

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

by Charles A. Maxfield

At the time of the American Revolution, the Congregationalists were the largest denomination in the United States. By 1840 they ranked fourth; in 1890 they were eighth.¹ What happened? Why did Congregationalists lose the West?

The same question can be asked concerning the three other denominations that came into the United Church of Christ. The Reformed Church in 1890 had 78% of its membership in the states of Pennsylvania and Ohio, and only 4% of its membership west of the Mississippi, where 27% of the country's population lived. The Christians maintained about the same membership throughout the Nineteenth Century, while other groups bloomed around them. In 1890 only 7% of Christians lived west of the Mississippi. Of these four groups, the German unionist churches had the most success in "The Valley" (The Mississippi drainage basin).

These groups were not complete failures. Congregationalists, Evangelicals, and Reformed all had strategies that established churches and brought in new members. These three groups all had significant membership growth in the Nineteenth Century. The Reformed Church had grown by a factor of 8.5, from about 24,000 in 1835 to 204,000 in 1890. Congregationalists grew by a factor of three, from 165,000 in 1845 to 513,000 in 1890, and the Evangelical Synod, non-existent when the century began, had 187,000 members in 1890. In a century when the country's population increased by a factor of seventeen, and other groups rapidly surpassed them, their gains look like losses.

James Rohrer, in *Keepers of the Covenant*, analyzed many of the reasons commonly presented for the "decline" of Congregationalism, and disproved them:

- Congregationalists were not "indifferent" to the frontier, but actively organized and contributed to send missionaries west.
- Congregationalists were not promoters of Federalist politics and established churches, but stayed out of partisan politics and cultivated voluntary organizations independent of the government.
- Congregational ministers were not "genteel" but came, for the most part, from poor or middle income families of rural New England, with little wealth or power.
- Calvinism had not become culturally unacceptable in the west. Congregational, Presbyterian and Reformed preachers always drew crowds and elicited a response.

According to Rohrer, the principle cause of Congregationalism's "failure" was its high membership standards. Hundreds would hear a Congregational preacher, but only a handful

¹In 1890, 45% of Congregationalists still lived in New England.

would pass the examination of doctrine, religious experience and morality that restricted access to the communion table. The multitude of persons touched by Congregational preaching, but excluded from the Table, found fellowship in less demanding churches. To the extent that Kirchenverein pastors subsidized by the AHMS stiffened their membership standards, their growth was inhibited as well.

Looking at the four groups that make up the UCC, we can identify other possible reasons for relative decline:

- Belief in Christian unity led Congregationalists and Christians into cooperation with Presbyterians and Disciples, respectively, that enlarged the other denomination at the expense of the group that joined the UCC.
- Internal conflict in the Reformed Church over the Mercersburg Theology, consumed energy, and reduced trust such that people did not give to the denomination for home missions. Wide disparity in belief among Christians, and theological conflict among western Congregationalists (pro-Oberlin vs. anti-Oberlin) also inhibited growth.
- Congregationalists, Reformed and Evangelicals all wanted well educated clergy who alone could administer the sacraments. This did not prevent lay people from gathering churches and leading worship. But it was difficult for lay people to sustain a church over a long period of time without ordained leadership. The Congregationalists, who were the most numerous and had the most financial resources, were most effective in training large numbers of missionary pastors. Reformed, Evangelical and Christian all struggled financially to establish and maintain schools for training clergy. The expense of the theological school left the denomination with insufficient funds for Home Missions.
- Theology did matter. Methodist polemics identified Calvinism with one doctrine—predestination. In a nation that had recently won its freedom, and on a frontier where people carved out their own future, free-will made more sense. The Baptist presentation of believer's baptism as a person's freely chosen commitment also made sense to many.
- Indifference to denominational identity made it easy for Congregationalists, Christians and Evangelicals to join other churches.

The groups that made up the UCC did not *lose* the West so much as other groups *won* the West. Of the seven largest denominations in 1890, Catholics and Lutherans grew through immigration; Presbyterians and Disciples grew through the efforts and at the expense of Congregationalists and Christians; Episcopalians, recovering from the Revolution, appealed to the growing interest in romanticism; and Methodists and Baptists grew through vigorous lay leadership and a message that harmonized with the values of the new nation.