

A BRIEF SURVEY OF CONFERENCE ORGANIZATION AND STAFFING  
IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

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As the New York Conference faces difficult questions regarding staff deployment, it might be helpful to reflect on the history of Conference organization and conference staffing. As we look at history, we are reminded, (1) we have **not** always done things this way, and therefore need not feel obligated to continue present patterns; on the other hand (2) there were usually good reasons for adopting present patterns. I will look at the various groups that came into the UCC, issues at the time of union, and some of the experience in New York State.

Congregational Conferences

Eighteenth century New England had two kinds of Congregationalism. Cambridge Platform Congregationalism in Eastern New England had no standing organizations. Saybrook Platform Congregationalism in Connecticut, western Massachusetts, and Vermont, had standing Associations. In the period 1810-1840 forces were at work which pushed eastern New England Congregationalists to adopt the more connectional pattern of Connecticut. 1) The rise of Unitarianism was perceived as a threat that needed to be challenged. Orthodox Congregationalists organized state "General Associations" with the Westminster Catechism as the creedal base, as a way of organizing and uniting the orthodox, and--by default--identifying and

isolating the Unitarians. 2) The rise of the missionary movement generated much excitement and required organization, which often paralleled and reinforced association and conference structures.

Conferences developed in tandem with the voluntary societies. An Association or Conference meeting in the nineteenth century was in fact a series of meetings. In the eighteen-teens when the Hampden (Springfield, Mass) Association met, the Hampden Bible Society, Hampden Foreign Missionary Society, and Hampden Education Society also met, sequentially, in the same place, with the same membership. The highlight of the meeting was a joint missionary sermon, and missionary offering. Interest in missions drew people to the Association meeting, and strengthened the Association.

The Vermont Convention of Congregational Churches was organized in 1795. The Convention organized the Vermont Missionary Society (1807), the Vermont Tract Society (1808), Vermont Bible Society (1812), a branch of the American Education Society (1820), and Vermont Sabbath School Union (1825). All of these societies became auxiliaries of national voluntary societies. They reported to the Convention, and some held their meetings at the same time as the Convention. Some, such as the Domestic (Vermont) Missionary Society were--by by-law--composed of delegates to the Convention. A history of the General Convention, written in 1838 reported,

The number who composed the Convention for ten or fifteen years after its organization, was small, and very few attended who were not members. All the business, except the delivery of one or two public discourses, was usually transacted in the study or the parlor of the minister, whose hospitality they shared. But after the Anniversary of the Domestic Missionary Society, in 1823, was brought into connection with the meeting of the Convention, and especially after other anniversaries were still added, the meeting, as the friends of religion

desired, became numerously attended by both males and females; was of thrilling interest; and might well be denominated the religious festival of the State.<sup>1</sup>

The 1845 annual meeting of the General Association of Connecticut, held in Plainfield, June 17-19, as described in a newspaper account, went like this. *Tuesday afternoon*: meeting of the Connecticut branch of the American Education Society. *Wednesday morning*: General Association met. Among other business, Leonard Bacon reported on a new hymnal he was preparing for publication. *Wednesday evening*: meeting of the Missionary Society of Connecticut. *Thursday morning*: General Association meeting--a debate on slavery preceded vote on a resolution. Then reports were heard from the American Sunday School Union, Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, American Bible Society, and American Colonization Society.<sup>2</sup>

The Vermont Convention and General Association of Connecticut just described, had **no** staff, and virtually no budget. The national voluntary societies **did** have staff, called corresponding secretaries, at their central offices, and deployed staff, called agents. The deployed staff, appointed by the national agencies, worked closely with the judicatories within their borders. They are the "grandfathers" of our modern Conference staff. The first responsibility of agents was to raise funds. In time, they were renamed "field secretaries" and given a multitude of responsibilities, in addition to fund raising.

For example, the North Dakota Conference, in the early years of the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Merrill, "History of the General Convention of Congregational and Presbyterian Ministers in Vermont" American Quarterly Register (Aug 1838): 41.

<sup>2</sup>"General Association of Connecticut" New England Puritan (Jun 27, 1845).

century, had a "Field Secretary" appointed by the Board of Home Missions in New York City. It would be more accurate to say that the "Home Missionary Society" of the North Dakota Conference had a field secretary. The field secretary's first job was to organize churches. His second job was to nurture those new churches along, which work included recruiting ministerial leadership. An important activity of the Conference/Home Missionary Society was the granting of subsidies to churches to pay pastors' salaries. Larger, self-sufficient churches did not have a relationship with the field secretary. In addition to the Field Secretary, the North Dakota Conference had a secretary for Sunday School Work, appointed by a board back East, whose first job was organizing Sunday Schools. Later, the national Women's Fellowship also sent a field secretary to North Dakota to work with Women's Fellowships across the state.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Congregational Conferences were evolving in three areas. (1) State Conferences and State Home Missionary Societies were merged, giving Conferences a staff person--and budget--for the first time. (2) Conferences strove to become self-supporting. In stead of sending their mission money to a New York office, and that office paying the superintendent, the Conferences raised or retained their own mission monies, and paid their superintendent. This meant they also selected their own superintendent. (3) The Superintendent's job description was changing. The Superintendent was to serve all of the churches of the Conference, not just the struggling ones. New church development became less important; placement and program support for **all** churches became more important.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>One has to question if these new directions were successful. Many conferences achieved self-support only briefly, continue self-support only by retaining a larger

New York Conference is typical. When Walter Rollins became Conference Superintendent in 1922, the Conference (i.e., his salary) was still subsidized by BHM. In fifteen years he moved the Conference to self-support. In 1925 the Conference called a Field Representative to work with rural churches. The following year, a Director of Religious Education was added, to work principally with the camping program. The society of Congregational Women had their own field secretary.

### Reformed

The Reformed Church in the US was connectional. It was always organized into Synods, classes, or other units. The clergy were not members of their local churches, but members of Synod, and recognized a responsibility to share in the work of their synods. This perhaps explains how the Reformed Synods could function quite well without any professional staff. I can find no indication of any Reformed Synod having full-time staff before the merger with the Evangelical Synod. The Reformed Church in the U S did not have full time staff on the **national** level until 1886, when a Superintendent of Home Missions was appointed. A General Secretary for Foreign Missions was named in 1887, and a General Sunday School Secretary in 1893.<sup>4</sup>

### Evangelical

In 1866 the young Evangelical Synod took the controversial step of electing a full-time President. For much of the remainder of the century, the Evangelical Synod

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percentage of OCWM, and are not supporting the ministry and mission they once had. Also, many of the larger Congregational background churches continue to have minimal involvement in Conference life at best.

<sup>4</sup>This information is based on a survey of David Dunn, ed., A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990).

debated whether or not they could afford a full-time President. The full-time Presidency was discontinued in 1880, restored in 1892, discontinued again in 1894, and finally restored in 1909. The Presidency was always perceived as a **pastoral** office. The first President undertook the task of visiting every congregation in the denomination. From the beginning the President was not administrator of program so much as chief pastor of the church. The Evangelical Synod did establish other full-time national positions. I do not know at what point a full time Secretary for Foreign Missions was appointed. A Secretary for Home Missions was appointed in 1903, and a General Secretary of the Board of Religious Education in 1915.

Each district in the Evangelical Synod also had a President. The District President was also pastor of a local church. This office was also seen as pastoral, and district presidents exerted themselves to make visitations of the churches in their districts. In 1919 the Evangelical Synod Home Mission Board began appointing field superintendents, who also served as presidents of mission districts.

### Christian

Christian Conferences were fairly small, comparable to Congregational Associations, and met primarily for inspiration. There was no staff.

### Evangelical and Reformed

The Constitution of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, adopted in 1940, provided for a mushrooming national bureaucracy. Each Synod had a Synod President, following the pattern of the Evangelical Synod. Some were pastors of local churches, while others were full-time Synod Presidents. By 1958, 25 of the 33 E & R Synods had full-time Presidents.

## United Church of Christ

The new United Church of Christ in 1958 appointed a "Committee of Nine" to establish guidelines for defining Conference borders. This Committee set down the following criteria:

- (1) Conferences and synods are essentially 'state oriented' . . . This suggests that the state might logically be the basic unit for the realignment of conference boundaries in the UCC. . . .
- (2) Conferences ought to be sufficiently large to support a strong and adequate conference staff.
- (3) Conference boundaries should be drawn on a basis which will be inclusive of racial, ethnic, and national groups.<sup>5</sup>

At first, the committee thought the minimum size needed for a Conference to support adequate staff was 200 congregations and/or 50,000 members. They found this criteria unworkable, and reduced it to 150 congregations and/or 30,000 members. The paper then added a fourth criteria, "the realignment of conference boundaries should take place, wherever possible, with a minimum of discontinuity to existing structures, programs, and services."<sup>6</sup>

The formation of Conferences in the new United Church of Christ was, in fact, a highly political process. The report of the Committee of Nine was quoted by those who agreed with it, and ignored by those who disagreed with it. The fourth criteria--calling for a minimum of change--translated into smaller groups being absorbed into the largest group in each area. This practice contradicted the spirit of union that created the

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<sup>5</sup>Yoshio Fukuyama, "The Committee of Nine: Its Quest for Principles and Criteria," p. 3. North Dakota Congregational Conference, Papers, box 21. North Dakota State Library, Bismarck, ND.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

United Church of Christ.

### New York Conference

In 1957 the Congregational Conference in New York consisted of eight associations: Suffolk, New York City, Hudson Valley, Essex, Black River-St. Lawrence, Union, Western, and Ontario (the last was a cluster of Christian-background congregations in Canada). They were joined in the United Church of Christ by two E & R synods: New York and Western New York. The Congregational Conference had a staff of seven:<sup>7</sup>

- 1 Minister and Superintendent (in New York City)
- 2 Regional Associates (Syracuse and New York City)
- 1 Minister of Stewardship
- 1 Minister of Christian Education
- 1 Director of Lisle (a Camp and Conference Center)
- 1 University Pastor at Cornell University.

Western New York Synod had a full-time Synod President; New York Synod did not.

Over the years, the New York Conference has used of variety of patterns of staff deployment. There has always been a Conference Minister, and some regionally deployed Associate Conference Ministers. In addition there have been programmatic staff, sometimes assigned to the state, sometimes regionally deployed, sometimes full-time, sometimes part-time. Staff size peaked around 1967 at 12, and has since declined to six--the size of the Congregational staff in 1947. However, the trend has been to preserve the regionally deployed staff, whereas the old Congregational

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<sup>7</sup>It is difficult determine by perusing the annual reports, which staff were full-time, which part time, and which voluntary).



Conference emphasized programmatic staff.

Where do we go from here?

Loren B. Mead, in The Once and Future Church states:

The church--its laity, clergy, congregations, executives, and bishops--has organized and structured itself for one mission. We have awakened to a world in which the mission frontier has changed. The organization and the structure of church life, formed for that one mission, now need to be reoriented to face the new frontier.

The task ahead is the reinvention of the church.<sup>8</sup>

Mead's point is that our present denominational structures were built on the premise of mission "out there." Denominations were structured to gather funds and mobilize resources to do mission somewhere else. Today we have a different understanding of mission. Every church is a mission station. We have to reorient how we function as denominations.

Mead's thesis is a particularly difficult challenge to those from free church traditions (like Congregationalists). We did not have denominational structures until missions created the need. We run the danger of losing our connectedness unless we rethink what we believe about the nature of the church (ecclesiology).

I believe that the church is more than the local expression of the church. Our connectedness is important. It is something to be affirmed and celebrated. The existence and importance of units like Associations and Conferences is not dependent on programmatic function or utility. It is important for us to come together and work together. It is important for us to help each other. Our life as a community is (should

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<sup>8</sup>Loren B. Mead, The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier (Alban Institute, 1992), p. 42.

be) a witness to the gospel.

### Summary

The conclusions which I draw from a review of history may be different from your conclusions. My conclusions are these:

(1) The "Conference" is not the Conference staff, but all of the people of the Conference. In the tradition of the Reformed Church in the US, we must all sense a responsibility to share in the work of the Conference. It should be made clear when any pastor is called to a local church in the conference, that part of that pastor's ministry will be carried out in the life of the Association and Conference. The use of "Deans" is one way.

(2) The trend has been toward Pastoral staff and away from Programmatic staff. This was the pattern in the Evangelical Synod, and the trend in the Congregational Churches. I believe that we have the programmatic resources within our Conference--in its pastors and active laity. We don't need specialized Conference staff--we do need to find ways to utilize the resources we have.

(3) The church exists for mission. This was, is, and shall be the essence of the church. Understandings of that mission may change. Denominational structures are still needed to empower mission. In our highly complex and interdependent world, it is naive to think that all mission concerns can be adequately addressed by the local congregation. The forces of evil in our world are strong, and united effort is needed to face them. Every level of the life of the church must be a unit of mission.