Westward expansion and social vision

The rise of denominationalism in the 19th century was a phenomenon for which Congregational churches, independent though loosely associated, were not well-prepared. Suspicious of institutional authority or hierarchy, the churches had provided for no mechanism by which they could act cooperatively on questions beyond the local congregation. They were churches, not the Church.

No single event was responsible for the movement toward state and national bodies that promoted cooperation and communion. Rather, a positive and vigorous reappraisal of Congregational history provided a rationale for denominational structures supported by the local congregation.

In the democratic tendencies of their polity, Congregationalists discovered a remarkable affinity with emerging American nationalism. The polity that allowed for diversity appeared to be an ecclesiastical counterpart to the democratic polity of the nation itself. They rediscovered Cotton Mather's "unity in diversity" and by 1871 a new, corporate identity was asserted. Their unity lay in a commitment to the diversity produced and embraced by the polity itself—a commitment continued in the United Church of Christ.

An atmosphere of political and religious liberty created American denominationalism. Each denomination founded new institutions for education and mission. Before William Ellery Channing, a Congregational minister in Boston, had proclaimed his leadership of the Unitarian movement by preaching in 1819 his famous sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," the liberal professor of divinity at Harvard, Henry Ware, set off a controversy that sparked the establishment of the Congregational Andover Theological Seminary in 1808, a bulwark of Calvinist orthodoxy. This was the first of hundreds of new colleges and seminaries founded by Congregationalists in the 19th century.

First overseas missionaries

Andover was instrumental in preparing the first Congregational missionaries for overseas mission. The churches already had sent missionaries to frontier America. The American overseas missionary movement had its informal beginning in 1806 when Samuel J. Mills met with four fellow students at Williams College in Massachusetts for a Sunday afternoon prayer meeting in a maple grove. A sudden thunderstorm drove them to the shelter of a haystack where, surrounded by thunder and lightning, Mills proposed a mission to preach the Gospel in Asia. His zeal ignited the four others with the intent "to evangelize the world," and they went on to study theology at Andover Seminary.

One of them, Adoniram Judson, who later joined the Baptist churches, had appealed to the London Missionary Society for support but was rejected. Believing it was time for American Congregationalism to support its own missionaries, the Andover faculty and leaders of the Massachusetts General Association authorized a cooperative missionary venture by the churches of Massachusetts and Connecticut. On September 5, 1810, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was born—the first foreign missionary society in the United States. On February 8, 1812, at a moving service of worship in the crowded Salem Tabernacle Church, the Haystack "Brethren" were ordained. Within two weeks, they set sail for India.

In the same year, New England Congregational clergy voted to condemn the War of 1812 as "unnecessary, unjust, and inexpedient." Their antiwar sermons and political organizing in opposition to a government policy were unprecedented.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions intended to establish missions not only in the Orient and Burma, but also "in the West among the Iroquois." Subsequently, throughout the 1820s and 1830s missions were organized among the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee, Osage, Maumee and Iroquois. In an effort supported by Congregationalists and members of other churches, the American Board provided aid for Indian resistance to government removal from their lands.

Backs Cherokee sovereignty

In a celebrated case, the American Board supported the Rev. Samuel A. Worcester, missionary to the Cherokee, in his lawsuit before the United States Supreme Court to prevent the state government of Georgia from

deporting the Cherokee nation from territory recognized as sovereign under United States law. The court ruled in favor of the Cherokees, finding that the Cherokee nation were under United States protection and could not be expelled from their land. But President Andrew Jackson ignored the court and ordered the tribes removed anyway. They were forced to move westward without adequate provision or shelter; many died on the way.

The German Reformed Church was also active in missions—both among Native Americans and recent German immigrants. More than 300 churches were built. Swiss and German students from Mercersburg Theological Seminary aided Germans on the western rontier. In 1862, the Sheboygan Classis of the German Reformed Wisconsin Synod founded Mission House to train local men as ministers and teachers. It initiated a ministry among American Indians in the 1870s by an act of providence. Professor H. Kurtz, overtaken by a snowstorm, succumbed to fatigue on a 12-mile return walk from a Sunday preaching mission. Some Winnebagos, finding him asleep in the snow, took him back to Mission House. Kurtz promoted help for Indians of the area, and in 1876, the Classis declared, "As soon as we have the money to find a missionary, we will send him to the Indians who live nearest us." The Classis sent Jacob Hauser to the Winnebagos in 1878. He was warily received, but interest in their children's education and belief that all people shared one God, the Earthmaker, helped smooth relations between the missionary and the community. Twenty years later a church was started. The Winnebago Indian School at Neillsville, Wisconsin was founded in 1917. It trained Christian ministers, teachers, nurses and leaders for the Winnebago people, among them Mitchell Whiterabbit, a pastor who later became a national leader in the United Church of Christ.

Moving towards the West

The 18th-century Great Awakening had been unconcerned with sectarian labels. Under the Plan of Union (1801) and the Accommodation Plan (1808), the theologically compatible Congregational and Presbyterian churches cooperated in their missionary efforts in the West. A minister of either denomination might be chosen by a congregation that was functioning under the polity of its founding denomination. Under the Accommodation Plan, Congregational Associations were received by Presbyterian Synods until 1837 when self-conscious denominationalism caused Presbyterians to withdraw. Congregationalists followed suit in 1852 when the Congregational churches were united into a national organization for the first time.

The first New England Congregational colony in the Northwest Territory was established at Marietta, Ohio, in 1788. Education a primary value, Muskingum Academy was soon opened and in 1835 became Marietta College. Congregationalists and Presbyterians planted colleges along the way. Most of the early colleges, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton long ago declared independence of a denominational connection. Thirteen frontier colleges have affirmed their diverse historical denominational ties with the United Church of Christ. Beloit (1846) was founded by the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. Other colleges related to Congregationalism are Illinois (1829), Olivet (1844), Grinnell (1846), Pacific (1849), Ripon (1851), Carleton (1866), Doane (1872), Drury (1873), Westminster (1875), Yankton (1881), Rocky Mountain (1883) and Northland (1892). Those with Evangelical, Reformed and Christian roots are Franklin and Marshall (1787), Heidelberg (1850), Defiance (1850), Cedar Crest (1867), Ursinus (1869), Elmhurst (1871), Elon (1889), Hood (1893), Lakeland (1893). Hawaii Loa College was founded in 1963, after the UCC united the Evangelical and Reformed and Congregational Christian churches. A special case are the six colleges founded after the Civil War to educate African Americans freed from slavery. That is an important story in the 19th-century history of the Congregational churches, which we will take up later in this book.

Apart from colleges, the century saw the founding of new seminaries to train ministers for service in local congregations. Andover (now called Andover Newton) was founded, as we saw, in 1808 as an alternative to Harvard University—which was moving away from the traditional Reformed faith of Congregationalism. Now new Congregational seminaries were founded: Bangor, Maine (1814); Hartford, Connecticut (1834); Chicago (1855); and the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California (1866). Lancaster, Pennsylvania (1825) was founded by the German Reformed Church, and Eden in St. Louis (1850) by the German Evangelical Synod. United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, in Minneapolis (1962) was a merger of the German Reformed Church's Mission House Seminary and Yankton School of Theology, originally founded by German Congregationalists. Also founded in the 20th century was the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta (1958). The United Church of Christ also continues to relate to the divinity schools at Yale and Harvard—universities that were originally founded by Congregational churches in the 17th century to prepare ministers for ordination.

Women respond to call

The 19th century was also the beginning of women's liberation. They emerged in greater numbers, often at personal risk, from the confines of their homes and families to respond to a Christian calling. Congregational educators like Emma Willard, Catherine Beecher, Sarah Porter, and Mary Lyon, and a writer appalled by the injustice of slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe, were breaking new ground for women. Betsy Stockton, a freed slave, sailed in 1822 from Connecticut with 13 others to help the first Congregationalist missionaries in Hawaii. A gifted and versatile Christian, Stockton taught school and cared for the sick.

Although her family discouraged her and Oberlin Theological School denied her the degree she had earned, Antoinette Brown sought for three years a call to pastor a church. A call finally came from the Congregational Church in Butler, New York. There she was ordained in 1853, an ordination recognized only by the local church. Her pastorate was short, for she would soon marry Samuel Blackwell and later give birth to seven daughters. Antoinette Brown's activist stand persisted for the abolition of slavery, for the promotion of temperance, and for the establishment of biblical support for equality between women and men. She wrote nine books and in 1920, at age 95 cast her first vote. By 1921, the year of her death, there were 3,000 women ministers in the United States. Her ordination itself had major implications. Her life and ministry are memorialized at each General Synod of the United Church of Christ when the Antoinette Brown Award is presented to two ordained women whose ministries exemplify her dedication and leadership.

Elvira Yockey, a German Reformed pastor's wife in 1887 founded and became the first president of the Women's Missionary Society of the General Synod. She wrote of her experience at Xenia, Ohio: "Here, as all over the Reformed Church, the women were expected to 'keep silence in the churches.' Their voices were never heard even in public prayer, and to this day, in most of the prayer meetings of the church the number of audible prayers is limited to the number of men present. How much the church owes to the number of silent prayers that ascend heavenward from feminine hearts, can never be known."

Few women could at first take advantage of higher education but during the 19th century missionary societies became the means for more women to relate to the public sphere. Still demeaned by female role enforcement, women were permitted only to form auxiliary fundraising units well out of range of policy making. The Female Cent Society in New England, forerunner of the Woman's Society of the Congregational Christian Churches, was such an organization. The Evangelical Synod's deaconess movement provided an acceptable vehicle for women's active involvement in evangelism and social service. Through periodicals, study circles, and organizations, women shared moral issues of the time. Countless volunteer hours were given by women to the alleviation of social ills as the earliest Sunday school teachers, as abolitionists, preachers, teachers, nurses, missionaries and activists for their own liberation as children of God.

A social vision takes shape

The end of the Civil War freed the hearts and imaginations of Protestants to again envision a Christian America. Congregational minister Horace Bushnell led with a vision of a virtuous, joyous, worshiping Christian America that would set the pace for others in the world. Other Congregationalists also were prominent. Bushnell's disciple Josiah Strong sought to rally concerned social action for the urban blight of growing industrialization. In Columbus, Ohio, the Rev. Washington Gladden, father of Social Gospel movement, defended the right of labor to organize for higher wages and better working conditions. Jane Addams saw the urgency of the urban poor and in 1889 founded Hull House, a "settlement house" in a poor working-class neighborhood of Chicago.

The many voluntary church societies responded to humanitarian concerns aroused by the great Awakenings. The American Home Missionary Society (1826) touched fingertips with the German churches by providing funds for the religious and educational needs of settlers in the West. In 1927, the General Conference of German Congregational Churches in Iowa was recognized by the General Council along with other Congregational Churches.

Transforming power of the Gospel

The American Missionary Association believed in the transforming power of the gospel to right social evils, particularly inhumanity to other races and the injustice of slavery. The AMA was, by charter, committed to "an elimination of caste." Black and white Americans were active supporters and workers. Engaged from its inception in abolitionist activity, the affirmation of Indian rights, and work among the Eskimo, the AMA responded immediately following the Civil War to the educational and religious needs of freed blacks in the South and of Native

Americans. A shortage of educators turned the Association to the education of teachers, and the black colleges were born. A relationship with the United Church of Christ would continue to be maintained by Fisk (1866), Talladega (1867), LeMoyne-Owen (1871), Huston-Tillotson (1876), Dillard (1869) and Tougaloo (1869).

The legal autonomy of the voluntary missionary societies left the Congregational churches and the legislative General Council without administrative authority over the direction of their own mission. The relationship bred long periods of unease. A partial solution came in 1917 when representative voting members of the Council were made voting members of the societies. Corporate law gave final control to boards and directors. Gradually, the home mission and education societies found it expedient to unite under the Board of Home Missions.

The Synod of the German Reformed Church had responded to needs of the people on the frontier by establishing, in 1819, a missionary committee that in 1865 became the Board of Home Missions. In 1866, the German Reformed Church decided not to unite with the Dutch Reformed Church. Dropping the "German" from its name, the church became in 1867, the Reformed Church in the United States.

Responsibility for home mission in the Reformed Church fell to the regional Synods. They were reluctant to comply when the 1878 General Synod resolved that "all home missions of the church should be brought under direct control of the General Synod's board as speedily as possible." When synods finally relinquished control of their mission programs, centralization allowed for productive overall planning and projects such as homes for children and the aged, assistance to Hungarian congregations, new church development, and (after the merger with the Evangelical Synod) work during World War II among Japanese-Americans placed in American concentration camps. Henry Tani, first director of youth ministry in the United Church of Christ, was a layman reached by the last ministry.

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