

THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY

INTRODUCTION

It is with a great deal of pleasure that this brief description of the origins and purposes of Congregationalism is produced. The information is divided into several areas dealing with the historical foundations of Congregationalism and the attempt on the part of the members of a Congregational Church to practically live out our shared heritage. May you find this information helpful as well as informative. Questions that will provide you with more information are always welcome.

HISTORY

Congregational Churches were first organized in England in the Sixteenth Century. The Church developed as a result of the perceived abuses of power in the State Church (Church of England). The Separatists sought to reproduce a Church according to the New Testament model of simplicity and democracy. Separatists wanted to choose their own ministers rather than to be forced to accept the choice of the bishop. They wanted no elaborate garments or ritual. They wanted the earnest prayers of the people led by Christ, instead of set prayers chanted by the priest. They declared themselves subject only to Christ and the covenants they would draw up in independent churches.⁽¹⁾

Congregationalists thus trace their heritage to the Separatist Movement in England and the settlers of Plymouth Colony. The important factor in the founding of Plymouth was the deeply held belief that a person should be able to worship God free from imposed outside regulation. It was maintained that liberated men and women would then be encouraged to develop their personal and congregational spiritual experience.

PURPOSE

Congregationalists seek democratic life and organization, simplicity and vitality of faith, intellectual freedom to follow the dictates of conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit, educational quality, evangelistic purpose, missionary zeal, social passion, nonsectarian fellowship, and unselfish devotion to the kingdom of God.

The purpose of of a Congregational Church shall be to bind together the followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing in the worship of God and in making his will dominant in the lives of men and women, individually and collectively, especially as that will is set forth in the life, teachings, death, and living presence of Jesus Christ.

POLITY

A Congregational Christian Church is a church of self-governing Christian believers organized on a democratic basis. Congregationalists believe in a free church, one unfettered by established creeds and outside control, under the sole authority and leadership of Jesus Christ represented by the Holy Spirit and expressed in the Bible. The free church ensures true freedom of the individual before God, liberty of conscience, the autonomy of the local church, and the free fellowship of churches.

A Congregational Church acknowledges Jesus Christ as its head and finds in the Holy Scriptures, interpreted by the Holy Spirit through faith, conscience, and reason, its guidance in all matters of faith and practice. The government of the Church shall be vested in its members, who exercise the right of control in all its affairs.

While Congregational Churches recognize no superior denominational law, they accept all the obligations of mutual council, courtesy, and cooperation involved in the free fellowship of the Congregational Christian Church, and pledge themselves to share in the common aims and work of the Congregational Christian Churches in state associations or fellowships and in the national association. For example, Beulah Congregational Church is an active member of the Great Plains Congregational Fellowship as well as the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. Our Pastor serves as the Area Representative for the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

DOCTRINE

Congregational Churches emphasize beliefs upon which most evangelical Christians agree, exalt nothing trivial or sectarian, repudiate dogmatism on non-essential matters, and all legislative control, ecclesiastical or civil, of spiritual life and practice. Spiritual union with all like-minded churches is sought on the basis of mutual freedom and fellowship. The rule of action is, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity."

A Congregational Church recognizes the Bible as the source of faith and the practice of Christianity. It holds that living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ is the true test of fellowship. Each member of a Congregational Church should have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of conscience under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

The following *Statement of Faith*, is not a test of membership, but an expression of the spirit in which a church seeks to understand and apply the Word of God.

"We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness and love; and in Jesus Christ, his son, our Lord and Savior, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and lives forevermore; and in the Holy Spirit, who takes the things of Christ and reveals them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of human beings."

COVENANT

A Congregational Church is a gathered congregation of Christian believers who are willing to enter into covenant relation with God and one another. A covenant is a solemn agreement or vow, to walk in the ways of the Lord made known or to be made known. We covenant together for religious worship, work, and fellowship, acknowledging Christ as the only authoritative Head of the Church. The following is a typical Church Covenant which many Congregational churches adopt and ask all members to affirm:

We are banded together as a Congregational Christian Church to maintain the worship of God, to proclaim the gospel of Christ, to develop in men and women a consciousness of our relations and duties to God and our fellow men and women; and to inspire each other with love for redeeming truth, a passion for righteousness, and an enthusiasm for service. To this end we publicly pledge our personal loyalty to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we covenant with God and with one another that we will strive to express his Spirit in our lives, both as individual believers and as a church; to live together as Christian friends and to submit ourselves to the government of this church; always working for its progress, giving liberally of our means for its support, and praying for its increase in efficiency, its purity in life and purpose, its peace and fellowship in service, and seeking in every way to make it an influence for the building up of the kingdom of God.

MISSION STATEMENT

A typical mission statement of a Congregational Church may look like this:

"We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all humankind, exalting the worship of the one true God, and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace and the realization of human kinship. Depending, as did our fathers and mothers upon the continued guidance of the Holy spirit, we work and pray for the extension of the Kingdom of God in the world, and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting."

The members and friends of a Congregational Church, under the banner of the Lord Jesus Christ and with dependence on and cooperation with the Holy Spirit, are committed to the mission of:

1. Proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to all.
2. Exalting the worship of the one true God.
3. Laboring for the progress of knowledge, both spiritual and secular knowledge and wisdom.
4. Striving to promote justice for all people.
5. Seeking to achieve the reign of God's peace for the individual and the community.
6. Championing the realization of human kinship with the recognition that we are brothers and sisters with the whole human family.
7. Working and praying for the expansion of the Kingdom of God in the world.
8. Looking with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The old world and the new are indebted chiefly to the Congregational Churches for the establishment and progress of the principle of religious toleration. Congregationalists sailed to America in the Mayflower as the Church of the Pilgrims. Settling first at Plymouth, then later fusing with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony who followed them, these founders of Congregationalism spread over New England, and through their democratic ideals laid the foundation for the free church, the free state, the free school, and the free social life of the country. The Congregational Churches have been the pioneer Protestant Churches of the nation in the promotion of education, missions, evangelism, religious progress, and moral reform. The Congregational Churches founded Harvard, Yale, and many other renowned colleges and schools. They were influential in the framing of the Declaration of Independence. The Congregationalists were instrumental in the abolition of slavery in America, and still today are advocates of justice, compassion, and human rights. The Congregational churches have also been zealous missionaries, taking the gospel of Christ to many unreached nations, including the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii), and the islands of Micronesia.

FUTURE

With loyalty to Christ and a willingness to welcome all who follow him, with a steady pursuit of the truth, unhampered by dead traditions, and eagerly embracing the opportunities of the present, the Congregational fellowship offers the freest working conditions for the spiritual development of the individual and the church, and for the development of a free Christianity in every land, among every race. You are invited to join us in our pursuit of faith, hope, and love.