

Congregational Polity, Spring 2008

This is a course in the history and development of Congregational Polity in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. How did Congregational Polity evolve and what were the differences in the Unitarian and Universalist approaches to governance? How have we handled issues of centralized authority and bureaucracy? We'll look at how religious communities make decisions, support their leaders and define ministry. With ministry we will ask about power, gender and ethics, the call, and the meaning and context for worship and rites of passage.

Syllabus

Mark W. Harris, adjunct professor

Course outline -

Requirements: reading assignments for each week, and a reflection paper on the topic for the week.

Final assignment: 10 page sermon or term paper on one of the weekly topics researched and reflected upon in greater depth, with an emphasis upon how this topic fits into our overall understanding of a UU "doctrine of the church."

Week 1 - - Forms of Church Government - European and Puritan background - Significance of Cambridge Platform

Reading: Act of Religious Tolerance - Diet of Torda
The Cambridge Platform
Henry Wilder Foote, The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform
Sidney Mead, The Nation with the Soul of a Church

Paper: What makes congregational polity different from other kinds of church government?

Week 2 - Covenant/ Mission

Reading: Chapter 1 -2 , "A Doctrine of the Church for Liberals" and "Walking Together" in Conrad Wright, Walking Together
Mission/Covenant, UUA publication, p.1-7

Paper: How do you understand the difference between covenant and mission?

Week 3 - - Unitarians and Church Governance

Reading: Channing, Remarks on Association
Hedge, The Broad Church
Bellows, The Suspense of Faith
Ed Atkinson, The Battle of Syracuse
Sidney Mead, An Address to Unitarians
Commission on Appraisal, Unitarians Face a New Age

Paper: What is the effect of religious individualism on how our churches are governed?

Week 4 - - Universalists and Church Governance

Reading: Robert Cummins, A United Church
Emerson Lalone, Shall We Have More Centralization?
Robert Cummins, Freedom is Still the Issue?
Richard Woodman, The Decline of Universalism

Paper: How did its lack of centralization affect Universalism in both positive and negative ways?

Week 5 - - Unitarian Universalist Association

Reading: Chapter 6, "UU Denominational Structure in Conrad Wright," Walking Together
Brief History of UU Governance in Final Report of the Commission on Governance
Faith and Practice in UU Churches by Joseph Barth
The Church and its Leadership, The Free Church in a Changing World

Paper: How do you identify Unitarian Universalism as a religious movement - denomination, church, sect, association - and why?

Week 6 - - Church Membership

Reading: Chapter 5, Autonomy and Fellowship, Conrad Wright, Walking Together,
UUA Commission on Appraisal, Belonging, p. 1-38, material on UUs and Class Issues

Paper: Write a newsletter column on why people should join the local UU congregation (what does it mean to join a UU church)
Could you also comment briefly on who is welcome in our congregations, and why?

Week 7 - - Sacraments - Baptism and Communion

Reading: Stephen Furrer, paper on baptism
Mark Harris, UUA pamphlet on "How We Welcome Our Children?"
Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Lord's Supper

Paper: What does the word Sacrament mean to you, and do we have any UU sacraments today or the equivalent?

Week 8 - - Ordination

Reading: Earl Holt, Ordination Sermon
Earl Holt, The Traditions and Meanings of Congregational Ordination in America

Paper: Who determines what makes a minister in our denomination - the call, the fellowshiping process, the ordaining power? Have the congregations lost their authority in recent years? What does it mean to be ordained, but not serving a congregation? Is there any reason to have tracking?? How does polity affect the notion of call? Are ministers employees or self-employed?

Week 9 - - Leadership – Who's in Charge?

Reading: Judith Walker-Riggs, Congregational Polity: Some History
Earl Holt, Does Congregational Polity Sanction Any Vice? Yes
Paul Beattie, Democracy, Covenant and Dissent in the UUA
Women and the UU Ministry: An Historical Overview by Cynthia Grant Tucker
John Bennett, Who's in Charge? UUA Pamphlet

Paper: What is the difference between influence and power in the ministry? Who really runs the church? Are there differences or issues with gender? What about multiple staff issues?

Week 10 - - Congregational Worship - Whose service is it?

Reading: Chapters 3 and 4, Worshipping Together and Another Look at Corporate Worship, in Conrad Wright, Walking Together
The Changing Face of Worship by Susan Manker-Seale

Paper: What is the role of the minister in worship, and how does she/he make it the people's work?

Week 11 - - Rites of Passage

Readings - from Edmund Searl, In Memoriam, p. 1-19
Jane Rzepka, ed. UUA Pamphlet, Death and Immortality
"Time to Commit" by William J. Doherty (UU World, January / February 2005)

Paper: What is your theology of death? - What are you trying to do in a memorial service? OR What is your theology of marriage?

Week 12 - - Sources of Authority - Where do we derive our authority as ministers, religious individuals, congregations? Is there a UU Canon?

Reading - Chapter 7, 9 and 11, Social Cohesion, The Mirror of History, Individualism in Historical Perspective in Conrad Wright, Walking Together
Philip Hewett, Why Unitarian?
David O. Rankin, From the Masthead to the Hatches

Paper: What do you call upon for sources of authority in your ministry?

Week 13 - - Practice and Ethics of Ministry

Reading - Chapter 10, The Role of the Clergy in the Shaping of Public Policy,
Conrad Wright, Walking Together
Peter Raible, The Meaning of Ministry Among Present Day Liberals
Partnership in Ministry by Marjorie Montgomery and Russell Benson
UUMA Guidelines

Paper: What do right relationships mean to you? (both between parishioners and between parishioners and clergy)

Week 14 - - Final Questions, Concerns, etc.

Reading - Commission on Appraisal, Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity, p. 1-60.

Sermon or paper due on: an aspect of Congregational Polity researched in greater depth with commentary on its relationship to a doctrine of the church for liberals?

Required Books to purchase: These first two are on the UUA's website and downloadable

The Commission on Appraisal, Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity. Boston: UUA, 1997.

The Commission on Appraisal, Belonging: The Meaning of Membership. Boston: UUA, 2001.

Conrad Wright, Walking Together. Boston, Skinner House Books

Other materials on website.

Additional Recommended Reading:

Conrad Wright, Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practices . Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997.

Limit on number of students is 15.

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