

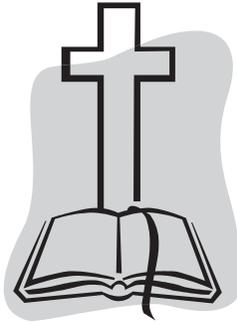
The Congregational Way

- **Where we are coming from**
- **What we believe**
- **What we do and how we do it**
- **Why we matter**



The Congregational Federation
8 Castle Gate
Nottingham NG1 7AS
www.congregational.org.uk

Independent churches are among the most vigorous expressions of the Christian faith in the world. In the United Kingdom they have a long history of witness to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, and many of them are members of the Congregational Federation. This leaflet describes how and why these churches came into being, and how they work together in a unique and effective way to celebrate and promote their faith.



The
Congregational
Way

THE FEDERATION

THE IDEA of churches being independent fellowships of Christian people, managing their own affairs under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has its sanction in the Bible and in history. It offers opportunities for churches to respond to the needs of their communities and the bidding of the Spirit to move in new directions, without having to seek sanction from distant courts of management hierarchies.

But there has to be inter-dependence, so that we sense the support and encouragement of other Christians with the same commitment. That is why the Congregational Federation was formed in 1972, when so many members of the former Congregational Union decided not to join the United Reformed Church, but to remain autonomous.

The Federation does not interfere in any way with the independence of the local church, but offers the following services which no one church could provide on its own:

TRAINING: We take seriously the need for church leadership to be well versed in scripture, church history, Christian ethics, and strategies for church management. Our training courses are widely admired, professionally taught and rigorously tested. We advise (never insist) that all those called to leadership in our churches achieve a basic standard of academic proficiency. And we offer a foundation course in Christian discipleship to all who wish to take it up.

MISSION AND SOCIETY: Our churches are of course concerned to be relevant to the times in which we live, and to fulfil the Gospel command to 'go, and make disciples'. The Federation cannot speak for all the churches on some of the contentious issues of our day, but it can propose guidelines of thought and opinion, which local churches can follow if they wish. It can also offer training on ways in which they can be more effective in their commitment to mission. The Federation is in membership of the Council for World Mission, which has a programme of activity and mutual assistance in many nations around the world. An International Congregational Fellowship celebrates the Congregational principle worldwide. The Federation is in active membership of Churches Together in England, and locally many churches take a leading role in ecumenical activity.

MINISTRIES: People wishing to become pastors and ministers in our churches are assessed so that churches can be safely advised about the suitability of individuals whom they wish to invite to leadership. They must have approval of a local church, and the Area (there are 12 Area Associations) in which it is set, before the Federation Pastoral Care

Board gives its opinion and, if convinced, recommends a pattern of training.

FINANCE AND SUPPORT: All churches are invited to contribute to a Ministry and Mission Fund from which financial help may be offered to churches where particular opportunities for growth and development occur. Area Associations also have funds which may be offered to churches facing more intermediate problems, say, with property. Churches which for good reasons wish to close are also able to get sound financial and legal advice.

YOUTH AND CHILDREN: We are very concerned to offer a ministry to young people, ensure their protection, and encouragement to take Jesus Christ seriously as their life-time companion. A Federation team considers strategies for fulfilling this ministry, and it is described elsewhere in this brochure.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: The Federation has a web site which is constantly up-dated with ideas and information about the life of our churches. It is to be found at www.congregational.org.uk We also publish a full-colour magazine every two months which is intended to inform and stimulate lively discussion in and beyond our churches. Both the web site and magazine are recognised for their professional content and appearance. The Federation is also responsible for a bookshop in Nottingham which offers a wide range of worship and study material.

THE COUNCIL: It is a matter of sensitivity for the Federation to think and speak only in reference to the autonomy of the local church. Yet Area Associations value an opportunity to share thought and experience in a national forum. For that reason a Federation Council meets three times a year - once over a week end - so that all members from all the Areas, including Wales and Scotland, can meet and make decisions affecting the general life of our churches.

The Federation constitution and comprehensive list of churches, ministers and recommendations are contained in a year book published annually and available from the office at 8 Castle Gate, Nottingham NG1 7AS

Michael Heaney - General Secretary

CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY

THE ORIGINS of Congregationalism have been said to lie in the independence of the churches of the New Testament. However the conversion of the Roman emperor led to an authoritative hierarchy which in the west centred on the Pope. The 16th century Protestant Reformation, with the Bible printed in English resulted in an overthrow of clericalism and in worship being conducted in the language of the people. Those who wanted further reforms than the monarch would allow were forced to break with the Church of England and Separatist churches grew up in London, Norwich and elsewhere. Some were imprisoned, some executed like Barrow, Greenwood and Penry in 1593, some went into exile in the Low Countries, and some, like the Pilgrim Fathers, to New England.

The English Civil War saw these Independent or Congregational churches grow markedly in numbers and Cromwell, Milton and Bunyan were all affected by them. At the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, they were excluded from the church settlement and thus became Nonconformists, with the Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers. Subject to harsh laws they endured persecution, exclusion from public office and their sons were barred from the universities. Consequently they set up dissenting academies and hymn writers, like the genius Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge, received first class educations there.

The evangelical revival of the eighteenth century benefited the Congregational churches in England, Wales and Scotland, where the Haldane brothers, in particular, were keen to build Independent churches. In 1795 the London Missionary Society was founded and this became the main agency for the Congregationalist serving abroad. Among these were Scotsmen like Robert Moffat and David Livingstone who went to south Africa, the Englishman John Williams to the Pacific Islands, and the Welshman Griffith John to China. The athlete Eric Liddell also went with the LMS to China where he died in a Japanese camp in 1945.

In the 20th century Congregationalists were often zealous for church unity which led to failed attempts to bring most mainstream Protestants together. Some Congregationalists joined the English Presbyterians in the United Reformed Church, in 1972 (England and Wales) and 1996 (Scotland), but some 500 Congregational churches opted to retain their freedom and rejected this centralising measure. The Congregational Federation has provided fellowship for most Congregational churches since 1972 without infringing their right to respond directly to the Holy Spirit in whatever way they believe called by God to act.

Alan Argent

BELONGING TOGETHER

BAPTISM

FOR Congregationalists, formal commitment to the life of the church and its faith in Jesus Christ is expressed in two stages - baptism and membership - although they can occur in close succession.

At the heart of this process is the conviction that God's initiative precedes, and nurtures, the human response. So if becoming a church member is primarily about the individual's response (see below), baptism is essentially a celebration of God's initiative, not a confirmation of a person's faith:

In baptism, the church celebrates its shared faith in the initiative of God's grace in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Since baptism primarily celebrates God's grace, the faith commitment of the individual is secondary. This means that we are free to baptise infants and adults. After all, not only did Jesus welcome children into the heart of his community, but in Acts of the Apostles (chapter 16, verse 15), we read that households were baptised, meaning people of all ages and as covenanted communities - 'the people of God' - we affirm that God's grace is for children no less than adults.

Nevertheless, those who bring a child for baptism will be asked to promise to nurture the child in the Christian faith and to encourage them to further Christian commitment, and an adult would make promises regarding their own commitment.

MEMBERSHIP

IF baptism celebrates the initiative of God's grace towards us, an individual's response to grace is constituted by the decision to become a member of a church. After some time of nurture in the Christian faith and the Congregational Way, and with the agreement of Church Meeting, the individual would profess their faith - usually expressed in terms of acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Saviour - and commitment to the life of the church (both local and worldwide).

For Congregationalists, this has never been a mere matter of saying 'the right words', but giving allegiance to Jesus and his Way. This includes commitment also to those with whom we 'covenant' in a church. By this mutual act between existing and new members, a church becomes a whole new church, a new 'body of Christ'.

This would usually occur in the context of Communion and consists of regularly sharing in the church's work and in its government, supporting it financially, valuing the Congregational heritage, and helping to foster a community which realises its distinctive calling for the sake of others. Some churches now renew their covenants annually.

COMMUNION

USUALLY in Congregational churches, participation in communion is open to “all who love the Lord Jesus”. This is increasingly children-inclusive. After all, our ‘understanding’ of communion is not constituted only by a conscious decision, but through the shared experience of a family meal - as with the Jewish Passover.

In communion, we commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus, generally sharing the bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood, reminding us of his costly death and resurrection. So it is the celebration of God’s forgiving love, which enables us once again to be the body of Christ, a renewed community of faith, hope and love, called to embody and proclaim the liberating gospel of justice and peace.

The Gospels give a picture of table fellowship with Jesus in which outcasts - e.g. ‘sinners’ and ‘tax collectors’ - are all welcome. So communion ought not simply to address so-called ‘spiritual’ needs, but expresses the fullness of Christ’s vision of inclusiveness and justice. For in communion we encounter God’s new world, the kingdom of God, where the last become the first, and the hungry are fed.

Church members are expected to share in the feast regularly, and Church Meeting decides who may preside, according to the Spirit of Christ.

Graham Adams

THE CHURCH MEETING

ALL MEMBERS of a Congregational Church are allowed to attend the church meeting and take part in discussions and decisions. This is the governing body of the Church, which meets usually monthly under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the privileges and responsibilities of membership! It is here that the members should seek the mind of Christ, through His promise “That where two or three are gathered together in His name He is present!”

At a church meeting all business of the Church is discussed including finance, fabric and not least the spirituality of the Church and its members, and is usually chaired by the minister or a respected member or deacon.

ELECTED OFFICERS

LIKE all good organisations, the Church needs officers to enable it to run smoothly. A secretary and treasurer are two of the main officers; others are elected as required. Most Congregational Churches elect deacons. (There is a record of ‘deacons’ being elected in the early Church). Deacons are people who should offer their personal gifts to God in the work of His Church. They are expected to support the minister and other officers in a practical and prayerful way. Deacons generally serve at the Lord’s Table and in the absence of a minister may preside at the communion service.

MINISTRY

CONGREGATIONAL Churches believe in “the priesthood of all believers”, which means that all members of God’s Church can be involved in its ministry. But it is good, where possible, for a person to be appointed as the Church’s minister to conduct worship and generally lead the members and friends of the Church spiritually. The Congregational Federation has prepared a document for Church to follow in appointing a minister.

George Lea

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

CHURCHES without children or young people are only a pale shadow of what a Congregational fellowship is called to be.

Over time Congregationalists have given enthusiastic expression to this high view of children's value and significance.

They have fervently supported Sunday schools and provided midweek clubs and uniformed groups, pioneered Family Church and experimented in all-age worship. More recently, they have developed toddlers' worship, café style clubs and other innovative formats.

A key development in recent years has been to see children and young people less as objects of concern, or customers of provision. Instead, they are seen more as full members of the fellowship with spiritual gifts to share - Christ's liveliest witnesses to refresh and inspire the whole people of God.

At their best, Congregational churches bring a unique value to youth ministry by expressing to the full their principles of every member ministry and whole fellowship decision making. Of course, in common with other Christians, they do not always live up to their principles, so there is always room for improvement!

The Congregational Federation supports churches and their young people through a Youth and Children's Group.

The Group plans training events and service opportunities, supports a team of Area Co-ordinators, and oversees the work of three service organisations.

CF Youth provides events led by young people for young people aged 13 plus.

Gofrit provides mission challenge and leadership training for ages 10 plus.

Pilots enables local churches to provide a weekly programme for ages 5 plus to celebrate belonging and serving in a world church.

The Youth and Children's Office supports all this work as required and also provides a rigorous safeguarding framework to help ensure that young people's experience of Congregational church life is safe and appropriate.

Stephen Haward
Director of Youth and Children's Work.

MISSION

MISSION matters to the church because the gospels leave us in no doubt it matters to Jesus.

“Go then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28 v 18b-20a)

and

“...in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.” (Luke 24 v 47)

Jesus preached the forgiveness of sins, taught Kingdom values, demonstrating God’s love for all. He met the needs of people from all walks of life; whether powerful or vulnerable, accepted or unacceptable. This is the gospel, the good news; the Church’s mission.

Mission is being Church, the Body of Christ, salt and light in the world.

Mission begins in worship, understanding the bible, exploring faith and having an answer for those who ask “what is our hope?”

Mission is to all people, everywhere, within and outside the church. People of faith and people of none.

Mission happens when individuals share the Good News by being Good News in their homes, work, leisure and community as well as in ‘Church’. Christians serve others in community activities, through volunteers, premises, expertise and financial support.

Mission takes place *locally* where worship, bible exploration, friendships and social activities take place in a loving and spiritual atmosphere. Where faith is nurtured and people are enabled to live the Christian life wherever they are.

Nationally through the Congregational Federation which supports and encourages local mission.

Internationally through the Council for World Mission in the European Region and globally, and by working with the International Congregational Fellowship and ecumenical groups such as Christian Aid and Churches Together.

Mission today includes the Church at large, where members are serving as volunteers or working and taking part in all aspects of community life where the Good News is seen in word and deeds and Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church initiatives which enable people to connect with God in new ways.

Sandra Turner

HOW THE CHURCH IS CHANGING

SOME THINGS never change, and the fundamentals of the Christian faith are among them. But the way in which Christians celebrate their discipleship of Jesus, and worship God, have changed considerably over recent years in order to be relevant to the changing times.

The main difference our forebears would note is the move towards informality. The rather stern mood of church worship in Victorian days has given way to a much more relaxed atmosphere. Ladies no longer wear hats (except for weddings) and men frequently appear without stiff collars and ties. There may be laughter, and even tears, in response to the songs and submission to Gospel truth.

Congregational worship still has a firm foundation in Bible teaching. But it will often be promoted with new technology, perhaps with words generated from a computer. We are less reliant now on books, as worship leaders become accustomed to the projection of ideas and texts on a screen.

There is more inter-action, too... The 40 minute lecture sermon has in many places yielded to discussion as dialogue has replaced monologue. Well-prepared sermons, of course, still have a valued place.

Church furniture remains focused on pews, pipe organs, fonts and tables, but in many worship areas chairs and guitars, keyboards and soft lighting now combine to allow space for dance, drama and debate.

There are even 'virtual churches' so that people can 'meet' to praise and thank God, confess their need of His forgiving grace, and study His word, from their own homes via a web-link. It is controversial, but for people who cannot easily get to a central meeting place, or prefer not to, it meets a need.

The great privilege we have as Congregationalists is that new ideas, and 'fresh expressions' of church life can be embraced without having to get consent from some external authority. If a church meeting approves, then all manner of relevant patterns of life and worship can be introduced, and if they don't work, abandoned!

Our fathers and mothers in God from 200 years ago would be amazed at some of the things that happen now in churches, and ways in which we speak, sing, and dress. But they would be consoled to realise that fundamentally we are 'all one in Christ Jesus' and that he remains 'the same, yesterday, today and for ever.'

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

BEING a Christian says something about both what we believe about Jesus and also our deliberate choice to be one of his followers. There are two aspects to becoming a Christian: What God does, and what we do. We could never make ourselves acceptable to God by our own effort. We depend upon God's part.

The Bible reveals Jesus of Nazareth to be God the Son - both fully God and fully human. His life revealed much about the nature of God. His death on a cross cancelled out the penalty of human sin. His resurrection from the dead confirmed his divine nature and that sin and death have been conquered.

We could never deserve what Jesus did for us; it is all because of his generous love for us. Furthermore God helps us see our need of forgiveness and enables us to have faith in Jesus. When we place our trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters our lives and brings many blessings including the assurance of sin forgiven and live everlasting.

So what do we have to do? Jesus once said that whoever comes to him will never be turned away (John 6:37). He also said a lot about repentance (being really sorry) for our sin. Repentance means a fundamental change of attitude; we cannot want to be a Christian and carry on doing those things that God calls sin. Becoming a Christian involves taking a step of faith, accepting our needs for forgiveness, trusting what Jesus has done for us, and committing ourselves to follow him.

Barry Osborne

(Among our churches there is a range of theological positions representing the traditional evangelical stance, and what are called 'liberal' interpretations of belief. Congregationalism encourages and welcomes discussion of these issues, and in doing so holds those who differ in true respect. - IG)

THE DECLARATION OF INTENT

Some 300 Congregational churches in England, and subsequently 35 in Scotland, declined the opportunity to be part of the United Reformed Church. A historic meeting in London approved this 'declaration of intent' to keep alive the Congregational principle.

ON THIS FOURTEENTH DAY OF OCTOBER IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1972, we whose names are appended hereto, meeting in the Congregational Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, London, and representing several thousand more in our land, reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ, and in the "gathered church" as that pattern of His whole Church which came to be designated 'Congregational'.

WITH grace we acknowledge that on the fifth day of October 1972 many of our brethren who had until that time declared their own faith in the Congregational Way, deemed it right for them to forsake the Congregational Way for another pattern of Christ's Church which it pleased them to call 'The United Reformed Church'. We pray God's blessing upon them and upon what service to Christ they may render. Nevertheless, since every man must be obedient to the faith that is in him, we here reiterate our faith, and pray God's strength and courage to be loyal to it.

THE Lord Jesus Christ "was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross" and our tongues shall "confess Him as Lord to the glory of God the Father."

THE Apostles, when challenged by their contemporaries in the crisis which called for a declaration by which they would stand fast, announced that they "ought to obey God rather than Men". In that same spirit, throughout many centuries, the Fathers dedicated their life and service, not a few of them suffering martyrdom for Christ's sake.

In the year of our Lord 1593 John Greenwood, Henry Barrow and John Penry were detained in a prison which stood on this site whereon stands today Congregational Memorial Hall, and were taken from it to Tyburn, there to be executed because they refused to recant that faith in which they offered sole obedience to the authority of God in Christ.

In the year 1662, some two thousand clergymen of the Church of England, required by the law of the land enacted in Parliament to conduct worship by no other form than that prescribed in the Book of

Common Prayer, surrendered their livings in the established Church, and gathered companies of believers around them for free worship independent of all other external human authority. For a century and a half such gathered companies of independents became consolidated in local churches having complete autonomy under God. They suffered hardship and privation, but at much personal cost remained loyal and true to conscience.

In the year 1831, on the thirteenth day of May, one hundred representatives of local independent churches throughout the land assembled in the Congregational Library in Blomfield Street, London and formally signed a document pledging themselves to help one another in the service of Christ, and to that end to form the Congregational Union of England and Wales, "founded on full recognition of their own distinctive principle namely the scriptural right of every separate church to maintain perfect independence in the government and administration of its own affairs; and therefore that the Union shall not in any case assume legislative authority or become a court of appeal".

NOW, on this fourteenth day of October, in the year of our Lord 1972, we who are here gathered, standing in this same glorious tradition, pledge ourselves to maintain it and extend it and to that end sign our names, knowing that within three hours we shall join many more in Westminster Chapel, who will stand with us to reaffirm that same foundation principle for the Congregational Federation under which title the fellowship of independent churches may continue.



The Congregationalist

A full colour magazine recording and reflecting on the life of Federation churches. It is published every two months and has become a favourite read among Christians in other parts of the church.

Order from the office at
8 Castle Gate, Nottingham NG1 7AS

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