

The Myth of Congregational Autonomy

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July 26, 2016

The first thing I was ever asked to do in a UU congregation was coordinate coffee hour. This is ironic because I don't actually drink coffee and to this day I have no idea how to make it. And thus began the perfect introduction to religious life - being asked to do something we're not at all sure we want to do and have no clue how. That preaches, doesn't it?

I showed such promise in my not-knowing that the second thing I was asked to do was serve on the ministerial search committee for my congregation's assistant minister. At our initial meeting, the senior minister explained that in Unitarian Universalism congregations choose their own ministers, and that this combination of responsibility and authority is congregational polity. Congregational what?, I asked. Polity, she said. And I thought, oh dear - that definitely sounds more complicated than making coffee.

Polity is one of those hard-core geeky religious words we think we should know the definition of but most of us don't. So let's get this out of the way. **Polity is a doctrine of church, specifically the way churches are connected to one another.** Every denomination has a polity. In fact, polity is the only thing that distinguishes a lot of Protestant denominations from one another, which is why many denominations - like the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists - are named for theirs.

Polity is the beliefs, doctrines, and structure that hold local churches together with whatever denominational chain exists of authority and doctrinal accountability. And as soon as people come together in groups they have to work out how they will be together. Polity enstructures a community's assumptions about how the world, God, and people work. Polity both reflects and creates that purpose.

Unitarian Universalists, our cousins the United Church of Christ, and several other smaller denominations are congregational in our polity. What's that? Well of course we can look to that essential reference Wikipedia to find out, where **congregational polity is defined as system of church governance in which "every local church congregation is independent, ecclesiastically sovereign, or autonomous."** Right? Doesn't that sound right, based on what you hear in your congregation?

Another article calls congregational polity "a type of religious anarchism" because congregations are self-governed. The problem with these definitions is that they are wrong.

When our friends at Wikipedia define congregational polity as "self-governed voluntary institutions" they are defining it in opposition to the structure of the majority of religious groups, in which churches are governed by clerical authority and denominational hierarchies,

and people participate because the safety of their souls depend on it. So while the Wikipedia definition might describe a little piece of congregational polity, it misses the larger story.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are in fact “self-governed.” Each congregation names its own conditions for membership, calls and ordains ministers, and controls its own budget. But we are also explicitly and formally united in mutual covenant with other congregations. **We intentionally come together to learn together, support one another, and to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone.** Our congregations may be self-governed but there is literally no such thing as a Unitarian Universalist congregation which is not connected by covenant to the community of Unitarian Universalist congregations. To be an officially recognized congregation in our tradition is to join other congregations in association – our UUA.

And this my friends, is a hint of what congregational polity really is. It requires congregations to join other congregations in mutual covenant. It calls the community of congregations to be interdependent, not as a theological abstraction, but as an every day reality.

Congregational polity is not the autonomy of individual congregations but the covenanted communion of autonomous churches. This is, in the words of the great Conrad Wright, a significantly different thing.¹ Let me repeat that. Congregational polity is not the autonomy of individual congregations but the communion of autonomous churches – a significantly different thing.

Somewhere along the line, our collective understanding of congregational polity became like that Wikipedia definition. Sort of right, but failing to express vital dimensions that are absolutely core to who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Somewhere along the line, congregational polity became conflated with the autonomy of individual congregations. The rich dimensionality of mutual covenant and interdependence has been sheared off, leaving only the barest bones of isolated self-governance and independence.

So, in some ways, is our faith. There is an exact parallel between the way we understand congregations’ relationships to one another and individual UU’s relationships to their congregations and communities. In just the same way, the independence of individual UUs is often privileged over interdependent community in our congregations. Exploring the conscience and individual journeys of individual people is perceived as the ultimate purpose of many UU communities. Our people therefore tend to organize themselves around individual conscience, individual discernment, and direct democracy rather than mutually covenanted collective conscience, collective discernment, and collective action.

Covenant – mutual covenant – is the missing link in our understanding of congregational polity.

Believing that congregational polity is primarily concerned with supporting and protecting individual voices and congregations is nothing less than heresy. Yes, I just called it heresy. And not in the cute renegade sort of way. I mean in the literal way – like apostasy – the renunciation or abandonment of a religious principle. Equating congregational polity with autonomy undermines our interconnectedness, erodes our covenant, and endangers our communities. It is flat-out ahistorical, not to mention wrong.

Here’s why we should care: this pervasive misinterpretation of congregational polity, with its emphasis on individual conscience and direct democracy, is a major cause of decline and source of ill health in Unitarian Universalist congregations. It drives healthy people away, weakens connections among our churches and beyond, and perpetuates mind-boggling degrees of suspicion about leaders in general and our Unitarian Universalist Association in particular.

How many of you are on or have served on your congregation’s board? Let me know if you recognize any of this:

There are few things more damaging to our congregations than a systemic belief that individual voices rather than collective purpose belong at the center of congregational life. And yet this amnesiacal interpretation of our tradition pervades many of our communities. Perhaps you will recognize some of these manifestations. Endless rethinking of decisions that well-informed leaders have already made. Over-empowerment and even protection of bullying voices. Hubristic belief in congregational specialness. Refusal to consider wisdom from the larger community of congregations. Undervaluation of associational connection. These are the sins inspired by our collective tolerance for this heresy. Countless faithful people have left our faith after being turned off, demoralized, or even victimized by these behaviors. Countless more have visited our congregations and never come back. The only people who want to join communities that deify individual voices are people who want to be deified.

There is another way. Every one of our flourishing congregations and communities knows this way.

My favorite congregation, which I can’t name because, well, as Regional Lead I’m not supposed to have favorites, is so wise. Good lord they are smart and soulful. Everything their church does and is is about making Love manifest in this time and place.ⁱⁱ They know in their bones that *how* they are says everything about *who* they are.

Somehow they’ve learned that people of all ages need help to live faithful, growthful lives, and that it is the congregation’s collective job to be that help.ⁱⁱⁱ In their written materials they address this whole spiritual-but-not-religious thing head-on just in case any newcomers are confused. “[**One person**” alone, they say, “**is incapable of being a church**”].^{iv} Right there,

front and center in their founding document. I love it! They know that they are united in covenant with each other so that they can help each other increase the sum of Love in the world.^v

This community doesn't do "membership". They do "covenant," and that covenant is so strong that each covenant partner accepts responsibility for reaching out in Love to those who wander from the covenant by word or deed. They do this not because they want to punish each other but because they believe **no one should ever "be cut off from the privileges of the covenant."**^{vi}

Their organizing document says explicitly that while officers and ministers can be helpful they are not absolutely necessary for the congregation to be healthy.^{vii} Admittedly, there is a long section in there too speculating about possible roles for ministers, deacons, pastoral visitors, teachers, treasurers and all that. These people are not anarchists after all, no matter what Wikipedia says. They like a good committee as well as the next.^{viii}

They have a lovely process for being with each other in times of conflict, encouraging people to talk first directly to the person they're having trouble with, and if that doesn't work ask another person to help them reconcile. If the conflict becomes intractable, this community recognizes that someone might need to leave, since the peace and well being of the whole is more important than that of any single individual.^{ix} But they also promise one another that they won't just leave - they promise not to remove themselves from fellowship on a whim. They specifically say that being mad at another member is not reason enough to leave. They liken people leaving to pulling pieces of timber from a building or limbs from a whole person. Because folks join the community by entering into covenant, folks can only leave by being released from that covenant.^x

They intentionally and explicitly avoid using the term "independent" to describe their relationship to other congregations.^{xi} They celebrate that each church is distinct, with special gifts and challenges, and that while churches certainly don't have control over each other they are nonetheless all connected.

And here's my favorite part. This congregation lays out in delicious detail the ways they will show up for their neighboring congregations. They promise to look out for their neighbors' welfare, and consult with them when they ask for help. They promise to tell hard truths if they see folks acting in ways that are unhealthy. They promise to worship and celebrate together, to share resources, and to work together to expand their faith in the world.^{xii}

This, my friends, is a community that understands congregational polity, where independence and covenant alchemize into precious religious life.

Where is this congregation? It is here, in each of us, in our DNA as Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, for the congregations whose story I just told came together in

Cambridge in 1648. These are our ancestors, yours and mine, the authors of the “congregational way”. Theirs is not a story of independence, not even remotely. The faithful people who gathered in Cambridge that sweltering summer knew absolutely that they needed one another if they were to serve God. Just a few years before they had escaped persecution and oppression of religious and secular authorities, coming to the new world to create a new way.

The Cambridge Platform was not a declaration of independence. It was a declaration of covenant.

But somehow over the last several hundred years the vital practices of mutual covenant weakened, both within and among our congregations. Our ancestors navigated the American Revolution, the creation of civil democracy, and the separation of church and state, not to mention profound theological shifts. Over this time, growing diversity and emphasis on individual rights and conscience – the hallmarks of liberalism – emerged to challenge collective accountabilities. I believe these essential elements of liberalism actually eroded covenant’s place at the center of our polity.

Our ancestors were religious radicals, no mistake about it. But they were not, as many believe, theological radicals. Their theology was virtually indistinguishable from the churches they left behind in Europe. They were radical because of their polity, which was based according to historian Perry Miller on “The pioneer formulation of the principle that a corporate body is created by the consent of its constituent members.”^{xiii} This was a new idea in 1648, that members of a community could freely gather according to their will and mutual consent and together exercise a stake in the collective mission of the body. That said, scholars are quick to warn us that this notion is quite different from democracy by any modern definition. Indeed our ancestors would be horrified to learn that their commitment to living by the consent of constituent members would one day lead to erode covenant, and that independence would overtake mutual reliance.

They put covenant at the center because they believed, in the words of scholar Alice Blair Wesley, that “*The* task of the free church could be summed – in their terms – as loving God and loving one another so well that in their own study and discussion, dispute and conference, prayer, consultation and more discussion in the free church, the members might learn together the divine will of the loving God... [as it] relates to justice, peace, and reasonable laws. And, if so, the members would be called, compelled, bound to proclaim it and try to bring it to bear in their whole society.”^{xiv} “For any who might suppose our 17th century free-church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination, and hellfire, I am glad to be able to tell you, not one of those topics is even mentioned”^{xv} in the records of the founding churches. Our ancestors organized themselves around loving one another in service of God. That is the beating heart of congregational polity.

As Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, we have allowed our beliefs to change over the long years according to conscience and science and revelation. We have managed to stay together even as the core Christian story receded as one among many wisdom stories. Our people have integrated the rationalism of science, the intuition of transcendentalism, and the ethics of humanism. Together, we have worked theological miracles. We have managed to stay connected as communities of faith through radical changes to our collective beliefs. Covenant – the collective commitment to and practices of religious community – is how we have stayed together.

And yet we are a people of competing commitments. The freedom of belief which has helped us remain flexible in light of new revelation and experience also weakens our binding ties. We value interconnection but are cautious about asking much of each other. As individuals and groups we want to belong but are reluctant to be claimed. This tension between freedom and connection is also our birthright.

Our collective anxiety about this tension and the resulting deification of individual conscience have squashed the rich dimensionality of covenant until it has become synonymous with a vague sense of commitment to a vague set of principles. We have abstractified covenant into spiritual cohabitation, the big tent under which we eat at separate tables. Covenant lives on as a vestigial metaphor for interconnection in our movement, but that is all. The call to covenant might be a theological imperative, but our collective covenant isn't worth the paper it isn't written on, for *there is no such covenant*. There is literally no covenant among Unitarian Universalists.

As congregations we “covenant to affirm and promote” the Principles. This way of practicing covenant puts tepid mutual agreement at our collective center. This is not covenanting. It is parallel play. It's what spiritual toddlers do. And it's not enough to hold our center against the forces of dissolution

It is no wonder that independence is all that remains of our beloved congregational polity. The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our collective past. We sense that interconnection, we preach it, and we rely on it. But covenant is more than impulse and echo. It must be activated intentionally for the full power of liberal religion – and congregational polity – to be revealed.

Our people successfully navigated the profound theological shifts of the last three hundred years. If Unitarian Universalism is to survive even the next century, we must change again – this time by countering forces of individual isolation and institutional dissolution. We must revitalize that which connects us as individuals and religious communities. We must reanimate mutual covenant as the beating heart of our polity.

The “congregational way” can help all of us discover the way forward – even in the wide world beyond congregations. Unitarian Universalist polity is essential to who we are precisely

because our theology is so broad. Without some kind of vital, clear center around which we convene ourselves, we will not hold. The ways we choose to connect with one another IS our center. If Unitarian Universalism is going to survive in the coming time - much less thrive - our center must hold.

If we are indeed Unitarian Universalist, and not Generic Religious People or even worse Generic Spiritual people, then by definition we claim and are claimed by a specific tradition. Ours is not some generic story of democracy, poetic self reliance, or liberal religion. As Unitarian Universalists we live in a particular stream of history with particular songs, sacred texts, theologies, liturgical practices, justice commitments, ancestors, and yes - polity. In a creedless faith that has grown away from the trunk of our original theological trees, this tradition is absolutely essential. Polity is how our little ragtag band of heretics and liberals communicates across time to tell us who we are and why. It is, in the words of UU scholar Conrad Wright, "part of the consensus that holds the denomination together."^{xvi}

To be a Unitarian Universalist person or congregation is to claim and be claimed by covenant. That - more than any theological identity - is who we are: we are a people connected in mutual covenant. The implication of this is deep, my friends.

Just as there is no such thing as a UU congregation apart from the community of congregations, so I would say there is no such thing as a Unitarian Universalist by themselves. A person can claim Unitarian Universalist beliefs, but if they are not part of a covenanted community they have not been claimed back. Individual beliefs may constitute spirituality but they are not religious. They are not Unitarian Universalist. Our faith is practiced in covenanted community.

There is no such thing as a disconnected UU - to deny associational connection is to repudiate our polity. Echoing the words of Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, we do not make the covenant, the covenant makes *us*. Our ancestors knew this in their bones. It's time we remembered.

Endnotes

ⁱ Conrad Wright, Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice (Boston: Skinner House), 1997, p. 12.

ⁱⁱ [The Cambridge Platform](#), 1648, (I.1)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, (I.4.)

^{iv} Ibid, (IV.5.IV)

^v Ibid, (II.6)

^{vi} Ibid, (IV.6)

^{vii} Ibid, (VI)

^{viii} Ibid, (VII)

^{ix} Ibid, (X.5.II)

^x Ibid, (XIII)

^{xi} Ibid, (II.5)

^{xii} Ibid, (XV)

^{xiii} citation from James F. Cooper, *Tenacious in Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 82.

^{xiv} Alice Blair Wesley, "Love is the Doctrine of This Church" from *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures* (Meadville Lombard Press, 2002), p. 20.

^{xv} Ibid, p. 22.

^{xvi} Conrad Wright, Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice (Boston: Skinner House), 1997, p. 1.