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ARTICLE IV.

PROPOSED UNION OF THE CONGREGATIONAL,
UNITED BRETHREN, AND METHODIST
PROTESTANT CHURCHES.

BY LUCIEN C. WARNER, M.D.

LAST February there met at Dayton, Ohio, a general council composed of over two hundred delegates officially appointed by the Congregational, United Brethren, and Methodist Protestant churches for the purpose of effecting an organic union of these bodies. This meeting is of especial interest to the members of the three bodies represented, but it is also of interest to others, as illustrating the tendency towards closer coöperation and union which exists among all Christian bodies.

The Dayton meeting was the result of negotiations which have been in progress for several years. Committees on union appointed by the national organizations of each of these denominations met in Pittsburgh in April, and again in July, 1903. After full conference and discussion, the outline of a plan of union was drawn up and submitted to the three national bodies. This plan was adopted by each body, and in accordance with its recommendations the recent Dayton General Council was held. The purpose of the Council as outlined in the report of the Joint Committee was as follows:—

“1. To present, so far as we possibly can, a realization of that unity which seems so greatly desired by Christian churches.

“2. To promote a better knowledge and a closer fellowship among the Christian bodies thus uniting.

“3. To secure the coördination and unification of the three bodies in evangelistic, educational, and missionary work.

"4. To adopt a plan by which the three bodies may be brought into coördinate activity and organic unity, a unity representing some form of connectionalism.

"5. To prevent the unnecessary multiplication of churches; to unite weak churches of the same neighborhood wherever it is practicable, and to invite and encourage the affiliation with this council of other Christian bodies cherishing a kindred faith and purpose."

The meeting at Dayton was remarkable in its directness of purpose, and harmony of action. Each delegate seemed to come to the Council with a personal desire for union, but with a fear that others might not share his feelings. With such a body definite action could not long be delayed. At the first session of the Council, a committee of sixty-three was appointed to work out the details of such a union. This committee divided itself into three subcommittees of twenty-one each,—one on Creedal Statement, one on Polity, and one on Vested Interests. The second day the Committee agreed upon its report with practical unanimity, and its action was reported to the General Council. After some discussion of details, the Council separated into subdivisions, each denomination discussing and voting on the report separately. It was adopted by each body with substantial unanimity. Some slight amendments were suggested, but only on minor details. The Council then adopted the report as a whole, and the committees were continued to work out in more detail the full plans of a union. The Council then adjourned to meet again next year, when it hopes to complete its work.

The difficulties to be overcome in effecting such a union are neither slight nor unimportant, and nothing will be gained by ignoring them. Let us review in broad outline the distinctive features of each denomination, and consider the means by

which it is hoped they may be brought into one united church, to the advantage of each.

The Congregational Church is the oldest and largest of the three bodies. Its history in this country dates from the settlement of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth. The leading feature of its polity has been the entire independence of each individual church. It has no official creed, and scarcely anything that can be called an official polity. Certain practices have grown up to which long experience gives the sanction of law. The churches in the same vicinity are gathered together in local associations or conferences. Local councils are also called to advise with churches and pastors, which councils may or may not coincide with the local associations. State associations have also been organized, and a national council is held every three years. But none of these bodies possess any real authority, and a church can still exist and be regarded as Congregational and take very little part in any of these organizations.

The United Brethren in Christ was organized in Maryland in the year 1800. It was made up chiefly from the German Reformed Church, together with a few scattered bodies of Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Mennonites. They were the evangelistic party of the Reformed Church, and they came together for greater evangelistic and aggressive work, rather than from any difference of doctrine. Their polity, however, differs in many important respects from that of the Congregationalists. They have local, state, and national conferences, not unlike the corresponding bodies of the Congregationalists, except that these bodies have direct legislative power. They have bishops and presiding elders. The bishops are elected for four years from those who have served six years as presiding elders, and are eligible for reelection. They preside

at the national and annual conferences, and devote their time to the general interests of the church. The annual conferences in many cases correspond to the state associations of the Congregationalists, but some large States are divided into two or more annual conferences. The bishops and presiding elders act as a stationing committee to assign ministers to their respective charges. Nominally the ministers are appointed every year, but it is the distinctly avowed policy not to change a minister so long as the minister and people desire his reappointment. The title to all church property, publishing-houses, schools, and colleges is held by the national or annual conferences, instead of being held by boards of trustees, as is usual with the Congregationalists.

The Methodist Protestant Church was organized in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1828. It was a split from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the cause of its separation was the demand for lay representation in the councils of the church. A generation later the Methodist body adopted lay representation. But at that time the ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church administered all the affairs of the church, and, rather than endure the persistent demands of a certain class for lay representation, they expelled from the church a large number of ministers and laymen located in Maryland, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Ohio. These met together and organized the Methodist Protestant Church, in which laymen had equal representation with ministers. The polity of the Methodist Protestant Church is very similar to that of the United Brethren, except that they have no bishops. They have local and annual conferences and a national or general conference. They have superintendents of annual conference performing much the same duties as the bishops of the United Brethren. The conferences also hold

the title to the church and school property, and have some legislative power by which they direct the activities of the church.

How are these three denominations so diverse in their polity to be united without doing violence to traditions and usages made sacred by long association? The task at first seemed impossible, but a way has been found through the local and state organizations, which are common to all. In the natural development of these three bodies, they have largely occupied different sections in the United States. The Congregationalists, originating in New England, have their chief strength in the northern tier of States corresponding in latitude with the locality from which they came. The other bodies, having their origin in Maryland, have naturally extended westerly along the southern and border States. The chief strength of these denominations will be found in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Southern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. It thus happens that the main strength of the different denominations is in separate fields. By allowing large liberty to the local and annual conferences, it is possible to permit each body of churches to conduct its local affairs very much as at present, and yet all be united in a general national organization. If this fact is borne in mind, it will be seen that the adoption of the new polity will not necessarily mean any marked change in the individual church.

The first duty of the Council was to agree upon a creedal statement. This is a rock upon which many churches have foundered, but fortunately the Council was led with substantial unanimity into adopting a confession expressive of the belief of the churches as there represented. The statements are general rather than specific. The doctrines of the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, sin, atonement, repentance, and salvation are recognized and accepted, but no attempt is made at elab-

orate definitions. The general form and tone of the declaration is devotional and spiritual rather than dogmatic. The entire document is as follows:—

“ THE DECLARATION OF FAITH.

“ We, the representatives of the Congregational churches, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Methodist Protestant Church rejoice at this time to enter into union with one another, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the love of God and for fellowship in the Holy Spirit. In this solemn act of faith and obedience toward the great Head of the Church, we do most humbly and confidently make confession of our faith and heartily renew the consecration of our lives to him and to the service of mankind.

“ 1. Our bond of union consists in that inward and personal faith in Jesus Christ as our divine Saviour and Lord on which all our churches are founded; also in our acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the inspired source of our faith and the supreme standard of Christian truth; and further, in our consent to the teaching of the ancient symbols of the undivided Church, and to that substance of Christian doctrine which is common to the creeds and confessions which we have inherited from the past. But we humbly depend, as did our fathers, on the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth.

“ 2. We believe that God, the Father and Lord of all, did send his son Jesus Christ to redeem us from sin and death by the perfect obedience of his holy will in life, by the sacrifice of himself on the cross and by his glorious resurrection from the dead.

“ 3. We believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God and of Christ, moves in the hearts of men, calling them through the gospel to repentance and faith, awakening in them spiritual sorrow for past sin and confidence in the mercy of God, together with new desires and a new power to obey his will.

“ 4. We believe that those of the sons of men, who, hearing God's call of divine love, do heartily put their trust in the Saviour whom his love provided, are assured by his word of his most fatherly forgiveness, of his free and perfect favor, of the presence of his spirit in their hearts and of a blessed immortality.

“ 5. We believe that all who are through faith the children of God constitute the Church of Christ, the spiritual body of which he is the head; that he has appointed them to proclaim his gospel to all mankind, to manifest in their character and conduct the fruit of his spirit, that he has granted them freedom to create

such offices and institutions as may in each generation serve unto those ends, and that for the comfort of our faith he has given to his Church the sacred ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

"6. We believe that according to Christ's law men of the Christian faith exist for the service of man, not only in holding forth the word of life, but in the support of works and institutions of pity and charity, in the maintenance of human freedom, in the deliverance of all those that are oppressed, in the enforcement of civic justice, and in the rebuke of all unrighteousness.

"Possessed of these convictions, both as truths which we do most firmly hold, and acts of faith which spring from our hearts, we do, therefore, in the happy consummation of this union and in the name of all the churches which we represent, commit ourselves, body, soul and spirit to the faith, love and service of him who made us and saved us, the everlasting God, our Father, Redeemer and Lord. To him be ascribed all praise and dominion and glory, world without end. Amen."

The polity proposed for the united church is based upon the following fundamental principles:—

"(a) The unit of our fellowship is the local church, and the character of our fellowship is that of a representative democracy.

"(b) Our coördinate principles are freedom and fellowship, a freedom which leaves each local church free in its separate affairs, a fellowship which unites all the churches for mutual care and coöperant action."

In accordance with these principles, the following plan of organization was recommended:—

"(a) The local churches shall be left free to conduct their worship and business as their present customs provide.

"(b) It is suggested that so far as may be the churches in separate districts be united in district conferences, which shall provide for fellowship and care of the churches connected with them.

"(c) There shall be constituted annual conferences of the ministers and representatives elected from the churches and pastoral charges; and their territory limits shall be fixed by a commission of the representatives of the three bodies in the state.

"(d) It is recommended that the national conference shall be constituted after the following manner:—

"Each district conference shall present to the annual conference the names of two persons, one lay and one clerical, from which as a whole the annual conference shall elect delegates to the national conference on the basis of one to every ten thousand and one to

every major fraction thereof. In case an annual conference is not fully organized into district conferences, the annual conference shall elect such delegates according to its own methods.

"The annual conference shall also be empowered to elect, on the same basis of representation, delegates to the national conference; provided, however, that each annual conference shall have at least one delegate.

"We further recommend that the appointments be distributed as equally as possible between the clerical and lay delegates.

"It shall be in the power of the national conference to change the ratio of representation according as necessity may require."

It will thus be seen that each district conference is left free to manage its affairs in its own way. This means that in strong Congregational conferences very little change will be made from the existing practices, while in conferences made up chiefly of the United Brethren or Methodist Protestant churches they will doubtless keep up very largely their present method of assigning ministers to the separate charges.

The polity further provides for a national conference to meet every three or four years, with delegates made up of both ministers and laymen very much as representatives are now selected to the present National Congregational Council. The chief provision of the plan which is new to Congregational churches is found in the articles on "Officers and their Duties":—

"(a) In the national conference there shall be elected a president who shall preside over this body and hold office until the next national meeting; he also shall give his whole time to the work of the united churches, and annually, in connection with one representative from each department of church work, he shall hold meetings to plan for the work of the church.

"(b) In each annual conference there shall be elected a committee to aid in keeping the churches supplied with pastors; and each annual conference shall determine for itself the mode of supplying the churches with pastors.

"(c) In each annual conference there shall be elected one or more superintendents who shall preside at the sessions of the annual conferences and over the meetings of the committee of ministerial supply, and shall give their whole time to the general work

of the church within the bounds of their respective annual conferences; provided, however, that the conference may associate a chairman with the superintendent in directing the work of the conference sessions."

This provides specifically for a president of the national conference who shall give his time to the promotion of the interests of the united church. It also provides that the annual conference, corresponding approximately with the state association of the Congregationalists, shall have a superintendent who shall give his time to the general work of the church within the bounds of the annual conference. The need of such superintendent has already been felt so strongly by the Congregational body that the State of Michigan has for some time had a man serving in this capacity, and other States have considered the matter very seriously. Many of the duties of such a superintendent have heretofore been performed by the state superintendents of the Home Missionary Society in their respective States. The responsibility of the home missionary superintendent is nominally limited to those churches which receive aid from the Home Missionary fund, but as a matter of practice they often render assistance to other churches. It is, however, but a makeshift arrangement, and many weak and struggling churches are left to suffer and die which might be made prosperous by a little timely counsel and aid. There can be no question but that the Congregational denomination has suffered great loss in the past from lack of a more effective organization.

There has also been no regular provision for keeping Congregational churches supplied with pastors, and it has been their reproach as a denomination that they have had a large number of ministers without parishes, and of parishes without ministers. The Superintendent and Committee of Ministerial

Supply which the new polity provides for will have no direct authority in placing ministers, but this is not needed for efficiency. Churches will welcome the aid of such a committee, and if its advice is wise, they will cheerfully accept it; if it is unwise, they ought not to be obliged to accept it. There is a radical difference between supervision which is advisory and supervision which is authoritative. All the advantages and benefits of supervision can be obtained under the former plan, and most of the dangers and abuses can be avoided. If the Congregational churches had adopted a plan of advisory supervision one hundred years ago by which weak churches could have been aided, pastors without churches, and churches without pastors, could have been brought together, and more effective means provided for the extension of the church into growing parts of the continent, the denomination at this time should number 2,000,000 instead of 660,000.

The articles on "Ministerial Standing" are as follows, and need no comment:—

"(a) All ministers in good standing in any of the denominations represented in this union shall be ministers of this new body. All licentiates shall retain their standing for the period of their licensure.

"All ministers under suspension shall look for relief from their disabilities to the body that imposed the restrictions. This shall hold until new rules are formulated for licensure, ordination and ministerial standing.

"(b) Ministerial standing shall be in the district conferences or in the annual conferences as may be determined by each annual conference."

The following supplemental paper from the United Brethren delegates was presented:—

"It is understood that the provisions here included do not set aside the principles of the so-called itinerant plan where now in operation. Furthermore, it is fully understood that the best plans and efforts shall be adopted to secure to rural and scattered con-

gregations everywhere the most effective ministerial service and to promote wide and genuine evangelization in every accessible field. As one provision to facilitate the accomplishment of these ends the churches shall adopt as far as possible, and as deemed wise, a common church year."

Some of the most perplexing problems are those pertaining to the vested interests of the societies. As we have before stated, the United Brethren and Methodist Protestant as denominations own all the church buildings, publishing-houses, and denominational colleges. Their benevolent societies are also wholly owned and controlled by the church organizations. How is this policy to be united with the Congregational body, where each church owns its own building, each college is in the hands of a local board of trustees, and even the missionary societies are not directly responsible to the church? These difficulties are more apparent than real. The ownership of churches or colleges is not an asset that is of any real value to an individual or corporation.

The church is held and maintained for the purposes of public worship, and not for the private gain of the corporate body which holds the title. The same is true of colleges, of publishing-houses, and of vested interests connected with benevolent societies. It will be possible to incorporate wherever desirable the district or annual conferences and to transfer to them the title to the church property or to the colleges within their district, and in this way the present custom of the United Brethren and Methodist Protestants can be continued with very slight changes. The benevolent societies of the Congregational denomination, although not held by the body in its corporate capacity, are under the control of representatives elected by the contributing churches, and so are as responsive to the wishes of the churches as though directly under their control. It will require much thought and care to work out

with equity all of the problems connected with these vested interests, but none of them are insuperable, and we have no doubt that they will all be brought into harmony and union.

As shown by the latest statistics, collected by Dr. H. K. Carroll, the Congregational body consists of 667,951 members, 6,127 ministers, and 5,979 churches. The United Brethren consists of 259,272 members, 1,960 ministers, and 3,927 churches; the Methodist Protestants of 183,894 members, 1,551 ministers, 2,242 churches. It will thus be seen that the combined church will consist of 1,111,117 members, 9,638 ministers, and 12,148 churches.

Among the advantages of such a union may be mentioned the more national character of the united church. A church to be thoroughly efficient should extend over the whole country and be equally strong in city and country. The cities are constantly fed from the country, so that the city church needs the country constituency for building up its membership, and the country church needs the strong city church to receive and care for the large number of its members which yearly find a home in the city.

The united church ought to gain by having a better organization than either of the separate bodies. The changes proposed are those which the experience of each of the bodies has proved to be wise and to give promise of greater efficiency. The Congregationalists will certainly gain by more thorough organization without in any way losing the independence and liberty which have been their proud heritage. The United Brethren and Methodist Protestants will also gain by the larger opportunities which will come to them from the wider and more numerous connection.

The Christian love and fellowship which brings these three bodies together ought to greatly strengthen the spiritual life

of the united church. Protestant bodies claim that they are united on all essential matters, and are only separated by non-essentials. If this is so, why not waive the non-essentials, and unite on the basis of the essentials? The burden of Christ's prayer was that his followers might be one, "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me."

Among the most alarming developments of the present time is the widespread unbelief of the working-classes. Indeed, how to overcome this unbelief is the most serious problem confronting the Christian church. In the presence of this problem, it is incumbent upon her to lay aside every weight, and the sins which most easily beset her. One of the most conspicuous of these is her tendency to magnify unessentials and set them in the place of essentials. It is this which has produced her present divided and dissentient condition, which forms one of the chief stumbling-blocks to those who are outside her pale. Indeed, the dissensions among believers absorb such an undue amount of the strength of the church, and so obscure her real testimony, that she largely fails in the entire purpose of her existence. Not until the faith and life of the church are lifted above the haze of party controversy can she serve her true purpose as a beacon-light to a benighted world; only so can she become a living epistle known and read of all men. If we, as Christians, expect our Lord's prayer to be fulfilled in the gathering of all nations under his banner, must we not ourselves respond to his prayer and become really one in him?