

The Congregational Christian Churches

The union by the Congregational and Christian churches seemed the most natural in the world, yet most of their life together from 1931 to 1957 concerned the General Council with matters surrounding church union, first its own and then with the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Nevertheless, the work of the church continued. In 1934, the General Council, "stirred by the deep need of humanity for justice, security, and spiritual freedom and growth, aware of the urgent demand within our churches for action to match our gospel, and clearly persuaded that the gospel of Jesus can be the solvent of social as of all other problems," voted to create the Council for Social Action. The Council reflected the focus of continuing Christian concern for service, international relations, citizenship, the rights of Japanese-Americans, rural life, and political, industrial and cultural relations. The General Council had acted to simplify and economize at a national level the prolific and redundant independent actions by churches and conferences, while maintaining the inherent liberties of the local churches.

State Conferences—led by "Superintendents" or "Conference Ministers"—responded to local church requests for pastors, published resources in Christian education, organized youth and adult conferences, and invited speakers on mission and social concerns. They received funds for mission, helped new churches and maintained ecumenical contacts.

Printed literature and communication continued to be essential. In 1930, the Christian Church's *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* merged with *The Congregationalist* to become *Advance*. The Pilgrim Press, a division of the Board of Home Missions, continued to publish and distribute books, Christian education curriculum materials, monthly magazines and newspapers, hymnals, worship and devotional material, and resources for education and evangelism.

Nationally, the Women's Fellowship connected the work initiated by women in the churches and the Pilgrim Fellowship provided a network of Christian youth. The Laymen's Fellowship enabled men to carry forward a cooperative ministry.

Relations with Evangelical and Reformed

Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed Church leaders already had begun private conversations about union when the news from Germany continued to absorb the attention of pastors and laypeople in both churches. In 1934, Reformed theologian Karl Barth—founder of the neo-orthodox movement—joined with Lutheran Hans Asmussen to draft a declaration of theological independence from the Nazi regime. Adopted by the Synod of the Confessing Church meeting in Barmen, it was the high water mark of Christian resistance to Nazi ideology. Deprived of his teaching post and deported by order of the Nazi Minister of Education, Barth returned to his native Switzerland where he continued to denounce Nazi racism and military Congregational Christian Churches. Helen Kenyon bore the weight of these litigations with strength, patience and valor. District Court judge Archie O. Dawson summarized the dismay of many outside the church who watched the spectacle, "It is unfortunate that ministers and church members, who purport to abide by Christian principles, should engage in this long, expensive litigation...." Then speaking as a "Christian layman ... in all humility" he urged the parties to the controversy to "give prayerful consideration to 1 Corinthians [6:1, 5-7] when similar controversies arose to trouble the early Christians."

It is not surprising that some members of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, watching the legal struggle in their partner denomination, would share that sense of dismay. But their commitment to the Union did not waver. "So long as they [the Congregational Christian Churches] continue to extend to us the hand of friendship and fellowship," said Evangelical and Reformed President Louis W. Goebel in 1950, "we members of a church committed to ... the reunion of Christ's church, are bound to accept that hand."

Ruling against those who would block it, the Court of Appeals issued the assurance that the union "would in no way change the historical and traditional patterns of individual Congregational Christian churches" and that none would be coerced into the enlarged church. Each member was assured of continuing freedom of faith and manner of worship and no abridgement of congregational usage and practice. The ruling assured the churches that the union would not be "hierarchical" but would depend on voluntary action taken by independent, autonomous churches.

In the United Church of Christ, the separate denominational ancestral stories are preserved at the Congrega-

tional Library in Boston, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Eden Theological Seminary and Elon College.

Some uneasiness remains

Legally free to proceed with union, uneasiness remained. Congregational Christians needed to clarify the difference between authority and power; while all autonomous units—individuals, churches, and agencies—were endowed with temporal power, none wielded authority over another except through the biblical authority of God in Jesus Christ. Evangelical and Reformed Christians needed reassurance that there would be one body and not just one head, trusting that the Holy Spirit would make of the Covenant, owned by the parts of the body—individuals, churches, and agencies—a whole United Church of Christ. In trust, a joint 1954 meeting of the Congregational Christian Executive Committee and the Evangelical and Reformed General Council (ad interim for the General Synod) affirmed "The Basis of Union" with the "Interpretations" as a foundation for the merger and sufficient for the drafting of a Constitution.

Both communions approached the 1957 Uniting General Synod with fresh leadership. James E. Wagner had succeeded Richards as president of the General Synod in 1953, and on Douglas Horton's resignation in 1955, Fred Hoskins was elected Minister and General Secretary of the General Council. Eight theologians from each uniting communion met to study basic Christian doctrine and theological premises in preparation for the drafting of a Statement of Faith.

The two churches united at a General Synod June 25, 1957, in Cleveland, Ohio. A small minority of Congregational Christian churches refused to be join the union. Some them organized a National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Others joined the fundamentalist Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

Source: <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/congchri.htm>
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