

COMMUNITY RENEWAL SOCIETY

1882-1982: 100 YEARS OF SERVICE

David Lee Smith

With an Introduction by Martin E. Marty

Community Renewal Society 1982

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Dedicated to the Cloud of Witnesses who have helped to make possible 100 years of service to the people of Chicago.

FOREWORD

No American city has been more deserving of the term “melting pot” than Chicago. For 150 years immigrants have poured in by the thousands, giving the city and its surrounding area the rich ethnic character it has today. The opportunities offered by the resurgence of the city following the disastrous fire of 1871 attracted large numbers of immigrants. It was the desire to minister to these newcomers that led a handful of Congregationalists to combine the resources of their congregations for this effort.

In the 100 years since its founding under the name of the Chicago City Missionary Society, the Community Renewal Society has remained faithful to the dedication of its founders by responding to the needs of impoverished communities in Chicago. However, this response no longer expresses itself through the Sunday schools and settlement houses of the early years but, in keeping with the increased complexity of city life, takes the form of innovative approaches to deeply rooted urban problems.

Today the Society describes itself as a voluntary, not-for-profit urban mission agency, integrally related to the United Church of Christ. Its many-faceted programs are motivated by the Christian imperative. Its commitment is to apply healing powers to urban suffering. Its dedication is to “renewing the metropolis through faith in action.” The Society has developed its distinguished, nationally acclaimed record through helping people to help themselves. Working with the Community Renewal Society, local residents identify community problems, mobilize local leadership, and design corrective and preventive programs of action. The Community Renewal Society continues its involvement in these church and community-based programs until they become self-supporting. When a program gives signs of being able to stand on its own with the guidance and support of local leaders, the Society gradually withdraws. This complex catalytic approach to ministry is carried out by a staff of twenty five experienced, highly trained professionals directed by a sixty-member volunteer Board of Directors recruited from across metropolitan Chicago.

This year the Society celebrates its 100th anniversary. Publication of this book helps to commemorate that important occasion. It also helps to remind us that the problems of urban life and the need to address them continue. The building of humane communities in large cities is unending work.

Needless to say, this book makes no pretense to being a comprehensive history of the Society’s first 100 years. Rather, it focuses on some of the most effective leaders, the critical periods, and the creative programming of the Society’s first century.

Many people deserve thanks for research and interpretation. David Lee Smith carried out the original research and writing of this book as a graduate student at the Chicago Theological Seminary. Smith’s work, supported by a grant from the Community Renewal Society, was guided by Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Assistant Professor of Church History and Director of Studies, and Dr. Shelby Rooks, Seminary President. Fannia Weingartner and Roberta Casey are responsible for extensive revision and editing of the manuscript. Sally Myers searched out the illustrations. Janice Feldstein compiled the index. Karen Kohn designed the book.

We are deeply grateful to Dr. Martin E. Marty, Professor of History of Modern Christianity, The Divinity School, University of Chicago, for contributing a substantive introduction which ably places the Society’s history in the broad vision of Congregationalism.

And, of course, many members of the Society’s staff have made invaluable contributions to this project, especially David Meade, Gretchen Breier, and Shirley Van Clay.

Finally, we express our appreciation to Harris Trust and Savings Bank for the grant which has made possible this publication.

Walter E. Ziegenhals
Associate Executive Director

The Community Renewal Society was established in 1882 by ministers and laymen of the Congregational Churches to provide a faithful Christian structure for the renewal of the quality of life in the Chicago metropolitan area. For 100 years, the Society has been primarily concerned with carrying out the Christian Mission to the poor and the oppressed.

The Society functions as a private, not-for-profit, tax-exempt urban mission agency integrally related to the United Church of Christ.

The Society ministers to the rich and poor and the powerful and powerless in the Chicago metropolitan area, works to advance justice, and serves as a bridge of communication and understanding between diverse persons and groups. Its programs are altered from time to time to meet the ever changing needs of society, but its continuing mission is to work with persons, groups and private and public institutions in the pursuit of justice and equity in the metropolitan Chicago area on the basis of the Christian imperative. [Adapted from Statement of Purpose of June 29, 1976]

INTRODUCTION

Moss-covered, muddied, neglected it was, this base of a pillar from Chicago's New England Congregational Church. No one had paid attention to it for years, there at the juncture of asphalt and garbage, where sprinkles of ground glass and chips from bricks cluttered the area. Cars parked near it in the lot of a Lutheran youth building on North Dearborn Street obscured it from view. It is hard to picture many drivers pausing to push aside the low branches of scrubby bushes to pick it out, to ponder its inscription.

My host one afternoon, Dr. A. R. Kretzmann, a Lutheran expert on architecture and liturgy, did pause for a moment after our lunch as we got into his auto. He pointed out the biblical text that graced the crumbling stone: "And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. Isaiah 35: 1." Kretzmann, who combined a love for the antique, for tradition, with a sense of pathos and irony, gave me a long look but no comment with it. The look was enough to say, "It didn't turn out that way, did it!" The desert of the western places where Congregationalists planted that pillar did not rejoice. We were blocks away from spirit-numbing slums. The desert not only did not blossom like the rose; it was paved, and only after years of neglect could that pavement evidence cracks and holes through which woeful slivers of green could rise.

The text, the pillar, the promise, all seemed to be denied. Yet neither of the heirs of those once-hopeful Congregationalists, the man who latterly pointed to their words of promise, nor the one who read them and writes them now, has acted as if either the text or the pillar-planting were idle ventures, or as if the believers and builders were fools. The signs of neglect and decay were simply reminders of the way the world is put together, of the ashes and dust and earth to which its slum-dwellers and church-builders return. But before that return, those New England people, Congregationalists, and the other desert-dwellers from the land of Isaiah to the streets of Chicago had lives to live. There were hungry mouths to be fed and needs for roofs overhead. Those who once walked past the pillar through the door to a sanctuary had a need to praise, to have signals called through a message that sent them back to the mundane city, their lives somehow transfigured. They would not have considered the promise of the text invalid, the meaning of their days canceled just because the world moved on.

People of the Congregational Way have long cherished the promise, given in Isaiah 35: 1, "And the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose," even if they have seldom lived up to it. After mid-point between their arrival in New England in 1620 and today, Horace Bushnell of Hartford, a towering pastor, referred to that text and bannered it in *Barbarism the First Danger*, back in 1847:

The wilderness shall bud and blossom as the rose before us; and we will not cease, till a christian nation throws up its temples of worship on every hill and plain; till knowledge, virtue and religion, blending their dignity and their healthful power, have filled our great country with a manly and happy race of people, and the bands of a complete christian commonwealth are seen to span the continent.

One dare never read lines from the past without remembering their context. Bearers of the Congregational Way today would squirm to hear that ours should be a "manly" race. They are not sure that a temple on every hill and plain would be good stewardship. God's city needs civic, commercial, and recreational buildings on many of its crossroads. And the language of a "complete christian commonwealth," the old dream of a Protestant America, which rightfully made some Catholics and Jews uncomfortable in 1847, still sounds ominous today when heard from the New Christian Right, the only sector that still voices it.

Having said that, however, one can still dredge much from the Bushnellian use of Isaiah, much that illumines the dreams and plans of the people behind the Chicago City Missionary Society--which has

since become the Community Renewal Society--whose story this book tells. They wanted *knowledge*, for Congregationalism is an educated tradition that cared about more than its own, often privileged children. They would spread knowledge also among the poor. *Virtue!* Today critics can look back and say that the old models were too Puritan and ascetic, too rigid, too righteous, even self-righteous. Yet these Congregationalists also knew that moral chaos benefited no one, that it left the desert desert, and allowed for no blossoming, no peaceful city. *Religion?* Yes, religion, but never religion bottled up, hermetically sealed and self-protected. This religion is always “blended” with something else in order to assert its proper “healthful power.” The blend made the Congregational Way a high-risk venture.

Bushnell’s idea of “blending” for the sake of a “commonwealth” is today seen as such a self-defeating venture in most religious institutions that one must step back for a moment in an effort to make sense of those Community Renewal Society pioneers who did not know enough to be self-protective. Being self-protective has come to be a first law of life of world religions and their domestic American branches and counterparts.

Harold Isaacs begins his book *Idols of the Tribe* (published in 1975) with some lines that illustrate how that law of life works in the world of prospering and militant--or prospering *because* militant--Islam, Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, or whatever:

We are experiencing on a massively universal scale a convulsive ingathering of people in their numberless grouping of kinds-tribal, racial, linguistic, religious, national. It is a great clustering into separatenesses that will, it is thought, improve, assure, or extend each group’s power or place, or keep it safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others.

At some earlier moments in their history these Congregationalists were themselves “convulsive ingatherers” of their own group. As for “separatenesses,” some of them were even called Separatists early in their history. They were tribal, convinced that God endowed their tribe especially with value and meaning. They were his elect, his chosen, his called, the New Israel. More than they knew, their ingathering was racial and national in character. “God is so much English,” one of the English Protestants had scribbled in the margin of his Bible just before the settlements in America started. The early Anglo-Americans often acted as if it were true.

These Congregational folk came to New England in order to “improve, assure, or extend” their “power or place.” Certainly they wanted to keep their group “safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others.” A third of a millennium later it is still considered remarkable that one of them one evening was hospitable to a Jesuit. Their own dissenters -Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams-they banished to Rhode Island, but they called it “Rogue’s Island,” where barbarism remained the first danger because people there did not “ingather” with their own kind. They, instead, would remain apart and pure. Back then Congregationalists did understand the power of tribal separatism, that first law of religious life in a world where identities are so often insecure. They had begun to lose that understanding by the time they reached Chicago and planted their pillars on its desert, by the time they started the Chicago City Missionary Society, parent of today’s wide-reaching Community Renewal Society.

Making sense of their intentions and their ways has been difficult ever since American religious folk learned to measure the power of separateness and ingathering, thanks to a potent and clarifying book of ten years ago. Published in 1972. Dean Kelley’s *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* pointed to new phenomena about which Congregationalists had learned over a century earlier. Ever since this book came to the attention of a public, it has been hard to imagine religious institutions operating by other laws of life. Kelley became a kind of manual of arms for church people who wanted their institutions to prosper. He was documenting not so much the growth of conservative churches -many of them did not

and do not grow-but of standoffish and self-assured ones. At the same time he fingered the downtrending lines on graphs of churches that were open, liberal, “blending,” as were those in the Congregational Way.

Kelley offered a graph or chart of his own, one which laid out six marks of “strong” and tribal and, hence, successful churches. Some of these marks the early Congregationalism possessed but had lost by the time of the Chicago venture. Others they kept but transformed for the purpose of seeing the desert blossom but at the expense of templing the hills and plains. We can profitably review them.

Commitment first of all. For Kelley this word had to mean “a total response to a total demand.” One will meet characters in this book who, to be sure, showed that commitment. But they did not direct it toward institutional self-preservation. Instead, they squandered resources on an often unresponsive urban population. That is, they let people who never knew that Congregationalists were behind their endeavors benefit from them. These were people who never were challenged to pay for their soup by attending a sermon, to sing for their supper by enduring uncongenial hymns. Such “committed” Congregationalists may have achieved some goals, but they did not, could not, build up their own groups thereby.

Kelley’s second mark was *discipline*, and the Chicago City Missionary Society’s pioneers possessed it in spades. They rose early and worked late, they moved from city to suburb and back, they gave of their resources and time to help the projects float. All of that takes discipline. But fast-growing groups imply something other than this, something other than the Congregationalist Way by the nineteenth century found abhorrent. Discipline in the Kelley book means “willingness to obey the commands of [charismatic] leadership without question.” That notion works, as anyone who is awed by the huge and authoritarian enterprises of television religion-in-politics had better learn in the 1980s. Even in the beginning, when voluntary discipline within the group was incomparably stronger than it would be in the same tradition today, the idea of obeying the commands of leadership “without question” was repulsive.

Not that the early leaders did not aspire to be charismatic and to be followed without question; later leaders may have had the temptation, too. Back near the beginning, Peter Bulkeley, the pastor in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1650, was already worried about the feisty spirit of independence among the laity who would not be disciplined just because he was their parson:

Shall I tell you what I think to be the ground of all this insolency, which discovers itself in the speech of men? Truly, I cannot ascribe it so much to any outward thing as to the putting of too much liberty and power into the hands of the multitude, which they are too weak to manage, many growing conceited, proud, self-sufficient, as wanting nothing. And I am persuaded except there be some means used to change the course of things in this point, our churches will grow more corrupt day by day, and tumult will arise, hardly to be stilled. [Quoted in Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (1965)]

Down the road a piece or three was Sudbury, whose minister, Edmund Brown, must also have been tempted to seek Bulkeley’s solution, to “make the church doors narrower,” which meant to restrict church membership only to his lackeys. Brown made efforts to command assent as he tried to run the town politically and profit personally from policies that had to do with “sizing the common” and thus determining whose sheep grazed where. Naturally, his own sheep would have done well. As Powell relates, layman John Ruddock, a true bearer of the Congregational Way and a kind of progenitor of many independent layfolk in this book, stood up to all that in a town meeting and said to his own minister, “Setting aside your office, I regard you no more than another man.” These Congregationalists were men and women of order. They had no other instincts in their being, but their leadership had to credential itself personally. When it did not, there was no following “without question” as there is in strong groups.

Kelley adds a third mark of strong groups, *missionary zeal*. This, for moderns, means standoffish, belligerent, and, therefore, successful groups, a cryptic language of internal communication. Such zeal did not well serve the Congregationalists of the turn of the century, because they wanted to listen to the outsiders in order to ally with some and serve others. Zeal, for Kelley's conservatives, also "eagerness to tell the 'good news.'" It must be said that these Congregationalist pioneers did better at telling than did most of their successors. For the old-timers the "mission" of the Chicago City Missionary Society did not mean only a mission of service in the sense of promoting welfare. It also called forth the mission of witnessing to their faith, planting churches, and evangelizing. Still, from the beginning, they not only spoke. They listened. Listening is risky and expensive to self-preservation minded groups.

When Kelley gets to his fourth mark, absolutism, he points to groups far from the spirit of those in the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Congregational Way. For the fast-growing militant groups of today this feature has meant, says Kelley, the belief that "we have the Truth and all others are in error," a "closed system of meaning and value which explains everything," and "uncritical and unreflective attachment to a single set of values." These people were convinced that they had truth, or were in pursuit of it. But in the Congregational Way they also had to remember the unfolding character of truth, as expounded by Pastor John Robinson, the mentor who sent over their ancestors on the Mayflower. Some of his parting words are chipped in stone on the wall of Chicago City Missionary Society kin, the Chicago Theological Seminary in Hyde Park, where no moss or undergrowth covers it: "Let us be certain... that the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word." Groups founded on such notions are vulnerable to change, to surprise. They offer less security than do absolutist ones. The Congregational Way used the Word in order to interpret life on the desert or among the roses and in the city, but never as a "closed system" with an answer for everything.

Conformity is next. The Puritan tradition encouraged and produced a considerable measure of conformity in the early, good old days. Kelley says conformity means "intolerance of deviance or dissent." Mrs. Hutchinson and teacher Williams could testify to its presence already in the 1630s. But the spirit of "separatism" and "shared stigmata of belonging" lost out as the Congregational Way kept opening itself to people of other ways. Old-fashioned conformity never stood a chance in the Chicago that lives on these pages.

Finally, *fanaticism* marks the "conservative" or aggressive religious groups today. "All talk, no listen," or "Keep yourselves unspotted from the world" in a cloister: these are the texts Kelley cites to illustrate fanaticism. To these would-be civil Congregationalists, fanaticism would have been more like what it appeared to be to psychologist C. G. Jung, "overcompensated doubt." Or, better, what "Mr. Dooley," Chicago journalist Peter Finley Dunne, spotted: "A fanatic is a man that does what he thinks the Lord would do if he knew the facts of the case." But though they were not fanatics, pioneers in the social welfare movement, like the agents of the Chicago City Missionary Society, were by no means shrinking violets. They were, in their tradition, committed to the "spotted" in the world, and the moves of their agencies showed this. While they talked with confidence, they listened with alertness. Change became the first law of their life, as they adapted to their evolving city and as they improvised ever-new missions.

Kelley also cites six balancing marks of "weak" groups. Many of these apply to the kind of Congregationalism described in this book. These pioneers would not have called their outlook relativism, but Pastor John Robinson had set them up for it with his word about more truth and light breaking forth from the Lord's word. They did not have all truth, and never would get a monopoly. They had to be "critical and circumspect," which, observes Kelley, violates the law of big growth. One need read only a few pages to see how committed to diversity they were and are; the pluralism of peoples, options, and thoughts is dizzying to the reader who seeks the thread, the continuity line. And, as with other weak

groups, they valued dialogue, appreciation of outsiders' views, something painful and possibly fatal among true tribes.

One of the six Kellean marks of "weak" groups helps account for the less attractive features of the decline of Congregationalism: lukewarmness. If today it is hard for the highly committed to be barely civil, it is also easy for the highly civil to be barely committed to faith, creed, and goal. One spots little lukewarmness in the heroes of this story, but on page after page there is a question as to where the troops were for these generals. How dedicated were the Congregationalists in the pews and "out there" in the local churches? Many of them gave generously, but one does have the impression that they became progressively more unsure about what they had to contribute religiously to the city and the work of these agencies.

That judgment deserves a little aside: religiously based groups have power, but it is a very circumscribed kind of power. They cannot raise taxes or armies, they cannot coerce. People who do not want to be led by them, who can resist their leaders and the symbols they wield, are always free to go elsewhere or nowhere in a voluntary and religiously free society. The power of religious groups inheres when the members believe some of the same things, respond to the same symbols, share some prayers. A vivid example of this power is present in the minds of America's mid-generation if they think back to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. No Southern sheriff was ever impressed by his charisma. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference had no coercive power. But the Bull Clarks, George Wallaces, and, eventually, the Lyndon Johnsons had to pay respect to the fact that King, by preaching the Declaration of Independence, the Bible, and a bit of imported Gandhi, was evoking response to a symbolic pool that white America professed to share. All along we'd been saying we believed the Bible, so what could we do (until we figured out again how to evade it) when King convoked the impulses of our prophets to change the world, to spread justice?

Congregationalism, a movement of dissent in England, became the official church, privileged, established by law in colonial New England. As such it did have a kind of coercive power, as "church and state" were blended. Soon (by 1819 and 1833) the game of privilege was all over in Connecticut and Massachusetts. This was thereafter a dissipated power, but it had left its sediment and legacy in the instincts and reflexes of Congregationalism. Its agents in the West tended to be educated and at least mildly privileged. When endowments (like the Victor Lawson largesse about which we shall hear) came along, this elite could continue to live off the faith that foreparents had planted. They did not have to work hard in order to nurture new common belief, symbols, or prayer. Of course, this comment is beside the point now, given the modern charter of the Community Renewal Society with its explicit pluralism. But in earlier times the Chicago City Missionary Society clung a little too easily to the memories of establishment and the realities of endowment. In the process, it did not generate as creatively as did some other groups a new devotion, new motivation.

Kelley's fifth mark of a weak group is individualism, one that characterizes almost all moves and movers in the story that follows. Kelley's chart spells out some of the features of individualism that make it hard for groups to charge ahead: "unwillingness to give unquestioning obedience to anyone" and "individuality prized above conformity." Sometimes a single individual, a Caleb Gates-whom the reader will soon meet-will have a vision and will rearrange his life to live within it. He is very much in the tradition of a group, a Congregational community, and would not know how to locate himself apart from those roots and that context. Yet if he must relocate himself, he would learn how to do this rather than yield vision or context. A vision need not be held privately or arrogantly. The Congregational Way committed one to mutuality, to responsible listening and learning. The town meeting, after all, is one of the most vivid images recalling inventions in this tradition.

One more way to lose out in the competition between tribes and strong groups in our world, says Kelley's chart, is reserve. That is, if members are "reluctant to expose" their personal beliefs "or impose them on others," they are in trouble and their numbers will decline. The risks for survival are too high. In the Babel of signals that makes up religious and secular America, one needs billboards and microphones, tract-pushing and doorbell-ringing activities, and great self confidence in the right of one to manipulate another. This the Congregational Way did not possess, so it could not be programmed into the Chicago City Missionary Society. Of course, these confident men would have liked to remake the world to conform to their vision. Certainly, they wanted others to join them in their churches-they were, after all, promoting a mission and church-building society. But they relied on persuasion, and their civility did make them diffident about working too hard to remake others.

All this attention to the six marks that fast-growing churches possess but that the Congregationalists did not, and to the six marks that declining churches exemplify and the Congregationalists also embodied, should prepare the reader for the story of the sponsors of the Chicago City Missionary Society. On the surface of things, there is no reason why most readers should care. They know that the Community Renewal Society is no longer Congregationalism's project, that people of many faiths contribute to it, work with it, or profit from it. For that reason, were one interested only in current events, there would be few reasons to ask questions about the fate of the sponsors.

This book, however, is a story, a history. And an assumption behind history is that, while it should delight readers with accounts of the past, it might also help inform them about present-day unfoldings and future prospects. Here, as so often, a reflection of Abraham Lincoln's seems appropriate: "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it."

Knowing "where we are" means knowing "where we've come from" historically.

The Congregational Way was the agent that genetically programmed the modern Community Renewal Society to be much of what it is today. And that Way through many decades helped the agency develop toward its present form of maturity. Origins, says an important axiom, do not explain all circumstances. But when an institution reposes in a tradition, including an extremely flexible one, knowledge of that tradition is informative.

Jewish agencies today may in many cases be "secularized," cut off from the synagogue or explicit reference to the God of Israel. They may draw funds from government, from public voluntary contributions, and from non-Jewish individuals, just as they may serve many non-Jews. Catholic agencies may remain somewhat more identifiably Catholic, yet it must be said that many hospitals or colleges, with lay and secular boards and staffs, are no longer introvertedly Catholic in outreach and service. Mainline Protestantism has been the least concerned about keeping its agency walls high, the most careful to be open to pluralism. The Congregational Way is at the far left of the Protestant-pluralist spectrum. So we do well to look to the past.

Where are these Congregationalists today? Clearly, they played a larger part in the founding of Chicago and its institutions than they now play. The name Congregational hardly lives in Chicago or the United States today. One small denomination that split off, some say, or held to the tradition, say others, retains the term "congregational" and holds the loyalty of about 1,000 Chicagoans within its national clientele of 100,000. One can learn much about Congregationalism from observing its members in their steadfast devotion to independency. A tinier split-off Congregational denomination, utterly conservative doctrinally, bears the name but little of the flavor of anyone recognized in this story. It is virtually unrepresented in Chicago, though its headquarters in the western suburbs.

By far the largest number of churches and individuals in the Chicago City Missionary Society kinds of Congregationalism have become part of a four-way merger into the United Church of Christ. This body nationally numbers fewer than 2,000,000 and locally gathers between 50,000 and 75,000 people. In 1957 the Congregational Christians, who had developed out of a linkage of that earlier Congregationalism, united with Evangelical and Reformed groups of largely Germanic background. Together they provided the first interethnic and trans-traditional merger of note in American Protestantism. After a quarter century one can step into almost any United Church of Christ congregation and sense whether it was once Congregational or Evangelical Reformed. Year after year, however, the explicitly Congregational motifs and lore become more recessive.

“The Congregational Way”: The term was the invention of John Cotton, the most prominent of the earliest New England preachers. He was speaking of people who were not sure they were a “denomination.” That term was rarely used in the 1630s, since the voluntary society that generated need for it was still more than a century into the future. Congregationalists did, of course, make churches but were they the Church, or a church? John Cotton fumbled for a new word because he felt he was dealing with a new reality. Here was a form of church life that saw individual congregations as being independent, sprung from the separate soils of their towns, and made up of individualists. Yet the minister and his lay counterpart Governor John Winthrop were just as sure that these individuals and congregations were bound together in a spirit of mutuality, “knitte,” they liked to say, the way the separate threads of a fabric were.

These like-minded individualists, who built both tension and irresolution into their charter, were English and Protestant. They were uneasy with and they eventually protested against the Church of England. Unlike many movements of religious discontent, theirs was not made up of the poor of the world, though they were by no means all well off and they did sacrifice much at first to leave England behind. What impresses the reader of their history and helps explain the Chicago City Missionary Society is the influence of education on their ranks. Most of the early pastors were from Cambridge, which in the early seventeenth century was a university congenial to Puritan protesting ideas just as a century earlier it had given a home to England’s first Protestants. At the side of these clerics were lay people, in many cases lawyers and merchants, who were well educated, also in things of the spirit. Especially because they felt strengthened by harassment and sometimes by persecution in England, they together had reason to think of themselves as “God’s choicest grain,” sifted from the best of the crop to come to America.

And they came, in two styles. Some were fiercely independent “Separatists” of the sort that settled Plymouth colony in 1620, and others were mainline Puritans who after 1630 populated Boston and Massachusetts Bay and then New Haven and Connecticut. The latter group made much of the fact that they were still a reformist party in exile, as it were, out to improve the mother church and country. But they were both in America to stay. They became one of the most literate groups in American religious history. Jonathan Edwards and Horace Bushnell, giants of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stand at the heads of columns marked by talent rarely matched elsewhere. The Congregationalists interpreted and defined much of the mainline Northern culture of the United States. They kept the educational interest that was born back at Cambridge, and founded Harvard and Yale colleges. The American map is dotted with “Old Mains” at colleges that were born of Congregational impulse. In the Midwest alone these included Oberlin, Grinnell, Carleton, Ripon, Beloit, Knox, Illinois College and, in a way, the University of Illinois. None remained enclosed or sectarian. They thus showed themselves to be spiritually akin to agencies like the Chicago City Missionary Society as bearers of the Congregational Way.

Educated, established, elite, English-speaking, these New Englanders moved west. They did not go en masse; there were not enough around to make a mass. Nor did they prosper as a church body, since they never gave themselves as a body to the revivalism that a few of them mastered so well. As they were losing their established status in New England they began to recoup losses with highly delayed and ineffective attempts to “civilize” and convert the Native American. They also pioneered in sending educated evangelizers to the Sandwich Islands, India, and elsewhere. In 1801, in order to boost mission efforts, they formed a Plan of Union with Presbyterians, who were far more aggressive as evangelizers. So Congregationalists lost out, in the rueful words of Edward A. Lawrence of Massachusetts at a convention in 1852: “They have milked our Congregational cows, but have made nothing but Presbyterian butter and cheese.”

Let the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians sweep the west with their recruiting revivals. The Congregationalists, like the more staid and originally southern Episcopalians, would move west more genteelly. In town after town they attracted or had sent ahead civil and responsible citizens who helped stake out squares and build the downtown church only to see each of them overwhelmed by noisier revivalist churches and, later, by Continental Protestants, Catholics, and other latecomers who did not fit the patterns. The Congregationalists did not grow in such circumstances, but they also did not fold their tents or, better, take down their graceful steeples.

Instead they settled for a division of labor that was expensive for their church growth prospects but profitable for other people. They became agency people, seekers of welfare, reformers. At first many of them were central to what one historian called “The Errand of Mercy,” which in the first half of the nineteenth century issued in an astonishing group of voluntary societies. They shared an Anglo-American fever at a heat unprecedented: to gather lay and ministerial energies, often across denominational bounds, in order to change the world. The secular benevolent network in

10 America took its lessons from these pioneers, or sometimes was simply their heir, as the Community Renewal Society has tended to be and become.

Soon a society developed for everything: an American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, an American Tract Society, an American Sunday School Union, mainline institutions that employed Congregational energies. Some of these used lengthy names to spell out their purposes: Connecticut Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Promotion of Good Morals, Penitent Females’ Refuge of Boston, and Society for the Reformation of Morals in Franklin, Massachusetts, were only starters. If one looks far enough there will be amusements, not all of them clearly under Congregational auspices, like a New York branch of the London Society for Providing Trusses for the Ruptured Poor. Few gaps were left.

The errand of mercy began to fragment by mid-century, however, as denominational self-consciousness and competition grew. Baptists wanted to spread Bible translations that rendered baptized as “immersed,” so they separated from the resistant “sprinklers.” Church after church found reason to go it alone in founding hospitals or orphanages, and so did Congregationalists, though they remained more open than most to cooperative work.

Alongside the errand of mercy was the itch to reform. Congregationalism provided much of the impetus for Northern religious abolitionism. By no means did all the Congregationalist clergy openly espouse abolition, because it was too radical for these sober folk. But they did tend to be more clearly anti-slavery than many other bodies, first enjoying the luxury of being almost exclusively Northern and later trying to pick up the pieces after abolition by helping send missionaries to the South, where they helped found colleges for blacks: Tougaloo, Dillard, Talladega, Fisk, Hampton Institute, and on the border between

North and South, Howard at Washington. The great grandchildren of those who established Harvard and Yale thought that the best way to improve chances for blacks was through colleges, and they were not wholly wrong.

All the while this tradition chose to be highly exposed to main trends in national life. In their New England heartland they divided, as their liberals headed off to Unitarianism. But through the century the Congregationalists who stayed also helped generate a liberal-minded theological tradition. Even when they started conservative seminaries to challenge the liberals -like Andover Theological School in the face of liberalizing Yale-these schools later also broke out with that virus of liberalization. Openness and exposure to new intellectual currents kept Congregationalism from being protected against secular thought or against evolutionary and higher critical views.

Similarly, the high-risk character of those in the Congregational Way made it possible for them to be agents of the Social Gospel toward the end of the century. Few of them were socialists or came from social classes where socialism prospered. Many of them were distant from the new urban immigrant workers. Most of them acted from a distance, out of some sense of noblesse oblige. But they also began to find idea patterns that enabled them to re-interpret biblical and Congregational ways so that they could begin to re-vision society. Why should American life with all its potential and its landscape rich in resources organize itself in such a way that there had to be a permanent poor class, they asked. In Columbus, Ohio, Washington Gladden became the greatest of the parish ministers of this stamp. He was Congregationalist, as was Chicago's Graham Taylor, who led the professors and social workers of Protestantism into much settlement house work, in the Chicago City Missionary Society spirit.

America's Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists all have a turf, some place or other where they are visible and where they set some of the terms for the culture. The colonial big three have yielded space and have no empires. Congregationalism's old New England has become almost a Congregationalist wasteland. To this day the American church building of folklore and Christmas cards is New England Congregational: simple, white, chaste, elegantly spired, clear-windowed, snow-surrounded. But many of these churches are monuments, lightly attended. Were they not landmarks they might often be overgrown like that pillar in the parking lot where the

New England Congregational Church had stood. Catholic immigrants took over New England, upper-class Congregationalists moved south with their mills, and lower-and middle-class types picked their way to little western towns like Chicago, where they were overwhelmed by more aggressive churches.

While they did have the numbers and the energies, however, they spent themselves on people who were not their own, and interpreted American life for people not of their way. Today it is easy to see them as smug and too sure of themselves. No "Way" from one era can be walked uncritically in another, no vision goes uncriticized, no ideas or plans unrevised. Given the choice of vices available to the nobler folk of the Congregational Way a century ago, the founders of the Chicago City Missionary Society selected some of the least serious. Given the choice of virtues, they selected many that profited not themselves and their churches but many who did not ever learn the name of the Congregational Way.

The cynic can say that lukewarmness did them in, that civility meant apathy. But there is another side. Many of them had learned from the Lord of the Congregational Way that like the seed that must fall into the ground and die in order to live, so people and traditions had to give of themselves in order to live and to help others live. Congregationalists did not plant enough seeds for the desert to blossom, but some of what they did does grow and produce new seed. They remain the worst possible examples for those who want to study institutional self-preservation and church growth. But in their story are examples and lessons for those who see that people of religious outlook also have other work to do. The wilderness

never disappears, but, they would have said, neither does the mandate to seek the oases, and to plant whether the prospects are pleasing or not.

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THE BEGINNING

The startling facts, which have been accumulating before the public, respecting the gambling dens, black holes, debauching theaters and saloons of Chicago, indicate a condition of moral peril which may well come home to every thoughtful citizen.

The last census of the Board of Education informed us that there were, in 1880, 35,578 children between six and twenty-one neither in public or private schools, nor at work. Cook County Sunday School statistics showed that “of the 135,694 of suitable age in our city, 85,694 do not regularly attend any Sunday School.” A published statement notes nearly twenty saloons to every church, and, as indicating the ominous encroachment upon the Sabbath from business alone, a well-known pastor stated publicly that on his way to church he counted two hundred places open on North Clark street, between Chicago avenue and the river, some half a mile. These figures may daze some minds by their very magnitude.

Thus ran the opening statement of a report “To the Congregational Churches of Chicago and Vicinity” dated April 24, 1882, and signed by a committee of seven. First among the signators was Caleb F. Gates, founder and first president of the Chicago City Missionary Society.

A Connecticut Yankee, Gates had arrived in Chicago April 14, 1853, six days short of his 29th birthday. Born in East Haddam, he had left home as a youth, when “a certain incompatibility of temperament... in time, by mutual consent, led to [his] separation [from home].” [Gates, 11] At the age of four, he was sent to live with relatives in Brooklyn, New York, but later that year was placed in the care of his mother’s sister in Springfield, New York. It was this aunt, Nancy Griswold, who would have the most influence on the young Gates.

According to his son’s biography of Gates, his aunt required the boy “to read his Bible, the Westminster Catechism, and *The Missionary Herald*,” and guided his religious and moral training. He would later recall: “Among the earliest memories of my life is that of an infant-class room, with its little raised seats, and pictures of Bible scenes hung on the walls and from the time I was six until I was twenty-one years old I cannot remember more than half a dozen Sundays when I did not go to church...” [Gates, 19] As an adult, Gates would credit his aunt for his love of good books, his interest in missionary work, and his commitment to charity.

Gates returned to East Haddam when he was 14 and finished high school there. After graduation he became an elementary school teacher and also taught Sunday school at the village’s Congregational church. Gates was 22 when he moved to Middletown in search of greater opportunities. Beginning as a clerk in a dry goods store, he went on to become first a teller, then a bookkeeper at the local bank. He married Mary Eliza Hutchins of East Haddam in May 1851, and in November the young couple moved to New Haven, where Gates became bookkeeper at the City Bank of New Haven.

Once again his dedication and acumen attracted favorable attention. When a friend acquired a large contract to build rolling stock for the Illinois Central Railroad, he offered Gates the position of secretary and bookkeeper. It was this position at the American Car Works that brought Gates to Chicago in 1853.

Like many a man from the East, Gates came armed with letters of introduction. In a letter to his wife, who was still in New Haven, he wrote:

my letters of introduction are all to prominent men in the Second Presbyterian Church, the aristocratic society of the city, and by going to that church I should probably be quickly settled in the best society. You see at once how strong the inducements are to sacrifice my Congregationalism to ease, comfort, and

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