determination as to the time and form. All agree that this sacrament "signifying an invisible grace" is the rite of admission to the Church of Christ.

The Lord's Supper (which may also be called Communion) is most often observed in Congregational Churches as a remembrance. Through the reenactment of Jesus' last supper we are drawn again into the reality of what God is doing through the Christ. As we come "remembering," we are restored and strengthened. It is our common practice to observe "open communion" in which we gladly share Christ's table with anyone who wishes to come in faith.

The form of this sacrament will most often be plates of bread and trays of individual cups passed through the congregation. Other forms may occur from time to time or even be normative in particular Churches. Similarly, the frequency of observance is a matter for each Church to decide. A monthly observance is not uncommon though the rate may exceed that or be limited to only two or three times a year.

The Ministry

In reduction ad absurdum, if one were asked who can be a minister of a Congregational Church, the answer would be "Anyone the Church desires." Truthfully, that is accurate. Once we recognize that the Church is "complete" in itself, it has only Christ to answer to in terms of the decisions it makes - including the call and ordination to ministry.

That we may does not mean that we must or should, nor that we always will. The fellowship life of the Churches and an historic commitment to an educated clergy have established fairly strong traditions among us. The primary role belongs to the Church but there is a place for fellowship as well. Specific issues surrounding ordination will be addressed later.

Our Association plays a vital role in the ministry of our Churches in two ways. Through the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies, men and women are able to attend any accredited seminary while simultaneously receiving spiritual, emotional, and sometimes financial support; and being trained in Congregational polity. Fellows of CFTS have individually applied for admission to the program and been admitted only after demonstrating their call and competence. This helps to assure a continuing supply of well-trained clergy for our Churches.

The second major role is that of placement. Our office of Pastoral Relations provides a source through which Churches may discover clergy who are available for call and where clergy may discover Churches who are seeking ministers. The function of our office is limited to certifying the accuracy of the record as it is presented on a minister's information form; and to sharing Church profiles with inquiring ministers; and sending minister's information forms to Churches (upon the minister's request). No member of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches staff is authorized or permitted to interfere in the process. Once the connection is established between a Church and a minister, all further discussions are held along that axis and our office is removed from the action. This system allows maximum freedom for ministers and Churches while still maintaining a forum where connections can be made.

Who Owns What?

The only real property owned by the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches is that associated with the office in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. This modest facility houses the administrative personnel of the Association. Occasionally the Association has held other property for a short time as the result of a bequest or other gift.

Each member Church, as a religious corporation of the state in which it exists, owns its own property and holds its own assets. Membership in the Association does not convey title or interest to the Association.

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What Do We Do and How Do We Do It?

A member Church of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches must have demonstrated that it is a regularly gathered and worshipping Church, and that it is founded on the principles of Congregational polity (the ultimate authority of the Church is the congregation under Christ only), and that it is in fellowship with other Congregational Churches. That is the extent to which the Association would inquire into the workings of a Church.

This has meant, in the entire history of our Association, that we have never passed a resolution on a social or political issue. It is not because we regard those issues as irrelevant.

Our Commissions, Divisions, and Annual Meeting (where each member Church has one vote) remind us that we are called to confront, in the name of Christ, the pain, suffering, oppression, and injustice which we meet in the world. But we remain convinced that these confrontations, these ministrations, will be most efficacious when they arise from the ministries of the Church and not from the pronouncements of national bodies.

Each Church may - and in the Congregational Way, each Church must - discover its own ministry for its own place. Each of us must uncover Christ's will for the work at our doorstep. This certainly means that we are working on varieties of ministries with varying priorities, It means that sometimes the prophetic word seems to differ, but perhaps no more than our places of ministry differ.

The role of the Association in all of this is to provide (largely through volunteers) the resources and the insights which make maximally effective the ministries to which each of the Churches is called. We do not expect our staff to tell you what you should do. We do expect our staff to be able to provide for you, or to guide you to, the resources you need to do what Christ is calling your Church to do.

Membership in Regional and National Bodies

For fellowship, worship, and outreach it is not inconsistent for Churches of our Way to be involved in regional and national bodies as long as we are clear about the nature of those bodies. The strength of Congregationalism rests in the autonomy and completeness of the local Church. Therefore, regional and national groups of Churches, meeting in fellowship, are not "the Church." Nor can such bodies presume to speak for any local congregation. Yet we are also convinced that we are called by Christ to be bound together in fellowship with other Churches. As historians point out, when representatives from Plymouth (MA) through a "letter missive" were summoned to be present at the ordination of the first Pastor and Teacher of the Salem (MA) Church, and William Bradford journeyed to extend the right hand of Christian fellowship to them, American Congregationalism was instituted.

But the initiative for such wider fellowship comes from our freedom and sacred duty, not from external authority.

Ordination to Ministry

Ordination is, of necessity, by the local Church. Whenever a man or woman is to be ordained to Christian ministry in the Congregational Way, the basic steps are clear: 1) The individual, in response to the call of God, seeks to be equipped for ministry (usually through the acquisition of a baccalaureate degree followed by a seminary degree); 2) The Church in which this person holds membership, after prayerful consideration, resolves to set this person apart for professional ministry; and 3) A letter missive is sent to neighboring Churches inviting them by Pastor and delegate to convene as a Vicinage Council to advise with respect to the proposed actions of this local Church. While the advice of such neighbors has no power to cause that local Church to change its actions, and while the local Church retains the freedom to ordain whomever it chooses, Churches are well advised to heed the counsel of the gathered ministers and delegates. If the Council does not proceed to the ordination, or in the

absence of a Council of the Vicinage, the ordination is recognized as valid for the initiating Church only and has no standing in our wider fellowship, except as it relates to that local Church - so great is our commitment to the realness of autonomy.

Financial Support of the National Association

Financial support is also at the discretion of the local Church; and to the degree that participation in such an association enables that congregation to do its work better, a fair share of the cost of those services is only right. But participation in the National Association also addresses the fellowship obligations which are ours as Congregationalists. The primary question is not, "What do we get?" but "What do we bring to such an association of Churches that will enable the witness of the Congregational Way to prosper in our time?"

The present mission statement of our National Association, as stated in the yearbook (1995) is this: To encourage and assist local churches in their development of vibrant and effective witness to Christ in Congregational ways." This exposure to other Churches across our nation, and to the work of missionaries around the world, broadens and deepens our identity as a people of God. Such participation encourages us to envision new ways to do the work of our Lord in that place where God's lens is focused for us - among the people with whom we have entered into covenant in a Church. But when such organizations presume to speak for a Church or assume to place costs upon that Church directed toward programs and issues to which that Church is not committed, we see this as a move away from Congregationalism toward a form of denominationalism contrary to our Way. Clearly our office in Oak Creek exists solely to assist the Churches of our Association and not the other way around.

Other Church Bodies

Each Church is free to do as it feels led. Just as an association of our Churches can never presume to speak for individual member Churches, so we are not disposed to seek membership in groups who make religious, social, or political statements as if those represented the thinking of each member Church. We presume that each member is capable of making those decisions on his or her own as guided by the dictates of conscience; and that the Church should speak its own convictions. We do receive and exchange fraternal delegates with other bodies and participate in ways consistent with our practice.

Ours is not the Church of the clergy, or a denomination, or of any wider council. The Congregational Church is the people's Church in Christ.

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