

part of any organic union that reduces the local churches to units in a machine.

When Archbishop Crammer in 1544 wrote the preface to his "First Litany," (the first use of English as a liturgical language), he suggested that even those who could not read might, through the litany, follow the service, "so that with one sound of the heart, and one accord, God may be glorified in his church."

This is the desire of Congregationalists: to glorify and to serve God with one sound of the heart. We recognize diversities of form, creed, and ritual; yet in fellowship and

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cooperative goodwill, we find the essence of discipleship that enables us to walk side by side with Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians and all others, with one sound of the heart.

One Sunday in India, I worshipped

with a congregation of outcast Christians in a small rural village. Between me and them were barriers of language, nationality, color, intellectual belief. Yet, I have never been more deeply moved by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper than that morning when I partook with those Indian friends. Despite difference, with one sound of the heart we were worshipping God's gift in Christ. Those people did not know whether they were Congregationalists or Presbyterians. They knew only that they belonged to Christ. This is all that matters, for fellowship in the Lord is of the essence.

We dare not lose this spiritual oneness in Christ by submitting to any centralized organization where the structure, rather than the sound of the heart, will determine what God requires of us.

About the Author

The Rev. Howard Conn was an active Congregationalist all of his life. Among the Churches he served was Plymouth Church in Minneapolis, from which he retired after years as their Senior Pastor. He also served many leadership positions in the Minnesota Fellowship and the NACCC. A preacher, lecturer, ecumenist, and writer, one of his favorite topics was the enduring significance of the Congregational Way of life.

The NACCC is an association of autonomous Churches bound by our belief that Christ alone is the head of the local Church. With this in mind, we express and discuss theological issues respecting different positions. There is no one document which directs all our Churches, rather clergy and laity are encouraged to establish their own understandings of scripture and congregational life in Christ. This piece represents the views of one of our respected leaders and is submitted to the larger fellowship of Churches for consideration and/or edification.

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Congregational Way Series

With One Sound of the Heart

by
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"A fellowship of loving hearts... working for the cooperative approach of our common tasks."

With One Sound of the Heart

Congregationalists have always been warmhearted and open-handed toward all Christian brethren. We hark back to Biblical days when men and women found new life in company with Christ, and to apostolic times when faith spread from person to person and town to town.

In its beginnings Christianity was neither an institution nor a dogma, but a fellowship of loving hearts kindled by the risen Christ. Today,

we know ourselves as part of that worldwide fellowship, which from age to age has experienced the same power and truth. We simply hold to the words of our Lord, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be present in their midst."

We recognize the church as being fully present in every local group in this spiritual interpretation of Christianity. "The Congregational Way" - brought to New England shores by the Pilgrims in 1620 and articulated by the Cambridge Platform of 1648 - recognized independent churches organized in response to Christ's call in each community, and loosely related in fellowship for counsel, advice, and mutual tasks.

In the past sixty years, Congregationalists have been in the forefront of the ecumenical movement. In local, state and national councils of churches, our people can be found working for the cooperative approach to our common tasks. This has been a natural role for us, inasmuch as we do not insist on the uniformity that many do.

We think that God is too great to care what denominational labels we wear, but that God does desire that we join hands with all who love Him/Her in an effort to hasten the day of the Kingdom. World Communion Sunday is impressive from our viewpoint. We Respect the customs and rituals of all denominations, and stress a common loyalty beneath all differences. Welcoming all to share with us, we seek to inherit the description of the early church given in the second century: "Christians hold the world together."

We simply hold to the words of our Lord, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be present in their midst."

To us the essence of the church is fellowship - a unity of spirit between member and member, and a unity of spirit between member and Christ. We need not agree in details of doctrine and organization before we care.

This emphasis on fellowship determines our approach to church unity. Though Congregationalists have pioneered the ecumenical movement, we have discovered that ecumenicity is often conceived in terms of organic unity rather than of cooperative fellowship. This confronts us with a real crisis. We are willing to cooperate with all denominations generously and freely, but when we are asked to join in an organic

union we are threatened with a complete denial of the nature of the church, as we understand it.

For example, we hold that the local church is an integral manifestation of the Christian fellowship, and that it is a church full and complete in its own right. ***The church is called into being by Christ, not by an ecclesiastical organization.*** It voluntarily chooses to cooperate with other churches to accomplish mutual tasks, and thus joins on its own initiative to help create councils, boards and associations that serve as its agents, yet is always dependent upon it. In this relationship,

the spirit of Christ in the local church remains the dynamic of all action.

This is reversed in ecclesiastical organizations such as the "United Church of Christ," by making "the Church" (spelled throughout their constitution with a capital "C" in contrast with a small "c" for the local parish) to be the top national organization. Within this organization each local congregation is subordinated as a unit. The life of the "the Church" is governed by a General Synod, the delegates to which are not chosen by the local churches but by the state conferences. All actions and all amendments are made on the conference level, never on the local church level.

Regardless of what freedoms are guaranteed local congregations, their integrity is hereby destroyed. No longer are they free, independent cooperating, Christ-gathered churches. They become units in an institution, gaining their rights and their directives not from Christ but from the organization.

We need not agree in details of doctrine and organization before we care.

For this reason the ***emphasis on centralized authority spells the destruction of the Congregational Way.*** We, who gladly have cooperated in councils, are asked to surrender our identity as independent churches, and

to recognize the control of a "super-church". This we cannot do. Because we believe fellowship is the essence of Christian life, we freely cooperate; but because we are historically and theologically opposed to ecclesiastical superstructures, we cannot become