

Congregational Polity and the Myth of Congregational Autonomy

Saturday, June 27 | 4:15pm-5:30pm US/Eastern (1:15 – 2:30PM PTD)

New England Region

Congregational polity is not fundamentally about autonomy or protecting individuals from spiritual coercion. This misunderstanding repels healthy people, weakens connections among churches, and perpetuates widespread suspicion about leadership. This workshop lays groundwork for a movement-wide re-covenanting process that could reunite the community of UU congregations.

Rev. Sue Phillips

Polity: How churches connected to each other. Beliefs, doctrine, structure.

Religion at intersection of self, community, spirit. People connecting the common element of definitions of religion vs spirituality (which can be solo).

Assumptions about self, God, what we should do. Polity reflects purpose.

UUs congregational in polity. Congregations independent and connected by covenant. Should not be defined as “religious anarchism.”

Typical religions in west more top-down than UUs. For example, sacramental religions. If scripture the infallible word of God, feeds into a top-down structure to ensure interpretations “correct.”

Accomplish together what we could not accomplish alone. Hymnals, setting and credentialing ministers, creating curriculum.

We believe we are part of an interdependent web. Part of what compels us to come together. There is no UU by him/herself. If not part of a community, not really a UU. Faith practiced in covenanted community. Solo can practice spirituality, but not religion.

Our faith requires us to be co-creators of beloved community. Our faith puts ethical obligations on us. Ignoring them doesn't mean they are not there. Our faith richer than “voluntary participation” implies.

Somewhere, congregational polity came to mean congregational independence. Limits growth. Should understand congregational interrelations the same way we understand relationships between individual people.

Natural that people organize selves around common beliefs and direct democracy rather than through covenants. Covenanted community of autonomous churches is what we should strive for.

Damaging to believe individual voices rather than community should be at center of congregational life.

A problem that we spend so much energy challenging decisions made by well-informed leaders.

It is the congregations collective job to be the help the parishioners need. One person alone is incapable of being a church. Need to be united in covenant to increase sum total of love in the world.

Cambridge platform not a declaration of independence, a declaration of covenant.

Corporate body created by the consent of the constituent members.

Joining and covenanting different in the way that a wedding is different from a marriage.

Covenant is how we have stayed together.

Big tent, but we eat at separate tables.

Call to covenant a theological imperative, no such paper covenant.

Covenant more than impulse and echo, needs to be triggered intentionally.

If UUism to survive, need to counter individualism and division.

Autonomy and interconnection cohabit comfortably. Connected by a web, not a rope.

Need a process to reengage in covenant.

Without covenant, suspicion enters in.

We aren't clear about the demands placed on us by our polity.

The authors of the congregational way had churches promise to take care of one another, welcome new members, provide relief and support as needed, offer right hand of fellowship, propagate new congregations.

As a proxy for the congregations' connection to each other, the UUA is weak. The issue is with the connection.

Congregations who do not contribute are out of covenant.

As each congregation cuts back, makes it less likely that a congregation in need will receive what they need.

Covenant = commitment, means, content, maintenance. Both a noun and a verb.

May need to start with an actual covenant. The Principles do not constitute a covenant.

The way we meet is one of the idols we have placed at the center of our religious life.

When did voting overtake covenanting as the means to our associational ends? As a practice, democracy emphasizes the wrong things, with divisiveness and winners and losers.

Polity helps us tell our story and transmit our traditions. Networks of covenants will be what connects us.

New ministries do not have institutional DNA. Creating new types of communities. People within these worshipping communities seeking connection. Leaders asking how they can be connected. Answer is covenant.

Clearest and most prophetic voices are coming from the “beyond” communities.

Example: Lucy Stone cooperative.

We need to figure out how to extend a hand to these “beyond” communities.

Community without commitment is not a community. How to engage in mutual covenant.

If UUism to survive, the center must fall.

We live in a particular stream of history. Polity how our little band communicates across time to tell our story. Part of the consensus holding the denomination together.

Identity mediated by institutions dying out among younger generations who can afford to untether from their communities of origin.

No such thing as a disconnected UU.

<http://Tinyurl.com/CongPolity-Myth1>

Question: How close is Orlando Platform to doing what you’re talking about?

Answer: Not familiar with finer points, but this is a marvelous example of iterating around covenant model, starting a change that we don’t know where it will end. About 250 congregations have decided to explore using the framework from this document.

Book: Percy Miller or Alice Blair-Wesley.