

Closing out 2017



JEFF GILL · THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2017

This is, God willing, my last post on the regional church in 2017; there will be more to wrestle with and plan and hope for in 2018!

From Oct. 28 to Nov. 30, I wrote a series of eight posts/Notes to put up on Facebook about the [Christian Church in Ohio](#); how we got here, and to a limited degree, what we might do to move forward.

The pieces put together in a document constituted an extended essay of over 100 page, with about a third of the content made up of excerpts from historical documents of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), plus some pictures of the last century-plus leadership. Call it 30,000 words in 12 point type, single-spaced. I've shared the Word document with anyone who's asked for copy.

What I've gotten a number of requests for, in the wake of my "So, what happened?" project, is something like this: "Gill, give me a break. I'm a minister, it's Advent, things are crazy, and I don't have time to read 100 pages of review and analysis . Boil it down to a page, okay?"

Which I've resisted, in no small part because I worry that one of the problems we've indulged in as the Ohio Region is the oversimplification of complicated situations that need prayer, reflection, and due deliberation, not a quick fix. And I've wanted to give folks a few weeks to try chewing on the whole thing.

Having said that, here's my attempt to put it all in as short a form as possible (it will be four pages in full if you print it out, you've been warned).

Our movement, starting with Barton Stone and Thomas & Alexander Campbell each just over the Ohio River from what is now the Christian Church in Ohio, is rooted in a reaction against the imposition of authority structures and the raising of unwarranted barriers between individual seekers and a loving God. They saw, on the early American frontier, the restrictive "franchise" of baptism and communion held closely by Protestant Christian bodies like the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, as the source of so much alienation and fear and despair, with people not able to access the means of grace because of how clergy used creeds and catechisms and membership rules to control who got in, and who was kept out.

So they began, after some fits and starts, a movement that broke down most of these barriers, and tried to prevent their reassembly through speaking negatively against any form of

religious authority that tried to put itself “above” the local church. Congregations were the church of Christ both writ small, and in themselves they were an expression of the Church Universal, tied together through a shared faith in Jesus Christ as a saving presence to the believer, and through the Bible as the only necessary document.

I put so much of that material in the first parts of the “So, what happened?” essay because it seems to me that many in our regional and general leadership still don’t understand that congregational autonomy is not a bug, it’s a feature. Like automatic updates, it may not be a program feature you always like, but it’s not a pathology per se, it is at the heart of our history and woven, unspoken and usually unwritten, into all that we have been and much that we’re still doing.

(See, I’m already over a page, but hold on, the rest is simpler and shorter.)

Local congregations of the Christian Church in Ohio have always been skeptical of the claims of any central authority – because that’s how we came to be, and that’s how we’ve always resolved that central question of how faith can avoid tyranny and oppression. Much of our seminary-trained and judicatory-oriented leadership catch the faint echo of the latter, and try to wish away the former. Yes, Disciples of Christ honor individual autonomy and personal choice, and resist imposed power structures, but we tend to do so in no small part by pointing to congregational authority, not wider church authorities.

In our history, leaders who have helped the cooperative work of our branch of the Restoration Movement thrive and grow have worked through that congregational centrality – Herald Monroe’s great gift to us that’s still at the heart of what works about our decentralized polity is “the region has just as much power as the congregations choose to give us.” So, starting with Alexander Campbell, there’s a vital sense that if local churches choose to work cooperatively to accomplish certain goals of spreading the Gospel, of sharing Christian faith, there are limits to how much authority can be rightly devolved to the cooperative association (such as on the Island of Guernsey, in Campbell’s original formulation, or through a state missionary society, or to a “region” as we have them today). Certain responsibilities are congregational and will remain such no matter what the wider church claims, and other state society or regional tasks are more sharable than others. Campbell called these “public duties” and today we talk about “living in covenant” but the continuity is that there are certain natural limits to what a region can do or be, beyond which they might find themselves cut off from the congregations who will continue to hold the duties and responsibilities that are theirs, no matter what others might say.

A much blunter way of putting it is that the wider church has no more claim on the monies contributed within congregations than they can make credible case for. A region may say what it likes about what congregations should give them, but in fact the giving of a congregation to the wider work of the church simply “is.” Congregations can stop or limit

their giving to a region, and that does not eliminate the reality of or even the theological rightness of having a region, but it does quite definitely limit the activity of the region. A region “is,” but its existence does not then require a certain level of participation from the congregations from which it is constituted.

From the theoretical and theological to the historical: from 1940 to 1980, congregations in Ohio were healthy, growing, and multiplying, with a steadily increasing amount of resources – time, money, seminarians, bequests – being passed along from the local churches to the regional work. Camp Christian in 1949, Ohio World Budget from 1950, and on through the new church establishment program of the 50’s and 60’s, all represented a constant flow of affirmation in terms of support from congregations to the “wider work.”

Reading in the minutes and reports of those decades, what I think becomes clear in retrospect is that the region and its growth simply was self-validating. Herald Monroe, even from a position of relative security, entered into the lives of congregations inviting them to grant him (or his staff) authority, and using it effectively to maintain congregations and clergy positions. But the pre-eminence of regional life in a variety of areas of church life, such as missions, became assumed, and unquestioned. Congregations were encouraged, I would argue, to focus on themselves, and the region would take care of itself. While the economy and demographics of the state were solid, that worked. The region did take care of itself, saw itself, at least here in Ohio, as a law unto itself, and the congregations sent both money and representatives, but as congregations, there was little direct engagement with missions at home or overseas, or even with ministry (beyond celebrating their count of “Timothys” who usually began their call at Camp Christian and CYF Conference). As instructed, congregations focused on themselves and their immediate ministries to members and somewhat to their communities.

When the economy starts to tank, beginning in the northwest corner of the state in 1977 and rippling quickly southwest through the 80s, this pattern becomes pathological. Congregations focus on themselves and their members, and the region – well, the region started getting less and less each year. Year-to-year dollars started to flatten, fall behind inflation, and then in actual dollars began a steady decline, at least since 2000. To be fair, the regional leadership and structures had no precedent in living memory to work with – forty years of feast and plenty had given us a much reinforced model for how to manage growth, and the institutional memory for how to respond to major social and economic changes was largely gone.

So we “managed by cuts.” As any first year MBA student can tell you, an organization can’t cut its way to growth. And as is true in any income-dependent operation, we quickly got to where we couldn’t cut fast enough. In a nutshell, that’s how we got from \$2 million plus in the bank in 2000 to broke today. We’re down to 100-some congregations, a mortgaged camp property that needs some maintenance, a camp & conference program that’s doing better

than most across the United States, and a bare-bones staff both at the camp and in the regional office (on rental contract through next October). Moving forward, we can't cut so much as we must rethink, review, revisit, and renew.

That's it. Three pages, not one, but it's better than 102 pages if you must have the condensed version. It skips the racism that has complicated our common life, the arrogance of self-understanding which has some roots in that sense of supremacy, and an economic illiteracy that I fear is all too common among clergy in general, and it has been clergy we've expected to manage some very tricky financial shoals these last couple decades, to our sorrow.

As to what we should do as the Christian Church in Ohio: I have some ideas. I've shared those with our key leaders. Much of what I've suggested looks quite harsh on the face of it, and I don't blame anyone for not wanting to implement the steps I have in mind for 2018. Plus, we have to see how the Christmas Offering and then how the first two months of the new year go, to measure if our basic structure itself can sustain. We shall see.

I'm going to keep pitching new and revised ideas for reformulation and renewal because, as my perhaps-lengthy historical materials in the longer document should show, if we closed down the Christian Church in Ohio on Dec. 31, on Jan. 1 we'd have to start it again. Alexander Campbell made a strong case for some form of cooperative "church" made up of local churches. He had strong opinions about the limits of what that larger, wider church was or should do – or should not do – but the fact that Christ's work through the company of the faithful required a state or district or regional church body was to him self-evident. Self-evident, but not to be taken for granted, and not to be given a supposed self-evident right to overreach beyond what congregations can and should do themselves.

Congregations cannot be encouraged to leave the work of Christian missions to others, regional or otherwise. And an effective state or regional church body will resource and encourage and connect congregations in their own missions, because that's how you get the local church to cooperate in the best and most sustainable ways on those wider fronts. Regions and regional staff will say (oh, I've heard it, indeed) that this is exactly what they are doing – but congregations feel that all they hear is the call for contributions and participation from them in regional programs. It may just be the case that both are correct, and both are wrong, at the same time. Perception is often the only reality we know, and reinforced perceptions from our years of plenty in Ohio have warped our understanding of each other, congregations and regional leaders alike.

How to be a region in the coming years is going to require our best prayer, our deepest reflections in community, a great deal of listening, and some very hard work (plus some intelligent fundraising). I believe it's all worth doing, or I wouldn't have written these few pages, let alone the longer essay. I am looking forward to 2018 for the Christian Church in Ohio, and I hope you are, too.

