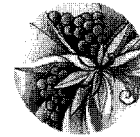


# PATTERNS OF POLITY

VARIETIES OF CHURCH GOVERNANCE



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# Contents

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## Introduction

# EXPLORING POLITIES TO UNDERSTAND FAITH TRADITIONS

**T**HIS IS A BOOK about how churches are governed. Normally, in thinking about various Christian groups, less attention is given to their governance than to their beliefs. For instance, in the monumental study of religious bodies written by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, under the title *Profiles in Belief*,<sup>1</sup> the distinguishing beliefs of various groups are described, together with the historical background of the different ecclesial bodies, but less is said about their governance.

To be sure, beliefs are important and often help to shape the nature of the institutions in which they are held. Identifying beliefs are usually embodied in creeds—formally adopted statements of doctrinal belief that constitute the core convictions of a particular group. Creeds do furnish one clue to the nature of particular churches or church groups, but there are only a few churches—for example, Unitarians—whose beliefs stand out so sharply from other groups as to cause their doctrinal position to be the reason for their names. Although there may be particular beliefs associated with different Christian groupings—such as predestination associated with the Reformed tradition, moral earnestness with holiness groups, and believer's baptism with the Baptists—the doctrinal positions of most mainline denominations are quite similar. Even their disagreements about matters of faith and morals are similar. But their polities are different.

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1. *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, vol. 1: *Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, and Eastern Orthodoxy*; vol. 2: *Protestant Denominations*; vol. 3: *Holiness and Pentecostal*; vol. 4: *Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Other Christian Bodies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977–79).

## BELIEFS ABOUT GOVERNANCE

It is true that churches believe certain things about governance as well as about doctrinal matters. These governance patterns deserve to be better understood, for differences and contrasts among mainline church groups may be seen more clearly by comparing governance than by comparing doctrines. There are clear and abiding differences in the patterns of governance—generally called the “polities”—of different churches. Several of the major denominations carry names that point to the procedures by which they govern their affairs (for example, *Episcopalian* for groups that govern with bishops; *Presbyterian* for churches that govern with elders; and *Congregationalist* for groups that place authority in the local membership). This means that governance may be at least as important as creeds in understanding denominations.

Polity provides institutional cohesion to many groups. Many denominations manage to stay intact despite cleavages in doctrine, unresolved differences in moral positions, and debates about social attitudes. They probably would not stay intact if equally divisive controversy existed about matters of governance and procedure. The so-called right and left in a denomination may bitterly disagree about a theological judgment or social witness but are generally loyal to the same polity, though they may well argue about the decisions by that polity.

In thinking about one group’s polity, it is important to begin with that group’s definition of its nature and purpose. How does it define its reason for being? A group may express its reasons for being in various ways. It may do so with credal statements, and it may do so in constitutions—particularly in preambles (or prefaces) to such instruments. It may express its reason for being in covenants of purpose that supplement constitutions and that are frequently drawn up by local divisions of the denomination, rather than by its major governing body. Although such statements are important clues to a group’s purposes, such groups seldom exist merely to hold certain beliefs; they usually exist to do certain things. The way groups do things frequently receives direction from polity, which reveals how a group believes things should be

done. Procedures therefore become as significant as affirmations, polity as significant as doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

## CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND LIVING PROCESSES

The governance of ecclesiastical institutions is a complex matter that defies description in simple categories. Although formal structure may be set forth in constitutional provisions, the constitutions of church groups vary widely in how, and the extent to which, they provide the definitive clue to the governance patterns of those groups. Some constitutions are detailed and explicit; others are general and leave much to inference and custom. Some are left to stand as originally written; others are constantly revised or amended as new occasions call for new responses.

Constitutional provisions cannot be ignored, but they do not necessarily reveal the living processes within particular groups. Just as it is necessary in the study of American government to read both the Constitution and the Supreme Court decisions that have interpreted the Constitution, it is necessary in dealing with ecclesiastical governance to know not only the statutes that formally define the polity, but also the decisions that have affected the character and practices of the group. The governance of any particular group may even have dimensions that go beyond the juridical processes and decisions that have taken place in its history. Even more important than the allegiance to constitutions and precedents are insights about how a group’s ecclesial machinery works and into the many subtle factors that give a unique “feel” or “flavor” to its ethos—that is, to the quality of its communal being. This is especially true of churches, in contrast, for

2. In “Denominations: Who and What Are We Studying?” in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Robert B. Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 111–33, Nancy T. Ammerman suggests that three factors must be considered in denominational studies: beliefs and practices; organizational structures; and cultural identities. While it is probably impossible to understand a religious group by any one of these factors, theologians likely have devoted more attention to the first and social scientists more to the third; the second factor has received the least attention. If this overview pays more attention to organizational structure than to the other two factors, it may help redress an imbalance rather than achieve an adequate perspective on the groups discussed.

instance, to political units. The “feel” or “flavor” is difficult to explain by examining the constitutional (or equivalent) instrument by which a group’s governance is formally described or historically interpreted. The behavioral patterns of the community and the unofficial conventions that sustain and shape those patterns have to be considered in understanding how the polity functions. Polity in its broadest sense is a matter, not only of laws and juridical interpretations, but of conventions and community behavior. Sometimes even the members of a denomination are not fully aware how these subtle aspects affect them, which makes the effort to understand various church bodies almost daunting.

In order to understand ecclesiastical polities, therefore, we must look at the varied and complex set of factors that give any group its unique identity. Not every factor operates in every case, and the absence (or limited use) of any factor or group of factors may be as much a clue to the nature of the group as its presence. For instance, all groups have ways of determining membership. These can vary from the most restrictive requirements to open membership. Even a group that refuses to define membership requirements does not thereby cease to have a polity; it simply has a polity of claimed openness about this aspect of governance. By what processes are members inculcated into the group (by birth, by conversion, by instruction, by probationary participation, or a combination thereof)? Is there any initiation process or ritual passage in joining, and how extensive and how formal is it?

When thinking about membership it is important to know not only how admission takes place but what prompts people to belong. Does a group seek new members or discourage them? What expectations do the members have? What are the advantages and obligations of belonging? Are the conditions of membership met at entrance, or are conditions reviewed periodically and the standing of members reexamined?

The polity of a particular church group is often more congenial to persons with certain temperaments than to others. Some groups appeal to those with aesthetic bents; others to those with humanitarian passion; others to those who enjoy (or who can at least tolerate) parliamentary maneuvering; still others to those who find political interaction uncongenial and who are content

to have decisions made for them. These factors become increasingly important as people become actively involved in a church group. Many people associate with local congregations for extraneous reasons that bear little or no relationship to polity. Many persons may simply join a church because casual attendance seems to show its appeal. However, a person cannot fully participate in a church without paying attention to its polity and ethos. And if a person assumes a leadership position there is no escape from having to reckon with the polity and how it operates.

Polity determines how rules and procedures are developed, sustained, and sanctioned. Although no polity is fixed and immutable, church groups cannot reinvent their procedures for every occasion. Although every polity undergoes developmental change—sometimes significantly—at any given time the polity usually determines how rules and procedures are enacted and/or enforced. Most polities provide for changes, not only changes in conformity with the ongoing polity, but sometimes changes in the polity itself. The provisions that a constitution makes for amendments to itself are a very important aspect of a polity. In some polities such changes can occur easily; in others, they are very difficult. Some of the greatest difficulties arise, not because the polity is clear and specific about making changes, but because the provisions are not spelled out and, hence, become matters of contention.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLS

Groups frequently have symbols through which they point to their reason (or reasons) for being. Although creeds are sometimes referred to as symbols, many other devices that give a group its identity are determined by the polity, either directly or indirectly. The utilization of symbols contributes significantly to group ethos. Even if the group decries or repudiates the use of symbols, or at least the use of overt symbols, that suggests an ethos or polity characteristic rather than the absence of a polity. The absence of symbols does not necessarily mean they have no bearing on spirituality. Quakers and some of the Reformed bodies in Europe have

made a powerful symbolism out of austerity—that is, out of the lack of symbols.

Liturgical events have symbolic significance. The observance of the Last Supper of Christ is present in most Christian groups, but the manner of its celebration and, more particularly, the symbolic role it occupies vary enormously. In some polities, the celebration of the Eucharist is carefully preserved as a function of the clergy; in others, the sacrament (or celebration) is done by laity, sometimes even without the clergy. Apart from the doctrinal interpretation given to this liturgical act, a set of meanings attaches to the celebration by the frequency (or infrequency) of its observation, by the provisions of the polity that define who can celebrate, and by the manner in which it is observed. Some of the most scrupulous ways of celebrating this liturgical act are associated with groups that are rather loose in defining it doctrinally—though this is not always the case, and the converse can be true as well.

Attire, whether of clergy or of all group members, has important symbolic functions. Not only does it identify persons as belonging to the group or as exercising leadership, but clothing creates an aura, with powerful functional significance. Matters of attire differ from denomination to denomination (and sometimes even within a denomination). In some cases a particular practice is required; in other cases, it is optional. Such differences often create strong responses and overt controversies, especially when the practice differs within a denomination. Even the non-use of special attire gives a group its own feel or flavor.

#### MEMBERSHIP, CONFLICT, AND AUTHORITY

What provisions exist in the group for rendering care and nurture to members? There may be wide differences not only among different Christian groups but even between local congregations belonging to a denomination with the same polity. Nevertheless, polity does bear on pastoral care, particularly on whether churches assume the task of caring for the temporal as well as spiritual needs of their members, or whether the clergy alone are qualified to render certain services. There is also the question whether such care is primarily sacramental and formal, or therapeutic and personal.

Some of the groups in which mutual aid and support are practiced most fully provide that aid and support through laypersons rather than clergy.

In thinking about the forms and meaning of membership, it is necessary to ask about the possibility of alternative roles. Is there only one kind of belonging, or are there different levels (or orders) of membership? Are such differences related in a communal, complementary, or hierarchical fashion? How do members relate to the group and to each other? What roles do subgroups play? Are ad hoc groups encouraged or discouraged?

Polities also differ greatly in the extent to which conformity and obedience are expected. Some presuppose rigid conformity to the group's official beliefs or practices; others tolerate diversity and even encourage alternative patterns of fidelity as a desirable aspect of discipleship. While clearly defined and formally applied sanctions generally are associated with groups that have the most explicit rules and expect the greatest conformity to those rules, even this relationship has to be looked at on a case-by-case basis rather than as an inevitable function of any particular kind of formal governance. The judicatories that oversee individual congregations in a given district or convention can enforce the same polity in widely different ways. The existence of a rigid rule sometimes brings about a decision not to invoke it, whereas a looser polity can become a matter of contention between parties as they seek to legitimize vindictive strategies aimed at driving out opposition. It is necessary to examine how groups deal with variances from polity, whether willful and explicit, or casual and unexpected (even unintended). When are such variations handled as pastoral concerns, and when are they handled as punishable offenses? These decisions may differ from instance to instance within the same polity. Although generalizations are therefore difficult to make, churches nevertheless develop histories that give clues as to how such matters are dealt with. Those histories have much to do with determining the nature of a religious group.

One of the important aspects of any polity is the provision for handling conflicts and disputes. Are there formal processes for resolving disputes, or are disputes handled in ways that politicize

the issues? Do disputes persist until one side caves in? Will groups split when differences arise that cannot be resolved within the polity's processes? Are such splits likely to come about because one side is ousted or because one side withdraws? How does group polity determine the most likely result?

Behind several of the previous considerations lies the matter of authority. How is authority created in each of the polities? Do leaders function by fiat and/or domination, or by example and/or persuasion? What happens when authority is challenged? One source of authority stems from the loyalty of members. Authority can be maintained by threatening to oust, or by ousting, those who do not conform to the polity. This approach is effective only if members care about membership. Do the provisions for removing members yield slow and cumbersome decisions or quick and easy decisions? But ousting nonconformers may not be the primary pattern. Can churches handle ecclesiastical disobedience, and to what degree can the polity (or the ethos) allow membership among persons with sharply different views and practices?

What provisions in the polity, whether formally specified or adhered to as convention, specify the accountability of leaders? Many churches have procedures for measuring the performance and for monitoring the professionalism and spirituality of their leaders. In other polities, leaders develop their own ways of doing things. One of the differences, for instance, between Billy Graham and many other evangelists lies in this area. Graham believed in having an association monitor his activities, account for his monetary intake and outlays, and otherwise insure the responsible conduct of his affairs. This is not true of every publicly visible or individual evangelist, many of whom need answer only to themselves and who can operate without regard to the responsibilities that attend institutional definition.

### MAJOR FORMS OF GOVERNANCE

The chapters that follow are arranged according to the three commonly acknowledged patterns of governance—*rule by bishops*, *rule by elders*, and *rule by congregational decisions*. Each pattern exists in a wide variety of forms, requiring separate chapters within each

division. The nature of episcopacy, for instance, is very different in the polity and ethos of the Episcopal Church than in the polity and ethos of the Methodist tradition; eldership means something quite different in Presbyterian churches than among the Amish and the Quakers; congregationalism runs the gamut from connectionalism—approaching the interaction in the other major forms of governance—to completely autonomous groups. A bishop may or may not have significant power; elders may or may not be ruling officials; congregations may or may not be free to set their own rules and to define their own procedures. One of the curious facts about polity is the extent to which some of the same titles—such as “bishop” and “elder”—are used in polities for offices with different functions. Unless one has a clear sense of what a term means in one tradition there is a danger of misunderstanding that tradition.

All of these factors make the analysis of ecclesiastical polity complex. The chapters that follow do not use just one sequence in describing these many factors. Instead, the descriptions will, as much as possible, start with an exposition of features in a polity that provide its most distinctive character. Those qualities will then be clues by which to understand how other factors, as they are incorporated, are shaped.

### RESOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF POLITY

- Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974.
- Mead, Frank S. *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. Revised by Samuel S. Hill. New 10th ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Mudge, Lewis S. *The Church as Moral Community: Ecclesiology and Ethics in Ecumenical Debate*. Geneva: WCC Publications; New York: Continuum, 1998.
- Mullin, Robert Bruce, and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominations: Interpretive Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt, 1929.
- Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*. Vol. 1: *Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, and East-*

## ASSOCIATIONAL CONGREGATIONALISM

PROVISIONS FOR ECCLESIAL CONTROL are present in different forms and to various degrees in each of the polities described in the previous chapters. This control may be said to operate either from the top down or from the sides in, but, in any case, the local parish is subject to requirements or expectations that come from its denomination. Procedures for monitoring local congregations are provided explicitly in polities with bishops and in polities with presbyteries (or their counterparts). Forms of control also develop with less explicit provisions in connectional congregationalism, in which churches monitor each other in ways that create considerable pressures for allegiance to what constitutes that denomination's understanding of the gospel.

### THE FREE CHURCH TRADITION

We now come to polities in which freedom is given greater emphasis than control. Such freedom is reserved for the local congregation, so that members may follow their consciences in working out their own ways of being faithful to the gospel. Denominations of such polity come in a number of variations but together are commonly described as "churches in the free church tradition." Although these churches differ in the ways they work out faithfulness, they are similar in locating ecclesial authority within the community of believers. We might, therefore, say that authority comes from the bottom up in their polities.

The term *independency* has sometimes been used to describe the free church tradition—often in a polemical way. For instance, a Presbyterian, writing in the early nineteenth century when church

polity was a source of much controversy, made this unsympathetic comment:

Independents and Congregationalists commit the whole government and discipline of their churches immediately to the body of the communicants. In some of their churches all the communicants, male and female, have an equal voice. In others, the males only take part in discipline. In the estimation of Presbyterians this mode of conducting ecclesiastical discipline is liable to most serious objection. They consider it wholly unsupported by Scripture; as "setting those to judge, in many cases, who are least esteemed in the church"; as extremely unfavorable to the calm and wise administration of justice; nay, as of all the forms of ecclesiastical discipline, most exposed to the sway of ignorance, prejudice, passion, and artful intrigue; that, under the guise of liberty, it often leads to the most grievous tyranny; and is adapted to exert an injurious influence on the character both of the pastor and the people.<sup>1</sup>

For Independents, on the other hand, the freedom of the local community has been devoutly espoused, not only as most consistent with the practice of the early Christians and hence more biblical than alternatives, but as a view that fosters the regeneration of life among all members.

Independents have argued that other polities either encourage or allow a special class to carry the burden of being Christian and tend to create a laity that is lax or callous in living according to Christian standards. Although the kind of polemic against the free church tradition cited above would likely not be written today, it indicates the extent to which congregational polities reverse assumptions about the most functional ways of maintaining the purity and vitality of the churches. In congregational polity, the vitality of the church is held to depend on a firm foundation of zealous fidelity within a local community of truly committed believers.

This emphasis on the regenerated life of all members of the believing community is crucial to understanding the origins of free

1. Samuel Miller, "Presbyterianism: The Truly and Primitive Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ," reprinted in David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds., *Paradigms in Polity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 98.

church polities. James H. Rigg, whose advocacy of free church polity was influential in the late nineteenth century, citing an important treatise of the time wrote:

The leading principles of Congregational Independency are three, of which, however, the first is not always taken account of, even by Congregational writers, although Dr. Dale, in his *Manual of Congregational Principles*, gives its true position and importance. They are (1) That every member of a Church must profess, and must be assumed, to be a spiritual believer in Christ Jesus, a believer "renewed in the spirit of his mind," and accepted as such by the fellowship of the Church. (2) That the members of every Christian Church form one distinct collective assembly, self-governing, and independent of every other Church. (3) That the Church meeting as a spiritual republic is the fountain of all authority and official position in the Church; and that in regard to questions of Church government and discipline coming before the Church, each several Church member possesses equal rights with every other member.<sup>2</sup>

In commenting on Dale's principles, Rigg suggests that the first is the most important yet the least emphasized. Churches whose polity places the entire burden (or at least the major part of the burden) for being true and authentic Christian communities on the parish are consistent when they expect all members of local congregations (or at least those who deliberate and vote) to have spiritual competency (the term commonly used by Baptists is "soul competency"), which enables them to conduct their affairs in ways faithful to the gospel. No special class of leaders provides assurance or takes over the task of achieving a faithful witness.

The obligations and the burdens of making such a polity work as intended are not inconsiderable. It is easy enough to hold in principle that every member of the Christian community is responsible for living by the requirements of the gospel, but putting this principle into practice is not easy. It can lead to concern for personal rectitude (and perhaps for spiritual enthusiasms) rather than to

2. James H. Rigg, D.D., *A Comparative View of Church Organizations: Primitive and Protestant, with a Supplement on Methodist Successions and Methodist Union* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1897), 162f. The book referred to in this passage was authored by R. W. Dale, LL.D., and published in 1884 by Quinta Press, Shropshire, England, under the title *A Manual of Congregational Principles*. It was reprinted in 1996 by the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

theological learning or scholarly acumen. Moreover, it would be difficult to prove that, as they operate in modern circumstances, free church polities are distinguished by a more apparent fidelity in church members than that in denominations with other polities.

The emergence of the free church movement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in no small measure a reaction against politically established and centrally controlled religion. The freedom sought by the groups that formed this movement had two dimensions. One dimension involved independence from control by political authorities; the other dimension sought independence from ecclesiastical authorities. Not all congregationalism has been equally adamant about both of these dimensions. Some groups with congregational governance, in the United States at least, have repudiated the idea of an established church more consistently than others. Some have been especially conscious of their heritage in the left wing of the Reformation (which generally disapproved of politically established religion); others have kept in mind their heritage in Puritanism (willing to be the established religion wherever it managed to gain the power to do so).

Some congregational groups have insisted so strongly on the freedom and autonomy of the local community that they have deliberately refrained from joining efforts to become something like a denomination. I look at these groups in chapter 9. In this chapter, the concern is with associational congregationalism—with polities that affirm the freedom of the local parish to conduct its affairs yet that utilize associations of local parishes to accomplish specific objectives (such as cooperative mission work). Such associations may also provide local parishes with greater collegial support and a more impressive denominational identity than one community could have by itself. This pattern has been most fully evident in the polities of Congregational and Baptist denominations. In these denominations, local congregations form associations that do much to carry the weight of denominational identity. Although such associations do not control local congregations in the same ways or to the same extent as such control operates in the polities discussed above, they can offer special opportunities to achieve mutual covenantal responsibility.

## THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Although the terms *episcopal* and *presbyterian* are still widely used, it has been nearly fifty years since *congregational* has been used to name a major denomination.<sup>3</sup> This is because, during the 1940s and early 1950s, the denomination called Congregational Christian Churches held extensive negotiations with the Evangelical and Reformed Church (both groups having been created earlier by mergers) to form the United Church of Christ, which was officially founded in 1957. This organic union brought together a denomination in which a General Synod (subject to concurrence of its regional synods) had the power to take actions binding on local churches, with a denomination in which the actions of its General Council were merely advisory to local congregations. This union is sometimes referred to as "combining a church with churches." On the "church" side, the merger needed to be ratified only by central governing bodies; on the "churches" side, it had to be accepted by a majority vote of individual congregations. At the time, many people doubted such a union was possible—combining, as it did, elements of presbyterian and congregational polities—but it has resulted in a major body with strong denominational identity and a highly functional example of effective associational congregationalism. Many members of the United Church of Christ cherish this mutuality and regard it as more distinctive of the denomination than local autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

Article III of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ makes it clear that decision making is to be consultative and collaborative among all parts of the church's structure. Article IV declares that officers of the church are to meet as peers. Both of these articles are safeguards against development of a hierarchical order. Not only does the UCC constitution guard against hierarchical control, but the ethos of the denomination demonstrates that congregational polity, not infrequently found in theologically conservative groups, can be associated with generally liberal the-

3. The term *congregational* is still used by some small groups that refused to enter the merger that created the United Church of Christ.

4. See Reuben A. Shears II, "A Covenant Polity," in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1990), 67-77.

ology, open church practice, and forward-looking social agendas. Not only was the United Church of Christ one of the first major denominations to encourage the ordination of women, but it is one of the few currently to permit the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians who are qualified to be ministers. It also has a history of liberal social witness pronouncements. These are aspects of a strong ethos of united witness and united effort.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the local congregation is the starting point for the polity of the United Church of Christ. The autonomy of the local congregation is protected by this strong constitutional language from Article V, section 18. "The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action." The governance of the local parish is carried on by a board of deacons, which has responsibility for spiritual matters, and by a board of trustees, which has responsibility for the finances and property. Both are elected by the congregation and function according to the provisions of the constitution or bylaws of the local parish. Tensions can develop between these two groups, each of which can meet by itself and create its own agenda. There is also a churchwide council consisting of the officers and chairpersons of the congregation's committees. There is no office of elder in this polity, nor are local parishes subject to supervision by a higher authority.

Congregations come together with other congregations to form an *association*. Ordained ministers who work in the area but who do not pastor churches are also members of the association as well as members of local churches. Associations are regional bodies that range in size from counties to parts of states. Each association writes its own constitution, even as each congregation makes many decisions on its own. The idea of freedom central to congregationally governed churches is thereby upheld by this aspect of the polity.

An Association elects its own officers, and it elects or appoints such committees as it deems necessary for the transaction of its business and the correlation of its work with that of the Confer-

5. A group of churches with congregational polity like that of the UCC but holding conservative theological and social views has formed a different national body, called the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

ence and the General Synod [explained below]. It determines its own method for securing financial support. It is concerned with the welfare of all local churches within its boundaries, and seeks ways and means to assist them when they are undergoing unusual difficulties requiring help beyond their own resources. It offers encouragement, guidance, and assistance in the organization of new local churches, and, with the counsel of the Conference, receives local churches into the United Church of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The same ministers and churches also belong to *conferences*, which cover larger areas (such as states or contiguous states) than associations. These bodies provide fellowship and mutual support among congregations; they undertake joint projects that would be too large for individual parishes or local associations to manage; and they help provide a denominational reality that moves from the bottom up. Both associations and conferences derive their being from the congregations which come together to form them. The membership of ministers is not transferred from the local church to the associations or conferences. Indeed, in keeping with the congregational premise that ministers are part of the local body they are called to serve, all ministers have membership in congregations.<sup>7</sup> There is no prohibition, as in Presbyterian polity, of a minister without a parish, who attends a particular church, being on the membership roll or serving on one of its committees.

The main official of the conference is called a *conference minister* (although the term *president* is used in some conferences). The position does not involve a higher order of ministry or carry life tenure. Although it may sound strange, the administrative and pastoral work of the conference minister may be somewhat analogous to that of a pastoral bishop. The effectiveness of the office depends largely on persuasion rather than control. The office of conference minister must be held by an ordained person authorized for sacerdotal ministry in and on behalf of the whole church. While

6. Douglas Horton, *The United Church of Christ: Its Origins, Organization, and Role in the World Today* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 171.

7. Interestingly, as the United Church of Christ has worked out ministerial exchanges with denominations such as the Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans, and Reformed Church in America, UCC ministers become members of the local churches they serve—even those in other denominations—whereas ministers in those denominations do not.

the power of ordination is not lodged in the conference minister in the same way as in a bishop, the conference minister, like a bishop, participates in ordinations as a visible symbol of the church's unity.

The national body is called the General Synod. The term came from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition, even as the term *association* came from the Congregational Christian side. The synod is composed of many constituencies: elected delegates from the conferences; representatives of the agencies that conduct denominational affairs (called covenanted ministries); and other representatives. While in some polities a synod has controlling power, in the United Church of Christ, the constitution explicitly prohibits the synod from interfering with the autonomy of the conferences, associations, and local churches, or impairing their right to acquire, own, manage, and dispose of property and funds.

The General Synod elects the individuals who serve as officers of the church: a general minister and president; an associate general minister; an executive minister for local church ministries; an executive minister for wider church ministries; and an executive minister for justice and witness ministries. It may also elect other officers. These officers serve as a collegium. The General Synod also chooses a moderator to preside over its next meeting, assisted by two assistant moderators. An *executive council* has the power to act on behalf of the General Synod between its biennial meetings.

The General Synod, working in covenanted collegiality with interested constituencies in the church, establishes the major boards and agencies that carry on the work of the church and that provide its most visible denominational identity. It can receive funds for churchwide endeavors, and it bears responsibility for relationships with other churches and ecumenical agencies. The United Church of Christ, reflecting its own origins, is generally in the forefront of ecumenical efforts.

#### ASSOCIATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE UCC

The polity of the United Church of Christ exhibits its associational aspect in two ways. Each association has the power to determine whether to confer membership status on any congregation. It also determines, confers, and verifies ministerial standing within the

denomination—one of its most important functions. Although the United Church strongly upholds the priesthood of all believers, and affirms that the laity have an apostolic role as important as the clergy's role, it makes special efforts to see that the church has a learned ministry. Three forms exist for the ministry—ordained, licensed, and commissioned. The *ordained ministry* consists of persons who have been ordained to ongoing preaching of the gospel, administration of sacraments and other rites of the church, and exercise of pastoral care and leadership. *Licensed ministers*, who are not necessarily ordained, can perform these functions for a designated period under supervision of the association. *Commissioned ministers*, who may be laypersons, carry on other church-related activities. All three forms carry voting membership in the association. They are not, however, steps in a hierarchy.

A local church can call and ordain persons to ministry without being credentialed by the association. However, ordinations authorized and carried out only by local parishes provide no standing in the church as a whole and have not been widely practiced since the early days of New England Congregationalism.

The first step in seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ is to come under care of the association. This involves examination on fitness and motives for seeking to become a minister. Those accepted are supported and supervised in their formal preparation, which generally includes graduation from both college and seminary. Although this has been the normal pattern, the UCC increasingly acknowledges the validity of other forms of preparation or experience as fitting persons for ministry. When a person nears the end of seminary training, or seeks ordination on the basis of special experience and skills, she or he prepares a paper setting forth his or her religious experience and understanding of basic theological affirmations. On the basis of this paper, the candidate is examined by the association's Committee on the Ministry. There is probably less emphasis in this examination on proving orthodoxy than on demonstrating deep religious motivations and on understanding the meaning of faith. In this process, as described many years ago, "the Church seeks to learn the candidate's own insights into the Gospel. Here there is a two-way motion of the spirit, the church seeking to understand the man

[sic] and the man seeking to understanding the church, all within their mutual commitment to God as he reveals himself in Christ."<sup>8</sup> Laity have a part in examining the candidate's suitability. Ordination is by the laying on of hands of ministers of the association, a group of whom assemble for the service, and often by the hands of some layperson or laypersons delegated for the function.

The way candidates are examined for ordination is a clue to the way theology is viewed in the United Church of Christ. There is freedom to understand the gospel and the Christian life in ways that are especially meaningful for the individual—though such beliefs are to be informed by the ancient creeds of the church and the insights of the reformers. Many individual congregations write and adopt their own covenants of purpose. Richness of understanding tends to be valued more than theological correctness. At times, a desire has arisen for a more explicit identification of foundational beliefs. Early in the life of the new denomination, a committee was appointed to draw up a brief statement of faith as a means of witnessing to common convictions. It was decided that the statement would not be used for testing the orthodoxy of members. The result was a statement of faith designed for liturgical use. Many members of the church have found that its cadences and affirmations lift the heart more than bind the mind. That the language of this statement has been revised for inclusiveness shows that it is part of a dynamic process of growth and development. It is a testimonial rather than a test of faith.

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,  
 God of our Savior Jesus Christ, and our God,  
 and to your deeds we testify:  
 You call the worlds into being,  
 create persons in your own image,  
 and set before each one the ways of life and death.  
 You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.  
 You judge people and nations by your righteous will  
 declared through prophets and apostles.  
 In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen  
 Savior,

8. Horton, *United Church of Christ*, 142.

you have come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death,  
and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues,  
and races.

You call us into your church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto you. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

The dialectical tension between the freedom of local congregations and the impulse to have a corporate denominational identity is not easy to maintain. Those who work in the denomination's bureaucracy must deal with such tensions when they arise between constituencies. "Pressures mount when those various constituencies want their views of proper beliefs and practices to be adopted by the denomination as a whole."<sup>10</sup> That tension has been characteristic of the United Church of Christ from its beginning, and it is dealt with creatively and with goodwill in an ethos characterized equally by freedom and covenanted mutuality.

9. United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology. Approved by the Executive Council in 1981 for use in connection with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Church of Christ.

10. W. Widrick Schroeder, "The United Church of Christ: The Quest for Denominational Identity and the Limits of Pluralism," in *The United Church of Christ: Studies in Identity and Polity*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Kenneth B. Smith (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1987), 25.

## BAPTIST TRADITIONS

The other major example of associational congregationalism is provided by Baptist churches. The principles of the Baptist doctrine of the church, as found in *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, suggest the importance of both the local congregation and of the associational dimension.

The most distinctive emphasis of the early Baptists was their threefold formulation addressing the relationship of the church to the churches:

1. They believed that the latter should reproduce, as nearly as possible in this imperfect world, the life of faith, obedience, and fellowship which characterizes the former. To this end they rejected infant baptism, insisting upon believer's baptism.
2. Holding firmly to the primacy of the universal church, they also insisted that each individual church represented the larger church in its locality, and had all necessary powers of self-government.
3. At the same time, they devised ways to express the interdependence of local churches, so that the tendency to an isolated self-sufficiency would be avoided. Around these three points the Baptist doctrine of the church revolved.<sup>11</sup>

The foundational unit of Baptist ecclesiology is the local congregation. While the local congregation enjoys the right to govern its own affairs—to admit (and dismiss) members, to call (and, if necessary, ordain) its own ministers, to possess (or dispose of) its own property, and to write its own covenants of purpose (which in some sense serve as doctrinal standards)—most Baptist churches conform to recognizable patterns that do much to counteract the otherwise centrifugal consequences that might flow from purely local decision making. To be sure, there are often differences (particularly in theological stance) between one local Baptist church and another, or between one Baptist association and other Baptist associations. Yet churches within the various Baptist associations have a similar set of worship practices (marked by fervor and informality). Although this similarity in posture and

11. Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice: Revised Edition* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1991), 38.

practice is voluntary, it is sufficiently in evidence to give Baptists a recognizable identity, despite the differences.

The largest Baptist denominations are the Southern Baptist Convention, the three African American denominations (National Baptists, Progressive National Baptists, and National Baptists USA), and the American Baptist Churches USA (successor to the Northern Baptist Convention and still colloquially called "northern Baptists"). But there are more than two dozen other Baptist groups. Although, in some groups of Baptists, congregational freedom is associated, as in the United Church of Christ, with tolerance of theological diversity and support for ecumenical cooperation, in many groups the reverse is the case. Theological rigidity is prevalent and ecumenical cooperation frowned upon. The contrast between the United Church of Christ and the conservative Baptist groups (as well as between liberal and conservative Baptists) is a good example of how very different characteristics can come from generally similar polities.

The typical local Baptist congregation makes decisions about a number of issues. Membership, for instance, is granted by congregational action. Sometimes, as in much past practice, this involves meeting newcomers at a gathering of the entire church, inquiring into their Christian experience, requiring baptism by immersion, and taking a vote of members present while the newcomer is temporarily excused. This is no longer a necessary scenario. Today it is more usual for the deacons—as the governing board of the local church—to meet with those seeking membership and to recommend them to the congregation for approval (rejection of those recommended is rare).

Variations exist within this basic pattern. Some Baptist churches grant full membership only to those who have been, or who agree to be, baptized by immersion. Others allow persons who do not meet this standard to become associate, but not full, members. Still others practice open membership, giving full status to persons previously baptized according to the practice of their previous denomination. The choice among these options is a local decision, although the choice is apt to be a clue to a church's theological stance.

With respect to the selection and authorization of ministerial

leadership, each church is constitutionally free to choose its ministers and even to ordain them. Baptist ministers—unlike Episcopal, Methodist, or Presbyterian clergy—are members of the congregations they serve. Just as they are called by the local church, they may be dismissed by vote. Time, however, has modified this local autonomy. The status of Baptist ministers is now monitored (though not determined) by Baptist associations. Local churches usually seek the advice and counsel of the association in calling ministers. The status of ministers is enhanced by having their ordinations performed by the association. The association sets educational expectations; examines candidates for competency and orthodoxy; assists local congregations in the service of ordination; and even enters as a friendly interlocutor if tensions develop between a congregation and its minister.

#### THE ROLE OF THE ASSOCIATION

The association helps introduce orderliness into a process that could be quite random. But it nevertheless allows churches to call (or retain) pastors who would not be approved by the association. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention has recently codified a provision that only men can serve as pastors.<sup>12</sup> This action is a move by conservatives, who have come to control the Southern Baptists, to make opposition to female ministers explicit and weighty rather than a matter of custom. But even if this stricture against women pastors is part of the Southern Baptists' belief statement, local churches may still have women pastors, and the Convention cannot stop them. The Convention's stand, however, must be overridden with caution, even if it is not a binding rule.

Individual churches can own their property and dispose of it as they see fit. Some associations try to persuade churches to agree to a provision in their local constitutions that, in the case of dissolution, property will be distributed to the denominational association or to one of its agencies. That does not, however, settle property issues if the church splits and each side wants to receive its share.

12. *The Daily Press*, Hampton, Virginia, June 11, 2000, A12.

Local churches also decide on their own covenants of purpose. These statements articulate the general commitments of the local congregation and frequently involve matters of practice as well as belief. A local church could write a covenant that emphasizes service to neighbor and concern for the poor and outcast as its central purpose, or it could write a covenant that stipulates conservative theological principles and restrictions on lifestyles. Writing these covenants when churches are organized, or revising them as conditions change, does require thought and negotiation that can raise awareness of the sacred obligations entailed in church membership.

But the associational principle has significance in this area as in other matters. Many congregations adopt a covenant in general circulation within the denomination. The following covenant is the most common among Baptists today.

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God and this assembly most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality, to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel throughout all nations.

We also engage to maintain as far as possible family and secret devotion; to teach our children the Christian truths; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, exemplary in our deportment, and zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

We further engage to watch over one another in Christian love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense but always ready for

reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that, when we remove from this place, we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of the covenant and the principles of God's Word.<sup>13</sup>

The general provisions of this covenant are rich in Christian discipleship. This document sets forth a remarkable ideal. However, although many Baptists have agreed to it, the family (or families) of Baptist churches are not free from theological controversy, nor are Baptists unique in the extent to which their members achieve spiritual discipline.

#### FACING CONTROVERSY

As with connectional congregationalism, creation of the association offers the possibility for controversy. When individual churches differ in theology or practice, it is natural for them to believe that their interpretation of the gospel should characterize all churches in the denomination. The election of delegates to the Convention becomes politicized. In recent years, the Southern Baptist Convention has witnessed a concerted effort by fundamentalists to obtain control. When they obtain a voting majority, they are in a position to control functions directly supported by the Convention—such as mission work or theological seminaries. Such control can be exercised directly over aspects of the church's life created and maintained by the Convention, but pressure on individual congregations to conform to the Convention's prevailing outlook also increases, even though such influence is indirect and theoretically nonbinding.

Since provisions for supervising denominational programs are not explicit in Baptist polity, Convention officials find ways to achieve results without creating a backlash. Many years ago, a study of these officials created considerable stir. In this study, Paul Harrison, a theologian and sociologist, examined how denominational officials in what was then the Northern Baptist Convention,

13. Maring and Hudson, *Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, 254f.

usually regarded as more liberal and open than its southern counterpart, "gained greater power over the activities of the churches than has ever been recognized as legitimate by the official apologists for the Baptist movement."<sup>14</sup> Harrison distinguished between "a formal system of authority," what I have designated as explicit provisions for control, and an "informal system of power." Rejecting the former required officials who bear responsibilities for shaping denominational life to resort to the latter. Much of this informal control requires charismatic qualities that depend on personal influence and negotiating acumen. Although such control develops over time and by virtue of skillful interactions, this power is not without consequences. According to Harrison,

[A]lthough informal, the power of executives may reach startling proportions. Modern Baptist emphasis upon ultimate authority of the individual believer, the authority of the local church, and the corresponding "containment" of the authority of the executive professionals resulted in unanticipated consequences. Being permitted nothing more, at least on the official level, than an instrumental function with no ecclesiastical authority, the executives were forced to substitute informal power for official authority. In individual cases, this can far exceed the power of many executives or ecclesiastical officers of the "authoritarian" religious orders.<sup>15</sup>

An example of the expanding power of denominational officials is a 1999 case in which a professional staff member of National Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA, responsible for corporate responsibility and economic justice, was asked to resign by the executive director. The executive's action significantly altered the stance and program of the church without a decision by a representative body.

Baptist churches, particularly in the South, are among the most numerous and possibly fastest-growing church groups in contemporary America. Local decision making enables them to adapt to the mores and circumstances of local cultures more easily

14. Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 7.

15. *Ibid.*, 94.

than more fully structured denominations adhering to traditional patterns.

Baptists are not restricted by allegiance to historic or formal practices in worship. Baptist congregations assume many levels of sophistication, from storefronts or whitewashed concrete-block shacks established by evangelists with little theological training to major churches with highly trained ministers and elaborate edifices. They vary widely in theological orientation, from liberal congregations (usually, but not always, in the North) to some of the most adamant advocates of biblical literalism and restrictive expectations regarding private moral behavior. Their ministers are accorded contrasting levels of allegiance, from the high level of regard and obedience often shown pastors in black Baptist churches (some of whom are even called "bishop" as a mark of respect) to far more casual treatment elsewhere. Such treatment is afforded pastors in churches in which a minister is looked on as a kind of domesticated caretaker, available on request to provide for church members' spiritual benefit.

Despite some significant social witness and the fact that some of the most effective and best-known leaders of social change have been Baptists, the polity of this tradition is not strongly suited to protect prophetic leadership. This is especially true where a congregation is composed of persons more bound to the mores of a culture than responsive to the transformative expectations of the gospel.

#### RESOURCES ON ASSOCIATIONAL CONGREGATIONALISM

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