

THE VISION OF THE CAMBRIDGE PLATFORM

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The Work of History

"Not all truth will be discovered in what
is to come; some must be recalled
from what has been forgotten."

- David J. Wolpe, *In Speech and in Silence*

Do you know that we are practicing our polity today? Polity is about the way we organize ourselves. To speak about polity is to speak about how people are related to one another. Congregational polity refers to the self-governance of local churches and the relationships among the individual congregations.

This second Conference on the Free Church is one way of organizing lateral relationships. As it turns out, our gathering is not an innovation. From 1842 to 1863 there was an annual public convention of Unitarians from New England and the Atlantic Seaboard. Historian Conrad Wright informs us that each meeting was separately organized at a different location, and included both laity and clergy,¹ Known as the "Autumnal Conventions," they would normally take place early in October for two days. The agenda included worship and the discussion of resolutions surrounding a particular issue. The conventions provided the opportunity for education, clarification, intellectual persuasion and the promotion of understanding among the congregations. The Autumnal Conventions were replaced by the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches in 1865 and it merged with the American Unitarian Association in 1925.

Do you know where the first Autumnal Convention was held? Right here in Worcester! You need not feel uninformed if you have never heard of Unitarian public conventions from the last century. It is difficult to remember what others have forgotten or neglected as not important. I am not convinced, however, that there is a vibrant sense of historical consciousness among Unitarian Universalists. It is not exactly a strong aspect of the American personality either.

This past summer the *Pensacola News Journal* (7/5/98) reported the results of a survey commissioned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for the purpose of discovering how much children and adults know about history as they prepared to celebrate the Fourth of July. Two-thirds of the kids aged nine to twelve and one-third of the adults could not identify who said "Give me liberty or give me death." Only three out of ten of those surveyed knew where the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are set forth, and perhaps most astonishing, more than one-third of adults

thought that Abraham Lincoln was among the founders of our nation. -Henry Ford's declaration that history is bunk may be destined to triumph in the American mind.

Before it does, let me quickly ask a question. Why should we remember and honor the 350th anniversary of the Cambridge Platform? Two responses come to mind. We learn about the history of our religious roots for the same reason that we find it instructive to understand our individual family origins. In that work we discover something about ourselves. Since the Cambridge Platform represents the original polity of those congregational churches that evolved into the nineteenth century Unitarian churches, we have a direct historical link to it. Furthermore, since how we relate ourselves in religious community is an expression of our corporate personality and common values, the history of that polity gives insight into our identity. Remembering what is true about that history enriches the bonds of our fellowship. It is how we receive our heritage. It is how we claim identity. It is how we create meaning.

The second reason to look backward is because from that perspective we might gain a better idea about our direction for the future. Let me illustrate with a story.

Back in the Middle Ages, an English knight was returning to the castle one evening after a long, hard day of skirmishes. His armor was dented, his helmet was askew and the plume broken off, his horse was limping, and he was listing to one side of the saddle. The lord of the manor saw him coming and went out to greet him. "You look ghastly! What has befallen you, Sir Albert?" he asked.

The disheveled knight straightened himself up and said, "Oh, Sire, I have been striving in your behalf all day, robbing and pillaging and burning the towns of your enemies to the west."

"You've been doing what?" asked the astonished nobleman. The knight repeated his statement, after which the nobleman cried, "But I haven't any enemies to the west."

"Oh!" exclaimed the perplexed knight. Then after a thoughtful pause he added, "Well, you do now."

So it is that enthusiasm is not enough for embarking on a journey. You need a sense of direction, and an understanding of why you may or may not wish to go that way.

A congregation or an association of congregations without historic memory must constantly re-invent itself. It has also been noted that the Achilles' heel of liberal movements is the impetus to grow progressively liberal and thus reject what has gone on before. We remember what happened 350 years ago so that we may value what has evolved to serve us, and to get a compass reading for the future. We remember a past

vision so that we may better create our own.

The Errand into the Wilderness

"We must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." - John Winthrop in a speech to his companions aboard *the Arbella*.

The story of congregationalism in America begins with a journey. It begins with men, women and children leaving home. It is not an easy thing to leave home and make a hazardous journey across 3,000 miles of ocean to a land characterized as a wilderness. It requires material and spiritual resources. It requires a vision and a sense of direction.

For the Separatist Puritans like the famous Pilgrims at Plymouth, the journey that eventually brought them to America was one compelled by the urgent desire to establish a congruent religious life free from the corrupting influence of society and the Church of England. For the Puritans who settled the Mass Bay Colony and spread out into New England, the journey was less a triumph of separation and more an experiment in the continuing reform of church and society that originated with the Protestant Reformation. There was an element of sorrow in the parting for while they believed that the Church of England needed further reform they also wanted to preserve its unity. The errand into the wilderness was not to establish a "new" England, and certainly not a new nation or a new Christian sect. The first Puritan settlers did not consider themselves to be Americans, nor should we imagine them to be like the patriots of the eighteenth-century or the liberal Christians of the nineteenth-century.

One of the early Puritan ministers of Massachusetts, Thomas Shepard, offered eight reasons for making the journey to New England:

1. I saw no call to any other place in Old England nor way of subsistence in peace and comfort to me and my family. 2. Diverse people in Old England of my dear friends desired me to goe to N.E. there to live together,... 3. I saw the Lord departed from England when Mr. Hooker and Mr. Cotton were gone, and I saw the hearts of most of the godly set and bent that way, and I did think I should feele many miseries if I stayed behind. 4. My judgement was then convinced 'not only of the evil of ceremonies, but of mixt communion 5. I saw it my duty to desire the fruition of all God's ordinances, which I could not enjoy in Old England. 6. My dear wife did much long to see me settled there in peace and so put me to it. 7. Although it was true I should stay and suffer for Christianity, yet I saw no rule for it now the Lord has opened a doore of escape, otherwise I did incline much to stay and suffer especially after our sea stormes. 8. Tho' my ends were mixt and I looked much to my own quiet, yet the Lord let me see the glory of those liberties in N. England.²

The list illustrates how the Puritans looked at the world with a God-centered vision.

They did not separate the sacred and the secular. Everyday life and history belonged to God. The "godly" life was being frustrated at home. The English Church still contained the remnants of Catholic liturgy and hierarchy. King Charles I and Bishop William Laud refused to tolerate nonconformity, and so the great migration of Puritans to Massachusetts Bay began in 1630.

In the Puritan mind the providence of God was at work. The hermeneutical question the Puritans applied to all things attempted to discern what God was revealing.³ The divine finger pointed to New England. Saints of the Church Militant, they now saw a mission to finish the Reformation free of hindrance from the Crown and the Anglican Church. The vision was to build a model city, a Holy Commonwealth. The blueprint for the ideal society was in the Bible, specifically in biblical covenants and the organization of the primitive Church. The vision for the City on the Hill was not based on the ideals of religious tolerance and a pluralistic society. It was fueled by a sense of moral superiority and the hope of being the instruments of God in the closing chapter of divine history. The City on the Hill was to be a lighthouse facing east for all of England and Europe to see. By its bright example God could complete the stalled revolution and make perfect the Church of England.

The errand into the wilderness was driven by a religious vision that was biblical and prophetic. The journey to New England was the first stage of fulfilling the mission. The next challenge was to frame the civil and religious institutions of the City on the Hill.

The process that defined the form of the churches in New England culminated in the Cambridge Platform of 1648. Though that document was not a statement of secession from England or her church, it was an expression of self-differentiation. That pattern of church polity known as the Congregational Way would continue to evolve past the original vision of its framers.

Four things happened that re-shaped the primary impulse for the errand into the wilderness. (1) Events in England moved the Puritan agenda there away from congregationalism and toward toleration. Instead of being the forecast of things to come, the City on the Hill became an isolated experiment. (2) Each new generation became more distant from the motivating factors of the Mass Bay founders. No matter how pious the children and the grandchildren of the original saints were, they found it difficult to experience the converting power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Testimony of such an experience was necessary for admission into the inner circle of the church. (3) Material success dampened the enthusiasm for building the ideal religious society. The elders of Puritan orthodoxy railed against the corruption of prosperity, but in the end the

secular city demanded space on the hill. (4) The wilderness provided space not only for the elect of God. The City on the Hill included a growing number of settlers busy with errands that did not include the Puritan vision.

The Politics of Polity

"Spiritual life is more than what we believe, it also includes how we relate." - Jim Wallis, *Who Speaks for God?*

What was the importance of polity for creating the City on the Hill? The short answer is authority. The Puritans were Protestants and the Reformation that began in the sixteenth-century was a rebellion against the Roman Catholic religious monopoly. Like Pandora's Box, the breaking open of the Catholic control of Christianity in the Western world changed forever that world. Authority spilled out and Rome could not gather it back again.

Catholicism vested the Church and its Pope with final authority. For Protestants the infallible source of authority was the Bible. The problem with the Pope is that he is human. The problem with the Bible is that humans must interpret it. Protestantism splintered into major and minor sects with a variety of church organizations. In seventeenth-century England the state church was Episcopal, placing authority in the bishops. The Puritans wanted to replace the Episcopal hierarchy with either a Presbyterian or Congregational form of church government. In the Presbyterian system control of the churches was placed in an association of ministers. It also represented a centralized form of polity. Congregationalism turned the aristocratic models upside down by placing authority in the local church. Those who supported Episcopal polity were monarchists who feared the masses. Those who supported Presbyterian polity were limited monarchists and republicans who did not trust the masses. Those who supported Congregational polity believed in a democracy of the elect and were therefore suspicious of any authority that would control the saints of the Church gathered in a local congregation.⁴

The Puritans were in agreement with the Calvinist doctrine of election. That doctrine taught that the true Church was composed of those people God had chosen to bless with his grace. Only God knew for sure who the predestined saints were. The wider Church included those who professed Christ but who were not elected. Certain Puritan leaders made polity important to doctrine by advocating that there could be no true reform of the Church without separating the elect from those who had not received the gift of grace.

Congregationalism was the solution. It differed from Presbyterianism in two ways. Instead of having geographical churches for the public, it proposed confessing churches with membership comprised of the visible saints. Evidence of election rested in the ability to demonstrate a pious life and make a public confession of faith. The gathered

saints constituted a true reformed *church* by joining in a covenant that promised allegiance to Christ as the divine monarch of the congregation. The covenant could only be authentic if it was voluntary. This gave the second distinction to the congregational form of polity. It might be called the Priesthood of all Saints. Since the elect were under the direct grace of the Holy Spirit working through them, and joined themselves in a visible church by means of a voluntary covenant, each gathered community was sufficient to itself with no need of ecclesiastical supervision,⁵

The theory of congregationalism did not need to be invented by the Puritans who settled Mass Bay. They understood that a reformed church had a limited membership of the elect bound by a covenant to Christ and each other. This provided for both religious uniformity and congregational autonomy. They also understood that the civil government was to be populated by godly men and that the power of state was a proper instrument for protecting the churches from heresy. Indeed, in the Mass Bay Colony only the elect could vote and hold public office. The clergy were not allowed to serve in the civil government but they were often called upon to give their advice on major matters and proved to be powerful allies of the magistrates. The City on the Hill was at times difficult to distinguish from a theocracy.

The paradox is that a church restrictive in its membership and intolerant toward dissent changed the dynamics of authority in novel ways. Though the elect were few compared to the general population, they did not gain their status by wealth or nobility or privilege. God chose the saints, and thus the doors to church membership and the civil franchise, however narrow, were open to those who could give evidence of their election. The saints of the church were a society of equals. The clergy were members of the elect before being called out from among equals to be ordained. Though the minister of a congregation exercised enormous power once placed in office, that power was not absolute. So traditional authority was altered in two significant ways. First, authority was dispersed to the local congregations through Christ. Second, authority was dispersed to the members of the local congregation who were responsible to each other through their covenant. The chosen elders were capable of being authoritarian, yet the membership was capable in active or passive ways of expressing the power inherent in the principle of the consent of the governed.

The Cambridge Platform

"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 9:5-6)

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."
(I Corinthians 12:27) - Two of the proof texts used for Chap.II.6 of the Platform defining "A Congregational church."

One of the immediate concerns the leaders of the Mass Bay Colony faced was how to create the City on the Hill without inviting interference from the English authorities. Distance and the internal turmoil of the homeland were helpful. To these advantages were added two more. The most important was the unusual feat of bringing the charter to New England. The seat of government was left unspecified when the charter was granted on March 4, 1629. The normal procedure for trading companies was to maintain a headquarters in England while the settlers in the colony operated under a local government. The Puritan leaders were able to take advantage of the omission in the charter and carried the seat of government to Mass Bay. This enabled them to make decisions without the prying eye of the Crown. The second careful management of the errand into the wilderness was the intentional effort not to leave a paper trail. The churches organized and the government developed without creating public documents that would raise questions back in England. For a time the experiment was safe.

What, then, caused the Puritans to unveil their church organization in the Cambridge Platform? Four factors were at work. (1) One was the challenge of persuasive clerical and lay dissidents. Roger Williams had been expelled for his insistence that the Mass Bay churches should separate from the Church of England. Even more difficult was the controversy caused by Anne Hutchinson and her emphasis On the Covenant of Grace. The first gathering of ministers in a synod or convention was called in 1637 to settle the matter. One way to discourage dissent and to challenge it is to have a clearly defined position codified in a document that has received the blessings of both the churches and the civil government.

(2) Another agitating element was the threat of Presbyterianism. The threat came from within and without. The second convention of ministers met in 1643 to consider what to do about the Presbyterian leaning congregations of Newbury and Hingham. Because the council possessed only the power of consultation, there was little it could do outside of applying peer pressure on the wayward churches. The Presbyterian oriented colonists who were not allowed to participate in the civil government decided to ask the English officials who managed the charters to intervene. The Mass Bay leaders encountered another problem because the Puritan movement in England had taken a

turn toward Presbyterianism. Letters of inquiry had been received concerning the development of the New England Way. A formal statement of polity would be the first line of defense.

(3) A third tension was the growing number of congregational churches. It would be helpful to clarify the relationship of the churches to one another and to the colonial government.

(4) The fourth disturbing tendency was the one explicitly stated for the calling of a synod in 1646. At issue were the criteria for *church* membership and baptism. Normative practice provided two standards for membership as a saint. One must display knowledge of faith and doctrine, and lead a blameless or pious life. In order to tighten up the qualifications for membership and make the reformed *Church* more pure, a third qualification was added in New England. A person must convince the keepers of the church doors of a regenerative experience. Unless the power of the Holy Spirit could be demonstrated there was doubt about whether God's grace was in operation. This presented a two-fold problem. The lesser problem was what qualified as a regenerative experience because of its subjective nature. The more difficult problem that plagued the churches for years to come was what to do with the children and the grandchildren of the founding saints. Should they be baptized as children and mature in the fellowship and instruction of the local congregation? What if they become model citizens and own the covenant of the local church but cannot give testimony to an experience of the Holy Spirit? Should they be excluded from the most precious symbol of membership---communion? How will the local church maintain its membership if the progeny of the saints cannot meet the regenerative test?

So, at the urging of a group of ministers, the civil government sent out a call to all the New England churches to send their representatives for a synod to meet in Cambridge at Harvard College, the only building large enough to hold such a gathering. From the beginning there was resistance. It had two sources. One challenge came from the deputies, the elected representatives from the various plantations. They asked what ecclesiastic right the government possessed for calling the autonomous churches together for a synod, and they contended that since the court intended to approve the deliberations of the convention there was the danger of centralizing power away from the independent congregations.⁶ A compromise was reached between the deputies and the magistrates. The deputies recognized that the civil covenant required the government to be responsible to God for the purity of the churches, and the magistrates returned the favor by amending the call for a synod so that it only expressed the "desire" of the court for the meeting.⁷

The second source of dissent became apparent when two of the oldest and most prominent churches declined to send delegates to Cambridge. Records of the debate in Salem have not survived, but it is known that the church in Boston discussed the matter for two weeks. Though the clergy in Boston urged the approval of a delegation for the assembly, there were a number of lay members who feared that the state would enforce the will of the ministers on the local congregations. The Boston congregation by a

majority vote finally approved to send its representatives when it was impressed upon them that the power of synods was only "consultative."⁸

After securing the participation of the Salem and Boston churches, the Synod only convened for two weeks in September of 1646. The product of that meeting was an agreement that the magistrates did have the legitimate authority to call such an assembly providing that the magistrates did not use their authority to introduce novel changes to church polity. The Synod also expressed the opinion that the power of such extra-congregational conventions was advisory and not judicial.⁹ The final action it took was to appoint John Cotton of Boston, Richard Mather of Dorchester, and Ralph Partridge of Duxbury in Plymouth Colony, to each prepare a model statement on church polity for consideration at the next meeting.

The Synod began its second session on June 8, 1647. It quickly ended, however, because of a deadly epidemic. Added to its charge to recommend a polity statement was the request from the Massachusetts government for a Confession of Faith. It was learned that the Westminster Assembly in England had prepared a statement of faith and without knowing its contents the magistrates wanted to have on record a confession that represented its churches. Before the Synod reconvened the Westminster Confession arrived in New England and the framers of the Platform were relieved to acknowledge their substantial agreement with the statement of faith. Their hope was that this would deflect the criticism they expected for creating a congregational platform. As it turned out, the victory of Oliver Cromwell in the English civil war provided the New England Puritans with a friend and the threat of Anglican and Presbyterian interference with the Congregational Way ended before the Synod met for its final session on August 15, 1648.

Within two weeks the Synod completed its work and The Platform of Church Discipline was printed at Cambridge in 1649. In October the General Court of the colonial government received the Platform and in a gracious move asked the churches within its jurisdiction to offer their recommendations. By June of 1650 the responses were so slow that another and strongly worded call for action on the Platform was issued. The admonishment worked and the various congregations made reply and some specific objections were made. The Court asked the clergy to respond to the criticisms. Convinced that the objections were properly cleared up, the Court voted on October 14, 1651, to accept the Platform as the official statement of church polity for the colony. Once again dissent was registered. Fourteen of the forty deputies gave negative votes. Among those voting against approval were the representatives from Salem and Boston.¹⁰

The enduring legacy of the Platform is its definition of the five fundamental features of congregational polity. They may be summarized as localism, the power of the laity, voluntarism, the representative nature of the ministry, and the communion of churches.

Localism: The Platform does not recognize a universal or catholic visible Church. The saints do participate in a spiritual union but they are not organized into a corporate

institution. As the saints are gathered individually by Christ they also gather themselves individually into a particular "Congregational-church" by way of a covenant "for the publick worship of God, & the mutually edification one of *another*, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus." Christ is the head of each local church and there is no intermediary role for a presbytery, bishop or pope to play. As the local church is a delegated body under Christ, so any collective agency created by a church exercises only delegated power that may be revoked. Each congregation is distinct and independent of other congregations. Thus the Platform recognizes that government originates in the local community.

The Power of the Laity: Only the laity can form a church. Synods, conventions and associations are not churches. No higher ecclesiastical or civil body can admit members into a congregation. Members rather than ministers are the final authority in the life of the congregation. As a fellowship of equals, the members of a Congregational church exercised considerable more control over its own affairs than either Anglican or Presbyterian laity. Thus the Platform inverts the pattern of authority by asserting that the parts give being to the whole rather than the whole gives being to the parts.

Voluntarism: While we wrestle with the problem of how to get members into our churches, the Puritans of New England wrestled with how to keep them out. They wanted to restrict membership to those God had destined to save. That was the whole idea behind "gathered" churches. The basis for this type of congregation was the voluntary consent or covenant that created "Church-power one over another mutually." The covenant represents the importance of the individual in the making of community. No one else can make a promise for you. Therefore membership is voluntary. There are two important aspects to this. While it was a burden to qualify for membership, that testing was not based on social standing or wealth. Voluntarism created citizens rather than subjects because covenants required a decision, are created and maintained by the consent of those who in participate in them, and depend upon mutual obligation. So one function of the covenant is to limit authority to the terms of the agreement. The other important aspect of voluntarism is that there is no covenant without a relationship. Members know each other because they share a common confession, worship and discipline.

The Representative Nature of the Ministry: Although the Puritan clergy exercised considerable influence, one characteristic unique to New England was the absence of a clerical superstructure above the local congregations. The clergy were not granted a special status since they were first lay members of a church. The Platform is very clear that membership precedes ordination, and that the importance of the office of the minister is found in its function and not in its order. According the Platform: "The essence & substance of the outward calling of an ordinary officer in the Church, doth not consist in his ordination, but in his voluntary & free election by the Church, & in his accepting of that election." The minister was not ordained for life but for the duration of his office in a particular church. The power of the minister was delegated by the congregation, and could be withdrawn. The real effective power of the minister was

relational.

The Communion of Churches: The Platform advocates fellowship and cooperation among the churches because they are all united in Christ. Lateral relationships take six forms: mutual care, consultation, admonition for the removing and healing of public offense, participation in the "Lord's table," and relief and help if there is a demonstrated need.

As the churches are "distinct, & therefore may not be confounded one with another: & equall, & therefore have not dominion one over the other," they can gather in synods or councils to consider issues but the synods cannot administer discipline or assume jurisdiction. It is within the power of the General Court to restrain and punish: "Idolatry, Blasphemy, Heresy, venting corrupt & pernicious opinions, that destroy the foundation, open contempt of the word preached, prophanation of the Lords day, disturbing the peaceable administration & exercise of the worship & holy things of God, & the like." The magistrates were not to interfere with the work of the church officers, nor could the ministers be elected to the civil government. So while the distinction between church and state was a limited one, there was the beginning of a boundary.

Emerson said that there is a crack in everything that God has made. The crack in the Platform was caused by the tension between keeping order and the doctrine of covenant in which a voluntary bond gave each member of the group the right of consent. Indeed, the vision of religious uniformity maintained by the interlocking of civil and church governments failed in practice. The City on the Hill could not maintain itself. The communion of churches suffered once it grew beyond the neighborhood of Boston. Even the power of the General Court and the bully pulpits of the clergy failed to maintain conformity. In addition to the two synods before the one in 1646-48 that produced the Platform, there were future conventions in 1657, 1662, 1667, 1679, 1680, and so on. Synods became a way of life as the cracks in the conformity spread,¹¹ The idea that independent congregations should promote a uniform practice and doctrine was based on a faulty assumption. That assumption was that conscience, study, and effort would achieve the same certain and confident faith which was ultimately the gift of grace from God to the saints. So dissent and nonconformity were identified as symptoms of blindness or obstinacy. The weight of the civil government and the work of synods could not maintain the cherished unity. Something happened that the framers of the Platform had not intended. The City on the Hill did not shine with one bright light toward the east. It shined with many lights and in all directions. The process of spiritual regeneration did not lead to a common faith and revelation. The saving remnant failed to complete its mission into the wilderness. They did not complete the reformation of the English Church. What they did do was seed something new in America. We are children of their family tree 350 years later.

The Wisdom of the Platform for Today

"Only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where

they are, where they appear to be going,
whether they wish to go there, and if so, why,
and if not, why not."

- Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal"

I will ask the difficult question right up front. What is a Unitarian Universalist? As you ponder that let me tell you a story.

When you go into the pastoral care office at Methodist Central Hospital in Memphis you will discover along the wall file folders identified by denomination. To this day I confess that I get a little rush of pride seeing "Unitarian" in black letters along with the Catholic and Baptist and Methodist and other major religious groups. In the file folders are computer print outs of the chaplain's patient list by religion. Now the strange thing is that the print out for Unitarians always contains several names of patients who are not associated with our congregation. I reasoned that when asked for their "religious preference" in admissions they said Unitarian because they felt compelled to say something,, and Unitarianism was close enough to having no religion at all.

Well, once in a state of evangelical frenzy, I decided to call on some of these folks while I was at the hospital. Perhaps, since they identified themselves as Unitarians, I could actually interest them in coming to church. The visits were very unsatisfying. The patients seem shocked that I called on them, perplexed by the very mention of the word "Unitarian," and uninterested in the prospect of visiting the church. The conversations were so strange and unproductive, that I decided I would have better luck at a tent revival.

Only recently did I discover the real source of the confusion. I brought home the patient list in the Unitarian folder to study the information in more detail. It was then that I found that under the heading of "church" there were a number of interesting designations on the print out. Along with "Unitarian" for members of the Memphis church, there were these entries: church unknown or none or no preference or unavailable or undefined. For some reason, the chaplain put on the Unitarian patient list all the people who claimed no religion or whose religion was in some way in doubt!

Now I know the real reason why there is a Unitarian folder on the wall in the pastoral care office. It's where all the names of the patients with no religion go.

That is how some people define a Unitarian Universalist. What is your definition? I suspect that it would be difficult for us to arrive at a common definition. I want to suggest, however, that one way to describe us is that Unitarian Universalists are religious people who order themselves on the basis of covenants. This essential element of congregational polity goes back to the Cambridge Platform of 1648.

Where is the primary covenant located? It is among the members of a local congregation. What is implicit is not the content of the covenant but that each congregation is free to express its own covenant. Each local congregation is gathered

around the voluntary mutual consent located in its covenant.

When I attend the service of another congregation in our association, I may or may not find how that religious community expresses itself appealing. However, I would not say that it is not a Unitarian Universalist church. Those who visit the congregation I am in relationship with may find some element of worship disagreeable, and may express that opinion. Yet they fail to understand the nature of our churches when they apply some universal criteria from their own experience and inform me that the Memphis church does not conform to standard Unitarian Universalist practice. For example, when did lighting a chalice make a congregation Unitarian Universalist?

Due to our polity there are wide variations in the ways local communities of faith structure their covenants, their offices, and their worship. Diversity among congregations is one result of creating relationships in which authority emanates from the bottom up. Inherent to the congregational polity of the Platform is the concept that the parts (the local congregations) give life to the whole (the association of congregations) rather than the whole creating the parts.

This is not to underestimate the importance of the whole. The Platform observed that while the communion of churches is not essential to the local church, it is to be desired for the well being of the local churches. We can observe from the history of the Puritans who created the Platform that there is an inherent tension between the autonomy of the local congregation and the power of the community of congregations. Both relationships are important. The issue was and is how to integrate the relationships in a practical way since ultimate authority is vested in the local congregation. The Puritans enjoyed a theological consensus and the willingness of the civil government to enforce standards of outward conformity--which we do not--and they could not preserve the unity they believed was important to their congregations, What we learn from them is that humanity cannot bear very much perfection. So our institutions must take into account our humanity. In fact, this is what happened in the development of congregationalism among the Puritans. Those who governed by consent learned the value of prudence in ordering their relationships. It was prudence or the awareness of the limitations of human judgment that fueled the willingness of people in covenant to share power and responsibility with each other.¹²

So we understand that inherent to our polity is the perplexing problem of finding the right balance between freedom and authority, utopian ideals and political reality, righteousness and tolerance. We understand the value of prudence in finding the right balance. What else do we need to understand? I believe it is helpful to keep in mind the nature of the covenant relationship in the local congregation. Covenants are something more than being in intellectual agreement. They do not come out of surveys or committees. There can be no covenant without a relationship. By that I mean the lived experience of person-to-person involvement based on trust. A true community is one painfully and joyfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together. The tough question is how to draw into deeper relationships beyond ideological categories and across congregations.

The place to start is with the local congregation where people begin to be related to one another. The local church can be attentive to its covenant. What is the bond of union or statement of purpose in your church? Is that what actually draws people into community? What is the mutual obligation implied in the covenant? The purpose of this work is not to bring about uniformity, but to enable people to be clear about the basic building block that creates the larger community of our association. You must know who you are in order to know others.

The second area of concern is the weakest among us, and that is the quality of the lateral relationships among congregations. Conferences like this are helpful but we must not stop here. One question we might take back to our congregations is how we can further and deepen our relationships with each other. What would a covenant look like among us? What kind of mutual obligations would nurture our religious life together and help us to mature in spirit? To the extent that local congregations can strengthen their lateral relationships they shall also strengthen the wider Unitarian Universalist movement. The communion of churches is desirable to our well being.

It began with women and men leaving home for conscience, for God, for reform for the adventure of the soul. Here they came, fallible men and women, whose errand into the wilderness and dreams of a City on the Hill took imperfect shape and evolved into institutions beyond their imagination. In the words of our hymn, *Hail the Glorious Golden City*: "And the work that we have builded, oft with bleeding hands and tears, oft in error, oft in anguish, will not perish with our years."

Their enduring legacy is an institution 350 years old and also inhabited by fallible women and men. It is a precious gift, more than a place for our self-fulfillment. It asks of us to remember that how we organize our relationships in covenant is essential to who we are. It was so in 1648 and is so in 1998 and will be so into the new millennium.

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