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## Walking Together *with Conrad*

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“Church-members may not remove or depart from the church, & so one from another as they please, nor without just & weighty cause but ought to live & dwell together.” This quotation from chapter thirteen of the Cambridge Platform appears in the opening essay of Conrad Wright’s *Walking Together*.<sup>1</sup> Conrad interprets the church covenant as an “agreement made between parties, not a statement made by an individual.” An exemplary and lifelong member of the First Parish in Cambridge, Conrad not only wrote about the role of covenant in liberal congregations, he walked together with us, faithfully sharing in the work and worship of the congregation for a lifetime.

Conrad traced his family history in the parish back to Cyrus Woodman (1814-1889), who moved to Cambridge in the middle of the Civil War. His mother and maternal grandparents were active members in Conrad’s childhood years. With the important exception of the summer months, when vacationing in Maine, Conrad attended worship weekly. The family occupied a pew in the center section of the meeting house. Later in life, he moved to a side pew where he could closely observe the worship leaders and the congregation.

Conrad believed in the power of our human institutions to amplify and extend our commitments beyond one lifetime. As Conrad Edick Wright noted at his father’s memorial service, the elder Conrad’s deepest personal and scholarly commitments were to institutions in general, and to three institutions in particular: Harvard University, the First Parish in Cambridge, and the Wright family. The depth of Conrad’s engagement with congregational life at First Parish confirms this observation. He accepted myriad assignments, but was best known as our *de facto* historian and occasional Clerk. As the primary chronicler

and interpreter of our congregation's history, he reliably brought lessons from the past to parish meetings, committee discussions, and to worship. Conrad was also a prudent fiduciary and served many years as Treasurer. His meticulous financial records and careful consideration of the long term risk of investments contributed to the congregation's current fiscal health.

In 1941, while a graduate student in Harvard's History of American Civilization department, Conrad convened a group of persons interested in forming a Historical Society of the First Parish in Cambridge. The first meeting drew thirty members and Conrad was elected chair. This society organized talks on historical subjects and preserved documents relating to the congregation's history. In January 1943, he returned from Fort Devens, where he was serving as a conscientious noncombatant during World War II, to preside over a meeting where he presented a paper, "When was the First Church in Cambridge Founded?" The paper refuted a popular idea that the congregation gathered by Thomas Shepherd in 1636 was continuous with the church gathered in 1633 by Thomas Hooker. The Hooker congregation, Conrad argued, departed Cambridge in 1635.<sup>2</sup>

This research would be echoed many times in classes for new and prospective members. Conrad was concerned that Unitarian Universalism had become a movement of "come outers" who knew little about our history, and so he thought it was his duty to inform and educate church members. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing for 30 years, Conrad would regale newcomers with a historical talk concentrating on four episodes spanning 400 years—the founding of the church in 1636, the role of the Standing Order in the eighteenth century, the Unitarian Controversy in the nineteenth century, and a controversy concerning our church architecture in the twentieth century. Each episode would touch upon essential elements of our polity, including the importance of covenant and the use of a democratic process in our congregation.

While our ministers enjoyed freedom of the pulpit, Conrad never hesitated to exercise his freedom of the pew by correcting historical errors. In 1971, Ralph Helverson preached on "What this Church was Like 125 Years Ago" for the 125th anniversary of Cambridge as a city. Helverson's journal entry later that day revealed his deep embarrassment that Conrad, along with another professor in the congregation, needed

to correct him after the service.<sup>3</sup> In his next newsletter column, titled "On Being in Error," Helverson apologized for his mistake.<sup>4</sup>

When I was elected Clerk of the Parish in 2001, Conrad would quiz me on aspects of our history relating to my office, such as, "What is the significance of Section 14, Chapter 67 of the General Laws of the Commonwealth?"<sup>5</sup> Upon receiving the first meeting warrant that I had signed with the Standing Committee's approval, he promptly returned a corrected copy to me. In addition to free history lessons, Conrad would sometimes, seemingly out of the blue, thank leaders for their contributions. For example, when Elizabeth Anastos concluded her term as Chair in 1991, Conrad publicly thanked her and praised her exemplary leadership,<sup>6</sup> and when I was Chair, he approached me privately and earnestly said, "Thank you for running the church."

In many of the committees he served, Conrad recorded the minutes. His meticulous minutes preserve our memory of most of the twentieth-century activities of the church. As Treasurer, Conrad created narrative descriptions of endowment funds and bequests that preserve donors' identities and intentions. He also collected every order of worship and every mailing to members and negotiated the gift agreement that brought the First Parish archives to Harvard Divinity School. Finally, Conrad occasionally preached. His July 16, 1972 sermon is memorable because it reflected on how worship can sustain congregations over time.<sup>7</sup> In Conrad's opinion, corporate worship at First Parish needed to maintain some conventional patterns to avoid alienating devoted members.

This position is consistent with Conrad's role at Harvard and in the church during the social upheaval of the 1960s. Conrad's wish that change be evolutionary, and not the result of the revolutionary actions of a few, came into play in 1991 when the Standing Committee discussed concealing the words of the church covenant and a biblical verse, Micah 6:8, painted onto panels displayed at either side of the pulpit. The covenant had been adopted in 1896 and no longer represented the sentiments of many in the congregation. When the Chair suggested the possibility of covering the panels with decorative hangings, Conrad argued that the Standing Committee should not give the appearance of prejudging what the whole church might decide in due course. He

suggested that the Standing Committee develop a procedure to review the covenant. A procedure for wide discussion was adopted.<sup>8</sup>

In 1981, as a member of the Investment Committee, and after a bitter conflict about divesting from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa, Conrad helped carry out the congregation's vote to divest. He also authored a memo urging our portfolio manager to drop Dresser Industries, now part of Halliburton, from the investment portfolio because they refused to accept the Sullivan Principles, a code of corporate conduct that forbids segregationist policies.<sup>9</sup> In 1994, Conrad aided the search for a socially responsible firm to handle the endowment.

Robert Putnam, author of the popular social analysis *Bowling Alone*, observed that civic participation in America reached its highest levels in the two decades following 1945.<sup>10</sup> Conrad's generation cared deeply about community life. Many of his peers also cared about institutions. What is remarkable is that Conrad cared about our Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist institutions. His scholarship is prominent in two recent and influential Commission on Appraisal reports focusing on congregational life, one on the meaning of membership,<sup>11</sup> and another about congregational polity.<sup>12</sup> At the First Parish in Cambridge, he modeled how we "ought to live & dwell together."<sup>13</sup> The church eventually voted to modify the panels at the front of the meeting house and we adopted a new church covenant in 2003. Conrad did not welcome these changes, and yet his commitment did not waver. His steady presence in worship, Sunday after Sunday, impressed us. He did an enormous amount of work, and apparently never considered the task of recording the minutes or keeping the financial books beneath him. By nurturing an appreciation of the congregation's history, he deepened our commitment. In sum, Conrad offered a model of community and scholarly engagement that is essential to the survival of our liberal religious institutions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Conrad Wright, *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> First Parish in Cambridge Records, Andover-Harvard Theological Library. bMS 300/89.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Norman Helverson Papers, bMS 601/6 (1), Journal entry on September 26, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> *Meeting House News*, October 3, 1971

<sup>5</sup> Section 14, Chapter 67 mandates that religious societies hold an annual meeting and that nothing can be acted upon unless inserted in the warrant.

<sup>6</sup> First Parish in Cambridge Records, Andover-Harvard Theological Library. bMS 300/61a (1).

<sup>7</sup> "Another Look at Corporate Worship" in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston: Skinner House, 1989), 51-61.

<sup>8</sup> First Parish in Cambridge Records, Andover-Harvard Theological Library. bMS 300/61a (1).

<sup>9</sup> First Parish in Cambridge Records, Andover-Harvard Theological Library. bMS 604/9 (26).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal. *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership: A Report* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal. *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity: A Report* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> *Cambridge Platform*, chapter 13.