**The Heart of Our Heritage and Our Future Treasure**

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**Introduction**

When I signed in at the 2018 Fall Meeting of the Massachusetts Association of Congregational Christian Churches, Marilou Hall looked at me and asked, “You’re delivering the Congregational Lecture in Cleveland next summer, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well,” Marilou replied, “it *better* be interesting, or you’ll owe me an ice cream.” I often say that if there isn’t good ice cream and chocolate in Heaven, then I don’t want to go. So, I take Marilou’s challenge as one of the most serious ones I have ever been given. Footnote: I recently delivered a presentation on the theology of music in worship at this year’s spring meeting of the Massachusetts Association. Afterwards, Marilou said that I didn’t owe her ice cream for *that* talk. Hopefully, I’ll be two for two today.

**I**

In keeping with the theme of the Annual Meeting and Conference, my lecture will draw on Matthew 6:21 — “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This is the theme of my church’s recent capital campaign, so I have been reflecting on this verse quite a bit lately.

This could easily turn in to a lecture on stewardship. This verse is tailor made for it. If you love your church as much as you say, then your pledge should reflect that, no? But I am not going the stewardship route, even though I would be spared the impression of singing for my supper in *this* context.

Anyone who has taken a course in Congregational polity, or has cracked open a history book, knows the story of our heritage. It is a rich narrative. It is the story of the seventeenth century Pilgrims and Puritans who sailed across the Atlantic to settle in the New World. They did this to escape religious persecution — to worship God as they chose. We are heirs of these brave men and women. Along with the historic details associated with the sixty-five-day journey that brought those 102 souls to these shores in November 1620, they also brought an Ecclesiology with them that is as alive today as it was 400 years ago. It’s funny: most Congregationalists are not biblical literalists, but we sure hold fast to the normative, theological principles that we inherited from those passengers on the Mayflower.

You do not have to go any further than the NACCC’s website to see what those principles are:

1. Christ alone is the head of the church.
2. All church members are spiritually equal and called to the work of ministry.
3. Every local church is autonomous and complete.
4. Each local church is called into wider associations of fellowship.
5. Believers are bound to one another in voluntary covenant.
6. Every Christian possesses full liberty of conscience in interpreting the Gospel.
7. The Bible is fully sufficient as our guide in matters of faith and practice and will inspire individuals and direct the church with fresh light and truth for every generation.

Some of these points are embraced by our congregations more than others. “Every local church is autonomous and complete” typically tops the list. We are autonomous. We do not have a Vatican or a Pope (although I would love to see Michael Chittum wear a mitre); we do not answer to a higher, earthly power, so no one is going to tell us what to do. I have heard that refrain throughout my twenty years of ministry. We had a crotchety, old man in my first church. (Every church has a crotchety old man, or two, or ten — they keep us honest.) This man, Norman, would stop me any time I mentioned our denomination, which was the United Church of Christ. He would look at me, scowl, and say, “*I* am a member of the First Congregational Church of Wakefield, New Hampshire, NOT the United Church of Christ!” When I tried to explain how he was a member of both, he would cut me off and say, “No! *You* may be part of some church authority elsewhere, but *we* are not. We don’t answer to anybody. We are a church unto ourselves!” New Englanders love their autonomy.

Interestingly enough, Congregationalists are among the first to shy-away from the question, “What does your church (or denomination) believe?” Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. acknowledges this in his book *The Congregational Way of Life.* In answering the question, “…what is the Congregational way? What do we stand for…?” he says,

Most of us would stand flat-footed, red-faced, and without an answer. Were we pressed so hard that we had to answer, some of us would probably retort: “Well, we’re the *free* church. We are the church with no ecclesiastical controls, no bishops to tell us what to do, just local churches ordering our own affairs and doing and believing what we think right.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Those of us who are confident in answering this question will say that we are not told what we must believe, or we will point to autonomy, like Norman from New Hampshire did.

Hallmarks of our faith. Defining characteristics. Marks of our Pilgrim pride. As we look to the future and the treasures we have to offer, we will find these as both our greatest assets and our greatest drawbacks. We know why they are *assets* — a faith that promotes freedom of thought and individual spiritual development is appealing. A church that is self-governing is also alluring. Being free to choose one’s destiny is as American as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (We will forgive that the latter was a Unitarian.) It is a *drawback* to some, because they don’t seek such freedom when it comes to matters of faith. They want an ecclesial system that dictates doctrine and practice. This is due to many factors — one of them being uniformity, another being stability. These terms sound synonymous, but there *is* a difference. Uniformity is when we all believe the same things, which leads to a sense of stability, however true or false.

The church in Wakefield, New Hampshire that I just mentioned was a fairly liberal, UCC church halfway up the far eastern side of the Granite State. There was a middle age couple who joined during my tenure who were very different from each other. She was extremely liberal and almost Unitarian when it came to her theology. He was extremely conservative and embraced a more fundamentalist theology. How they got along was as much a mystery as why he joined *this* particular congregation. Anyway, Dave (the husband) was a bright, successful attorney who was easy to talk to, so one day I decided to ask him the burning question: Why? Why was he a fundamentalist. He looked at me, took a breath, and said, “I realized long ago that I cannot really control anything in my life. *Anything* can happen to me at *any* moment: I could lose my job, my wife could get sick, one of my children could die — I am at the mercy of fate.” He continued: “I decided long ago, that I was going to have *one thing* in my life that I did not have to question or think about, and I decided that it was going to be God.” Dave confessed that embracing fundamentalism; being an exclusivist and a biblical literalist gave him *one thing* in his life that he did not have to think about.

All of the world’s major religions have fundamentalists — and there is an obvious appeal. In his online article “The Appeal of Fundamentalism,” Robert Stucky writes, “The yearning to transcend suffering and achieve lasting peace is arguably innate to our species.”[[2]](#footnote-2) My former parishioner, Dave, found this in a faith he did not have to question — one that provided him with *all* the answers.

I respect Dave and his spirituality, but I feel a little sad. Jesus is also the one constant in my life — the one I can turn to knowing he will always be there, the cornerstone, the rock of my salvation. It is just that the God made known in Christ allows me to think about my faith and to wrestle with it. He does not abhor questions and does not see doubt as a sign of weakness. T.S. Eliot one said that “doubt and uncertainty are merely a variety of belief,” but that is another lecture for another time.[[3]](#footnote-3) My point is simple: there are those who need uniformity of faith to feel secure, but that is not our tradition — and those aren’t the people who will most likely be happy in a Congregational church.

There are several beliefs and practices that we can offer the Church, which is in such a state of decline. We all know that. We’ve read the studies. Fewer people are going to church. We lament the glory days of the 1950s when the Sunday school walls were bursting, because we had so many students. Some churches, like mine, remember with joy having to build a wing onto our building to accommodate our youth. There are many reasons why the Church is in a state of decline: we are a post-Christian society, we compete with everything from Sunday morning youth soccer to a generation that has the attention span of Kim Kardashian’s latest dress. We regret the change, yet we can keep doing things the way we always have hoping people will catch-on and return. We are propagating a delusion. It’s not going to work. It’s 2019, not 1959. A lot has changed since then, and thank God for that!

We honor our heritage best when we learn from it and build upon it, not when we become unyielding slaves to it. Let us look back at our past, with an eye on the horizon — asking how the heart of our heritage can lead to future treasures.

**II**

There are many treasures that we could focus upon, but, due to our limited time, I want to highlight three of them:

* Covenant
* Faith
* Service

**Covenant.**

As mentioned a moment ago, one of the fundamental principles of the NA is that “Believers are bound to one another in voluntary covenant.” We focus more autonomy than anything else. Again, no one is going to tell *us* what to do — but we are not independent, nondenominational churches. We exist in covenant with one another. That term often gets overlooked, deafened by the “Autonomy!” rallying cry.

A covenant, as I often remind my congregation, is a relationship of reciprocal love, support, and care. In a covenant, your best interests are my best interests — and mine are yours. When you rejoice, I rejoice. When you grieve, I grieve. We are inextricably bound together with one another and Jesus Christ.

This isn’t the way the world thinks. We are contractual, not covenantal. We coexist within the bounds of legal agreements to protect ourselves from each other. Covenants are different, because covenants *always* include God. William Johnson Everett, Professor Emeritus of Ethics at Andover Newton Seminary, cogently argues that all covenants involve three parties: God, people, and the land. The third part of this triad (the land) is a lecture in itself, encouraging us to be better environmental stewards. (Again, we have to table that one.)

We are social beings. We were made to be in relationship with one another. To be made in the image of God means that we are to reflect God’s life together as a Trinity. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer — God exists as a community of persons united in perfect, covenantal love. The *Imago Dei* is about us reflecting the Divine life — existing together — not about us as individuals. If this is true, then it is in our spiritual DNA to want to coexist in a covenantal relationship with one another. This is something we can offer the world. However, when we focus solely on autonomy, what we offer is a sense of isolationism as opposed to unity. I’m not saying autonomy is not important. What I am saying, though, is that when we make that our focus, and short-shrift the message of covenant, our message sounds as if there is a clear division between us and them.

People in our communities are hungry for such relationships — relationships built on love, and trust, and forgiveness, not ones based on exploitation, and suspicion, and guilt. People want to be loved for who they are, not judged for who they are not. This is a fundamental aspect of who we are, and what we can offer to a world that is starving for such a theology.

**Faith.**

But it isn’t just about covenant, otherwise the Church would amount to little more than a friendly, social organization. The covenant we share is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This past February, my wife and I were driving home from a visit to her parents’ house in Glen, New Hampshire. Most of the trip is a 140 mile straight-shot down two long routes. During the first leg of the trip, I was struck by a sign I saw in front of a small church. It was one of those movable-letter signs, and it read, “Jesus hates religion, too.” This may be a reference to a recent book by Alex Himaya, but in any event, it rattled me. First of all, the words “hate” and “Jesus” do not go together, contrary to what the Westboro Baptist Church might say. Second, I wondered, “What is the gist of this message?” Does Jesus despise the institutional Church, because it can sometimes be too legalistic? Does Jesus think that we are a bunch of hypocrites? Is Jesus part of that whole “I’m spiritual, but not religious” movement associated with writers such as William B. Parsons, Lillian Daniel, and Robert C. Fuller?

Whatever the impetus behind that New Hampshire church’s sign, there is a general perception among many people in our culture that organized religion is hypocritical, whether it is stories about clergy abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, and more recently in the Southern Baptist Convention, or whether it is the old adage that Christians appear all pious on Sunday, but the other six days of the week they are the biggest sinners of all. Many people feel as if we do not practice what we preach. In an article from the magazine *Relevant,* Jayson D. Bradley writes,

I live in a small town that excels in Saturday night drunkenness and Sunday morning church attendance. In the news, we’re regularly confronted with embezzlements, affairs, abuses of power and worse from high-profile Christians. We all have Christians we consider frauds in our lives. And if we’re being honest, hypocrites stare back at us while we brush our teeth.[[4]](#footnote-4)

There is a sermon in that. Christians aren’t so much hypocrites; we just know that we are sinners. As a good friend of mine, Father Edmund Babicz, often says, “The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.” There is a reason why we *appear* hypocritical.

That said, the fact that so many people identify as spiritual, but not religious may mean that *they are hungry for something that mainline churches aren’t providing.* I believe that the NACCC is in a unique position to fill this void.

Many mainline denominations today focus on social justice. That is a blessing: a suit that more should follow. Jesus calls us to take up the cause of the poor and the oppressed, the widow and the orphan. Theologians such as Letty Russell remind us that Jesus broke bread with social pariahs to take them from the margins of society to the center.[[5]](#footnote-5) He was scorned for doing so by the religious leaders of his day. Likewise, we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned regardless of what those inside and outside of the Church feel. Churches and denominations that advocate for those traditionally ostracized by Christianity due to their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, ability, or economic status should be commended. But there is more to *being* the Church than service. There’s also *proclaiming* the Word.

It may be that some within the multitude who claim to be spiritual but not religious feel that the Church is not feeding them the Word. They come hungry and leave famished. One of the unique characteristics of the NA is that, as a larger body, we do not take stands on sociopolitical issues. In true Congregational form, we let individual churches make such proclamations (if they wish), but the National organization does not. That is one of the qualities that attracted me to the NA, having come from a denomination whose headquarters are located in *this* city — a denomination whose focus seems to align with anything that comes from the far left. (Footnote: even though my own politics lean to the left, that is not why I go to church. Do we want to be a place for only one group of people, alienating half of our flocks?) Our focus is, and needs to remain, theological — offering people spiritual edification not political talking points. Our sister denomination on the far right is just as guilty. If the four C’s are the Republican party at prayer, the UCC is the Democratic party at prayer.

But my point is not to bash other ecclesial bodies. We have our own faults as well. One of my favorite lyrics is by the British band Dire Straits, who, in one of their songs, sings, “When you point your finger cause your plan fell through, you’ve three more fingers pointing back at you.”[[6]](#footnote-6) My point is simply that the NA offers people a reprieve from the political rhetoric and ideological bashing that saturates our lives. They call it a sanctuary for a reason!

This brings us back to my point about proclaiming the Word. As much as people are tired of hearing the Church weigh-in on both sides of the political aisle, they are famished for spiritual food. We have an opportunity to present the core doctrines of the Christian faith to them in a way that offers hope, and love, and life. We have answers to those pervasive philosophical questions: “Why are we here?” and “What is the meaning of life?” If we do not present the tenets of the Christian faith in a hardnosed, exclusionary way, we have a feast to offer the multitudes.

Even though the beliefs and practices of the Pilgrims and Puritans were rigid, they believed that God is a God of love, too, as the First Letter of John declares. When we think of our religious forebears, images of Jonathan Edwards and his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” come to mind. I actually had to read that sermon in high school (a public high school, no less). If films like *The Exorcist* weren’t scary enough, the teenage me was vexed by Edwards’ warning:

…natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up…[[7]](#footnote-7)

It’s probably *not* a good idea to use this as part of an evangelism campaign in your local church. But this is what comes to mind when we think of the Pilgrims and Puritans. (That and a page or two from Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.)

But what about John Robinson, the famous pastor of the English Separatists? We often quote his “Farewell Sermon” that sent the Mayflower on its way: “the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Read Robinson’s book *New Essays; or Observations Divine and Moral,* published eight years after his “Farewell Sermon.” In the second essay, he writes, “God reveals…his gracious love and mercy in, and unto his church here upon earth; which he therefore hath chosen, and taken near unto himself, that in it might be seen the riches of his glorious grace.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Love? Mercy? Grace?

The message we have to offer people who are spiritually hungry is that God is a God of love who seeks to know us personally, as any lover longs to know his or her beloved. God did not create us out of need, because of some divine lack. He created us in order to share his life and love with us. The very essence of the Trinity — God as a community of persons who coexist in a relationship of perfect, reciprocal love — is a model of the relationship that should unite us not only to one another, who are created in the Image of God (the *Imago Dei*); it is also a model of the relationship we are to share with God.

This leads me to the key point I want to make today.

If people are spiritual, but not religious, maybe it is because the mainline church is not providing them with the spirituality they need. That spirituality can come from many places, but as far as the Church goes, it is clearly stating the doctrines of the faith in a way that applies to people’s lives. Our Puritan forebears saw no division between people’s ecclesial lives and their public lives. That is what it means to be spiritual. Maybe that’s why (in part) that the church in the square also served as the town meeting house. All that they did publicly was guided by their faith. But what we face today is something different: people no longer attend church because they either aren’t being fed, they think the church is no longer relevant, it doesn’t fit their busy schedules, or all of the above. The scheduling problem can be resolved with alternative service times, and some churches in the NA and beyond have done that. But what about the other two? I’ll talk about the second one in a moment when I reflect upon service.

People are hungry. They want God in their lives and we can give that to them without all the political hubbub. We have to proclaim what we believe boldly. “God reveals…his gracious love and mercy in, and unto his church here upon earth,” Rev. Robinson wrote almost 400 years ago. Let’s breakdown that quote a bit, shall we? There are two parts to it.

First, God offers us love and mercy. This is the message we need to disseminate 24/7/365. This is the meal people want. For God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus: the One who loves us unconditionally and offers us the gift of salvation (John 3:16). As Paul wrote, it is not something we earned. It is a gift, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). All we need to do is accept it. And accepting it is simple. You don’t need an advanced degree in theology. As Paul told the Romans, if we declare with our mouths that Jesus is the Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, then we will be saved (10:9). That salvation is not just the life that we will inherit when we shuffle off this mortal coil. It is the life-together — the *shalom* — that God intended for us to live now. As Bob Dylan once sang, “Ye shall be changed.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Maybe that roadside sign in New Hampshire was criticizing the overbearing, legalistic character of much organized religion. No wonder many of the broken dread walking through our doors. They feel as if they will be judged, because they are not perfect. They are riddled with fear, guilt, regret, shame, you name it. The church doesn’t need to beat people up; most do a good job of that themselves. As one of my polity professors in seminary (Rev. Richard Sparrow) used to say, “If you treated other people the way you treat yourself, you’d be in jail.” I am a big fan of Brennan Manning, who, in his book *All is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir,* writes, “My message, unchanged for more than fifty years, is this: God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be.”[[11]](#footnote-11) How different would our churches look on Sunday morning if this was the message we sent throughout our communities? It’s not about judgment. It’s not about wrath. It’s about love — the boundless love of God. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” God told Jeremiah (31:3).

The second part of that quote is equally interesting. God’s love and mercy are given to *the church.* All pastors know that, on their day off, they shouldn’t let people know that they are pastors. They also know not to wear clergy shirts (you know, the ones with the collar) when they go to the store. It is an open invitation for people to come and talk to you. Listen, when it comes to people who are in pain and need a listening ear, I’m all game. I’m there. But more often than not, some see it as a time for confession. People see that you are a pastor and they want to confess — not about the wrongs they have done, and even less about the good they have left undone. No. That’s not it. People want to tell you *why they don’t go to church.* Here’s the most common confession: “I believe in Jesus, but I do not need to go to church to be a Christian. I can worship God in nature.” First of all, I highly doubt that the vast majority of these nature-cathedral believers make a weekly pilgrimage to the woods to worship God, but let that go. Second of all, they are wrong. You *have* to go to church to be a Christian, because at the heart of our faith is a call to be part of God’s community. The Methodist theologian Laurence Hull Stookey put it best. In his book *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church,* he writes,

The Risen One, who is present at all times and in all places, seeks to bind together by the action of the Spirit all things that have been wrongly separated. Participation therefore is not something we do on the basis of personal choice or need; participation in the Body of Christ is inherent in being Christian. The church, not the individual, is the irreducible unit of Christianity.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Did you catch that? “The church, not the individual, is the irreducible unit of Christianity.”

So, when people complain that Christians are hypocrites — you know, they act all righteous on Sunday, but the rest of the week they are sinners like everyone else — they’re right. Christians don’t go to Church because they feel it makes them righteous. (If we do, then we’re going for the wrong reason.) We go, in part, because we are broken, and we know it. We go, because we know that God calls us as a people (not as individuals) to worship and serve him. And this leads us to our third point — the third treasure that we have to offer.

**Service.**

Gabriel Fackre is a Congregational theologian who recently passed away. He is famous for his series *The Christian Story,* which is a two-part narrative interpretation of Christian doctrine for lay persons and pastors. In it, he offers a model of Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the Church) that is similar to what Cardinal Avery Dulles developed in his classic *Models of the Church* (originally published in 1974). Obviously, Dulles’ text has a Roman Catholic focus, but it aligns ecumenically with what Fackre published four years later.

Fackre claims that there are four principal marks of the Church. He uses traditional Greek terms and their equivalent English verbs to explicate them.

**Kerygma**

The proclamation of the Word. Fackre calls this *telling.*

**Leitourgia**

This is the sacramental life of the church. We get the word “liturgy” from this word. It is aptly named *celebrating.*

**Koinonia**

The covenantal fellowship that is the Church. This is labelled *being.*

**Diakonia**

From which we get the words deacon and diaconate. Fackre calls this *doing* — the Church serving God in the service of others.

We are called to worship and pray, but we are also called to put our faith into action. We are called to feed the hungry, give clothing to the naked, and to visit the sick and imprisoned. We are called to be the servant church.

I don’t know about your community, but in Canton, high school students have to put in a certain number of service hours each year. We get phone calls *all the time* from young men and women asking if there is anything that they can do around the church to fulfill that requirement. When there isn’t anything for them to do, I am *so* tempted to invite them to wash and wax my car, straighten my office, or be my personal assistant — maybe one of them can run and get me lunch, go to the bank for me, or order flowers for my wife. I’ll be honest, there have been times when I’ve thought: I wonder if I can ordain a few of them and have the preach or do hospital visits. There’s a lesson there: be careful what you ask for… But I digress. Why do school districts require their students to complete service hours? I called my good friend, Lorinda Visnick, who is a member of my city’s School Committee and I asked her this question. She said, “We want our students to develop an ethic of helping others, so that when they graduate and head off to college or go into the work force, they will not think that it’s all about them.” By no means is that a bad reason.

In a similar vein, I belong to a private club and one of my jobs is to welcome and orient new members: to let them know what the organization has to offer and to hear their suggestions. Recently, a new member asked me if the club had any outreach programs. “We’re not all about book discussions and wine tastings, are we?” she asked. I fumbled over my words and responded, “To be honest, I don’t think we *do* have any outreach programs.” This new member felt as if this was unfortunate and that we *should* be “giving back,” and she’s right.

But these are not the only reasons why the Church engages in service, is it? Are we trying to learn that it isn’t just about us and that we need to give back to the community? Noble endeavors, clearly, but are they Christocentric? Are they part of the Congregational tradition?

I remember my first meeting with the Church and Ministry Committee of the Essex Association of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. *(Say that three times fast!)* I met with this committee to be taken In Care. In the NA, local churches ordain ministers. In the UCC, Associations (groups of local churches) ordain, so when students enter seminary, they are mentored and evaluated throughout the process — hence, they are taken “In Care” of the Association. When the Church and Ministry Committee first meets with a prospective candidate, they ask all kinds of questions. They want to know about your background, your faith journey, why you want to become a minister, and so forth. One of the ministers on the Committee, the Rev. Dr. Jim Tedesco, asked me why I wanted to be an ordained minister. I said something to the effect of, “I want to help people in ways that I can’t as a professor alone.” (Up to that point, I wanted to just be an English professor.) Rev. Tedesco had a follow-up: “Then why don’t you just become a social worker?” I was a bit shocked by what I took to be a hostile response at the time, but obviously his question remained with me — and it was a valid query. Even though he didn’t say it, upon reflection I knew he meant that there’s nothing wrong with being a social worker, so why not do that *if* all I want to do is help people?

*Diakonia* is not about doing good deeds for the sake of being compassionate, altruistic, or nice. This mark is about serving others, especially those on the margins of society, because, in doing so, we minister to Christ. (Read the story of the judgment of the nations at the end of Matthew chapter 25 as a refresher.) We serve, because, in so doing, we minister to Christ. This is *who* we are. It is *what* we are. It is a fundamental part of our identity. We’re not social workers. We’re not philanthropists. We are Congregational Christians. Service is in our blood — our spiritual DNA. There is a world of people looking to give of themselves in this way. They want the work of their hands to be connected to their hearts and their spirits.

The NA is rich with mission work. Visit our website and the sites of our mission partners. For a gathering as small as ours, we move mountains. How do we break that vision open? How do we open our doors to attract those who are attracted by outreach into our fold? We have a unique opportunity here. It is who we are.

We often hear about the stringent piety associated with our Puritan forebears. We do not typically think of them as being a people who sought to serve God in the service of others. If you look carefully, though, you will see that this perception is not wholly accurate. Let me give you just a couple examples from history. In his landmark study, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957,* John von Rohr discusses the treatment of Native Americans by the seventeenth century Puritans. He writes,

No doubt there were some among the settlers of the first several decades who preferred extermination to conversion as the means for dealing with the American Indian presence, but by and large humanitarian and evangelistic attitudes prevailed. Contrasted with the cruelty and exploitation of much of the nineteenth-century American treatment of the retreating native population on the western frontier, the Puritan practice of seventeenth century was both restrained and responsible.[[13]](#footnote-13)

If you look at the NACCC’s website, particularly our philosophy of missions, you will read about John Eliot: a teacher in the church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. A missionary to the Native Americans, he studied many of their languages and “eventually founded fourteen communities of ‘Praying Indians.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) Eliot, known as the Apostle to the Indians, published the New Testament in Algonquin in 1661 and the Old Testament in 1663. Von Rohr also tells us that “With the aid of additional translators other books were put into the native tongue [by Eliot], including Puritan tracts on personal piety and the Cambridge Platform for administering Church life.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Some may contend that this sounds more like evangelism than outreach, but isn’t evangelism a fundamental part of mission? Historically, when missionaries go overseas, or to other states, or around the block to help others, they do so in the name of Jesus Christ, which means that they are also spreading the Good News. Nonbelievers critique such work as nothing more than colonialism: of the West imposing “their way of life” upon Third World peoples. I see things differently.

Whenever missionaries force their beliefs upon anyone, that is wrong. If, however, they are allowing God to act through them, then how can they *help* but witness to the Gospel. How can they keep from singing, as that old hymn declares? Our heritage is one that sees our outreach as being commissioned by God — as Christ working through us. Furthermore, this heritage extends beyond Eliot’s ministry to Native Americans. It includes foreign missions as well. In fact, global missions in the United States *began* with our Congregationalist ancestors.

During an 1806 revival at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, five students, known as the Brethren, took shelter from an approaching storm.  They met in the lee of a haystack.  While there, they discussed and prayed about ways to convert people in foreign lands.  “Remaining together for professional training at [then] Andover Theological Seminary, three of these students joined with additional Andover graduates in 1810 to seek help from Connecticut clergy for the furtherance of their plan.  With the assistance of several other clergy from Massachusetts, these humble beginnings of the Haystack Meeting, which was part of the Second Great Awakening, led to the establishment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (or ABCFM).”[[16]](#footnote-16)  On February 6, 1812 at Tabernacle Congregational Church in Salem, Massachusetts, “Adoniram Judson and five other New England men were commissioned as the first American foreign missionaries.”[[17]](#footnote-17) I do not have the time to go into the rich history of this organization, but suffice it to say that “By 1870 the ABCFM was an exclusively Congregational organization.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

**III**

So, “where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” Our hearts are rooted deep in this rich, Congregational heritage.

It is one that has always espoused covenantal connectedness. Although our churches are autonomous, we are united in a relationship of reciprocal love, support, and care. People are hungry for that, especially in a world that promotes a sense of isolated individualism.

We are also a people of faith. Our churches run the gamut. We are liberal, conservative, and everything in between. I was attracted to the NACCC, because it does not take political stands at the national level. This was a breath of fresh air for me. My own church is one in which we leave politics out of it, because our members hold diverse political views. But that is not why we come together as a congregation, nor is that why we come together as the NA. We come together because of our common faith. In an age of spiritual confusion (an age in which people try to find meaning in vapid, secular, self-help offerings), people are hungry to latch on to something substantive, to hear the story that is ours. We not only proclaim that God is real, but that God loves us so much that he came to us in Jesus Christ to free us from ourselves, to forgive our sins, and to offer us new life.

Lastly, our faith and worship remind us that we are a servant church. It’s not about us, although you might think differently if you ever attended a PLM: a parking lot meeting. It is about allowing the living God to work through us as we serve Jesus Christ in the service of others.

Surveys continue to show that people want to part of something bigger than themselves. In an article that appeared in *Forbes* magazine two years ago entitled “Pursue Purpose Over Success”, the author, Margie Warrell, quotes the Facebook tycoon Mark Zuckerberg, who told the graduating class at Harvard University, “Purpose is the sense that we are part of something bigger than ourselves…that we are needed, that we have something better ahead to work for. Purpose is what creates true happiness.”[[19]](#footnote-19) People realize more and more that they can’t take it with them. They want their legacy to be one that made a difference. There is no organization that can connect service and spirituality to create a holistic sense of identity better than the Church.

If we continue to be hum-drum, lamenting the way the Church used to be as we get all melancholy and play the “remember when” game — remember when we needed two worship services to meet the demands of all the people who used to come; remember when our church school was bursting at the seams — if we continue to do this, then we will become a relic. We’re heading in that direction.

We can address this issue and even turn the tide, however, by thinking outside the box: by looking at what we have to offer rather than mourning what we no longer do. Times have changed. Like it or not, we live in a digital-age — and the Church of tomorrow will face challenges that even our children cannot perceive.

But we also have a great deal to offer a world that is slowly coming to realize that social media is empty, that reality TV isn’t real, that trying to fill your life with “stuff” brings little more than compounded debt. When those in search of meaning cry out, “There’s got to be more to life,” we in the NACCC can say, “Indeed, there is! Come through our doors and meet the living Christ! Come, be fed by the Word! See how it connects to your life! Come, be part of a family who will love you for who you are, not judge you for who you are not! Come, and truly see that the more you give of yourself to others, the more you will receive!

Congregationalists have been singing this song for almost 400 years. Sometimes it sounded a bit different, but the message is the same — and the song is ours. Our forebears took a mammoth chance by stepping out in faith to make their world different — to make it one that conformed to the Gospel. We can do the same! “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our heritage is the heart of who we are. Our future is a treasure that we are called to share with others, an investment that will reap rewards 100 fold. May we not only realize that, but may we work together, pray together, and love together so that our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches may truly be that city set on a hill, shining God’s light for the entire world to see. Thank you very much, and God bless the NACCC.

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2. Robert Stuckey, “The Appeal of Fundamentalism,” taken from the Faith In Diversity Institute, May 5, 2012, fidinstitute.org. Accessed February 4, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. T.S. Eliot quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jayson D. Bradley, “All Christians Are Hypocrites,” taken from *Relevant* (May 23, 2016), https://relevantmagazine.com/god/all-christians-are-hypocrites. Accessed February 25, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. cf. Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dire Straits, “Expresso Love,” Mark Knopfler songwriter. Taken from the Warner Brothers album *Making Movies,* 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jonathan Edwards, “Sinner in the Hand of an Angry God,” section 10, available online at Blue Letter Bible. Accessed March 13, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Robinson, “Farewell Sermon,” July 1620, available online at Pilgrim Hall Museum. Accessed March 13, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Robinson, “New Essays,” 1628, available online at Pilgrim Hall Museum. Accessed March 13, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics 1961-2012* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brennan Manning, *All is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2011), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Taken from the NACCC website. Accessed May 7, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Von Rohr, 110-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Taken from [tabernaclechurch.org/about/history.](https://tabernaclechurch.org/about/history/) Accessed May 15, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Margie Warrell, “Pursue Purpose Over Success: The Science Behind Mark Zuckerberg’s Advice to Harvard Grads,” from *Forbes,* May 30, 2017. Accessed online on May 28, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)