

The Congregational Way

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Many years ago now, while being given a tour of the city by friends in the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, I was driven by an interesting spot in Thunder Bay. It wasn't much to speak of, since there was nothing really there. It was pretty much just a vacant lot that had, at its centre, a large cross with faded wreaths and flowers scattered around its base. I was quite taken by the site, imagining that it must be some sort of peculiar shrine in the community, like those crosses you will sometimes see at the side of the road to mark the spot where someone's beloved has died. I imagined that there must be something particularly sacred about this place. Upon inquiry, I learned that there had once been a great controversy involving this very spot. You see, it had been the site of a Roman Catholic church, which had burned to the ground. The parishioners – mostly Italian and Portuguese – were very much attached to their historic location and a large number of parishioners hoped to rebuild on the site. From what I was told, the then bishop of Thunder Bay wouldn't hear of it. He had in mind a magnificent and elegant new edifice at a different and admittedly more spacious location. Yet many parishioners clung to the hope that they would be able to rebuild on the land where the charred remains of their beloved church now stood. The bishop said no. Ultimately, it was his decision to make, no matter how many members of the congregation might object. Construction went ahead according to the bishop's plan and the new church is indeed a spacious and lovely facility, which even boasts a stained glass window of Jesus, for which a local Unitarian was the model! The last time I passed by the old site, the cross still remained and there was still a scattering of tributes on the ground. I have no real idea how many members of the congregation wanted to rebuild at the original location. It doesn't really matter because, when push came to shove, there was never any question but that the bishop's will would prevail.

It was against the very concentration of power in the hands of bishops and distant hierarchies that the first advocates of congregational polity sought to rebel. The roots of what we now call congregational polity can be traced to the century immediately following the Protestant Reformation, among radical Protestants who, knowingly or not, unleashed a movement to democratize the church. Oh, it was an imperfect effort at democracy, to be sure, and their understanding of it would have been considerably different from our own. In the early years of congregational governance, the clergy still held far too much sway in the affairs of both church and home. Nor did congregationalism imply the complete autonomy of the church as a human institution,

since the presence of the Holy Spirit was thought to be an important influence in the affairs of congregations. Yet, the claim that the God-given authority of the church rested in the local congregation was a radical development. How different things might have been for that burnt out congregation at the Lakehead if the members of the congregation itself had been obliged to wrestle with the question of rebuilding, with nothing but the Holy Spirit and their own wherewithal to guide them. Whether they chose to rebuild at the old site, which likely would have been a terrible mistake, or arrived at the same conclusion as the bishop and build elsewhere, at least it would have been their decision to make! The genius of congregational polity is that, not only does it allow congregations to make their own decisions, it even allows them to make their own mistakes. But since it is the people of the church who are responsible for its welfare – to pay for its needs, to give of their time, to build community together – it is only fair that they collectively have the final say in matters that affect them.

I suppose that our early ancestors really *were* “spiritual Bolsheviks” of a sort. They were institutional iconoclasts who declared that the church had become top-heavy, that the work and government of the church needed to be restored to the people, as it was in the primitive church of apostolic times. James Luther Adams has observed that the struggle for congregational independence was carried on amidst “much dust and heat.” It took a great deal of trial and error to refine the principles of congregational governance and, even then, it is still prone to conflict and error. From time to time, representatives from various congregations would gather to address issues of common concern and interest. While the early congregational churches may have been independent, this did not mean that they were necessarily isolated. In 1648, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, such a gathering produced what has since been called *The Cambridge Platform*, or more properly, *The Platform of Church Discipline*. After considerable deliberation – much dust and heat, as it were – *The Cambridge Platform* set forth the five basic principles of congregational polity, principles that remain the key elements of our polity to this very day. Along with the Congregationalists, the United Church of Christ, and several other denominations, Unitarian Universalists are heirs to *The Cambridge Platform*.

The five principles of *The Cambridge Platform* are, at once, simple and straightforward, as well as spiritually demanding! The first principle is that each parish shall call its own minister, which is to say that each congregation has the right to call forth its own ministers and ordain them to service. The second principle is that each parish shall control its own property and funds. This is a measure of no small consequence when one considers both the power and the responsibility that comes with ownership. The third principle of *The Cambridge Platform* is that each parish shall determine its own criteria for membership. While we have come to accept standards articulated by the larger association of churches that call on us to refrain from particular

forms of discrimination in our membership practices, the fact remains that it is a moral argument that compels us to abide by those standards rather than a legal one. The fourth principle is that all parishes shall be free to associate with one another, without permission of any higher authority. It is the right of autonomous congregations to decide which extra-parochial affiliations they will participate in and maintain. This principle, of course, was central to position of those who have argued that last year's decision to change denominational structures in Canada was a violation of the fundamental rights of free congregations. The final principle of *The Cambridge Platform* is that, in the absence if such higher authority, issues of conflict and discipline, as well as the ordination of ministers, shall be dealt with by interchurch conferences of councils. I would add, only for the purpose of emphasis, that these conferences and councils are voluntary in nature, drawing their authority from the participating congregations.¹

Back in colonial New England, “[t]he Puritans were so wary of Presbyterian authority and control,” observes Harvard historian Conrad Wright, “that they even looked with suspicion, at first, on ministerial gatherings or associations, lest they develop into presbyteries and usurp the independence rightfully belonging to the churches.”² This suspicion has been present throughout our history, resurfacing at times of institutional change. It even proved difficult to organize the American Unitarian Association in 1825, owing to concerns about both sectarianism and the risk of denominational interference in the affairs of the dissenting liberal parishes. The “Unitarian Controversy” was already a full-blown conflict by 1805, when the liberals prevailed in the appointment of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. Historic parishes divided over conflicts between Trinitarian Congregationalists and Unitarian Congregationalists, as we were then known. (Plymouth’s Church of the Pilgrim Fathers – and mothers too! – had actually split as early as 1801!) In 1819, William Ellery Channing, whom we hail as the father of Unitarianism in North America, preached his famous Baltimore sermon, *Unitarian Christianity*, which quickly became the manifesto of the early Unitarian movement. But it was not until 1825, nearly a quarter of a century after the division of New England Congregationalism began in earnest, that the American Unitarian Association was actually formed in a process that frankly looks a little sneaky in historical perspective. Such was the suspicion of liberal churches when it came to matters of ecclesiastical authority!

Channing himself was ambivalent about the notion of organizing any denominational body among liberal Christians. He eschewed the sectarian spirit and feared that organized denominations tended to serve that very spirit – the spirit of division and narrowness, rather than the spirit of breadth and generosity. Channing stood apart from the movement to organize an American Unitarian Association and declined its presidency when it was finally organized in 1825. Several years later, he wrote to a friend, “I distrust sectarian influence more and more. I am more detached

from a denomination, and strive to feel more my connection with the Universal Church, with all good and holy men. I am little of a Unitarian, and stand aloof from all but those who strive and pray for clearer light, who look for a purer and more effectual manifestation of Christian truth.”³ He was not alone – then or now. In fact, the three so-called “prophets of religious liberalism” all had ambivalent relationships with denominational institutions. Channing was one. Ralph Waldo Emerson never showed any enthusiasm for Unitarian denominational bodies, becoming the first member of the Free Religious Association in 1867 when it organized to challenge the institutional arrogance of both the AUA and the National Conference of Unitarian Churches. And Theodore Parker, the third of the “prophets,” was actively ostracized by his colleagues, who even refused to exchange pulpits with him, contrary to the prevailing custom of the time. It is interesting to me that the leaders we most remember from the early years, the thinkers who most inspire us today, seem to have had rocky relationships with denominational institutions. As someone who has built his career as a denominational official, doing a little congregational ministry on the side, it is humbling to know that the prophets and seers of our faith followed a very different path.

Writing a century ago, the Unitarian historian George Willis Cooke, observed, “Even to the present time Unitarianism has shown this independence on the part of local churches and this freedom on the part of individuals. Because of this attitude, unity of action has been difficult, and denominational loyalty never strong or assured.”⁴ Now despite this fierce streak of independence, fellowship between congregations is vitally important and must always be a priority for healthy independent churches. Our polity does not insist on autonomy to the exclusion of association; quite the contrary.

“The Puritans did insist that independent or autonomous churches should walk together in sisterly fellowship,” notes Conrad Wright. “In matters of ecclesiastical governance and discipline they properly ought to consult with one another.”⁵ So it is that we have had conferences and councils, associations and conventions, that have brought together leaders and other interested individuals from our congregations. In this way, our congregations have been cross-pollinated, sharing ideas and inspiration, resources and responsibility. Even as we cherish the independence and autonomy of our congregations, it is nevertheless important for us to be in relationship with neighbouring churches of the free spirit. Just as “no man is an island,” to quote John Donne, so too, no church is an island. Denominational relationships support and nourish the local congregation. As Conrad Wright points out, “the notion of an isolated church to itself would be regarded as an anomaly; the principle of autonomy was balanced by the principle of fellowship. ... Congregational polity, if true to its tradition, does not mean simply autonomous local churches; it means the *fellowship* of autonomous local churches, which is a significantly different thing. The principle of fellowship and the principle of autonomy are both essential parts of the equation.”⁶ So

we seek relationships of mutual benefit between congregations, sharing some of our resources and honouring obligations to one another that are grounded in our sense of being part of a common family of faith.

Let's be honest with ourselves. The Arborg Unitarian Church is a fragile and struggling institution, which barely manages to eke out an existence. Although we may feel bruised by what we see as the arrogant disregard of the Canadian Unitarian Council, or at least its leadership, the simple fact of the matter is that we need the relationships afforded by the CUC for our own institutional survival. Like it or not, it will soon be pretty much the only show in town. Since we need and wish to maintain our relationship with kindred congregations in Canada, we must figure out just how we wish to fit in to this new denominational environment. We need to maintain our relationships with other Unitarian congregations in Canada, but this does not mean that we must blindly support the program of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

Fellowship requires mutuality, or at least some measure of reciprocity. Many of us have felt this to be lacking in recent years. I regret to say that we have not been treated as full partners in our Canadian organization. The concerns that have been expressed by those who have objected to the changes – changes which, for all intents and purposes, would separate us from our American friends – have been largely ignored by CUC leaders, one of whom glibly quipped, “You know how they say that God answers all prayers, but sometimes the answer is no.” I'm sure that he wasn't seeking to compare the CUC to God but, then again, one never knows. The good news of congregational polity is that, when denominational authorities usurp the divine prerogative of saying “No,” they risk facing a similar congregational response to their own prayers. As one who has devoted so much energy to serving the larger community of congregations over the past two decades, it is difficult for me to suggest that “no” may be the appropriate and responsible answer to some of the CUC's expectations of us. Perhaps we are called, on this bank and shoal of time, to be gadflies in service to our tradition.

You know that I did not support the decision made in Montreal last May, which effectively removes Canadian congregations from a full and complete fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, even though some ties will remain. The many hats I wear prevented me from taking the kind of leadership role I would have liked in the debate over the future of our faith in Canada. As a member of the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I was constrained from speaking publicly in a manner that would have been seen as political. By the same token, one of the hats I wear is that of being the minister of this church, which obligates me to say to you some of the things I cannot say to a wider audience.

I have been frequently heard to say in recent years that I fear that Unitarian Universalism is faced by what I would describe as “creeping presbyterianism” in its polity. This is not something that I mean as an insult to our Presbyterian neighbours, who choose a different but valid way to govern their own affairs. It is simply and observation that *their* way is not *our* way. Presbyterian polity is alien to our heritage. I question the authority of denominational officials to dismantle relationships of long-standing – relationships that involve the fundamental rights of membership – without congregations having a direct say in the decision. In this case, I’m afraid that delegate votes at denominational meetings don’t meet the test, since conference-goers (myself included) are a notoriously self-selected and privileged lot. Denominational meetings are about as representative as the average country club. At all levels, they are dominated by the leisure class and a host of special interests, rather than by congregational representatives *per se*. For matters of routine business, delegate votes will suffice; but for matters as fundamental as our right of membership, surely a higher standard is called for. I believe that the process that has led to the severing of our historic ties to the Unitarian Universalist Association, albeit with the possibility of our remaining as second-class members, was flawed from the very beginning. Just as congregations were called to act directly to approve the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961, so should our congregations have been so consulted in making a decision as significant as the one by which we now find ourselves bound. Four decades ago, our congregation had a direct say in that momentous and wonderful decision to merge those two great streams of liberal religion. We could then enthusiastically support the decision, since it reflected the will of the congregations, our own included. We have not had the same kind of direct input to the decisions that now affect us; instead, our congregational rights have been bargained away by ecclesiastical officials. This is what I mean by creeping Presbyterianism. It is fine to delegate routine business to delegates and representatives, ministers and denominational officials; it is quite another thing to surrender the right and responsibility of congregations acting as a whole body on matters of supreme importance.

“Congregational polity is ours by inheritance, but also by conviction,” affirms Conrad Wright. “It commends itself to us as congruent with democratic principles we cherish. But with its values and virtues, we have to accept its characteristic problems and pitfalls.”⁷ While I believe that the pending changes in denominational structure are an example of the problems and pitfalls that come to us when we stray from our cherished traditions, our little church isn’t going to change the outcome. If we cannot avert the problem, then we need to use our collective imagination to find a solution that will allow us to remain faithful to the principle of congregational autonomy while remaining in relationship with those institutions and kindred congregations that sustain

us. Like the faithful adherents to the congregational way throughout the generations, we are called to choose autonomy *and* fellowship. At the same time, we should recognize that the current trend in denominational affairs has leaned increasingly to fellowship *over* autonomy. When the historic tension that keeps these two principles in balance shifts too far in one direction, it is the right and responsibility of dissenting congregations to lean hard in the opposite direction, in order to help restore the balance for all. It appears to me that our congregation is being called to a creative contrariness, not for the sake of selfishly asserting our independence, but for the sake of maintaining the balance on which the congregational way depends. Conrad Wright reminds us that organizations like the UUA, the CUC, or our district are not the denomination itself, but “instrument[s] created to serve it.” Such institutions are “entitled to support; it is to the larger religious community that loyalty is owed.”⁸

So let us insist on our autonomy but let us refrain from being arrogant about it. Let us seek to maintain fellowship with other Unitarian Universalist congregations on both sides of the international boundary but let us remind the denominational organizations in which we participate that we will do so on our own terms, respectful of other congregations and responsible, as we feel called, to denominational organizations. Our primary kinship is with liberal congregations and the living tradition we share, not denominational structures, however good and beneficent. As a faithful and free congregation, let us be clear about our loyalties and let us then be faithful to the liberal religious tradition we hold dear – a tradition that is firmly grounded in the congregational way.



First Reading:

From *The Enduring Validity of Congregational Polity* by James Luther Adams⁹

There is at least one thing that Unitarians share with the Baptists, and also with the Disciples and the Congregationalists, namely, congregational polity. ... It was born in a protest against “the establishment” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England and New England. These dissenters could not accept the centralized power of the established church. They wished to place authority in the local congregation and thus to be free of control at the hands of bishops and a hierarchical clergy. They revived the covenant theory of the New Testament, and attempted to model the congregation on the primitive Christian church according to Scripture. And, like those early Christians, they had to suffer persecution as a consequence. In this new covenanted or gathered church they gave the power to the laity along with the clergy. Every member had the right and the responsibility to participate in making social decisions. That, by the way, is a good definition of power, the capacity to participate in making social

decisions. So we may say that congregational polity represented a dispersion of power and responsibility in two senses, an assignment of power to the local congregation as such and also to the members of the congregation as participants who held to the principle of the consent of the governed. ...

The struggle for freedom to form an independent religious association had to be carried on with much dust and heat, indeed arousing persecution that harried many of these dissenters out of the land. They were viewed as disrupting the unity and stability of the commonwealth. A conservative historian of today has called them "spiritual Bolsheviks."

Second Reading: From *Walking Together* by Conrad Wright¹⁰

Congregationalism as we have practiced it has meant different things at different times. We too easily assume that our present version of it is what it has always meant. We need to take account of the fact that our polity has a history too. Since the way we order our common affairs is an expression of who we are and the values we hold, the history of our practice of congregational polity tells us much about ourselves, if from a different perspective than the history of theological controversies.

... We have inherited a very parochial understanding of congregational polity from colonial times, when the only purpose of extraparochial structures was the discipline of clergy and laity. In the nineteenth century, however, changed conditions made it necessary for all religious groups to assume additional functions, such as the education of persons for the ministry, the publication of tracts and hymnbooks, the preparation of religious education materials, the organization of new churches, and so on. These new functions called for organizations of a very different kind than any of the denominations had known. New institutional structures, bureaucratic or administrative rather than ecclesiastical, were developed to undertake new or enlarged functions. ...

For Unitarians and Universalists, as for other denominations adhering to congregational polity, one result has been an especially acute tension between traditional local independency and a necessary consolidation of forces and centralized control. Furthermore, to the long standing resistance in congregational polity to hierarchy and centralization, there has been added the conflict between ecclesiastical structures and bureaucracy. The Church as a community of the faithful, and the denomination as a bureaucratic organization, are not the same thing, and there is an ineluctable conflict of values between them. Thus there are two sources of tension built into our present polity: parochialism versus denominationalism, and the Church versus bureaucracy.

References

- ¹ Warren Ross, "350 Years of Congregational Polity," in *World*, the Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association (May/June 1998), 14. The language used here to outline the five principles of *The Cambridge Platform* is drawn from Ross's summary, which distills the essentials in words that are relevant and easily accessible to the modern reader.
- ² Conrad Wright, "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Structure," in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Skinner House Books, 1989), 75.
- ³ William Ellery Channing quoted in George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America* (American Unitarian Association, 1902; repr. 1910), 125.
- ⁴ George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America* (American Unitarian Association, 1902; repr. 1910), 126.
- ⁵ Conrad Wright, "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Structure," 75.
- ⁶ Conrad Wright, "Autonomy and Fellowship," Ordination Sermon for Louis Linwood Dees, Dighton Unitarian Church, November 7, 1965, in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Skinner House Books, 1989), 67.
- ⁷ Conrad Wright, "Autonomy and Fellowship," 70.
- ⁸ Conrad Wright, *Walking Together*, 214.
- ⁹ James Luther Adams, "The Enduring Validity of Congregational Polity," in *The Prophethood of All Believers*, ed. George K. Beach (Beacon Press, 1986), 131-132.
- ¹⁰ Conrad Wright, "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Structure," in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Skinner House Books, 1989), 73-74.