

## Our Roots: Congregational Polity

Reverend Sharon Dittmar  
 First Unitarian Church  
 536 Linton Street  
 Cincinnati, OH 45219  
 (513) 281-1564  
 September 7, 2008

Newcomers to Unitarian Universalism are always mystified when I tell them the Unitarians are descended from the Puritans. How can this be? How can the open, affirming, optimistic, non-creedal faith we know as Unitarian Universalism come from a faith we think of as judgmental, pessimistic, and punitive. Theologically we have little in common with our Puritan ancestors other than an emphasis on character and good works. How we are still very much the same though, is congregational governance and community relationship. The Puritans honed their ideas of congregational polity and covenant, and as far as we have moved from them theologically, we have kept their ideas of polity and covenant.

When the Puritans began arriving in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, they brought with them a deep concern over church governance. The Puritans pulled away from the Church of England (Anglican Church), not over issues of theology, but over issues of church governance; who is in charge, who makes decisions, who has the final authority. In the Church of England, bishops had the final say.

The Puritans yearned for validating opportunities where they could express their thoughts and faith. But the bishops regularly reprimanded the Puritans when they attempted to hold conferences among the laity and clergy, or when clergy attempted to preach on market days.<sup>1</sup> After decades of failed efforts at reform, the Puritans came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony to make a new start practicing the faith and form of congregational governance they chose.

Within the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritans chose congregational polity, where each congregation is independent and subject to the authority of its members, rather than bishops, councils, or monarchs. This form of congregational governance is still practiced today by Unitarian Universalists, Baptists, and Congregationalists.

Puritans believed that humans were either “elect,” (redeemed and going to heaven), or not elect (going to hell). This part of their theology was derived from Calvinism, and would later divide what was left of the Puritan faith into two separate movements (the Unitarians and the Congregationalists). The Puritans called themselves “saints” because they had saving experiences, and “lived in blameless obedience to the word.”<sup>2</sup> Members were expected to have a saving experience, repent from sin, live a moral life, actively participate in religious community, and accept Jesus Christ as Savior. The concept of religious community was crucial for the Puritans, for only in community could the faith of Jesus Christ be lived as it was in the *New Testament*.

Members literally had to walk with one another in religious community, worship, and education, to know a complete life of faith. As the *Cambridge Platform* explains,

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice Blair Wesley, “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Platform: Contemporary Readers Edition*, Peter Hughes editor (2008), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hughes, editor, *The Cambridge Platform: Contemporary Readers Edition* (2008), 18.

“One person is a complete subject of baptism, but one person is incapable of being a church. Similarly today, it is not enough to call oneself a Unitarian and never attend services, events, or offer a pledge. To be a member you must participate (unless you are incarcerated or geographically isolated). We are Unitarian Universalists in community, not by theology alone. The Puritans got this part right.

The Puritans believed that in following their faith, they were living life with Jesus Christ. Election into this faith community was therefore a sign of both favor and responsibility. In all things, Jesus was king and ruler. They wrote of their congregations

In respect of Christ, the head and king of the church, and the sovereign power residing in him and exercised by him, it is a monarchy. In respect of the body, or brotherhood, of the church, and power from Christ granted unto them, it resembles a democracy. In respect of the presbytery and power committed to them, it is an aristocracy<sup>3</sup>

Once elect, all members received Christ and became equally special, another basis for congregational polity. While being skeptical of synods and councils, Puritans still understood the need for deacons, elders, and ministers within their congregation, and the ability of those “called out” to make leadership decisions. However, it is interesting to note the tension inherent in a system that includes Jesus as king, the people joined in democracy, and a presbytery that functioned as an aristocracy. Democracies don’t easily work in partnership with kingdoms and aristocracies.

Even today in our congregations we see the struggle between our leaders elected to serve by the members, on the Board of Trustees, and the arguments that develop when the electing members disagree with the decision of the Board they placed in office. The Puritans established this uneasy alliance among the leaders called out from the people, and the people themselves. We are a moderated democracy, then and now.

When there is trust and shared values, congregational polity is empowering. However, this governance model can be misused if an individual or group of individuals chooses to undermine a leader or unfairly challenge his/her authority. Congregational polity is inherently anti-authoritarian (we come from a dissenting religion – that crossed an ocean to have its own way), and many of our congregational and association struggles to this day come down to questions of who is in charge and periodically, members behaving poorly.

In a democratic(ish) faith, members have more responsibility to monitor themselves, be informed, and behave well. There is no authority to do it so we need to do it. With more privilege (which we have) comes more responsibility. To this day we need congregational members to attend congregational meetings (next one is on September 28), stay informed, participate in the life of the congregation, vote on issues and candidates, and behave well in covenant with one another.

The Puritans tried to ease the tension between democracy and leadership by noting that free members freely elect officers they are willing to submit to, and those leaders who do a poor job can and will be replaced by the people. They explained

---

<sup>3</sup> *Platform*, 33.

A church, being free, cannot become subject to any but by a free election; yet when such a people do choose any to be over them in the Lord, then do they become subject and most willingly submit to their ministry in the Lord, whom they have so chosen. And if the church have power to choose their officers and ministers, then, in case of manifest unworthiness and delinquency, they have power also to depose them.<sup>4</sup>

This is still the case in our congregation today. Officers and clergy can be removed by the members, if it is the will of the people. In addition, the Puritans continually reinforced the concept that all members were special, having passed faith and behavior tests, and being part of the elect. As they explained, “Ordination therefore is not to go before, but to follow election.”<sup>5</sup> To this day, the people of individual Unitarian Universalist congregations choose to ordain those they find worthy among them. The UUA does not ordain our clergy, nor does the General Assembly, nor the Minister’s Association, or our seminaries. In addition, ministers have less power than colleagues in other denominations. For example, I can not vote at Board meetings because I have not been elected to vote there. I vote at congregational meetings because I am a member of this congregation. This is congregational polity.

In 1648 the Puritans created a document, known as the *Cambridge Platform*, to explain their understanding of congregational governance and authority. They used their understanding of the Bible as their guide for congregational structure and relationship. They noted that the *New Testament* makes no mention of bishops or kings (other than Jesus), so they did not see the need for them in congregational affairs. Potential members must have their faith examined prior to entry because Philip tested the faith of the eunuch of Ethiopia. Candidates who did not meet the faith test were not admitted due to concern about corrupting the whole. Ministers were to be ordained with the literal “laying on of hands” (which is still done in some ordinations today) because that is how Paul, Timothy, and Barnabas were ordained. One section of the *Platform* reads in part

A congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification.<sup>6</sup>

Puritans were deeply concerned about right living and the *Cambridge Platform* has detailed passages about how to reconcile members who have fallen away. When reconciliation failed, members were denied communion and excommunicated, literally shunned. This sounds very extreme to our modern ears, and you may yet again be wondering how we are related. Think polity rather than theology.

With this concern for right living and thinking the Puritans made sure they had the power to admit their own members, “and, therefore, there is great reason they should have power to remove any from their fellowship again.”<sup>7</sup> This is not an unreasonable standard. As I said earlier, to be a Unitarian Universalist you need to positively

---

<sup>4</sup> *Platform*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Platform*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Platform*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Platform*, 34.

participate in congregational community. Unlike Catholics, we do not count and keep you for life regardless of where you go and what you believe.

Over time, the Puritan church came to be known as the Standing Order church to explain the relationship that developed as towns grew. The “standing order” allowed new congregations to be developed within a town while all residents shared the same civil services. Again, the name “Standing Order” denotes the continued preference the Puritans received in New England.

In one regard the Puritans were deeply divided, how much could they morally control the population as a whole. As church historian Conrad Wright explains “The Standing Order in New England was predicated on an essentially homogenous population sharing a common theological heritage.”<sup>8</sup> In one regard, *The Cambridge Platform* is remarkably naïve. It assumes that there is one faith and everyone thinks alike and wants to belong, which was almost the case in 1630 (native population definitely excluded), but definitely not the case by 1730.

*The Cambridge Platform* declares “It is not in the power of the magistrates to compel their subjects to become church members and to partake at the Lord’s Table”<sup>9</sup> Magistrates represent civil authority (for example, the police). This sounds like the separation of church and state, which it is, but it is more complex than that. The Puritans did not want magistrates to make congregational decisions, because they Puritans wanted the ability to test the faith of each incoming member.

In addition, when the Puritans read the *New Testament* they noted that Jesus was regularly at odds with the civil authority. So the *Platform* also states, “As it is unlawful for church officers to meddle with the sword of the magistrate, so it is unlawful for the magistrate to meddle with the work proper to church officers.”<sup>10</sup> Yet at the same time the *Platform* reads, “idolatry, blasphemy, heresy . . . open contempt of the word preached, profanation of the Lord’s Day . . . are to be punished by civil authority.”<sup>11</sup> Doesn’t this indicate that the civil authorities are expected to have Puritan sensibilities? In a homogenous group this works. With diversity it falls apart.

Here’s the first step in how it finally fell apart, Puritan clergy were expected to both educate their congregant and educate the entire community (regardless if everyone was a Puritan). In fact, the 1780 Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts referred to clergy as “public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality.”<sup>12</sup> Public Protestant teachers. Obviously, as New England diversified this did not work. Over time Quakers, Baptists, and Universalists began to bitterly complain. The Puritans preached about hell, the Universalists preached about God’s love and salvation. It didn’t match.

Even more amazing, residents of New England towns were taxed in order to support public worship. Wright explains that inhabitants were taxed to “pay for the civil religion of the whole community.”<sup>13</sup> It was believed that supporting the Puritan or “Standing Order” church benefited the whole community whether or not one a Puritan or professed any faith at all, so everyone had to pay. All residents in the town or parish paid

---

<sup>8</sup> Conrad Wright, *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice*, (1997), 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Platform*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> *Platform*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Platform*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 29.

for the construction and upkeep of the meeting house and minister's salary. I always tell people that the Puritans came to this country to practice freedom of religion for themselves, not to share that freedom with everyone else. After much agitation, in the late 1720's Anglicans, Baptists, and Quakers were exempted from parish taxes in support public worship as long as they attended their own services. Atheists, agnostics, deists, Jews, and others were out of luck.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Standing Order church began to divide between members who were Calvinistic (believing in election and emphasizing original sin and human evil) and members who were Arminians (believing in salvation for all and refuting the existence of original sin. Some orthodox Standing Order congregations developed creedal statements, but not all, and with congregational polity at the center and a belief in the right of private conscience (which we still have today), there was no way to force any congregation to accept a standard creed (faith statement). The liberal ministers staunchly refused any suggestion of a creed, and to this day, Unitarians, unlike their Puritan ancestors, have never had a creed. Without a creed, and without a hierarchical structure to enforce a creed, congregational polity has enabled congregations to theologically evolve, often within just a generation.

After the Revolutionary War the split became more apparent and clergy, who had routinely engaged in pulpit exchanges since 1630, dropped the practice because orthodox minister refused to exchange pulpits with their more liberal brethren. Councils that had formerly been held to settle differences between congregations also disbanded and the conservatives and liberals within the Standing Order church drew farther apart. In 1819 William Ellery Channing preached an ordination sermon entitled "Unitarian Christianity" that separated what remained of the Puritan faith.

You will not be surprised to learn that within one generation the formerly liberal and revolutionary Unitarian Christians were engaged in bitter theological arguments with their Transcendentalist Unitarian children. Similarly those of you who entered our movement in the 1950's and 1960's might have been shocked by the spirituality that re-entered our movement in the 1980's and has remained, reintroducing prayer, meditation, and joys and sorrows. With congregational polity and without a creed, theological change happens. My theology, which is mainstream for Unitarian Universalists today, will be, I am certain, replaced within a generation.

Ultimately, the old Puritan decision to tax the entire parish, regardless of membership within the Standing Order congregation, dealt the final blow to Puritan rule. In 1818, the parish of Dedham, Massachusetts selected a minister who was rejected by the Standing Order Dedham church (he was too liberal). The parish ordained him anyway, and the church withheld their records, parish, and silver. Ultimately, the courts ruled in favor of the parish. They might not be members, but they paid in taxes, so the money and silver belonged to the parish, whether they were members or not. Throughout New England the parish kept the money and silver and in general, chose to side with the more liberal Unitarians, which is why, to this day, if you go to a town outside Boston, the church on the green is always Unitarian, and most likely still has the silver (in the case of First Parish in Concord it is Paul Revere silver). Note the name, "First Parish," since the parish turned to the left in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Concord church founded 1636).

Within a few years there were no more taxes for public worship. This caused many congregations, including our own (founded in 1830), to start the practice of "pew

rental.” The church needed money so they assessed and then “rented pews.” That practice has since been replaced by the all church canvass, and as much as you might not like the canvass, it is much better than sitting in an assigned seat based on pew rental (it is more democratic too).

Theologically we are not like our Puritan ancestors, other than our continual stance as a “dissenting” religion. Part of this dissent though, comes from the nature of congregational polity where congregations are self governing and members are equal. Leaders are called out from among the people, not appointed by a religious hierarchy. Congregational polity comes with extensive privileges that require greater responsibility for those who are members. Members elect other members to leadership roles, and like our Puritan ancestors we struggle to let our leaders lead.

We are Unitarians because we gather in religious community. We are non-creedal because our polity allowed it. We are religiously liberal because our polity allowed it. We respect the individual because our polity encouraged it. Your vote decides how we conduct our business because the *Cambridge Platform* made it so. As an ordained clergy person I am with you, not above you. We might not agree with our Puritan ancestors about hell and sin, but we are just as independent and ambivalently democratic as they were almost four hundred years ago.