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The Congregational Churches of Litchfield County, Conn.

*A paper read at Litchfield, Connecticut,
September 29, 1902 at the 150th Anniversary
of the Litchfield County Consociation
and Associations*

BY

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*"Remember the days of old, consider the
years of many generations; ask thy father,
and he will show thee; thine elders and
they will tell thee."—Deuteronomy 32: 7*



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I WISH to-day to say a few of the many things that might well be said of the Congregational churches in Litchfield County. These churches have given to the world many noble men and women, well worthy of mention, and have been served by many ministers whose names are written large on the pages of history, but of these I leave others to speak. Ministers come and usually go, the churches stay. Ministers give advice or instruction to the churches, the churches take what they please of either. The churches choose their ministers, and have much to do with making or unmaking them. No minister has a large influence for good in any com-

munity without the faithful support of a working church.

The Saybrook platform of 1708 organized the churches in the various counties of Connecticut into Consociations, which met regularly to consider the interests of their constituent churches, had charge of the installation and dismissal of pastors, and were standing courts with jurisdiction in all church trials. These Consociations were peculiar to Congregationalism in Connecticut and were prevalent for about 160 years. They are sometimes spoken of in these later days with disparagement as representing a kind of semi-Presbyterianism contrary to the principle of our order. Their actual working was productive of much good to the churches and their Consociations were much loved by many good and wise men. While many of the original Massachusetts churches went over to Unitarianism, there was not a single instance of this kind in Connecticut, and the different result was probably due to the Consociations. The Consociation of Litchfield County and the Association of

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Ministers which occupied the same territory, were organized in 1752. In September, 1791, they divided into the South and North Consociations and Associations. The fact that the original history of our churches goes back only 150 years tells us that Litchfield County is only a youthful fraction of the State. Our history is an outgrowth and development from the older history of other Connecticut churches, though we claim a character and influence that are distinctively our own. The earlier settlements were mainly in the southern towns of our county. There farming land was more fertile, and until this last fifty years they had a larger population and more wealth. They were theologically and ecclesiastically more conservative in their beginning because of their earlier settlement, and also because their inhabitants came more largely from New Haven Colony, which was the most rigid in its ideals and methods of all the Puritan colonies. It had insisted that only church members could become voters, and that there should

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be a most thorough examination as a prerequisite to church membership. The fear of the effect which the Connecticut laws would have in relaxing the government of their churches and causing their deterioration was one of the objections which New Haven Colony had to being merged in Connecticut.

The churches in Litchfield North Consociation being settled later and from Hartford and Windsor were freer and more varied in their ideals and methods. The purpose of the Consociation had been to maintain orthodoxy and uniformity. Our fathers from the beginning believed in brotherhood, fellowship and freedom of conscience, but they first of all were anxious for truth and safety. In their ideal of brotherhood they aimed at complete agreement in belief and practice. They were greatly disturbed by Christians who differed from them in opinion, or who advocated changes in rules by which the churches had been safely governed. If they were mistaken in some of their aims it was not be-

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cause it is blameworthy to be cautious, but because they did not sufficiently trust the God who was guiding *them* to guide also those who should come after them. If we are sincere and single-hearted in our desire to do the right we find we can trust our Heavenly Father to make the path of duty plain before *our* feet, but we are all very liable to think that others will need to be kept in the right way by very rigid rules, and that guide-boards must be set up at every step for their benefit. We should strive for a faith sufficiently Calvinistic to believe that God's hand is guiding his people safely even through their own foolish mistakes and failures, and that He may be trusted to guide those who come after us as well as he has guided our fathers and is guiding us.

One hundred and fifty years ago the influence of Whitefield and the Great Awakening was moving strongly on the churches and Separate Congregational Churches were being formed. In 1752 a Separate Church was organized in Canaan, which had a mem-

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bership of about 100, and in 1762 moved as a whole to Stillwater, N. Y. The church in Salisbury at its first organization refused to accept the Saybrook platform, and when Mr. Lee was installed as its first pastor members of Consociation who took part in the service were censured for their action. Mr. Robbins, the first pastor in Norfolk, was a liberal by inheritance. His father, the Branford pastor, was cut off from fellowship by his Consociation for disregarding parish boundaries and preaching to a Baptist congregation. The Norfolk pastor was influential in organizing the neighboring churches, and their creeds bear witness to a wise restraint which commends itself to our time.

Mr. Roberts, of Torrington, and Father Mills, of Torrington, were men of practical character, not much hampered by theological or ecclesiastical trammels.

These men were illustrations and also in part causes of a liberalizing tendency in the Litchfield North Consociation which was by no means so prevalent in Litchfield South.

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A dependence on mines and manufactures in the northern towns also promoted the development of even the religious character of the people along business lines. The great men, and especially the great theologians of the eighteenth century, belonged to the southern part of the county. A hundred years ago the town of Litchfield, as a great educational centre, had taken on a cosmopolitan character, and in the first half of the nineteenth century gave us Horace Bushnell and the Beechers. The leaders in missionary work, both home and foreign, belonged mainly to the North Consociation. Such names as Mills, Baldwin, Sturtevant, Finney, Gaylord, Cowles, etc., show the part these northern churches had in the aggressive religious work of the missionary age. The change from consociations to conferences, which belongs to the history of the last fifty years, illustrates the greater conservatism of Litchfield South.

This change had a two-fold origin. It sprang from the desire for a state organization in which the churches could be repre-

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sented and coöperate in the common work, and from the "Home Evangelisation movement"—both were the natural outgrowth of modern conditions. There had been in former times suggestions of a State Consociation, but it had not commended itself as desirable. In earlier times the State legislature sufficiently represented the churches and had sufficient control of them to satisfy the layman's point of view. The liberal element which objected to the judicial authority of the consociations did not want that authority strengthened by their federation in a central body. The ministers were satisfied with the General Association, and it gave advice to the Church with a large degree of authority. The rise of the modern beneficent and missionary societies made it desirable that our churches should organize more closely for consultation and control of those large enterprises which were appealing to us for aid. The desire for Home Evangelization, for making the churches more effective in their own parish fields, became quite general in Connecticut from

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1857 onward, and worked toward the same end. In the earlier times the churches were responsible each for its own town or parish. They were supported by town taxes, and attendance on public worship was compulsory. The coming in of other denominations and of the Separate Congregational churches gradually destroyed the efficiency of that system, and in 1818 the system itself was given up by the state. The consequence was that each church became a voluntary association and came to feel itself responsible only for members of its own congregation. By 1850 there were found in most towns neighborhoods in which no meetings were held for religious purposes, and of which the inhabitants attended no churches. A little less than fifty years ago there was a general awakening on this subject. Christians began to inquire if it was their duty to send missionaries to convert the heathen abroad, what was their duty towards their neighbors who were without the Gospel? Ministers began to realize that they were not simply commanded to preach the Gospel to those

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who came into their congregations, but to "go" and preach to everyone. They held neighborhood meetings and enlarged their pastoral work.

They soon found that more than ministers were needed, and that the churches must preach the Gospel to make it effective. They began to appeal to their churches to appoint committees for visiting and for neighborhood meetings and Sunday school work. In 1859 a Committee reported to the General Association in favor of a plan for enlisting the churches of the State in this work. To promote this object Rev. Leonard W. Bacon was, in 1861, employed as a State missionary. Among other things he interested himself in organizing conferences of the churches for fellowship and the discussion of practical questions. A Litchfield North Conference was formed at that time, meeting under the auspices of the Association and covering the same field. The Standing Committee of the Association arranged for such a Conference in connection with each annual meet-

ing from 1861 to 1873. The Consociation at its annual meeting transformed itself for the most part into a similar Conference.

On November 13, 1867, the General Conference of the Congregational churches of Connecticut was formed in New Britain, "for the purpose of fraternal intercourse and of co-operation and mutual incitement in all the evangelizing work of Christian churches." Its chief Committee for several years was a Committee of Fellowship and Work, to promote Home Evangelization and report on its progress and methods. The General Conference was made up of delegates from local organizations of the churches. The Consociations could be represented if they so desired, and the Litchfield South Consociation continued to represent the main body of its churches. In Litchfield North several of the churches had already withdrawn from the Consociation, and refused to return to it on any condition. It removed from its constitution the claim to judicial authority and authorized its churches to call councils for install-

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ing and dismissing pastors, but the name seemed to carry with it something of old authority, and its rules and customs of procedure might not be changed without possibilities of controversy. So two conferences were formed for fellowship and the work of evangelization in the fall of 1868. The Litchfield North Consociation continued for several years to hold an annual meeting, which has been discontinued though the Consociation still exists and can be called together if the constituent churches so wish.

Perhaps a personal incident may be allowed as illustrating the way in which selfishness is liable to overreach itself. When the division of the Litchfield North Conference was under discussion, I, as pastor of the Ellsworth church, objected strenuously, on the ground that Norfolk would naturally go into the North-East Conference, and declared that I would rather go across the county at any time than attend a meeting without Dr. Eldridge. After consideration it was decided that the division must be

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made, but that Norfolk should be put in the North-West Conference. When two years later I became pastor in Winchester I realized that I had only myself to blame for the absence of Dr. Eldridge from the fellowship meetings in which I had a part.

In the early days of the Conference most of the churches organized themselves in a business way to carry the Gospel to all within their parish bounds. Monthly or quarterly visiting of families, tract-distribution, neighborhood meetings, neighborhood Sunday Schools, invitations to the church services were the order of the day. The Conference met frequently as a whole or in groups for stimulus or discussion of methods. There has been a reaction from the spirit and method of those days. The new methods seemed after a time to grow formal and most of the churches dropped them. The Conferences meet less often, and often discuss less vital themes. The Christian Endeavor movement has absorbed some of the enthusiasm formerly given to the Home Evangelization movement, and even that has had

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its local reactions. Notwithstanding these reactions there has been some real gain. The churches know that they exist not simply to enjoy religion and give their members a ticket of admission to heaven, but to preach the Gospel, and to serve men for the Master's sake. They know that the pastor is not merely employed to serve the church which pays his salary: that he is appointed of Christ to lead the church in its service to the community, and to the whole world. I have dwelt on these details because I believe that the Home Evangelization and Christian Endeavor movements have been outward suggestions of what is essential and vital to the inward life of all our churches. I do not believe the Conference system will be complete until it reaches the inter-denominational federation of our churches in all practical Christian work, but every change which has helped to take the churches out of a merely dogmatic and formal condition into a real grapple with the work of the world is something for us to rejoice in and help onward. It

seems to me essential to the very existence of our small country churches under present conditions that their members should be made to feel that they do not join a church simply to secure their personal salvation, but to take a hand in the work of saving with Christ's help every man, woman, and child in the community. This is what Christians are for. It is what Conso- ciations, Conferences, Associations, Unions and Conventions are for. There has been during the last fifty years a progressive change in the ideal of church life. We have not given up creeds or church polity, but the emphasis is no longer on creeds or polity but on Christian service. We are seeking first of all the Kingdom of God through service to all men for Christ's sake, and the ideal church is striving to bring the whole community within the range of its possible influence into complete spiritual subjection to the living Christ.

It remains briefly to notice the changes in church membership which have been taking place in the last fifty years. The

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boundaries of the Litchfield Consociations have never been precisely co-terminous with those of the county. Terryville has always had its fellowship in New Haven County and Sherman in this county, the congregations in both cases being drawn from both sides the county line. Two churches over the New York State line in Amenia and Millerton were formerly members of the Litchfield North Consociation, but are now outside our fellowship. In the statistics I give I hold to county lines, except that I count Sherman among our churches and do not count Terryville. In 1852, fifty years ago, there were in this field 41 Congregational Churches, with a reported membership of 6,518. In 1902 there are 48 churches, eight having been formed within fifty years and the First in New Hartford having become extinct. These 48 churches had at the beginning of the year 7,105 members, an aggregate gain of 587.

Of the 41 churches reported fifty years ago, one has died, one reports the same membership, thirteen have gained 1,160

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members, twenty-six have lost 1,471, or on the average about one-third of their former membership. The eight new churches have a membership of 886. The churches in the growing manufacturing villages have increased rapidly in number and wealth; the rural churches have quite generally decreased in membership and in ability to pay their ministers a comfortable salary. In some cases a fund has been created which helps to meet current expenses. In others salary has been reduced or help received from the Missionary Society of Connecticut. In some parishes it is possible that the loss of our churches is made up by the growth of those in other denominations, but in most of them there has been no gain to compensate. Wherever the children of the church have gone there has been a new accession of Christian life and power, but there is present loss to us.

This is not pleasant to think about, and is not compensated for by the increased strength of large churches in the manufacturing villages. What can we do about it?

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I feel sure of but two effective remedies. They have been already suggested, and perhaps rightly developed and used may be sufficient for the need. They are practical church fellowship, and training the particular churches to recognize and fulfill their obligations to preach the Gospel continuously to all in the community. In a real fellowship among Christian churches, the strong will as a matter of course help the weak financially and otherwise. So far as any church is living for itself alone, seeking simply to receive and enjoy the benefits of the Gospel, financial help is liable to develop a pauper spirit, and may work injury as well as benefit. If once each church becomes in reality what it is now becoming in theory, a detachment of Christ's army, not only "holding the fort" for him, but fighting to conquer the world for him, with special responsibility for every man in his own community, the difficult field held with a small force will rightly be counted a post of honor, and for its support the common resources will flow out freely and

safely. If we think only of what the Litchfield County churches have been doing for their own maintenance we shall have a very inadequate conception of their real work and worth. So many have gone out from us to achieve distinction in the service of the wide world, that if a great man lives anywhere who was *not* born in Litchfield County, it calls for explanation. Not only the twenty-nine missionaries of the A. B. C. F. M. who went from the county in the first fifty years of its history, and the much larger number who have carried the gospel banner in the front of all onward movements in this country are to be counted as the gift of our churches to the progress of Christendom. Men and women of power have been going in a constant stream to lead toward higher and better things in all departments of the world's work. Our churches have less growth at home because they have been contributing of their best to other communities. Statistics tell so little that I have not gone into this matter thoroughly, but selecting the

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church at Harwington as the one that has lost most in membership among us, I find that in the last ten years she has given 51 more members to other churches by letter than she has received by letter. In the same ten years the Second Church in Waterbury has received by letter 59 more than she has given, and the South Church in New Britain 95 more. Such gifts must be counted and weighed to know what the country churches are doing. A present day theory claims that by such giving of its best life the quality of the stock left behind deteriorates—that having given of her best this county will soon have nothing left worth giving. I do not believe it. Those who are going out from us to-day at twenty years of age are not as distinguished as those who left us fifty years ago and are seventy years old, but where they have had the training of our churches I have no doubt they are every way the equals of those who have had fifty years more in which to do their work and make a name. In working up the history of a little country church that for ten years

had been steadily losing in membership, I was cheered to learn that in that time it had furnished deacons to six other churches of our order, most of them large churches, and a class leader to a prominent Methodist church. It is work worth doing. These churches need a larger courage and a clearer outlook on their real mission, but they have a grand place yet to fill in the history of the world that is to be. Just trying to maintain themselves they might fail, but taking possession of their own communities for Christ as a step toward conquering the world for Christ these churches will prove their right to continue. Litchfield County is not simply a glory shining from the past, but a promise of great and good things yet to come. We have reason to believe that the old Puritan stock taking root in the villages and cities and the far-off regions will still give a good account of itself, but we cannot afford to give up a single county parish hallowed by association with the great names of other days.

