

A Summary History of Ministerial Credentialing, Fellowship and Discipline In the American Congregationalist, Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist Traditions¹

Prepared by Susan Ritchie

The Congregationalist 17th Century

The modern concept of ministerial credentialing and fellowship postdates the initial practices of American congregationalism. In the very earliest days of the American colonies, issues of ministerial fitness were primarily discussed in terms of the appropriateness of one particular person for one particular parish ministry. Even ordination was understood as the formalizing of the relationship between one congregation and one minister, not the assumption of a person to any larger class of ministry. Ordination ceremonies reflected this. The sermon was preached by the ordinand himself, and the laying on of hands was performed by either all of the church members or by representative laymen. The ceremony itself was only symbolic of the conveyance of the office of the ministry, which was actually bestowed by the vote of the parish. Participation in the ordination ceremony by ministers from other congregations was strictly limited to the extension of the right hand of fellowship (which was itself customarily offered to all officers of the church).



What is not widely appreciated is how very briefly such thorough congregationalism was practiced. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 was already a compromise between those who were arguing for and against an authority for the clergy that would extend beyond the confines of a particular congregation. While it is common in our circles today to hold up the Cambridge Platform as a pure expression of congregational democracy, the fact of the matter is that the laity hated it and read it as evidence of the clergy's desires to take away power from the people. The clergy tended to respond to this criticism by consolidating their interests: as early as the mid 17th century there was a growing tendency on the part of ministers to identify with each other as a common body, sometimes over and against their

In the 17th and 18th centuries, young boys were often set aside for the ministry locally--by elders, pastors, fathers, or patrons. Piety, suitable character, and most promising of all-- "a sickly or morbid constitution"-- were all considered positive identifiers for the ministry.

¹ Universalist process being ignored only for the purposes of this paper, given the complete triumph of the Unitarian system at the time of consolidation.

ties to their individual church. This identification would eventually grow into a sense of ministerial fellowship, with bodies of ministers rather than congregations assuming the right to admittance. As one 17th century minister could already write, “There is a clerical as well as a church fellowship.”

The colonial clergy observed the custom of gathering “in association” during meetings of the General Court. While the ministers were primarily present to exercise their unique civic authority within New England culture, at these meetings “every pastor that met with singular difficulties had the opportunity to bring them under consideration.”² Counsels of ministers and ruling elders from different congregations also served in advisory roles in the case of difficulty between a congregation and its elected minister. The first dismissal of a minister in Massachusetts came in 1636, when Thomas James of Charlestown (poor man!) was removed from ministry by the action of his congregation on the advice of neighboring ministers and elders, for “melancholy fits.”

By the late seventeenth century, increasing impulses towards secularism lead to a gradually lessening of prestige of the office of minister. Clergy tended to react to this loss of social status by again emphasizing the special role of the ministry. Ordination ceremonies reflected this change, and by 1670 the act of ordination was almost exclusively performed by visiting ministers rather than laypeople from within the congregation. Alas, what ministers gained in their identification with each other was lost in a new precariousness in their relationship to the congregations. With the primary identification of the clergy as being joined in a more or less permanent bond to one local congregation disrupted on both sides, the average length of individual pastorates began to shrink as both ministers and congregations felt more free to break their covenantal relationship in search of better prospects.

The Congregationalist 18th Century

The first American bodies to assume the modern functions of ministerial credentialing and fellowshipping appeared in New England in the earliest years of the 18th century in the form of county ministerial associations, which claimed quite broad powers, from disciplining other ministers for “scandal or heresy,” to licensing ministerial candidates to preach. In practice, the members of local ministerial

Statement of Purpose from a 1705 ministerial association in Connecticut: “that Advice be taken by the Associated Pastors from time to time, e’re they Proceed to any action in the Particular Churches, which be likely to produce any imbroilments. That the Associated Pastors do Carefully and Lovingly treat each other with that watchfulness which may be of Universal Advantage; and that if any Minister be accused to the Association whereto he belongs, of Scandal or Heresie, the matter shall be there examined, and if the Associated Ministers find just accusation for it, they shall direct it to the Calling of a Council, by whom such an Offendor is to be proceeded against. That the Candidates of the Ministry undergoe a due Tryal by some one or other of the Associations, concerning their Qualifications for the Evangelical Ministry, and that no particular Pastor or Congregation Employ any one in Occasional Preaching, who has not been recommended by a Testimonial under the Hands of some Association.”

² As Henry Adams remarked, “...society was organized on a system—a clergy in alliance with a magistracy; a university supporting each, and supported in turn,—a social hierarchy in which respectability, education, property and religion united to defeat the unwise and the vicious.”

associations proved largely reluctant to discipline their fellow pastors, and the groups would recommend the removal someone from his congregation only in cases of grievous and repeated demonstrations of flawed pastoral character (repeated public drunkenness over the course of many years is one of the more frequently cited issues).

Most of the congregationalist parish clergy prepared for their vocation by attending college, and then serving an apprenticeship while living with a practicing minister for periods that varied from several months to several years. Ministerial education and training was regularized during the revival movements of the Great Awakening as the learned clergy became concerned with the uneducated, self-proclaimed preachers roaming the country free of parish boundaries. Massachusetts ministers persuaded the General Court to pass the Religious Act of 1760, which required that the tax-supported ministerial salaries of the churches of the Standing Order go only those who had a formal college education or the testimony of the local ministers' association as to equivalent learning. The reforms of this time were at least partly focused on futile attempts to shore up the eroding position of the clergy within the cultural and intellectual elite.

The Unitarian 19th Century

In 1864, acting on a common understanding that the local ministerial associations were inadequate for the proper credentialing of ministers, Unitarians formed the first nationally organized Ministerial Union. The increasing number of ministers who had not trained at Harvard or Meadville had also created a new anxiety that non-Unitarian seminaries would fail to weed out “incompetent and unworthy” ministerial candidates. Hence under the first rules of the Ministerial Union, graduates of Unitarian affiliated Harvard or Meadville were admitted into the fellowship without question. All others could be admitted into common fellowship only by the Committee on Membership, a committee of three ministers directly elected by the membership as a whole. The Union claimed the authority to dismiss members for immoral conduct undertaken against fellow members, but denied any jurisdiction over the behavior of ministers within their own congregation. Indeed, the Ministerial Union always insisted that while it would control admission to its own membership, that in a setting of congregational polity, it was not the proper body to credential Unitarian candidates for ministry in general.

... the Fellowship Committee from its origins had the responsibility to determine not mere professional competence, but a candidate's moral and religious character, part of which was understood as the discernment as to whether a person might be thought to be an appropriate representative of Unitarian religious tradition. In the context of congregational polity, it was felt that this function should be as directly tied to the congregations as possible.

Hence it was that American Unitarian Association President Bellows brought the question of authority to grant ministerial fellowship to the National Conference (established in 1868 as the first group in which representatives of congregations met together—the AUA had previously consisted only of individuals). The National Conference established local committees to examine ministers for “natural competencies, acquirements, and moral and religious character.” Part of the interest in establishing a fellowship committee had to do with new thoughts about credentialing in all of what we only now think of as professions—law, medicine, clergy. By the mid-

19th century a “culture of professionalism” had arisen, which argued that the authority that

to practice a profession could only be granted by a collective body of other practitioners, those who had themselves been through prescribed rituals and training. The standardization of formal education seemed to be the main impetus for this change. But it is extremely important to note that the Fellowship Committee from its origins had the responsibility to determine not mere professional competence, but a candidate's moral and religious character, part of which was understood the discernment as to whether a person might be thought to be an appropriate representative of Unitarian religious tradition. In the context of congregational polity, it was felt that this religious function beyond professionalism should be as directly tied to the congregations as possible. At first, this direct tie was established by having the National Conference itself establish the Committee on Fellowship; eventually this responsibility fell to the Association's Board of Trustees. The purpose in each case was clear: to make sure the congregations—which in this case explicitly included the laity--had a powerful voice in determining who it might be said to represent the shape of their living tradition.

So it was that in 1878 the National Conference authorized by a narrow margin the establishment of a Committee on Fellowship of twelve members, three each from four separate geographical areas which consisted of regional subcommittees. Applicants not from Meadville or Harvard had to apply to the chair of national committee with letters of recommendation; some personal interviews were conducted. Most persons received fellowship through the small regional subcommittees. The Committee was not given power to remove persons from Fellowship until more than a decade later; when they were given permission to do so if they were "satisfied that in conduct and character such a person has become unworthy to continue to hold the office of a Christian Minister in Unitarian Fellowship." The greatest concern was with "moral adventurers."

The Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist 20th century

The constitution of the association, then, as now, prohibited any more direct intrusion into the rights of the congregations to call or ordain their own ministers, and this boundary has held pretty firm with some exceptions. The early 20th century saw the first attempts of the association to counsel congregations against settling ministers who had not first received the approval of the Fellowship Committee. Eventually this led to the current position, where the association does not assist ministers not in fellowship in the settlement process.. And of course, many congregations choose to wait to ordain persons until they have achieved fellowshiping; whether this is be from choice, or in some cases, ignorance of the process. In the early 1990s the requirement for candidates pursuing fellowship to be "sponsored" by a congregation was added, although the separation between congregational ordination and associational fellowshiping has remained otherwise complete.

At the time of the consolidation of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961, the Universalist practice of both ordaining and fellowshiping ministers at the level of the state convention was repudiated as having strayed too far from congregationalism and too far into a hierarchical structure that was almost Presbyterian in the role reserved for the clergy and an elite of elders (someone once remarked that Unitarians had the hearts of Presbyterians and the polity of the Congregationalists, while Universalists had the heart of Congregationalists with the polity of Presbyterianism). Under the Universalist system, fellowshiping and

ordination went hand in hand, and churches were strictly prohibited from hiring ministers who were not in fellowship. In fact, the strictness of Universalist polity in this matter had actually already started to erode as early as 1917, when declines in both Unitarian and Universalist membership lead to an increased number of federated Unitarian/Universalist churches, which in turn required admitting ministers into dual fellowship.

Some Generic and Summary Conclusions and Response to A Common Question³

1. Congregational polity – *when immaculately conceived*—does require the separation of the processes of ordination and fellowshiping, with the later belonging to the association as a whole, given that part of the process of fellowshiping goes beyond professional credentialing in its interests in determining appropriate representatives of the living tradition; there are, however, multiple ways in which “belonging to the association” might be interpreted. The bottom line for this belonging in the context of congregational polity would be the ensured participation of laity. Oh, and, well, nothing we do is immaculate.
2. Whether or not credentialing of musicians and religious educators belongs to the association entails agreement on whether or not such is a purely professional credential, or like the ministerial one, implies a measurement of moral and religious appropriateness in relationship to the living tradition.

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³ ...in which Susan really does *try* to restrict herself to a commonly understood reading of the dictates of congregational polity in Unitarian practice, rather than assert her own position, which is far more specific and cranky. Inquiries welcome.

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