

"Past Experiences With Unitarian Organization"

by Francis A. Christie
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Francis Christie (1858-1938) became an instructor at Harvard Divinity School first then in 1893 began 33 years of teaching at Meadville Theological School as a professor of church history.

This is a rare effort to deal with the history of denominational organization.

The emphasis is on the organizational plan adopted by the Unitarians in 1884 and still in force when Christie wrote nearly 40 years later. (See by-laws attached of the American Unitarian Association for 1884 & 1885).

Obviously, theological issues impinged on Unitarian organization, but beyond that what other issues seem important?

What was the result of the by-law change to make the AUA delegates (except life members before 1925) represent local societies?

Could the real issues in the AUA be traced (after 1865) by the quarrels (and sometimes lethargy) over changes in the wider Unitarian organization?

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PAST EXPERIENCE WITH UNITARIAN ORGANIZATION

By Prof. Francis A. Christie, of Meadville.

At a time when by action of the General Conference the problem of a unified and efficient organization of the Unitarian churches is again under consideration it is profitable to recall the views and the experiences of those who gave us our inheritance. The national organization of churches of the Congregational polity, whether orthodox or liberal, whether Congregationalists so-called or Baptists, was a slow and difficult matter. In the case of the Unitarians the only definite organization before the end of the Civil War was the American Unitarian Association, begun in 1825 and incorporated in 1847. This was an association of individuals, not of churches, although churches contributed to its funds. In its first quarter century never more than half of the churches made annual contributions and the average receipts of the first forty years were only \$8038.88. In spite of this lack of support, this organization accomplished a remarkable work for the spread of liberal religion. The only other agency for national co-operation was the informal autumnal convention held in various cities from 1842 to 1863. The crisis of the Civil War stressed the sense of social duty and forced men to co-operate nationally for national interests. The work of the Christian Commission and of the United States Sanitary Commission, awakened in American churches the sense of membership in one body. So with the Unitarians. An immense impetus was given to the American Unitarian Association and in 1865 for the first time a national convention of delegates of churches was held, in New York, at which was formed the National Conference, the first session of which came in 1866.

The situation that ensued was that of a National Church Conference as a kind of legislature for the churches, and the American Unitarian Association as a kind of executive agent. The Conference was a meeting of delegates of individual churches, but the ideal system as shaped by the masterly mind of Dr. Bellows and expressed in the Council report of 1866 was that the whole Unitarian area should be territorially divided; that each church should belong to a regional Conference, and that in the end the National Conference should be made up of representatives of the regional conferences. These sub-ordinate conferences, meeting more frequently, should plan for the religious wants of their own area and co-operate with the general missionary operations of the

denomination at large. The result of this recommendation appears in the Report on Local Conferences in 1868. Fourteen Local Conferences had been organized over the country and in 1870 the Council reported twenty in all with the result of increased interest of laymen in church work. In 1874 the Report of Council read by Rev. Edward Everett Hale endorsed the system of regional missionary work by regional conferences. "It is evident that the Missionary Conferences will be, in most instances, the best judge of what is desirable work in their own districts." "No rule can be fairer than that the money raised in Missionary Conferences shall be expended in their own borders, if on fair consideration they so require." But the Council urged that the Conferences should also raise money for the common work.

Obviously the relation of this system to the American Unitarian Association required definition. In 1872 the Rev. J. F. Moors presented a report deprecating any plan of sinking the American Unitarian Association in the National Conference and in 1878 the Council report read by Dr. Bellows advised that the American Unitarian Association, not the National Conference, should raise missionary funds and that the funds so raised should be distributed by the Council in connection with the American Unitarian Association among the local Conferences. This eighth National Conference (1878) voted to appoint three missionaries for new fields to operate under the advice of the Directors of the American Unitarian Association. In 1880 the Council through its chairman, Dr. Bellows, secured the appointment of a committee of seven to report on the problem of co-operation between the two organizations and the action is explained by an editorial in The Christian Register of October 16, 1880 which speaks of "the almost spontaneous agreement of those who had any conversation on the subject as to the necessity of giving the American Unitarian Association a larger field of operation, by bringing it more directly under the influences which control the Conference and shape its decisions. It has become apparent to the most languid observer that there is a momentum in the movements of the Conference and a power behind its appeals which is to some extent wanting in the Association. The Association now loses a large part of the impulse generated at Saratoga because the power must be transferred from its source to another set of agents." The editorial urged that Conference and Association be "so fused that there will be no separate meetings as now," and an editorial of October 30 speaks again of the hope that the two "will ere long be merged into a more organic relationship." No protest against this view is found in the subsequent issues of the Register.

The Committee of Seven presented its report through the

Hon. Dorman Eaton in the National Conference of 1882. It set forth the difficulties of consolidating the two bodies. In order to end the distrust growing out of the fact that the membership of the American Unitarian Association thus far had been in large measure confined to a section, it was advised that the Association be made a representative body. Each church should make its minister permanently and its other delegates to the National Conference for the two years of their service, members of the Association. Changes should be made in the Charter and By-Laws of the Association which would enable and require it to act definitely and according to instruction as the administrative agent of the Conference as to any matters or fund placed in the keeping of the Association. The Association should keep its legal identity as the only body competent to receive gifts and bequests. The Conference having an intermittent existence and a transitory membership could not hold funds like a corporation. It could mature plans and give direction to the Association about the use of the funds and should receive detailed reports of these expenditures, but as a popular convention could not itself be converted into an administrative bureau. A minority report was also read by Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, dissenting from the assumptions of the majority report, and arguing that a more effective executive impulse was given in Conference sessions than in the brief annual meeting of the Association; that, further, two organizations in friendly free co-operation could accomplish more than either separately. The minority therefore recommended that (1) the Association remain intact as the administrator of trust funds and have charge of publication, tract distribution, preaching at college centers, aiding weak societies. (2) That the Conference be incorporated under New York Laws with a Charter allowing sessions anywhere in the United States. (3) That from contributions of churches and individual memberships (annual or life) the Secretary be salaried to give his whole time to the work assigned him. In the discussion following, the minority report was supported by Rev. C. W. Wendte and Rev. John W. Chadwick, while Rev. Charles G. Ames desired the expansion of the Association into the proportions of the Conference so that there should be but one body. The Conference unanimously referred both reports to the original committee "with the request that a definite and detailed plan looking to the amalgamation and organization of the American Unitarian Association and National Conference be presented to this Conference at their earliest convenience and that the committee confer with the American Unitarian Association about the feasibility of engrafting the delegate system upon its Constitution." In consequence of this action the American Unitarian Association in May,

1884, adopted its present system of dual membership: life members and delegate members appointed by the contributing churches. Thereupon in September, 1884, the National Conference Committee reported that the action of the American Unitarian Association in becoming a representative delegate body virtually accomplished the most important step urged by the Majority Report of 1882 and while assuming that this may not be the last step to closer relations thought it inexpedient to make other recommendations at the time.

The improvement in the organization of the Association did not meet all the needs of the case. What was lacking was emphasized in a Report on State and Local Conferences by Jenkin Lloyd Jones in the General Conference of 1884. There were eight state conferences which with the help of the American Unitarian Association were doing missionary work, raising money themselves for the direct work, while of the eleven local or county conferences (ten of them being in Massachusetts) only one or two raised money save for the expense of meeting. "If the stability of American institutions depends more upon our town, county and state governments than upon the administration of affairs at Washington, so the perfecting of our missionary organization depends upon our giving life, coherency, and system to these subordinate organizations." Local Conferences should become State Conferences with longer sessions and be incorporated to hold funds. "What we want is not a missionary sent into a Conference by the American Unitarian Association, but one who is an officer of the Conference, elected by the Conference, and so far as possible supported by the Conference. When the support is inadequate, let the work be done so well as to deserve the co-operation of the American Unitarian Association." Two days later a resolution offered by the Business Committee and advocated in discussion by Dr. Hale, Dr. Calthrop, Rev. L. G. Ames, Joseph Shippen, Joseph May and others was unanimously adopted. It recommended the system of State Conferences with a State missionary, nominated by the State Conference, subject to the approval of the American Unitarian Association and that when a State Conference could assume to pay one-half of the support of its missionary, the American Unitarian Association be invited to pay the other half.

The persistent interest in the stimulation of regional missionary effort by the system of State missionaries appears in the session of the National Conference of 1886 where it was advocated in the Report of Council presented by Rev. James De Normandie, in Rev. J. R. Effinger's Report of the Western Conference, and in a valuable report on State and Local Conferences by Rev. T. B. Forbush. A strong presentation of the system was

made by Rev. J. H. Crooker in the National Conference of 1889. In 1880 the Michigan State Conference had begun to raise an annual fund and placed in the field a State agent directed by the ministers of the prominent churches. In five years the conference had more than doubled its strength. On the other hand the Wisconsin Conference had dispensed with this State supervision in the same period and had shrunk to less than half its former size. Further, in the succeeding years Michigan gave up its State supervision and not only was no church added but the newer societies suffered a decline while Wisconsin undertaking supervision of local work—though unable to have a paid State missionary—had a remarkable growth in the number and activity of churches.

The effort to amalgamate the two national organizations having come to an end, and the Unitarian Association having become representative of the churches by its system of delegate members, the tendency was to give the missionary supervision to its agents. Beginning with 1885 the Association appointed missionary superintendents for five divisions: New England, Middle States, and Canada, Western States, Southern States, Pacific Coast. A centralizing of missionary responsibility and missionary plans in the administrative force of the Association in Boston has thus developed in the recent period. Now again the amalgamation of the Unitarian Association and the General Conference which was so generally favored in 1880 is under discussion. The proposal should involve a reconsideration of the advantages of the regional distribution of missionary responsibility and missionary supervision which was the ideal of those who created and developed the General Conference.

BY-LAWS OF THE ASSOCIATION. (1884)

ARTICLE I. — The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.

ART. II. — An annual subscription of one dollar shall constitute a person a member so long as such subscription be paid; and a subscription of thirty dollars shall constitute a person a member for life.

ART. III. — The officers shall be a President, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, and one or more Assistant Secretaries, a Treasurer, and eighteen other persons, who, with them, shall constitute a Board of Directors. These officers, fourteen of whom, at least, shall be laymen, shall be chosen by ballot at the Annual Meeting. The President, Vice-Presidents, Secretaries, and Treasurer shall be chosen annually, to serve for one year each, or until their successors are chosen. The other Directors shall be chosen for three years, or until their successors are chosen; and one third shall be chosen annually. But, at the Annual Meeting of 1877, the full number of eighteen shall be chosen, — six for one year, six for two years, and six for three years.

ART. IV. — This Board shall meet at least once in three months, eight constituting a quorum; and shall have charge of all the business and interests of the Association, the direction of its funds and operations; with power to fill any vacancies that may occur in their number between any two annual meetings, and to call special meetings of the Corporation whenever they shall deem it necessary or expedient.

They may choose from their own number an Executive Committee, which shall meet at the call of the Secretary or President, and shall have charge of such business as may be intrusted to it by the Board of Directors.

ART. V. — It shall be the duty of the Secretary to keep a full record of the meetings of the Corporation and of the Board of Directors; to conduct the correspondence of the Association, and keep an accurately arranged file of the same; and, in general, to perform such services, to suggest, devise, and execute, under the direction of the Board of Directors, such plans and measures, as shall, in their judgment, tend to promote the objects of the Association, increase its usefulness, and enlarge the sphere of its influence; and the Assistant Secretaries shall render such service as shall be specified by the Board of Directors. The salaries of the Secretaries shall be determined annually by the Board of Directors, the Secretaries not voting.

ART. VI. — The Annual Meeting of the Association shall be held on the Tuesday before the last Wednesday in May, at such time and place in the city of Boston as the Board of Directors may appoint; of which due notice shall be given, by advertisement in two or more newspapers published in Boston, at least ten days previous.

ART. VII. — Any amendment of these articles, proposed at one annual meeting, may be adopted at the next, if a majority of the members present vote in favor of it.

LIFE MEMBERS.

The by-laws of the Association provide that "a subscription of \$30 shall constitute a person a member for life," and, through such payment, the following named 1511 persons now occupy that position; of whom 78 (those whose names are in Italics) have been added during the year 1883.

It will be noticed that many of the settled clergymen of the denomination are not members. It is to be hoped that during the coming year, through the generosity of parishioners, the names of many such ministers will be added to the list; and also a much larger number of lay members than in any previous year.

Should any one find in the list the name of a person not living, a favor will be conferred by communicating the fact to the Secretary of the Association.

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BY-LAWS OF THE ASSOCIATION. (1885)

ARTICLE I. — The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.

ART. II. — A subscription of fifty dollars shall constitute a person a member of this Association for life.

ART. III. — The churches contributing to the funds of this Association shall be entitled to representation under the following conditions, namely: —

Any church or missionary association, of at least two years' standing, shall, upon sending a contribution for missionary uses to the Treasurer of the Association for two successive years, be entitled to representation at all business meetings of the Association, by the persons of its minister or president, and two additional lay delegates; provided that such contributions shall be placed in the hands of the officers of the Association on or before May 1, to entitle a church to be represented in the following annual meeting.

Delegate members shall have the right to vote at all meetings of the Association.

ART. IV. — The Board of Directors may by a unanimous vote at a regular meeting, two thirds of their number being present, elect Honorary Members of this Association, who shall have the same rights and privileges as other members. Such elections shall be by ballot, and nominations shall lie over at least one month.

ART. V. — The officers shall be a President, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, and one or more Assistant Secretaries, a Treasurer, and eighteen other persons, who, with them, shall constitute a Board of Directors. These officers, fourteen of whom, at least, shall be laymen, shall be chosen by ballot at the Annual Meeting. The President, Vice-Presidents, Secretaries, and Treasurer shall be chosen annually, to serve for one year each, or until their successors are chosen. The other Directors shall be chosen for three years, or until their successors are chosen; and one third shall be chosen annually.

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ART. IX. — Any amendment of these articles, proposed at one annual meeting, may be adopted at the next, if a majority of the members present vote in favor of it.

LIFE MEMBERS.

The by-laws of the Association provide that "a subscription of \$50 shall constitute a person a member for life," and the following named 1552 persons now occupy that position; of whom 83 (those whose names are in Italics) have been added during the year 1884.

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