

**HANDBOOK FOR  
UNITARIAN  
CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCHES**

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Handbook for Unitarian Congregational Churches by Various

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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION  
1901

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## Foreword

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**I**N January, 1886, a committee of the American Unitarian Association, consisting of John F. Moors, Grindall Reynolds, and Francis B. Hornbrooke, prepared and printed a pamphlet on "The Organization of Parishes and Churches." In the Annual Report of the Association in May, 1900, it was pointed out that this pamphlet was both out of date and out of print, and that there was a rational demand for a carefully prepared manual for the facilitating of the organization of new churches on the principles of our order, and for the guidance of ministers and parish committees in the conduct of the administrative affairs of our existing churches. In accordance with this suggestion, the Directors of the American Unitarian Association, at a meeting held June 12, 1900,

*Voted,* That the recommendation of the Secretary for the appointment of a committee to prepare a manual on methods of church organization is hereby indorsed, and the President is requested to appoint such a committee.

The following persons were accordingly appointed as this Committee,— John P. Forbes, Roland W. Boyden, George H. Badger, Clara B. Beatley, Florence Everett, with the President of the Association as Chairman.

The handbook prepared by this Committee is issued to promote an intelligent appreciation of the principles and methods which have been found helpful in the experience of our religious fellowship,

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and in the hope that the suggestions offered may be helpful to those who are engaged in the work of organizing or administering our free churches. While the recommendations set forth in this handbook are primarily directed to the needs of new churches, it is hoped that the older churches will also find useful suggestions for the conduct of their work, and that by the more general adoption of the principles here set forth our methods of administration and our ways of ordering the worship of our churches may be harmonized and unified, and our churches brought into closer and more sympathetic fellowship.

The Committee does not assume that the adoption of its recommendations will create opportunities or powers. The endeavors of a working church are not mechanical, but inspirational. The Committee seeks simply to help churches to utilize the forces that are assumed to already exist in the purposes and hopes of ministers and people, to show our fellow-believers who long to advance the kingdom of God what they can do and how they can do it,—in a word, to point out some ways in which the latent power in the Unitarian movement can be organized and expressed. No mere machine methods are here proposed. The ways of working in our free churches must obviously be flexible, and must vary according to local needs and conditions; but the ways of working should never be loose and haphazard.

With one exception the methods of co-operative



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life and service recommended by the Committee have been abundantly tested in the experience of our fellowship. They are in complete operation in a few existing churches and partially adopted by nearly all. They are in no sense experimental. Experience has proved that, other things being equal, the churches are strong and fruitful in proportion to the measure of their use of the channels of organized life which are described, not originated, in this handbook.

The one recommendation which has not yet been sufficiently tested by experience relates to the organization of the church. From the Congregational inheritance of our churches we have derived a complicated and ineffective plan of organization for our societies. The people of our older churches are gathered into several distinct bodies, each body making its own rules, choosing its own officers, managing its own operations, without adequate sense of common work and purpose, without unity of plan, and sometimes even without harmony. The parish is usually a purely business body, owning the real estate and managing the money matters. The church is usually a small and inactive body, and in many cases is practically extinct. The Committee believes that this traditional system, if it can be called a system, is discredited: it should never be reproduced in new churches, and, where it exists in old churches, it should be gradually modified until a simpler and more efficient form of organization can be substituted. A single inclusive organization of

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all who are interested in the objects of the church, and who wish to co-operate with others to promote these objects, will truly express our free Congregational ideals, quicken the sense of unity, provide against friction and for adequate oversight of all departments of the church work, and give each member an equal privilege and duty in the church life. While, then, in most of the recommendations offered by the Committee, alternative methods or plans are suggested, in this primary matter, there is, in the judgment of the Committee, but one course of action which is just, wise, inclusive, and efficient.

The work of the Committee has been submitted to careful and repeated revision. A number of wise and experienced fellow-workers have offered their criticisms and suggestions, and now permit the handbook to be published with their general approval and recommendation to the churches for practical use. Among the friends who have thus aided the committee are Rev. Francis G. Peabody, D.D., of Harvard University; Rev. Edward A. Horton, President of the Unitarian Sunday-School Society; Rev. Daniel W. Morehouse, Secretary of the National Conference; Rev. Howard N. Brown, Chairman of the Council of the National Conference; Rev. F. C. Southworth, Secretary of the Western Conference; Rev. George Batchelor, editor of the *Christian Register*; Mrs. B. Ward Dix, President of the National Alliance; and Miss R. D. Homer, Secretary of the Young People's Religious Union.

S. A. E.

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## The Congregational Inheritance of Unitarian Churches

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A Congregational church is a church governed by its own congregation. In the administration of its affairs, both ecclesiastical and secular, it is independent of diocese, synod, or presbytery, and also of all other congregations. Whenever a number of people meet together without external dictation, and express a common religious purpose, adopt articles of fellowship and a statement of faith, that group constitutes of itself a Congregational church. It chooses its own officers, determines its own order of worship, and selects its own minister.

For the sake of a wider fellowship and a greater usefulness a number of Congregational churches may unite in Associations or Conferences. In this way the interests of a common cause are furthered through wise and effective co-operation. But such organizations have no power to control the action of any church in the administration of its own affairs.

The word "Congregational" stands, then, not for a statement of theological belief, but for a form of church government. There are Trinitarian and Unitarian Congregational churches, there are Baptist and Universalist Congregational churches. By a rule of custom, Trinitarian churches that have adopted both the Congregational form of government and the fundamental doctrines of Evangelical faith, are spoken of, in distinction from other relig-