THE ART AND PRACTICE OF THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY

A CHURCH GUIDE

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National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

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Introduction

It Matters. Over 50 years ago, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) was incorporated as a fellowship of Congregational churches. The churches in this fellowship opposed merging with the Evangelical and Reformed Church that some Congregational churches favored. The idea of merging with another denomination was not, in and of itself, offensive. Congregationalists had effected two successful mergers[1] already, however, the controversy of this particular merger centered on Congregational Polity (practice). Those against the merger feared that the merger would establish a church hierarchy and that their church would lose its independence and ability to self-govern. While this is a simplistic summary of a complicated and emotionally-fraught period of history, it illustrates how core principles and practices of the Congregational Way were the driving values that formed the NACCC.

The question of what is unique and distinctive about the Congregational Way is never far from us. This handbook is meant as a basic, practical guide for understanding of the Art and Practice of the Congregational Way. In claiming what is distinctive in our Way, I do not mean to imply that other religious organizations are inferior to ours. Many others also order themselves around some of these religious virtues.

[1] With the German Evangelical Protestant Church in 1925 and with the Christian Convention in 1931 (John Von Rohr, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 389 and p. 345, 390).

However, the Congregational Way matters. It mattered to a band of Pilgrims that crossed an angry November Atlantic Ocean in 1620 and established a colony in New England. It mattered to the Puritans that followed their lead. It mattered to the revivalists of the 1700's and to the visionaries of a new independency that led to the United States of America. It mattered to Abolitionists, and Missionaries, and embracers of the Social Gospel in the late 1800's. It mattered to the founders of the NACCC. I hope this guide, then, will not only be helpful, but will also reveal the deep faithfulness that forms the core of Congregationalism.

A Daunting Task. Committing essential and commonly held Congregational values, principles and practices to paper is a challenge. There is a wide variety of thought and practice among our member churches. This, in itself, reveals an essential aspect of Congregationalism: each church, using scripture as its foundation and guided by the Holy Spirit, determines its faithful forms of worship, governance and belief. This naturally leads to diverse worship practices, beliefs about God, and Biblical interpretations among churches. How can this handbook represent all the faithful expressions of the Congregational Way? The answer is: It can't. But the aim of this handbook is not to catalogue the variety of expressions of Congregationalism. Rather, it is to bring into focus some distinguishing characteristics to help congregations understand, practice and pass on the wisdom of Congregationalism.

A Swinging Pendulum. For any of the principles in this handbook, one can find periods in history when these principles were stronger or weaker, absent or emerging,

original or adaptive. In other words, the principles identified in this handbook are supported, denied or ignored depending on the period of Congregational history one uses as a reference. The values contained in this handbook are widely recognized markers of the Congregational Way today, based on our history, tradition and faith.

A Guide. As you read these pages, I hope you will gain insight not only into the Art and Practice of The Congregational Way, but also your role in it. At the heart of Congregationalism are relationships, not structures or absolute doctrines. Our Way is highly dependent upon the committed participation of members. You walk this spiritual pathway with many other Congregationalists. Together we encourage, instruct, guide and help each other on this journey of faith.

Pilgrims, Puritans and Separatists. This handbook will use the word "Pilgrim" and "Puritan" interchangeably. Our Congregational ancestors were English Pilgrims and Puritans of the 1500's. Each believed similar things. They sought to create a church more faithful to scripture and, therefore, to God. Each believed the Church of England was corrupt and needed to be changed. The Pilgrims believed they Church of England couldn't change fast enough so they separated from the Church of England to establish their own congregations. This is the group we celebrate as establishing Plimoth Plantation in New England. The Puritans tried to reform the Church of England from within, without separating from it. This is the group that came to American and established the Massachusetts Bay colony that we now call Boston. Each group endured persecution in England for their beliefs. In

Congregational literature and history, authors will also refer to Pilgrims as Separating Puritans, Dissenters, and Non-Conformists. All are proper references for those who became the early founders of Congregationalism. For our purposes, Pilgrims and Puritans will be treated as one.

Resources. This handbook draws on a number of scholarly and historical documents. A complete listing can be found at the end of the handbook. Some of these resources come to us from a time before the merger controversy, when Congregationalism was a unified and growing body. Some of the practices expressed in those earlier documents have been adapted to the smaller numbers of the NACCC. In all things, Congregationalism is a dynamic Way. This handbook captures this reality as we look at our core principles historically, theologically and in contemporary practice.

Use of Language. I have attempted to write in gender-inclusive language as appropriate. I have not changed historical quotes and when writing the historical statements, I have retained the gender-exclusive language as an accurate representation of that historical period of time. I trust the reader to recognize that if those circumstances and quotes were from today, the masculine pronoun and the feminine pronoun would be equally appropriate.

Contact us. If you would like more information or clarification on any of the topics in this handbook, please don't hesitate to call the NACCC office.

Rev. Dr. D. Elizabeth Mauro

SECTION I: FAITH

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who are being protected by the power of God through faith…"

I Peter 1:3 – 5a
New Revised Standard Version

Section I: Faith
1. Covenants

Principle: Congregational churches are organized around a covenant.

In a religious context, a covenant is an agreement between people and God. This agreement also shapes the promises that people make with each other. Covenants and the relationships formed by them depend upon faithfulness to the agreements and promises.

Historical Statement. Our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears turned to the Scriptures as their guide for faithful living. In the Scriptures, they found two major types of covenant that expressed how we are in relationship to God: the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace.

The Covenant of Works is shown in the story of Adam and Eve. God would bless Adam and Eve as long as they remained obedient to God. However, they failed in this and fell into sin, taking all humanity with them. Because of this, God sent Jesus Christ to form a new relationship with us, redeeming us from our sin.

Through Christ God established the Covenant of Grace. This was an act of God's love and mercy for us. Unlike the Covenant of Works, this Covenant of Grace was tied to God's promises rather than human obedience. The Pilgrims and

Puritans looked to these covenants to make sense of their relationship with God and to understand how to be in relationship with each other.

Theology. The Puritans and Pilgrims were inspired by the words of Matthew 18:20: Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (NRSV) They believed this expressed God's Covenant of Grace in their everyday lives. They believed in the presence of Christ. Pilgrims and Puritans committed themselves to live faithfully as God required. They drew up their own covenants that everyone agreed to. People became members of the church by voluntarily "owning" the covenant. They pledged to "walk together in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known"[2] to them. The church of Christ was created through acceptance of the church covenant. With Christ as the head of the church, they would be blessed.

Practice. Congregational churches use a covenant that people accept to become members (see Section II.1: Voluntary Covenant). These covenants express the reasons people come together as the church. Look for your covenant in your Constitution and Bylaws or other organizational documents. Some churches display their covenant prominently on the beginning or ending pages of the church hymnal. Many incorporate the covenant into church liturgies as a way to remind people of their promises to God and each other.

[2] From the Kansas City Statement of Faith, 1913.

Principle: Members of Congregational Christian Churches are followers of Jesus Christ.

Some have said that Congregationalists "believe anything they want to" because they have no creeds. Strictly speaking, neither observation is correct. Throughout history, Congregationalists have drawn upon creeds and statements of faith to express their beliefs. However, the use of creeds as a "test" of faithfulness is not recognized by most Congregational churches. When creeds *are* used, it generally is because an individual congregation believes it enhances the experience of the worship of God and promotes the spiritual maturity and unity of the congregation. There is no creed or requirement of a creed that is binding on all Congregational churches.

Historical Statement. In the 1500's it was the practice of the Church of England to repeat creeds and prayers without thought. Our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors objected to this. They strongly believed that personal conviction and thoughtfulness was a critical component of faithfulness. While they whole heartedly believed in prayer, they rejected the common practice of using set prayers in worship believing "they suffocate the very Spirit that should be present to enable significant voicing of the congregation's petitions and praise."[3]

[3] John Von Rohr, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p.45.

Likewise, this was the case with creeds. The Puritans and Pilgrims didn't disagree with beliefs expressed in the creeds, but felt that creeds could not be used to force belief. They objected to "the supposed authority by which creeds were imposed upon the conscience of ministers and church members."[4] Later Congregationalists would describe the value of creeds and statements of faith as "testimonies, not tests."[5] Throughout the history of Congregationalism, many statements of belief have been drafted but none have ever been binding on the local congregation by any outside authority.

Theology. While many statements of faith can be found in Congregational history, two in particular are basic to Congregationalism: The Westminster Confession of 1646 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. Both documents expressed the beliefs held by early Congregationalists and differ only on church government. By the time the Pilgrims and Puritans arrived in New England in the 1600's, the beliefs contained in these documents were thoroughly known and accepted. Throughout history, these original statements of faith have been revisited for their wisdom. Today, Congregationalists remain decidedly Christian in belief, using the Bible as their interpretive guide and authority. However, each local congregation and member thereof "possesses full liberty of

[4] William E. Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants*, 1917, p. 228.

[5] Ibid., p. 28. "(Congregationalism) holds to no one man-made creed as of perpetual authority. It rejoices in the right of the churches from time to time to compare their faith with the essential faith of the past, and has repeatedly declared itself in essential accord with the historic symbols of Christendom. But it holds to the right of (people) to be wiser tomorrow than they are today, and to revise all creeds, and to use them as a testimony rather than as a test."

conscience in interpreting the Gospel"[6] which necessarily creates diversity of Christian expression and thought among Congregational churches.

Practice. Because of the variety of Christian thought and practice among Congregational churches, use of statements of faith and creeds varies. Some churches rely solely on the church covenant as its primary statement of faith congregation. Others include a Statement of Faith in their constitution or bylaws to complement the covenant. Still others draw upon ancient or contemporary creeds as part of worship. There is no creed or statement of faith that is required for membership in the NACCC. Use of such statements and creeds, or not, is the right of each local congregation. As an association of churches the NACCC affirms, as did our ancestors, that such statements cannot compel belief; nor do we wish to have such expressions bind the consciences of local congregations of faithful people.

[6] Francis Gibbons*, What Every Congregationalist Should Know*, 1956, p.12.

Section I: Faith
3. Priesthood of all Believers

Principle: In the body of Christ, laity and clergy have spiritual gifts in differing measure, but all are spiritual equals, and as members have "rights, powers, and privileges equal to those of every other."[7]

Congregationalists have long embraced the idea that in God's eyes, all of the faithful are spiritual equals. While some may be more mature in faith than others, everyone is equal before Christ who is the head of the church. An ordained person is not spiritually superior to anyone else in the gathered church.

Historical Statement. Earlier, in Section 1.1, we noted that Congregational Churches are based on a covenant. This covenant assured that Christ was in their midst as the only authority over the church. No outside religious oversight was needed or proper. This meant that the affairs of the church were in the hands of the congregation. Decisions were made under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and within the bounds of commonly understood Christian faith. In practical terms,

[7] Henry Martyn Dexter, *A Hand-Book of Congregationalism*, .1880, p.65.

decisions were made democratically, implying all members were equal.[8]

The phrase "priesthood of all believers" was used by later Congregationalists to express this equality among all members. By at least 1915, this concept was getting specific attention in Congregational literature and manuals, stating clearly that "the basic principle of Congregationalism is the supreme leadership of Christ and the priesthood of all believers."[9] When controversies about this idea have erupted, it usually is over how much authority the minister should have in deciding the affairs of the church.

Theology. Because Congregationalists believed that no one stood between the believer and Christ, it was the "inherent right of every Christian soul to approach God directly… This priesthood of all believers enthrones Christ as the only Lord of the Church, and carries with it as a corollary the spiritual equality of brethren in Christ."[10] One British Congregational handbook declares, "In affirming the priesthood of believers, we affirm a ministry of the whole Church, in which all have the privilege and duty of sharing the good news of Christ with others and of exercising within the Church the spiritual functions for which God has endowed them with the necessary gifts."[11]

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[8] This equality was reflective of the age. For instance, early Congregational churches did not extend the right to vote to female or African-American church members; this would come later as these rights gained acceptance and legitimacy in broader society.

[9] William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 1915, p. 10.

[10] Ibid., p. 11.

[11] Francis Gibbons, *What Every Congregationalist Should Know*, 1956, p.34.

Practice. This core belief of equality is incorporated in the Articles and Bylaws of the church by giving members voting rights and privileges. Individual members have a responsibility to participate in the decision-making process of the church. Church members, gathered under Christ, seek the will of God through prayer, discussion and democratic process. Each member's vote is equal to every other member's vote. This will be discussed further in Section 2.3.

This principle of equality also means that all people are considered "ministers" and may step into leadership roles that clergy traditionally fill. Historically, some duties were only performed by ordained clergy such as administering the sacraments. Today, there is a wider acceptance of laity stepping into pastoral roles. Each church decides the extent to which this happens in its own congregation. In some churches, laity

- step into the pulpit to preach
- deliver communion to shut-ins
- lead the prayers in worship
- preside over the Lord's Supper
- conduct baptisms
- respond to other pastoral needs and duties

While ordination to ministry may set an individual apart for the duties, privileges and responsibility of ministry as decided by the church, the "priesthood of all believers" still exists. In other words, the minister is not spiritually greater than the members of the congregation.

Principle: Congregationalists recognize two sacraments only: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Congregationalists turn to scripture as their guide. Early Congregationalists found evidence for only two sacraments in the Bible, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In each case, the sacraments affirm the covenant and are an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality of Christ's presence.

Historical Statement. Early Congregationalism arose at a time when the Catholic Church in Rome dictated religious practice in Europe. The Church of England followed the religious practices of Rome. The Pilgrims and Puritans reacted against what they called the "Roman superstition" in the church. To them, "Roman superstition" included any practice or belief that was not found in the Holy Scriptures. In particular, they objected to:

- Clergy wearing clerical vestments
- Kneeling for the Lord's Supper
- Making the sign of the cross

They also objected to:

- The affairs of the church resting with the clergy
- The Bible being read in Latin and therefore, not available to the laity

- The numerous church rules being enforced by a hierarchical system of bishops
- Church law and the civil law being one and the same
- The excessive taxation on the laity to support the church

As the Puritans and Pilgrims were working out their own understanding of faithfulness, they turned to Scripture as their guide and sole authority in all matters religious. There they found little justification for many of the ways of the Church of England. Particular to the sacraments, they found only two sacraments in the Bible: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Theology. Puritans and Pilgrims believed that both the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper were related to the Covenant of Grace (see Section I.1). By participating in these, the Covenant of Grace was "sealed" for the believer. These sacraments were "visible signs that God (had) given to confirm to the individual person God's covenant promises made through God's Word."[12] The sacraments were outward signs of the inward truth of God's grace.

Baptism signified the washing away of sins. In Baptism, one rose to new life in Jesus Christ. Because Baptism was a gift of God to humanity, the Puritans and Pilgrims believed baptizing infants was appropriate as a seal of the covenant. They did not view baptism as a guarantee of salvation. Baptism placed children firmly in the care of the church.

The Lord's Supper was viewed as an act of renewal for participating believers. It was a sign of the redemption

[12] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 41.

promised through the broken body and shed blood of Christ. They rejected the Catholic idea that in the communion service the bread and wine physically became the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). The Lord's Supper fed the soul and Christ was present at the meal spiritually, not physically.

Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper were sacraments of the church and were practiced only when the congregation was gathered as the church, in the presence of Christ. These acts were part of the worship of God and were not practiced privately by the Puritans.

Practice. Today, there is great variety in how these two sacraments are practiced. In some churches, only ordained clergy administer the sacraments. In other churches, laity may preside.

In most of our churches, Baptism is practiced by sprinkling or pouring. A few practice immersion. Some require Baptism before becoming a member. Others do not. Some perform Baptism as a way to renew promises to Christ and the church. In strict Congregational practice, Baptism does not occur outside of worship. However, some churches will perform Baptisms outside of worship with one or two deacons representing the church as witnesses. Additionally, in crisis situations such as hospital intensive care units, clergy and others may choose to baptize for spiritual comfort. In Congregationalism, Baptism is not needed for salvation. It is offered to accept new life in Christ. Most Congregational churches practice both infant and adult Baptism. Those that do not baptize infants often have ceremonies of "dedication" or "consecration."

The Lord's Supper (Eucharist) may be practiced as often as the local church desires. Some churches practice quarterly Eucharist, others monthly. Very few choose to do so weekly. Likewise, there is variety in how the bread and the cup are given. Some churches serve people in pews by passing individual cups and pieces of bread on trays down the rows. Others invite people forward to claim these symbols. Some churches practice intinction where the piece of bread is dipped in the cup of juice or wine and taken immediately. The ceremony of the Lord's Supper varies among Congregational churches. There is no set order.

SECTION II: FREEDOM

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Matthew 18:18-20
New Revised Standard Version

Section II: Freedom
1. Voluntary Covenant

Principle: The church is comprised of individuals who voluntarily accept the covenant of the church.

Members of Congregational churches are bound together by accepting a covenant which expresses their promises to God and to each other.

Historical Statement. In the 1500's, at the time of the Pilgrim and Puritan movement in England, what church a person attended depended upon geography. Areas were divided into sections called parishes. Each parish had a church that all people in that area were required to attend. The Puritans and Pilgrims rejected this model of church, believing it was "well-nigh fatal to real piety."[13] According to the model they saw in the New Testament

> "Believers should be united to God and to one another by a covenant, entered into, not by compulsion, but willingly. Such a body, so united, and recognizing their obligations to God the Father and to Christ as their law-giver and ruler, are a church. Of this

[13] Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 9. Here Walker is saying that this is a conviction that came to Robert Brown, one of the original dissenters.

> church, Christ is the head, and his powers and graces are for the use of every member."[14]

Puritan William Ames maintained that

> "Believers, simply as an assembly, do not constitute a church even though they may regularly meet together. Only unification through covenant, with its shared commitment to perform requisite duties toward God and toward one another, creates church estate."[15]

Theology. For the early Puritans and Pilgrims, the Covenant of Grace found in the Bible was directed to individual believers. But it was extended to the *entire church* through the church covenant. When one willingly professed faith and voluntarily accepted the covenant, that person became accountable to the church, where everyone promised to live a godly life. The desire to live a godly life could never be coerced or mandated. Only voluntary agreement could bring forth authentic faith and practice. As Puritan Robert Brown described it, "Christians are a company or number of believers, which by a willing covenant made with their God, are under the government of God and Christ, and keep his laws in one holy communion."[16]

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[14] Ibid., p. 13.

[15] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 37.

[16] As quoted in *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* by John Von Rohr, 1992, p. 37.

Practice. The church covenant is still the organizing principle of Congregational churches and is the centerpiece of the reception of new members. Ceremonies that admit new members to the church vary, but "assent to the covenant is the central element."[17] When individuals "own the covenant," they participate in the mystical act of creating the body of Christ on earth. In voluntarily agreeing to the covenant, the individual believer becomes one of many who are sincerely seeking to follow Christ, not because they must, but because they may; not responding fearfully to the judgment of God, but joyously to the love of God. How the "owning of the covenant" is incorporated into the reception of new members in the church is a matter that is determined by the local church.

[17] Oscar E Maurer, ed., *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, 1954, p. 195.

Section II: Freedom
2. Local Autonomy

Principle: Every church is complete under Christ with the authority to administer its own affairs as it seeks to be faithful to Christ.

Congregational churches practice a variety of worship styles, ministries and mission work as each sees fit. They also interpret scripture among themselves, being guided by it to arrive at decisions and understandings. No Congregational church is exactly like another.

Historical Statement. In the 1500's, the Church of England was overseen by a complex system of rules. These rules were enforced by bishops. The church was supported by a system of unreasonably high taxation that *all* people had to pay. The church determined "right religion" and dealt harshly with those they judged to be unfaithful or disobedient. The idea that a local congregation was capable of overseeing and administering its own affairs was radical for the day. Many were persecuted for promoting this idea. Still, when the early Pilgrims and Puritans turned to Scripture to guide them on how a church should be structured and ordered (polity), they could come to no other conclusion than the self-rule (autonomy) of the local church. Following the pattern of

churches lifted up in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, they "recognized no spiritual hierarchy from people to priests to bishops."[18] In other words, there could be no one over the local church except Christ. This polity was affirmed in 1648 in the Cambridge Platform, the first document describing Congregationalism in America. It was affirmed again in 1865 in the Burial Hill Declaration of Faith whose first statement of congregational principles reads, "…the local or Congregational church derives its power and authority directly from Christ, and is not subject to any ecclesiastical government exterior or superior to itself."[19] Throughout history, Congregationalism has strongly protected this autonomy of its churches. Preserving this principle has animated many discussions about forming associations of churches and merging with other churches. The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches formed, in part, to ensure the continuation of this core Congregational principle, local church autonomy.

Theology. Puritans and Pilgrims saw the church as a holy instrument for God's purposes. "As a covenant community, the church was called into being by God and endowed with God's own authority and power that it might carry out a saving ministry to God's people."[20] This meant "it possessed within itself, as God's gift, the power and responsibility of

[18] Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life*, 1972, p.4.

[19] Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, pp. 567-568.

[20] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, pp. 34-35.

church government"[21] and must necessarily be independent of external control.

Practice. It is a sacred responsibility for Congregationalists to identify, develop, and implement the practices of a faithful community. "Members of every Congregational church, meeting under the authority and discipline of Christ as revealed in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, claim and exercise the privileges of deciding their own forms of worship, appointing their own office-bearers and minister, and admitting to their fellowships those whom they deem suitable."[22] This means that a Congregational church is only as strong as their members are committed to it. This commitment is first and foremost to seek the will of Christ for the congregation. Secondly, it is a willingness to attend and contribute to the work, decisions, and obligations of the church. There is no one outside of the local church who can do these things for the church. Only its members can.

[21] Ibid., p. 37.

[22] Francis Gibbons, *What Every Congregationalist Should Know*, 1956, p. 27.

Section II: Freedom
3. Authority in the Hands of the Membership

Principle: Through its membership, Christ endows the church with ecclesiastical authority, including the rites of ordination, the right to call to choose its own minister, the ability to own and sell its own property, the authority to determine corporate rules, and the acceptance of new members, among others.

By now, it should be clear that to be a member of a Congregational church is an honor and a responsibility. There are many decisions and procedures that the church directs. Its members, under Christ, are the sole authority in providing for the religious activities of the church and for transacting its business.

Historical Statement. As early Pilgrims and Puritans turned to the Bible to find a "true" form of church, they came to believe that there were four major abuses in the Church of England. John Greenwood identified the abuses as these:

- Because membership was compulsory, the congregations were made up of both believers and non-believers.
- The use of the Book of Common Prayer in worship was limiting of the spiritual aspects of true worship.
- Ordinations and the appointment of clerics by bishops was a false form of ministry.
- Because the church was denied the rights to elect officers and discipline members, the structure was faulty.[23]

Particular to these last two abuses, Pilgrims and Puritans believed that to be a "true" church they must have the authority to elect its own officers, to discipline members, to ordain individuals, and to make church appointments as matters that should be in the hands of the members.

Theology. Pilgrims and Puritans relied upon the Bible as the "ultimate source and authority for Christian truth."[24] They believed that the local church was the avenue for divine activity. These beliefs led them to reject any authority outside of the local church. They claimed that the authority of Christ was exercised only through covenanted members gathered together as the church. Therefore, the members should be able to decide who could be a member, how to discipline disobedient members, and how to recognize individuals as ministers of the church. This last point will be taken up in greater detail in the next section.

Practice. Congregational churches today affirm that all affairs of the church are managed by its members. The church

[23] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 11.

[24] Ibid., p. 26.

is considered spiritually complete and sufficient, it is fully equipped to make decisions for itself. It may seek advice from other Congregational churches, but it is under no obligation to do so. It may decide who to ordain, what property to purchase, hold or sell, who can be a member, what ministries to engage in. Some of these privileges and processes are explained in a church's bylaws or constitution, others are not. What will be clear in the governing documents is that members guide the church in all matters.

Section II: Freedom
4. Democratic Decision-making and Representative Government

Principle: The ability for each member to exercise their rights and responsibilities in the church is assured by a process of democratic decision-making and structure of representative boards, committees and teams.

The seeds of democracy can be found in the earliest beliefs of Congregationalism. The influence of Congregational beliefs in America helped set the stage for our democratic civil government.

Historical Statement. The Congregational ideals of the Priesthood of all Believers (see Section 1.3) and the autonomy of the local church (See Section 2.2) required a church government where believers could make decisions faithful to the will of Christ. But they did not view their church structure as a democratic one as we think of it today. Puritans and Pilgrims would have viewed our "popular democracy" as "mob rule." The Pilgrims and Puritans lived in societies based on monarchies and aristocracies. These early Congregationalists interpreted "their church order as a mixed

form of government in which monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic strains were joined."[25] To these Puritan and Pilgrim leaders, church government was first a monarchy in that the church was under the headship of Christ. Second, it was an aristocracy formed by a system of elected leaders and elders. Third, it was a democracy for its membership rested on people's free consent. Still, all actions and decisions had to be in accord with the will and rule of Christ. "So this 'mixed government' was declared by early Puritans (and Pilgrims) as proper for each local church – and as something quite different from a democracy embodying no more than the people's will."[26]

Democratic decision-making was accomplished by voting. The right to vote was given first to white, male members of the church. As women, African Americans and other disenfranchised groups in America gained the right to vote in civil elections, the church ultimately followed suit. Some churches were even promoters of the right to vote, while others were slow to adopt the civil changes when they came.

Theology. Because the church is considered the body of Christ, and because Congregationalists believe the church comes into being when individuals voluntarily own the covenant, each church member is essential in creating the body of Christ. Therefore, each person has a role and a responsibility to participate in the governing affairs of the church. What makes a church different than a civic club is its use of the Scriptures as its guide, its promise to seek together

[25] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 39.

[26] Ibid., p. 40.

the will of Christ and their promises to be faithful to what Christ calls them to do. The democratic process of decision making is the way Congregationalists seek God's purposes for the ministry of their church.

Practice. Congregations hold meetings of its membership to make decisions. Such Congregational meetings are "duly-called" by rules set out in the church's bylaws. There are many reasons a church might call a Congregational Meeting. Many churches, because they are legally incorporated, hold an annual meeting of the congregation to satisfy the corporate requirements of their state. Meetings are called to adopt annual budgets or to elect officers and leaders for committees or other work of the church. They are called to vote upon extending an offer to a new senior minister. They are called to change Articles and Bylaws and to buy and sell property. These are some of the most common reasons, but there are other reasons as well, too numerous to list here. It is Congregational practice for churches to ensure members have a way to call Congregational meeting outside of regularly scheduled ones. The procedures for how such a special meeting of the membership is called are made clear in the church bylaws.

It is not practical for many churches to call Congregational meetings to conduct *all* matters of business that need attention. Because of this, churches often constitute committees, teams, councils, etc. The church membership, through their bylaws, empowers these constituted groups to carry out the day-to-day and month-to-month business of the church. The highest governing body of these groups (sometimes called the Council, the Prudential Board, the Executive Committee) is

said to "represent the church between the meetings of the membership." Congregational governments allow an avenue for members of the church to affirm or overturn decisions made by their representatives between Congregational meetings.

Generally, church meetings rely on Robert's Rules of Order to guide the discussions and make decisions. Some churches prefer to seek consensus first and move to Robert's Rules when consensus cannot be achieved. In all things, meetings should seek the will of Christ through prayer and attention to the movement of the Spirit among the people.

SECTION III: FELLOWSHIP

"And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another…"

Hebrews 10:24 – 25a
New Revised Standard Version

Section III: Fellowship
1. Ministerial Standing

Principle: It is the local church that ordains individuals to the ministry and through which a person is determined to be a Congregational minister.

It is by association and membership with a local church that a person is considered to be a Congregational minister.

Historical Statement. As we have seen, the Puritans and Pilgrims believed that local churches were not only able to manage their own affairs but were required to do so by Christ himself. This meant that they selected their own clergy. Ministers were *elected* from the congregation, by vote, to serve as minister or teacher. Ordination happened upon election. The minister was then installed to that position with prayers and by the laying on of hands. The Cambridge Platform, drawn up by Congregationalists in colonial New England made this sequence of events clear: "Ordination is not to go before, but to follow election."[27] In essence, a member of the congregation was elected and ordained by the congregation to

[27] The *Cambridge Platform* Chapter IX. Section 2, as found in Williston Walker's *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing, 1969, p.215

be their minister. The minister accepted election and was then ordained and installed into the office by prayer and laying on of hands. "Ordination was performed by the local congregation, although it was the election, rather than the formalizing ceremony of ordination, that bestowed ministerial status."[28]

No one was elected as a minister without being a member. To be a member, they agreed to the covenant of the church. While the church conveyed the authority of Christ to the ministers through election, "because of their participation in the church covenant, the range of the authority was limited to the congregation they served."[29] Influential Puritan minister Thomas Hooker wrote of ordination, "There ought to be no ordination of a Minister, at large, *Namely, such as should make him a Pastour without a People."*[30] In other words, when the pastor resigned the office, he was no longer a minister: "When a man was no longer minister of a local church, either by his own resignation or discharge, he lost his standing as a minister and became a layman."[31] He had given up the election.

As Congregationalism grew in America, attitudes and practices of ordination changed, often in response to practical challenges. In particular, two circumstances had a large effect

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[28] John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 1992, p. 97.

[29] Ibid.

[30] From Thomas Hooker's A Survey of the Sum of Church-Discipline as quoted by Williston Walker in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing, 1969, p.145.

[31] Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1942, p. 362.

on the practice of ordination. One was the rise of the missionary movement in America. Missionary efforts as a documented movement began as early as the mid-1600's with John Eliot's mission to the Native Americans. It blossomed with the Haystack Meeting of the early 1800's, which launched the Protestant Missionary Movement. The missionary movement presented this dilemma: if a minister was elected from the congregation to serve the congregation and was not a minister otherwise, how could ministers act as missionaries? There arose a need for ordaining ministers to general service so that they could serve outside of the local church. This happened when "the need arose to send missionaries to the Indians."[32] It became more pressing as Congregationalists looked to send missionary overseas.

The second circumstance to press the idea of general ordination was at the time when America's frontiers were being settled. "Soon it became necessary to commission men who would minister to the small, poverty-stricken groups in new settlements who had not yet established a church and could not afford a settled minister."[33] In response to this need, ordained clergy (who were already meeting together regularly) formed themselves into associations. These associations took on the responsibility of "issuing licenses to those qualified to speak in churches."[34] Licensing became an alternative to ordination to meet the needs of the frontier settlements.

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[32] Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1942, p. 363.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., p. 364.

Because of these changing realities, American Congregationalists began to practice "permanent" ordination where ordination was recognized as valid outside of the local church. Associations now granted "standing" to ministers by accepting them into the Association. However,

> "While ordination had come to be recognized as permanent, the minister was not given any right in a church over which he was not settled as minister. He ranked in the church simply as a lay member. His standing, however, was no longer with the church that ordained him but in an association into whose fellowship he had been received formally by vote."[35]

This practice was formalized by the Council of 1865 which declared that the ministry included all who had been ordained.

In spite of these changes, the power to ordain resided only in the local church, not in any association of ministers or churches. The Council of 1886 clarified that three things were necessary to attain standing in the Congregational ministry, "namely: (1) membership in a Congregational Church; (2) ordination to the Christian ministry; and (3) reception as an ordained minister into the fellowship of the Congregational churches in accordance with the usage of the state or territorial organization of churches in which the applicant may reside."[36]

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[35] Ibid., p. 365.

[36] Ibid., p. 369.

By the early 1900's, Congregational luminaries such as William Barton were declaring that even ordination by local churches had changed:

> "In early Congregationalism it was held that the local church had authority to ordain its own minister. Such ordination is no longer valid. The right of ordination passed from the local church to councils of the churches, and has now passed also to Associations, as permanent ordaining bodies."[37]

This practice of Associations having the power to ordain continued through the first half of the twentieth century.

The churches that formed the NACCC in the 1950's reclaimed ordination as the right and responsibility of the local church only. According to Henry David Gray's *Bluebook of Congregational Usage* of 1966*:*

> "The Congregational Minister is a member of the Congregational Church he serves. His is an office NOT an 'order'. His 'standing' depends wholly on the Church itself. …Since all Church-power in our Congregational Churches resides only and solely in the Churches, no body other than a church ought to confer any Congregational 'standing' whatsoever."[38]

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[37] William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 1915, p. 211.

[38] Henry David Gray, *Bluebook of Congregational Usage*, 1966, p. 32.

Following the pattern that Congregationalists knew best, churches that formed the NACCC also grouped themselves into state and regional associations. But, two significant factors caused the churches of the NACCC to once again practice ordination by the local church only. One was simply pragmatic. Less than 5% of Congregational churches signed on to the NACCC.[39] The reduced size was also felt in the regional and state associations that formed. Put simply, associations affiliated with the NACCC were no longer large enough to carry out duties of ordination and credentialing as they had in prior, unified times.

The other factor was more important. The practice of Associations instead of local churches ordaining clergy created the very hierarchy that early Congregationalists had fought so hard against. It compromised the autonomy of the local church to determine its church affairs.

Theology. By now it should be clear that four major theological principles support that ordination should be done only by the local church.

- The local church is complete and sufficient to determine its own matters of faith and practice
- All members are spiritually equally, described by the phrase "the priesthood of all believers
- Christ alone is the head of the church and the church is where Christ is active.

[39] The 1956 Year Book of the Congregational Christian Churches reported 5,549 member churches. The 1966-1967 Handbook of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches reported 211 full members and 15 Associate or Affiliated member churches.

- Church members are bound together by covenant and therefore are responsible for the spiritual welfare of one another which includes raising up ministers to serve the church.

Practice. In the NACCC, it is the local church that ordains a person to ministry. The pathway to ordination always begins with a vote of the church to ordain a particular individual to Christian service.

There are two pathways to ordination. One pathway ordains only after seeking advice from sister Congregational churches about its intention and desire to ordain. When a church seeks counsel from other churches, an Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage (Vicinage Council) is called. Ordination by Vicinage Council confers the historical designation of "permanent ordination." This type of ordination is recognized among Congregational churches whether or not that individual is serving the ordaining church. The next section will take this up more fully.

The other pathway is when a church ordains without seeking advice. Ordinations performed without consultation from a Vicinage Council are considered "local" ordinations. In a local ordination, the ordination is valid only for service in that particular church. Once that individual no longer serves in the ordaining church, the ordination is no longer recognized in that or any other Congregational church.

No ordination, local or permanent, grants to any minister authority over the local church.

Some state and regional associations still examine the credentials of Congregational ministers and grant standing.

However, most do not. A person is a Congregational minister if they have been duly called by a local church to be its minister. Any person called as minister to an NACCC-member church is listed in the NACCC yearbook as a Congregational Minister. This is not a credential or an endorsement on the part of the NACCC. It is a directory of those who are in ministerial office in Congregational churches. The yearbook of the NACCC states:

> "It is the historic and accepted practice of the NACCC to list the names of those who have ministerial standing in our member churches. The presence or absence of any name on this list should not be construed as either conferring or denying ministerial standing. We make no statement as to the fitness or appropriateness of any minister or any member church by publishing this list."[40]

Technically, if a person is not recognized as a minister by a member church, that person is not a Congregational minister. Ordination must be complemented by the recognition of a local church through call or licensing.

Ordained individuals not serving as a minister in a church may be granted ministerial standing by a local church through membership and licensure. Historically, licensure was granted by clergy associations to students studying to become Congregational ministers who were "in care" of a local church. Today, licensure is granted by the church with local

[40] 2014 NACCC Yearbook, http://www.naccc.org/Yearbook/Default.aspx, accessed January 16, 2014.

Associations providing advice and guidance only. The church may license an individual as a step toward ordination, while providing opportunities for that person to gain experience in preaching and other church functions. But licensure is not just for students. Ordained individuals serving in some capacity outside the local church (e.g., chaplain, seminary faculty, etc.) may also be licensed in recognition of their ministry outside the church. In a very real sense, when a church calls a person to be its minister, or when it licenses a previously ordained person, it affirms and completes the personal call to ministry an individual feels.

In all things it is important to remember that "the ministerial function is not exclusive. It does not shut out the general body of believers from active participation in church worship. No line of separation is drawn between the minister and the laity."[41]

[41] William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 1915, p. 207, quoting Ross, *Church Kingdom*.

Section III: Fellowship
2. Vicinage Councils

Principle: Through Vicinage Councils Congregational churches actively seek advice from one another to aid in discerning the work of the Spirit among them.

Congregational Churches have always valued fellowship with other churches and have depended upon these churches for advice and guidance on important matters.

Historical Statement. As we have noted, Congregational churches were based on the idea that each local church was autonomous and free from outside authority. However, early Congregationalists also believed there needed to be a way for local churches to receive wisdom and direction from other local churches. The Church of England had a system of bishops to enforce correct belief, similar practice, and obedience of the churches. There was no such system for the independent churches Pilgrims and Puritans established. Puritan Robert Browne was the first to write down concerns and procedures of accountability for Puritan and Pilgrim churches. Just as individuals within a church were accountable to each other, Browne believed that local churches

also had duties and responsibilities to each other even though they were independent. He recognized the usefulness of councils,

> "the 'meetings of sundry churches: which are when the weaker churches seek help of the stronger, for deciding or redressing of matters…'"[42]

This idea of churches forming themselves into gatherings for mutual concern and advice was affirmed in colonial New England in 1645 by Thomas Hooker in his work, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline,* and was expressed more fully in the 1646 *Cambridge Platform.* The *Platform* stated that churches fellowship

> "…by way of consultation one with another, when we have occasion to require the judgment and counsel of other churches, touching any person, or cause wherewith they may be better acquainted. …When any church wants light or peace among themselves, it is a way of communion of churches …to meet together by the Elders and other messengers in a synod to consider and argue the points in doubt or difference; and having found out the way of truth and peace to commend the same by their letters and messengers to the churches, whom the same may concern."[43]

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[42] Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 14; language modernized.

[43] The *Cambridge Platform* as found in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 230; language modernized.

This form of church fellowship formalized itself in the practice of calling together area churches for advice. These gatherings came to be known as Ecclesiastical Councils of the Vicinage.

In his 1913 book, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, William Barton explained:

> "Ecclesiastical councils (of the Vicinage) are, first of all, organs for the expression of the fellowship of the churches. From the beginning Congregational churches have held not only to freedom but to fellowship as fundamental to the Congregational system. Forms for the expression of the fellowship have varied, but the council is the oldest and best established of all accredited forms of co-operant action among Congregational Churches. Particularly, councils are called to organize or recognize churches, to ordain or install or recognize ministers, and to give advice in matters of church life and administration." [44]

While the Councils carry no power over the local church, they are not without moral persuasion, according to Henry Martyn Dexter, writing in 1874, before Barton.

> "Councils have no authority whatsoever – properly so called. Yet, there is a moral and spiritual weight in their decisions, growing out of the facts - that when good men, the representatives of Christian churches, meet, and in the fear of God and with invocation

[44] William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 1915, p. 258.

> of the wisdom of the Spirit, prayerfully investigate a point, and deliberately make up their minds concerning it, there is great inherent probability that they will be right; and that since this way of Councils is Christ's appointed way out of difficulty for the local Church, it is reasonable to hope and expect that his special guidance – as its Great Head – will make itself appear in their decisions, when reached as carefully, humbly, thoughtfully, patiently, and prayerfully, as they always ought to be. So great, therefore, is the weight of probability in favor of this rightness of the advice of such a Council, and so strong the presumption that it ought to be followed by those to whom it is given, that nothing but the clearest evidence of its being in error, can justify the honest followers of Christ in failing to comply with it."[45]

Theology. For early Congregationalists, counsel and advice sought among the churches was a practice found in scripture, "as the church of Antioch consulted with the Apostles, and Elders of the church at Jerusalem, about the question of circumcision of the gentiles, and about the false teachers that broached that doctrine."[46] Congregationalists believed it was "a matter of just offence both to the Lord Jesus and to other churches" if a church was divided within itself and sought not

[45] Henry Martyn Dexter, *Congregationalism: What it is. Whence It is. And How it Works*, 1874, pp. 64-65.

[46] The *Cambridge Platform* as found in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 230; language modernized.

the advice of other churches.[47] They also believed such advice received and taken did not compromise their autonomy as a church.

Practice. We will take up the broader implications of fellowship in the next section. Here we will focus on the purposes and practices of the Vicinage Council today. Vicinage Councils are used for:

- examination of candidates for ordination
- introduction of ordained ministers before installation to a new call in order to introduce the person to the fellowship
- counsel and advice for churches facing challenges such as conflict or division, for which they seek clarity
- the organization and recognition of a new church (although this last is rarely practiced as few new churches are being established).

The historic practice of Vicinage Councils called for the purpose of correction or rebuking is no longer in use. The most commonly called Vicinage Council is for ordination. The next most common is for installation of a new minister.

A Vicinage Council is called by a local church, [48] acknowledging its shared fellowship with these other Congregational churches. Because these churches have been in fellowship together, the representatives of the vicinage can offer wisdom to the church grounded in their knowledge of

[47] Ibid.

[48] William Barton outlines circumstances by which others call a council, but many depend upon a fellowship greater in numbers than we have today. See William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 1915, pp. 258 – 259.

each other. The request for an Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage is so important to Congregational fellowship that it should be regarded as a high priority and sacred duty in our Congregational Way. Invited churches should make every concerted effort to participate in the council. Those who attend the council become a vehicle for the Holy Spirit to guide the church that is seeking discernment and advice.

In Vicinage Councils called for the purpose of ordination, a church asks the council representatives to "examine" the candidate it is proposing for ordination, to confirm or redirect its decision. The holding of a Vicinage Council also helps the new minister establish and sustain a relationship with the churches of the association.

> "All neighboring Congregational churches have an interest in his personal ability, discretion, and soundness in the faith. It is, therefore, a prompting of the cooperative and Congregational spirit, that, when a Church has made choice of its Pastor, it invite its sister churches to assemble, by their Pastors and appointed lay delegates, to review their action, and examine the candidate for their Pastorship, that so – being satisfied of the suitableness of both – they may pronounce the benediction of the fraternity of the churches upon the union, and extend the right hand of cordial fellowship from that fraternity to the newcomer."[49]

[49] Henry Martyn Dexter, *Congregationalism: What it is. Whence It is. And How it Works*, 1874, pp. 137 – 138.

This is also the rationale for calling a Vicinage Council for a person who is already ordained but is being installed to a church as its new minister.

Over the years, there has been much discussion about what it means to "examine" a candidate for ordination. Early Congregationalists made sure the candidate upheld the Christian beliefs of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). This Confession of Faith was so accepted as the norm that Congregational authors describing the principles and practices of Congregationalism in the Cambridge Platform mentioned it only in passing:

> "This synod having perused, and considered (with much gladness of heart, and thankfulness to God) the confession of faith published of late by the Reverend Assembly in England, do judge it to be very holy, orthodox and judicious in all matters of faith: and do therefore freely and fully consent thereunto, for the substance thereof."[50]

Today, the wide interpretation of scripture, informed by the Holy Spirit and individual conscience, results in no consensus about what constitutes "right doctrine." Many have questioned if the Vicinage Council called for the purpose of ordination is anything other than a "rubber stamp" of an action the church has already determined to take, regardless of the findings and friendly advice of the Vicinage Council. If "what is sought is not the examination of the candidate with a

[50] The *Cambridge Platform* as found in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 194; language modernized.

view to accepting or rejecting him (because) this is beyond the power of the Council"[51] then what important purpose does the council serve in advising the local church?

The advice of a Vicinage Council for ordination to a church falls into three outcomes:

- Confirm the church in its choice of candidate and recommend proceeding to ordination with the affirmation of the Vicinage Council
- Confirm the church in its choice of candidate for its particular congregation and recommend local ordination
- Suggest to the church that the candidate would benefit from more training and experience prior to any ordination. Options might include licensure, mentoring, entering the lay ministry training program or other forms of education

In all three cases, if the candidate does not come from the Congregational tradition, it is proper for the Vicinage Council to recommend the candidate engage in a Congregational History and Polity seminar or engage in the online course of the same within a year of ordination or licensure.

A Vicinage Council does not accept or reject the candidate being examined, *per se*. Rather, at the request of the church, the Council is engaging the candidate to give the church the benefit of their collective wisdom and knowledge. As such, members of the Vicinage, implicitly or explicitly, explore these questions:

[51] Henry David Gray, *Bluebook of Congregational Usage*, 1966, p. 35.

- Does the candidate express a clear sense of call to the ministry that also compellingly expresses God's authentic role in that call?
- Does the candidate express theological consistency, whether that theology meets some members' own beliefs or not?
- Does the candidate's expressed theology fit with the theological outlook of the sponsoring church and of a portion of NACCC member churches?
- Does the candidate seem to approach ministry with a sense of compassion for others?
- Where does the candidate believe authority in Congregationalism resides?
- Are the candidate's credentials adequate for the call the church is extending, if applicable?
- Do the candidate's credentials reflect the education, training, experience, and/or gifts required for engaging in effective pastoral ministry?
- Does the candidate have a good grasp of Congregationalism and its implications for ministry?
- Can the candidate articulate the relationship of the minister and the people that is unique to Congregationalism?
- Is the candidate committed to participating with reasonable regularity in fellowship with other clergy and churches in the regional, state, and national Associations? (It is understood that "reasonable regularity" will vary due to practical matters such as geography from region to region)
- Other questions as the council members deem appropriate.

All of these questions are exploring the larger questions: has the church discerned this candidate's gifts for ministry well enough to affirm their decision to ordain?

Once a Vicinage Council has given the church its thoughtful advice, it is up to the church to prayerfully decide what to do next. The church is free to reject the advice of the Vicinage Council. However, it is a serious matter to do so given that the church asked for the advice, presumably to be guided by it. As noted above, in convening a Vicinage Council, the local church is granting moral weight to the proceedings, believing that wisdom will be gained from these Christian colleagues.

There are reasons other than ordination to convene an Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage. Churches often find it useful to convene a Vicinage Council to air a problem or challenge and get advice on how to resolve or manage it. Some churches will ask for help in charting a course for their future. Occasionally, a church may find itself in a conflict that can be best mediated by a Vicinage Council. Councils have also been used for the purpose of establishing a new church. However, "councils called for the purposes of ordination are by far the most common councils."[52] Always, "the churches through their delegates meet to share with the Church that has called the Council, their experiences with Christ, and to offer what they believe the Will of Christ might be in the particular situation confronting the Council."[53]

In the past, associations of churches or ministers sometimes convened Vicinage Councils to discipline local churches in matters of doctrine or practice. Today, this is seen as infringing on the autonomy of the local church and is no

[52] Hugo Pruter, *The Theology of Congregationalism*, 1957, p. 73

[53] Ibid., p. 64.

longer practiced. It is up to the local church to ask for a Vicinage Council and to state the business to be considered.

For more on how to call and conduct an Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage, see the section on Documents to Consult.

Section III: Fellowship
3. The Way of Fellowship

Principle: While each Congregational church is autonomous, it reaches its fullest expression as a Congregational church in Christ only in fellowship with other autonomous Congregational churches.

From the very inception of Congregationalism, fellowship with one another was a key marker of being a Congregational Church.

Historical Statement. The seeds for cooperative fellowships of Congregational churches were planted in its earliest expressions, in the works of Robert Browne in 1582.[54] As early as 1637 in New England, the first called gathering of churches represented by clergy and laity was held in Newtowne, Massachusetts. It was called by the ministers "to consider 'eighty-two erroneous opinions and nine unwholesome expressions.'"[55] Reportedly, the participants enjoyed the experience so much that they proposed meeting yearly. But

[54] See Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 12.

[55] Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1942, pp. 183.

the magistrates who controlled the funds that paid for the meeting rejected that idea. However, other gatherings eventually followed, the next being the Cambridge Synod of 1646 – 1648. This gathering resulted in the Cambridge Platform, the first document to outline Congregational practice in America. As time went on, Churches called on others to associate together based on geography, generally in county or state gatherings. Cooperative gatherings became more frequent and formalized. Ministers met together to discuss the state of the church. Beyond meeting to give advice and counsel there were other matters to bring churches together. They recognized that some common interests shared by all of the churches could be realized only by willing cooperation. Associations of churches collaborated to establish colleges, to settle churches on the frontier during the westward expansion of the 1800's, to license ministers and to promote missionary evangelism, to name a few.

As these associations experienced the value of working together on projects too large to be done by a single church, there was a call for a gathering of all Congregational Churches. This resulted in the first national meeting in Albany, New York in 1852. The next national gathering occurred in Boston, Massachusetts in 1865. In 1871, at a national council meeting in Oberlin, Ohio, these gatherings were formalized by the adoption of a constitution that created the National Council of the Congregational Churches in the United States. Its purpose was to "express and foster their substantial unity in doctrine, polity and work; and to consult upon the common interests of all the churches, their duties in the work of evangelization, the united development of their

resources and their relations at all parts of the kingdom of Christ."[56]

Even though more and more associations established themselves over time, they were not easily created. Always present was the fear of compromising the autonomy of the local church through such affiliations. The Cambridge Platform addressed this fear stating that the function of church gatherings was "…not to exercise Church-censures in way of discipline nor any other act of church-authority or jurisdiction…"[57] Over the years, both in England and America, the major documents of associations of Congregational churches made similar statements, the notable exception being the Saybrook Platform of 1708.[58]

The founding Constitution of the National Council (from which the NACCC descends) clearly stated that the independence of the local church could not be taken away:

> "The churches, therefore, while establishing this National Council for the furtherance of the common interests and work of all the churches, do maintain the Scriptural and inalienable right of each church to self-government and administration; and this National Council shall never exercise

[56] From the accepted *Constitution of the National Council of the Congregational Churches in the United States* as quoted in Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *The History of American Congregationalism*, 1942, p. 213.

[57] The *Cambridge Platform* as found in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 234

[58] These documents include the Savoy Declaration of 1658 and the English Declaration of 1833, both British documents. They also include the Burial Hill Declaration of 1865 in America, and others.

> legislative or judicial authority, nor consent to act as a council of reference."[59]

Similar statements are also found in the institutional documents of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.[60]

Even as these historical statements were clear about the preserving of church autonomy, they were equally clear about the purpose and benefits of churches joining together. The Cambridge Platform cites six reasons:

- mutual care
- consultation
- admonition
- participation in communion
- recommendation
- relief and succor

The Articles of Association of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches cites these reasons:

- for churches to consult with and advise together on matters of common concern
- to provide closer fellowship and unity in spiritual matters
- to aid the continuance and growth of the Congregational Way
- to carry-on, and supervise cooperative activities.[61]

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[59] The *Constitution of the National Council*, proposed and accepted at the assembly in Oberlin, Ohio in 1871 as quoted in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, p. 573

[60] See the preamble of the Articles of Association and the statement on Referendum Councils of the same. From the 2014 Yearbook on line, http://www.naccc.org/Yearbook/Default.aspx, accessed January 21, 2014.

Theology. The important belief that Congregational churches are under the headship of Christ alone cannot be overstated. A church

> "ceases to be a Congregational Church when it denies the Headship of Christ, no longer conducts its affairs by congregational meeting during which it seeks the revelation of Jesus Christ or permits the decisions of the Church to be overruled by a bishop, synod, conference or other authoritarian body with which it may have affiliated."[62]

Additionally, a Council or Association "is not a Church, and its members do not live in an intimate fellowship with one another…"[63] Delegates to Associations are "…interpreters or ambassadors from the Churches. Their function is to make known to the other Churches of the Association the Will of Christ as it has been revealed to their respective Churches."[64]

The reason for autonomous churches gathering in Associations or Vicinage Councils is stated in the Cambridge Platform as follows:

> "Although Churches be distinct, and therefore may not be confused one with another: and equal, and therefore have not

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[61] From the 2014 Yearbook on line, http://www.naccc.org/Yearbook/Default.aspx, accessed January 21, 2014.

[62] Hugo Pruter, *The Theology of Congregationalism*, 1957. p. 72.

[63] Ibid., p. 65.

[64] Ibid., p. 73.

> dominion one over another: yet all the churches ought to preserve *Church-communion* one with another, because they are all united unto Christ, not only as a mystical, but as a political head: when is derived a *communion* suitable thereunto."[65]

Practice. Councils and Associations of the past took on large ministries that a single church could not otherwise do on its own, such as the founding of schools, the promotion of missionary concerns, and the establishing of new churches, to name a few. So it is today. Churches affiliate one with another through state and regional Associations and nationally through the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Churches come together to share in the responsibilities of caretaking the Congregational Way through support of seminarians, endorsement of Missions, planting new churches, and ministerial services, including the process of finding a new minister when a church is seeking to fill their pulpit. Associations host gatherings once or twice a year so that churches may learn from each other, discuss topics of mutual concern, plan events and oversee their work together. The business of Associations is in the hands of the churches, represented by delegates at duly called meetings. In most if not all Associations, clergy and laity are treated as equal representatives for voting purposes but each Association structures their representation differently. Lay representation is highly valued but often, to our great misfortune, underrepresented compared to clergy participation in such

[65] The *Cambridge Platform* as found in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Second Printing 1969, pp. 229 – 230; language modernized.

gatherings. There is no distinction made with regard to the Annual Meeting and Conference of the NACCC between clergy and lay representation. Each church is allotted one delegate and one alternate, one of whom votes when required.

Citing the rich and deep history of churches meeting in councils and associations, Congregational luminary A. Vaughn Abercrombie, wrote

> "The historic phrase 'the duty of association' has been held to be equal in importance to 'the right of autonomy' in classic definitions of Congregationalism. . . . Where other polities have relied upon bishops, canon laws, and paternalistic successions to create catholicity, and to maintain ecclesiastical order, we have chosen to depend entirely upon voluntary 'association in Christ' to be both the guiding principle of our common life, and the basis of our polity and cooperative activity."[66]

The mutual encouragement, education, friendship and sense of purpose that arises when churches meet together cannot be overstated and should be held in high regard among all Congregational churches by both clergy and laity. Churches that do not participate in such gatherings often find themselves struggling in isolation. This becomes especially apparent if a crisis or acute need arise in the local church. The wellspring of support that churches gain one from another helps them remain vital while adapting to changing times and

[66] A. Vaughn Abercrombie, *The Congregational Christian Way of Inter-Church Fellowship*, 1988, p. 1.

circumstances. Such association also increases the reach of the church's good beyond its immediate influence, even to "the ends of the earth."

SECTION IV: THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay side every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith…"

Hebrews 12:1-3a
New Revised Standard Version

Section IV: The Cloud of Witnesses
1. Resources to Consult

Principle: There is "yet more light to break forth from God's glorious Word" and wisdom in the "cloud of Witnesses" that has gone before us.

Because our heritage is so rich and our tradition deep, much has been written about Congregationalism. Scholars have researched it. Ministers have preached about it. Laity have practiced it. But it is the church that has embodied it.

Historical Statement. The information in this document has relied heavily on the writings of others, including documents dating back to the 1500's. Congregationalism is a dynamic movement, and we look back for the express purpose of moving forward with wisdom, understanding, and commitment to the Congregational Way.

Theology. Because Christ is the head of the church, each local church is in a dynamic process of understanding the will and purposes of Christ for their particular covenanted and gathered church. When Congregationalists meet together and discover how others are experiencing the dynamic rule of Christ in their congregations, they find help and encouragement for their own churches. The covenanted community under Christ and the meeting with other churches

for advice and encouragement describes the faith, freedom and fellowship that forms the foundation of the Congregational Way.

Practice. In addition to works cited, the following is a list of helpful resources for churches in their practice of Congregationalism. Many of these resources are available at the NACCC office: P.O. Box 288, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, 53154; 1-800-262-1620.

Calling A Congregational Minister: A Handbook for Pastoral Search Committees.

Available online at http://www.naccc.org/CMSUploads/1080_Calling%20a%20Congregational%20Minister.pdf

This web-based resource guides search committees through the process of searching for their next minister.

The Congregational Way Pamphlet Series, Various Authors.

Available on line at http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregationalism.html

This set of 6 tri-fold brochures highlights some unique aspects of Congregationalism

- *With One Sound of the Heart* by Howard J. Conn. Topic: Fellowship
- *The Congregational Christian Way of Life* by Phil R. Jackson. Topic: Church
- *New Testament Tests for Congregationalism* by Henry David Gray. Topic: Scripture
- *The Congregational Way*, by Steven H. Ware Bailey. Topic: History and Legacy
- *The Biblical Basis of Congregationalism* by Harry R. Butman. Topic: Scriptural Warrant
- *The Meaning of the Meeting House* by Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. Topic: Church Building

The Congregational Christian Way of Inter-Church Fellowship by A. Vaughn Abercrombie.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregationalism.html

This small volume focuses on the importance and reward of fellowship with other Congregational churches, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

The Congregational Way of Life by Arthur A. Rouner, Jr.

Available from the NACCC office.

This book is a favorite Adult Sunday School volume. Rouner not only provides a brief history of Congregationalism but also lifts up the Spiritual richness of the Congregational Way. It contains a helpful study guide by George W. Brown.

Congregational Worshipbook by Henry David Gray.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregational-worshipbook.html

This worship resource book first appeared in 1978 and is full of orders of worship, prayers, special ceremonies and other worship aids developed over years of practice by Dr. Gray. This also has a section on how to call and conduct a Vicinage Council.

Congregationalism 101 DVD by Steven Peay.

Available from the NACCC or via web:
http://www.naccc.org/Resources/Publications.aspx

In this one-hour video Dr. Steven Peay presents a lecture on basic Congregationalism. This DVD is suitable for new member and confirmation classes and anyone else desiring a brief historical overview.

From Call to Settlement by Lloyd M. Hall, Jr.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/pastoral-search.html

This booklet traces the processes and steps by which Congregational Christian Churches recognize and nurture an individual's call to ministry, including procedures for licensing and ordaining. This also contains helpful information on calling and conducting vicinage councils.

How to Gather and Order A Congregational Christian Church by A. Vaughn Abercrombie.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregationalism.html

This small booklet takes readers through the steps of gathering a new church, from owning a covenant, to the creation of bylaws, to the calling and installing of the minister and teacher, and receiving the hand of fellowship of other churches.

Hymns for a Pilgrim People Hymnal, Rev. Cynthia Bacon, chair of the Hymnal Committee.

Available from GIA Publishing.

This new hymnal was created specifically for Congregational churches drawing on many beloved hymns from the much-used Pilgrim Hymnal and updated with contemporary music. It includes the psalter and service music.

The Lord's Free People by Harry R. Butman.

Available from the NACCC office.

This slim volume traces the history of Congregationalism, including the controversy that enveloped Congregational churches during their discussions of merging with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, a controversy that eventually led to the formation of the NACCC.

NACCC brochure.

Available from the NACCC office, free upon request.
An 8 ½" x 11" brochure designed to introduce your church members to the NACCC.

NACCC Membership Handbook by D. Elizabeth Mauro.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/naccc-church-handbook.html
This resource describes the opportunities, requirements, and relationships that are part of being a member church in the NACCC.

Online History and Polity Course.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/history--polity-on-line-course.html
This course is designed in two levels for all people who wish to delve more deeply into Congregational History and Polity. Level I is especially aimed at church leaders and laity. It can be used with membership or confirmation classes. Level II is the advanced class for church leaders and clergy who are serving Congregational churches but who have come from other faith traditions.

Principles and Practices: The Congregational Way of the Churches of the National Association, by Lloyd M. Hall, Jr. and Karl D. Schimpf.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregationalism.html
This 12 page booklet summarizes the basic principles which are distinctive to Congregationalism and touches upon the way in which the churches practice fellowship in the NACCC.

Searching for a Minister: A Church Guide to Best Practices.

Available online at
http://www.naccc.org/CMSUploads/1078_Searching%20for%20a%20Minister%20Overview%20Best%20Practices%207-2012.pdf

This resource educates pastoral search committees on the best practices when searching for a minister.

What it means to be a Member of a Congregational Christian Church by Henry David Gray and revised by David L. Gray and Douglas L. Gray.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/congregationalism.html

This one page pamphlet is designed to introduce the Congregational Way of church to new and prospective members. It is also available from the NACCC.

Worship Resources for Congregational Christian Churches by Steven Peay and Shawn Stapleton.

Available online at
http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/worship-resources-for-churches.html

This resource is a wealth of prayers, calls to worship, and sample service orders.

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