

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Erwin A. Britton, Executive Secretary

Because of the many requests that my office supply a brief sketch of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, I have prepared the following account of where we have been, where we are and where, I believe, we are going.

I

FIRST, WHERE WE HAVE BEEN.

Gathering at the Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit, Michigan, nearly twenty-six years ago, official representatives and visitors from 102 churches, widely differing in geographical location, size, theological positions and resources came together with one basic, overriding desire; viz, to offer to each other and to those who might be encouraged later to join the movement a viable alternative to membership in the United Church of Christ.

No matter how intensely the persons present at this historic meeting believed in the autonomy, the independence and the completeness, under Christ, of the gathered congregation, they also deeply and passionately believed in fellowship: a fellowship formed by forces stronger than legalism or the coerced loyalties of frightened or sycophantic ministers who were admonished "To go along or else"; a fellowship unmarred by ecclesiastical manipulations; a fellowship honoring the ties of Christian love, inner discipline, the constraints of Christ and responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

The Association began with no funds, no staff and no organization, but with a deep conviction that, as God had led the Pilgrim forebears across a stormy sea, He would sustain this venture in faith and reward those faithful to this cause.

There were times that those involved in this enterprise gained new understanding of and appreciation for the problems faced by Nehemiah as he sought to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem following the return of the exiles from Babylon, when, to bolster their flagging spirits, he rallied the people with these words, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." (Neh 4:19, 20)

In 1956, Dr. Harry Johnson of Idaho, former superintendent of the Inter-Mountain Conference of the Congregational Christian Churches, was named Executive Secretary, and the work of co-ordination and expanding the National Association began in earnest. In 1959, Rev. Neil Swanson, minister of the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, became Executive Secretary. Space was rented in a downtown office building in Milwaukee, and Association continued to move forward. In 1973, following an authorizing vote at the Annual Meeting in 1972, an intensive fund-raising campaign called Forward in Freedom, took shape. A site for an office building was purchased in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and a modest yet very attractive structure was erected and dedicated in 1973. Substantial funds were also gathered at that time to plant new Congregational Churches where none existed and to provide an endowment in support of general operating needs.

## II

### SECOND, WHERE WE ARE NOW.

An association which seeks to serve in an adequate manner its members must develop some programs, recruit some personnel and gather some funds to carry through, in concrete fashion, its dreams.

Great stress continues to be placed on the involvement of volunteers; lay persons and ministers with both expertise and dedication to develop programs in Missions, Pastoral Relations, Christian Education, Women's programs, Communications, World-wide Relations, Church extension, support of a building and loan program, spiritual growth, education in preparation for Christian service, Youth.

Each year over 125 volunteers, elected by delegates to the Annual Meetings, initiate, evaluate, promote and implement programs in the aforementioned service areas.

The Association now has four full-time, and one part-time, members of its Executive Staff. The Rev. David L. Gray, D. Min. Associate Secretary with responsibilities for Youth, Christian Education, Spiritual Resources and Dean of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies (our program for training in full-time Christian vocations); The Rev. A. Ray Appelquist, D.D., Associate Secretary for Missions and Pastoral Relations; Ms. Roberta Paetow, Administrator; Mr. Harold Frentz, Field Representative and the Rev. Erwin A. Britton, D.D., Executive Secretary with special responsibility for the Building and Loan Division and Congregational Church Development Division.

There are the usual support persons: secretaries, financial secretary, clerk-typists, printer and maintenance. It is a loyal, dedicated staff, giving constant thought to ways to increasing the effectiveness of the Association, and many times going well beyond the call of duty to advance the work. The Association is supported by voluntary contributions from member churches and interested individuals. Each Division makes a special appeal for funds to support its particular projects. During the Twenty-fifth Anniversary year, additional funds for endowments were solicited.

The Association now has assets totaling approximately \$3,100,000 including the value of the property at the Oak Creek and some restricted funds. Its funds are managed professionally by a competent Trust Company in such a way as to insure maximum yield consistent with safety and in accordance with the particular needs and goals of the various components of the Association. The books of the Association are audited annually by a nation-wide audit firm. Inquiries about the manner in which funds are handled and particular needs may be directed to Division, Committee or Commission Chairmen, or the Executive Staff. Such inquiries are solicited, and will be responded to promptly.

Annual Meetings of the Association (with one church/one vote) are held in various parts of the country. Pilgrim Fellowship Youth (High School age) and H.O.P.E. (Heritage of Pilgrim Endeavor, College age) also gather simultaneously with and in the general locale of the adult assembly. All groups are showing growth in attendance, enthusiasm and the quality of programs. The Association now numbers over 400 churches, with about 100,000 members. As a body, the Association is not affiliated with the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches or the Consultation on Church Union (C.O.C.U.).

It makes no pronouncements on social or political issues and, consistent with basic Congregational polity, leaves the matter of theological formulations to each local Church.

Rather than viewing the consequent theological diversity as a weakness, members of the Association profit by greater depth of understanding and enrichment as persons of widely varying points of view have the opportunity to interact one with another.

### III

#### THIRD, WHERE ARE WE GOING

Questions have been raised from time to time whether the National Association, as it matures, and as those who fought hard for its life are no longer able to be active in its

affairs, will not go the way of so many similar organizations and become a highly centralized, bureaucratic organization and less responsive to the needs of the churches. That concern is a proper one. Lord Acton was not the only person to observe that, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

What may make the National Association unique among organizations is the fact that carefully-worded safeguards are built into its Constitution and By-laws making such a "take-over" virtually impossible. Some of these vital safeguards are as follows: limiting the length of the terms of the Executive Staff; limiting the number of years a person may serve on the Executive Committee [Art. IV. 2, a(2)]; limiting the powers of the Executive Committee (By-law IV, 1.); the requirement that all actions of the Executive Committee must be reviewed and ratified by the delegates at each Annual Meeting (Art. IV, 2-C); the provision that the nominees for the Nominating Committee originate from the floor of the meeting and are elected by the delegates (By-law IV, 3-A); the fact that all nominations to membership on Divisions and Commission and Committees must also be reviewed and ratified by the delegates (By-law IV, 5-E); the provision that a church may withdraw from membership by its own action and without any impairment of its temporal or spiritual rights as a congregation (Art. III, 1-C); the fact that ministerial standing is not held by the Association (By-law IX); and, finally, the provision for a Referendum Council, which the churches may initiate when they feel their authority is in jeopardy, the findings of which are binding on the Officers, Committees, Divisions, Commissions and Staff. (Art. VIII).

If a Pharaoh should arise who remembers not Joseph and his brothers, the written documents, attesting to the fact that it is the churches which wield ultimate power in the affairs of the Association, would bring his reign to a quick end.

It is a sobering thought, but we need constantly to refer ourselves to Santyana's dictum, that, "Those who forget their history are condemned to relive it." Any careful student of Congregational history will be able to cite events in the past that confirm Santyana's insight.

Because the Association was able to utilize a special gift for this particular purpose, it became possible several years ago to engage the services of a professional consultant to review its operations to date.

The Association was particularly fortunate to secure the services of one of the top people in the country in the area of church management. For nearly a year Dr. Robert L. Wilson, Director of the J.M. Ormond Center for Research, Planning and Development at Duke University Divinity School, attended several of the Association gatherings and conducted personal interviews with over a hundred persons from coast to coast before making his report. He made many helpful suggestions. He was quick to point out its

strengths and its weaknesses, but most significant in his findings was his enthusiastic evaluation of its place in the American Protestant scene.

Dr. Wilson, most knowledgeable in the field of church structures, wrote in the conclusion of his report. "The future of the National Association will to a larger measure depend upon its ability to offer something or some combination of things which are unique and are not duplicated elsewhere in Protestantism. A denomination consisting of completely autonomous local churches has a distinctive contribution, particularly in a period when church organizations are becoming more centralized. Thus the National Association should not only continue to be a viable denomination, but can offer a form of polity distinct from much of Protestantism."

Anyone desiring further information covering the work of the National Association is encouraged to write to:

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(Date:1981)

Note: The NACCC address is now P.O. Box 288, Oak Creek, WI 53154.