

# Doing Our First Works Over: Whither Congregational Polity?

with an Excursus: Claiming The Freedom to Choose One's Own Minister

Rev. David B. Parke

"There is no such thing as poetry without poems, art without paintings, architecture without buildings," James Luther Adams writes, "and there is no such thing as an enduring faith without beliefs." "Faith," he continues, "must have a definite form" and "Freedom requires a body as well as a spirit." "There is no such thing as goodness as such ... There is only the good spouse, the good worker, the good employer, the good churchperson, the good citizen. The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms."

The two foundational principles of Unitarian Universalism are, I hold, individual freedom of belief, the right of every member of our community of faith to formulate his or her convictions in response to the biddings of reason, conscience, and experience, and congregational self-government, the right of every local society to choose its own leaders and order its own affairs.

These foundational principles are a corporate legacy we have received from those who preceded us in the freechurch tradition. The definitive formulation of congregational polity having been enacted by representatives of the New England churches at a synod in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the year 1648, we meet today to mark the 350th anniversary of the Cambridge Platform.

I propose to discuss three questions. First, what form shall the Church of Jesus Christ assume, and by what authority? In this section we examine the biblical background of church and ministry with special reference to the Jerusalem church. Second, what does the Cambridge Platform say? In this section we examine the text of a document that, like many such, is more often referred to than read. Third, whither congregational polity? In this section we examine the problem of faith in contemporary Unitarian Universalism in the context of congregational polity. Following the presentation, within available time I invite your questions and comments on the theme.

## **I. What form shall the Church of Jesus Christ assume, and by what authority?**

Jesus did not specify the form of the community of faith he called into being. His first recorded words are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1-15 NRSV). An age is coming to a close, John and Jesus seem to say, and a new age is about to be ushered in. Only by repenting can the people prepare themselves for the inbreaking of the promised reign of God. In other scripture passages Jesus seems to accept the world as it is. Following his baptism he appoints disciples and instructs them on how they are to proceed. In the Sermon on the Mount he blesses the people, casts his lot with the disinherited, and, in the words "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you," differentiates his teaching from that of the received authorities. He illustrates his message in dramatic and unforgettable stories. He heals those who come to him, assuring them that it is their own faith that has made them well. At first he teaches in the hill country of Galilee. Later, declaring he must challenge the ruling powers on their own ground, he takes his message to the capital city of Jerusalem. He

purges the temple of money-changers, breaks bread with tax collectors and prostitutes, encourages the lowly, rebukes the proud. The reign of God, he says, will come in the form of an innocent child, a wayward son reconciled, a lost sheep borne safely home. At length, aware that the end is near, he gathers his disciples at Passover, washes their feet, and affirms his deathless solidarity with them in the sacrament of bread and wine.

The question of whether Jesus intended to establish an earthly church I leave to the biblical scholars. It seems likely that, having proclaimed the imminent advent of the reign of God, Jesus realized at some point that things weren't going as he had expected. Did he change his mind? Well, changing your mind is a very Unitarian Universalist thing to do, so we are glad to give him that one. To me, Jesus' essential message is conveyed in direct statements to persons. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:49). "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed ... For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21) In these passages, Jesus communicates not so much his purpose or his mission as himself. He gives himself wholly to the relationship with the other person. In his presence one is empowered.

Because Jesus connected so powerfully with those who came to him for help, he did not need to specify the exact form of the community that was to bear his name. From Orthodox Judaism and from Islam we learn that too exact a prescription of sacred forms lays a heavy burden of conformity on those whom one purports to set free. The community of Jesus' followers that gathered in Jerusalem after his death was the first Christian congregation. Inspired by the apostolic preaching, the people became aware that, although the man Jesus was no longer among them, his spirit continued to dwell in their hearts. Dead to the flesh, he was alive to the spirit. His presence was everywhere felt. "God raised him up," Peter declared, "having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

Moved to bear witness to Jesus' saving presence, the Christians gathered themselves into an intentional fellowship of believers. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). "All who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having goodwill for all the people. And day by day God added to their number those who were being saved" (2:44-47). The statement "they broke bread at home" calls to mind the house-church described by one scholar as "the smallest cell of the Christian movement, the household assembly." The Jerusalem Christians received the Holy Spirit, witnessed signs and wonders, buried their dead, and in other ways attested their joyful, life-giving, and world-transforming certainty that Jesus was among them healing their wounds, forgiving their sins, and calling them to newness of life.

In what ways did the Jerusalem Christians function as a congregation? Jesus having received baptism from John in the Jordan, Christians are to baptize in the name of Jesus. Jesus having established in the presence of his disciples a memorial meal of bread and wine symbolizing his body and blood, Christians are to come together and break bread in his name. Through baptism one becomes "in Christ" and a Christian, and through the communion of bread and wine one continues in Christ.

Jesus having pronounced not one but two commandments upon his hearers, namely "You shall love the Lord your God" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and exemplified compassion in his ministry and his parables, the Jerusalem Christians attended to the care of those in need, especially, in the spirit of ancient Judaism, widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22, James 1: 17).

"Because Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, the urban Christian groups obviously had the diaspora synagogue as the nearest and most natural model." Those who joined the Jerusalem congregation were Jews, and for a time the temple and the synagogue served both groups, the Jews and the Jewish Christians, as a place of worship and a social center.

As the Christian movement expanded beyond Jerusalem, Jews and gentiles alike responded to the apostolic preaching. The question arose: Are gentiles to be accepted into the new community directly, or, as the Pharisees demanded, must they convert to Judaism, keep the law of Moses, and in the case of males undergo circumcision? This issue arose first at Antioch, a hellenistic metropolis to the north in which a majority of converts were gentiles. A meeting was held in Jerusalem. Peter argued against imposing the Jewish law on gentile converts. Paul, a Jew who had persecuted the Christians before his conversion, spoke of the signs and wonders God had done through himself and Barnabas among the gentiles. Agreement was at hand. Peter and Paul, two strong-willed leaders, had their differences, but on this issue they were in accord. "We should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God," James said. Gentile converts need not convert to Judaism in order to become Christians (Acts 15, Galatians 2). So it was that the early Christians welcomed to their ranks persons of every background, station, and persuasion, such that Paul could write, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

In making decisions and maintaining discipline, the Jerusalem Christians felt the need for designated leaders and helpers to carry out the work of the community in the name of God and under the authority of those who had known Jesus. I have referred to the disciples, whom Jesus personally commissioned to preach and to heal in his name. The disciples Peter and John inaugurated the apostolic age in their preaching at Jerusalem. An apostle is one commissioned by the risen Christ to preach the gospel. The apostles Paul and Barnabas were active in the Jerusalem community in the course of their missionary labors. As the community grew a group of seven respected members was set apart to attend to the needs of certain widows, the term deacon, literally "one who serves," being appropriated to denote this role. Elders, or presbyters,

are senior leaders responsible for the welfare of a congregation in the absence of an apostle. Prophets and teachers are inspired persons set apart to perform these functions- in the church. In the course of time, ordination by laying on of hands was instituted for certain higher offices.

The issue of circumcision was one of many sources of friction in the new Christian congregations. The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters to the churches detail the growing pains of the new movement as it differentiated itself from Jewish faith and practice, negotiated a distinctive presence in the wider culture of the Roman empire, and refined its message to its adherents and to the world.

As attested in Scripture, as celebrated in myth and song and story, Jerusalem was the birthplace of Christianity. It was here in the shadow of the Cross that the followers of Jesus gathered to sing, pray, study, break bread, and create, day by day and convert by convert, a living community of faith worthy of their risen Lord.

## **II. What does the Cambridge Platform say?**

Having scrutinized the Christian community in Jerusalem, the first organized expression of Christian faith and practice, we turn to the Cambridge Platform. As we do so we are interested in the question, To what extent was the Jerusalem church a self-governing community?

The form of church government, the elders and messengers gathered at Cambridge declare, must conform to the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ as attested by the Holy Scriptures. "The Catholic Church," the Platform states, "is the whole company of those that are elected, redeemed, and in time effectually called from the state of sin and death unto a state of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ" (all quotations are from Walker, archaic language and punctuation has been modernized in quoted material). Because the church both ancient and modern consists of particular congregations in particular locations served by particular officers "appointed to feed, not all flocks, but the particular flock of God over which the Holy Ghost had made them the overseers," "there is no greater church than a congregation."

Those who constitute the church are called saints. These have attained knowledge of the principles of religion, are free from gross and open scandal, and, having repented of sin and professed their faith, walk in obedience to the word of God. The Platform states that "The children of such, who are also holy" are members with their parents. A Congregational church is, by the institution of Christ, "a company of saints by calling [that is, members who have explicitly professed their faith], united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification one of another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus."

The officers of the church of Christ are instituted by God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. "Extraordinary" officers are apostles, prophets, and evangelists, "ordinary" officers are elders and deacons. The former are called directly by Christ. Elders, also called presbyters or bishops, attend chiefly to the ministry of the word. The offices of pastor and teacher are included in the

category of elder, such that every pastor and teacher is an elder, but not every elder is a pastor or teacher. Over time the office of ruling elder emerged, a senior leader who attends to tasks of parish administration. The pastor attends to exhortation, administering a word of wisdom, the teacher attends to doctrine, administering a word of knowledge. Both are authorized to administer the Seals of the Covenant, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper, and both are charged to execute censure, a specialized application of the word.

Complementing the work of the pastor and teacher, the functions of the ruling elder include admission of members, ordination of officers, excommunication of "notorious and obstinate offenders" renounced by the church, and restoration of the penitent forgiven by the church. The ruling elder attends to the business affairs of the church community including calling meetings, training leaders, admonishing the faithful, and visiting the sick.

The deacons attend to temporal concerns. They receive offerings, keep financial records, and serve the tables, including providing for the needy.

Church officers are ordained by the laying on of hands and by prayer; in the case of elders, fasting is also enjoined. However, "the essence and substance of the outward calling of an ordinary officer in the church does not consist in his ordination but in his voluntary and free election by the church, and his accepting of that election."

Offices not specifically authorized and appointed by God are "altogether unlawful," the Platform declares, "either to be placed in the church or to be retained therein, and are to be looked at as human creatures, mere inventions and appointments of man, to the great dishonor of Christ Jesus .... whether Popes, Patriarchs, Cardinals, Archbishops, Lordbishops, Archdeacons, Officers, Commissaries, and the like. These and the rest of that Hierarchy and Retinue, not being the plants of the Lord's planting, shall all be certainly rooted out and cast forth."

Of the election of church officers the Platform declares that only those called of God may assume the honor, that calling is either immediate, by Christ himself, or mediate, by the church, and that officers are to be called only by the churches to which they are to minister. The civil magistrate does not have the power to appoint church officers.

The government of the church is a mixed government, the Platform states. In respect of Christ, the head of the church, it is a monarchy. In respect of the body, or membership, of the church, it is a democracy. In respect of the presbytery, or ministry of the church, it is an aristocracy.

Concerning membership, "The doors of the churches of Christ upon earth do not by God's appointment stand so wide open that all sorts of people may freely enter therein at their pleasure; but such as are admitted thereto, as members ought to be examined and tried first, whether they be fit and meet to be received into the church society, or not." Two things are required of all church members, repentance from sin, and faith in Jesus Christ. The Platform adds, "The weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church ...

Severity of examination is to be avoided." Sincerity is evidence of conviction, and those who fall short "have the greatest need of the ordinances for their confirmation and growth in grace."

Those who, through excessive fear or other infirmity, are unable to make public declaration of faith, may profess their faith in private to an elder who will inform the church. However, every member of the church is obliged to make a personal statement of faith whenever called upon. "We are to be ready to render a reason of the hope that is in us, to every one that asketh us--therefore we must be able and ready upon any occasion to declare and show our repentance for sin, faith unfeigned, and effectual calling, because these are the reason of a well grounded hope."

A notable section of the Platform deals with the communion of churches with one another. Typical forms of this communion, exercised by one congregation in relation to others, include: mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation (through, for example, reciprocal partaking of the Lord's Supper or baptism of children in the absence of one's home minister), recommendation, relief and succor, and, last but not least, the propagation of new churches when a particular church has grown too numerous. "As bees, when the hive is too full, issue forth by swarms, and are gathered into other hives, so the churches of Christ may do the same upon like necessity."

Synods are acknowledged as ordained by Christ. Although not necessary to the church's existence, they are "necessary to the well-being of churches for the establishment of truth and peace therein." Consisting of elders and other church members, synods are convened in the name of Christ to argue, debate, and determine "matters of religion according to the word" including controversies of faith, cases of conscience, and the good government of the church, and "to bear witness against maladministration, corruption in doctrine or manners in any particular church, and to give directions for the reformation thereof." Magistrates have the power to call a synod--the synod at Cambridge was convened by the Massachusetts General Court, the colonial legislature in Boston--but, the Platform states, "the constituting of a synod is a church act."

Concerning the power of the civil magistrate in matters ecclesiastical, church government "stands in no opposition to civil government of commonwealths," the Platform states. "The power and authority of magistrates is not for the restraining of churches ... but for helping in and furthering thereof." No magistrate has the power to compel any person to become a church member or to partake at the Lord's table.

The magistrate's office is fulfilled in the quiet and peaceable life of the citizenry, alike in matters of human and divine government. Toward this end "idolatry, blasphemy, heresy," and other actions subversive of Christian worship, the sabbath, and public order "are to be restrained and punished by civil authority."

Thus the Cambridge Platform. The question arises, To what extent does the apostolic church described in the first chapters of Acts exemplify the spirit of a congregational church as delineated in the Platform? Let us revisit the characteristics of a Congregational church. A

Congregational church is "a company of saints by calling united into one body by a holy covenant for the public worship of God and the mutual edification one of another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus." As advocates and exemplars of the congregational way in religion, we as Unitarian Universalists desperately want the first Christian congregation to be a free church like our own. We are constrained in our hope by the presence of apostles and elders including Peter, John, Barnabas, Paul, and James who exercise paramount authority, according to the account in Acts. One passage, however, gives us pause. Following the decision on circumcision we read: "Then the apostles and elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 15:22a). "The consent of the whole church" is not a phrase to be passed over lightly, nor is the fact that members of the congregation were appointed to accompany Paul and Barnabas to the consultation at Antioch.

It is difficult to evaluate these matters from a perspective of almost two thousand years. Numerous details in Acts militate against the postulate that the Jerusalem church exemplifies the spirit of congregationalism. Yet seeds of congregational autonomy are growing even here in the unwrought iron of the primitive church. The scripture record bids us take our place among the saints of God in the temple at Jerusalem, in the household assembly, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, hand in hand and heart to heart with those who, to their and our infinite blessing, were present at the creation of the Church of Jesus Christ.

### **III. Whither congregational polity?**

We have visited first century Jerusalem and seventeenth century Cambridge in search of the fountainhead, the genius of the free churches. In these manifestations of the Spirit we behold the "first works" referred to in the title of this paper. The reference is to the Book of Revelation, the second chapter.

Jesus Christ, appearing in the form of the Son of Man, commands John of Patmos to write seven letters to the seven churches of Asia, of which the first is Ephesus. "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance," the letter declares. "...But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent ... Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:2a,4-5,7a) .

Doing our first works over means renewing the covenant of being into which we are summoned to newness of life. Each of us is called to do God's work and will. Each of us is loved unconditionally. Each of us abandons one's old self and embraces the self as new creation. Each of us stands forth as one touched by holiness, righteousness, and mercy. Each of us submits to the judgment of the Holy One of Israel, or a variant creative principle, in relation to whom we are taught to forbear, forgive, struggle, suffer, endure, be reconciled, search the scriptures,

welcome the stranger, and extend ourselves to those in need. We are doing our first works over, here, now, today.

As we survey the Unitarian Universalist landscape, edified by Conrad Wright's new book, *Congregational Polity*, and by *Interdependence*, the Commission on Appraisal study, one problem confronts us at every turn. It is the problem of faith. Some of you are familiar with my earlier reflections on this theme. In this section I address the problem of faith in contemporary Unitarian Universalism in the context of congregational polity.

Faith is the great frontier of Unitarian Universalism as we stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century. Only individuals possess faith. The congregation is established and upheld by the covenant of faith of the persons who constitute it, but the church is not the source of faith. Faith is the gift of God. Apart from persons of faith, there is no community of faith, there is no covenantal power.

The substance of the church's covenant is kept, according to the Cambridge Platform, "where there is a real agreement ... of a company of faithful persons to meet constantly together in one congregation". Here in the covenanted community it is persons, not congregations, that are faithful.

The word faith appears only once in the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Following the seven principles and the six sources, we read these words: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

This is an intriguing formulation. Do the words "our" and "we" refer to the covenanting congregations or to the men and women who constitute them? If the former, we are entitled to ask, what is the particular faith that is enriched and ennobled by religious pluralism? If the latter, that is if the faith referred to is that of the individual men and women who collectively constitute the covenanting congregations, we are entitled to ask, specifically whose faith is enriched and ennobled, and from what sources, and with what consequences? Also, are the "understanding" and "vision" referred to in the first sentence attributes of congregations or of persons? An empiricist could argue that only individuals possess understanding and vision, not communities, institutions, or societies.

One is, I believe, permitted to conjecture that in the first of these two sentences the subject "we" momentarily slips out of the congregational context and expresses the collective will of the individual men and women who constitute these congregations. I will read that sentence again. "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision." That sounds to me like the collective statement of a group of Unitarian Universalist individuals, not of a group of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Of greater moment is the question of how we kindle, extend, and communicate the faith that is in us.

If one were to ask a panel of Unitarian Universalist historians to name the three most important institutional events in our associated religious life in the past 150 years, since the epic decades of John Murray and Hosea Ballou, of Channing and Emerson and Parker, one would not be surprised to find on the list the establishment by Henry W. Bellows and others of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in 1865, the establishment by the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in 1934 of the original AUA Commission of Appraisal in response to demands by James Luther Adams and others, and the vote by the 1968 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Cleveland to fund the Black Affairs Council in the amount of one million dollars as the UUA's corporate response to the Black Rebellion. Scrutinizing these three events we realize that all of them originated outside the mainstream decision-making structures of the existing denominational body. The AUA in 1865 was an association of individuals, not of congregations. The senior salaried officers of the AUA in 1934 were blissfully unaware of the political, economic, and ideological earthquake that was convulsing Western civilization. "What, me worry?" was the AUA's magnitude of response to these stupendous, interlocking, worldwide events. When the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus in November, 1967 petitioned the UUA Board of Trustees to fund the Black Affairs Council, the Board spurned the request, with the result that the Black leadership, now in solidarity with its white supporters through the FULLBAC organization, brought the proposal to the Cleveland General Assembly where it was approved by a 72 per cent majority.

On occasion the elective and administrative leadership of a farflung membership organization initiates fundamental changes in the structure and priorities of the organization. An example is the Frederick Eliot administration's leadership in the establishment of the Unitarian Service Committee as a department of the American Unitarian Association in 1939-40, initially to assist the victims of Nazi terror to escape from Germany during World War II. Another example is the UUA's leadership in the cause of gay and lesbian liberation during the presidencies of Robert West and Paul Carnes.

Whether initiated from within or beyond the mainstream decision-making structure, each such venture is an attempt to reform the organization to which one gives one's loyalty. Jesus was a Jewish prophet and reformer. John Wycliffe and Jan Hus were Christian reformers before the Reformation, loving critics of an ancient and imposing but flawed and debased institution. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were Catholic reformers before they were Protestant reformers. And just as the Anabaptists and proto-Unitarians sought to complete the Continental Reformation through the reform of doctrine, governance, and liturgy, so the English Puritans sought to complete the English Reformation. Not satisfied with the substitution of prince for pope as the head of the church in England, the Puritans insisted that Jesus Christ was the original and only head of the church. Radical Puritans, grounding their faith in Scripture and in the English liberties, discerned amidst the tumults of Tudor and Stuart England a sublime idea, namely that

the fulness of God and Christ is realized in the ordered life of each gathered congregation as its members kneel in prayer, embrace the word, profess their faith, raise their children, and attend to their daily tasks unafraid.

Where, you ask, is the greater potential for faithfulness, in the loyal insider who accepts existing processes and priorities as normative, or the loyal outsider who adheres to a higher, farther standard of judgment? I answer: Both are faithful. The UUA career of our Moderator, Denny Davidoff, whom I first met 30 years ago in Cleveland at a FULLBAC rally, offers an eloquent answer to Richard Gilbert's question, Can a prophet be chairperson of the Board? The answer is Yes, she can, if she keeps the prophetic imperative at the forefront of her organizational agenda.

A further concern is theological inquiry, reflection, and dialogue among Unitarian Universalists. It is ironical that, in a time of institutional prosperity in our local societies and in our continental association, theological discourse is at an all-time low. Few Unitarian Universalists engage in disciplined theological reflection. Our theological schools do not prepare their graduates for leadership in theology. The interaction of ministers with their congregations and with other ministers is organizational, administrative, programmatic, consultative, collegial, cognitive, or strategic, but it is not theological. It is not based on fundamental questions of life and death, nature and destiny, faith and doubt, truth and error, brokenness and blessing. The preaching office seldom includes theological questions, theological postulates, and theological speculation.

Faith and theology are not the same. Faith is the end, theology is the means. Faith is the journey, theology is the road. Faith is eternal, theology is temporal. Faith is absolute, theology is conditional. What is clear is that because faith is local, theology must be local also if the questions of theology are to produce the answers of faith.

We are impoverished as a continental community of faith by the absence of theological journals. But the UUA and its regional entities cannot fill this void. Only those who are asking theological questions can create the instrumentalities for exploring them, whether in the local congregation, the theological school, the study group, the UUMA chapter, or the interfaith colloquium.

I want to tell you how I am addressing this problem in my ministry at Emerson Unitarian Church in Houston. As a theologically-grounded and theologically-committed minister, I have cut to the chase. I preach only theological sermons. My pastoral prayers are unashamedly theological. My fortnightly newsletter columns are brief theological essays on pastoral and prophetic concerns or urban and historical themes. Starting in August we will have a personal statement at every Sunday service titled "This I Believe." Week by week we will experience the rainbow of faith that is Emerson Church. If more people want to speak than are scheduled, I will sit down, I will get out of the way so they can be heard.

There is more. The laity, women, men, young people, children, even babes in arms, are glimpsing the power and promise of a theologically-grounded and theologically-engaging congregational life. Every question we ask, every question we entertain is at root a theological

question. Slowly but surely our work as a congregation is taking form and finding its voice and claiming its generative energy under the categories of eternity. Some of you remember the late Jim Curtis, a ministerial colleague whose motto was, Nothing is settled, everything matters. That describes the mood at Emerson Church. The place is electric. People are laughing again. We appointed a Director of Religious Education. We painted the outside of the sanctuary. We hired a caterer for Sunday luncheons. We're beefing up the endowment. Our Befrienders Group is providing a ministry of presence to the congregation. Our Growth Planning Committee has a new slogan: 2002 Space Odyssey.

I am satisfied. I am completing my tenth year of full-time interim ministry to seven different congregations from Boston to Spokane and from Montreal to Houston. This fall I will have completed 43 years of ministry. My health is good. My head is clear. My bills are paid.

Faith, my friends, is the name of the game. Faith is the apostolic church in Jerusalem. Faith is the saints by calling in the churches of the Standing Order in colonial New England. Faith is the covenant we enter into with God, with ourselves, with one another, in our congregations, and in the larger councils of our associated life, worshiping as one people, welcoming the newcomer, standing together in affliction and adversity, cherishing our children, laying to rest those whose labors are done, singing, weeping, praising the Holy One of Israel for all good gifts.

Congregational polity is a form of church government whereby we decide for ourselves who we are, who will lead us, and how we will spend our money and order our affairs. We choose the congregational way because only thus is our faith unfettered and our future secured.

Let the experiment continue. Amen.

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### **Excursus: Claiming The Freedom to Choose One's Own Minister**

In preparing this paper, I encountered two early instances of the popular demand for the freedom to choose and to dismiss one's minister. The First is The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants, 1525, a manifesto detailing "The Just and Foundational Articles of All the Peasantry and Tenants of Spiritual and Temporal Powers, By Whom They Think Themselves Oppressed," cited in full in Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, trans. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H.C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 195-201. "We humbly ask and beg," the first article reads in part, "...that henceforth we ought to have the authority and power for the whole community to elect and appoint its own pastor. We also want authority to depose a pastor who behaves improperly." It is to assure the 91 constant preaching of the true faith" that the peasants make this demand (Blickle: 196). The author was Sebastian Lotzer (Blickle: 54).

Two years later, in February, 1527, the Swiss Brethren, a group of evangelical Anabaptists, gathered in the Canton Schaffhausen near Zurich and adopted the Schleithem Confession, subtitled "Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles," cited in full in Mark A. Noll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 50-58. The pastor of the church of God, the Fifth Article reads, "shall be supported by the church which has chosen him." The author was Michael Sattler (Noll: 48). See also George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia.. The Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 181-188.

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