

Toward an Understanding of Local Autonomy (1969)

Explanatory Note

A major statement by the Theological Commission of the United Church of Christ on a matter of vital interest is set forth here.

In undertaking a theological study of the autonomy of the local church, the Commission was prompted by its own desire to clarify and to grasp more deeply the meaning of local autonomy. It was concerned also to interpret that meaning to other Churches, especially to those with which the United Church of Christ is exploring through the Consultation on Church Union the possibility of a united church.

The statement is the culmination of a process of discussion, drafting, discussion and redrafting until a text was achieved which could command the approval of the members of the Theological Commission. On July 1, 1969, it was submitted by the Commission to the Seventh General Synod of the United Church of Christ which approved it and "commended it to the churches for study."

1. Introduction

The autonomy of the local church is a distinctive characteristic of the United Church of Christ. The autonomy of the local church does not express the full understanding of the church; but it does involve a dimension of our apprehension of the meaning of the spirit of Christ for the ordering of the church.

The expression "the autonomy of the local church" calls for some explanation. The phrase itself derives from the Congregational line of our inheritance and came into common usage during the last part of the 19th century. It was apparently never used in connection with the churches either in England or this country in the early days of Congregationalism. It finally appeared in an official statement of the Congregational Churches in the so called Kansas City Statement adopted by the National Council meeting in Kansas City, Mo., in 1913.

The idea was in Congregationalism in its beginnings. The churches are described as "self-governing," "independent," and "free." But the idea never appears in the fathers of Congregationalism except as coupled with the idea of inter-church fellowship. To isolate the idea of "self-governing," or "independent" or "free" or "autonomous" churches from the idea of fellowship creates a danger. The Kansas City Statement of Faith is faithful to this linkage: "We hold to the autonomy of the local church and its independence of all ecclesiastical control. We cherish the fellowship of the churches united in district, state, and national bodies for counsel and co-operation in matters of common concern ... We hold to the unity and catholicity of the church of Christ."

The phrase "autonomy of the local church" has become so familiar in recent usage to witness to a legitimate concern that we shall probably continue to employ it. But we do not interpret it in the light of terms of Greek and 18th-century ideas of freedom. In the New Testament, the special ways and teachings and prerogatives of the local and regional Christian communities are honored and respected; but they are not thought of as self-governing or autonomous in a secular sense. We should seek to interpret the expression, "the autonomy of the local church" in the light of fundamental Christian views of the church.

Within such a context, the principle of the autonomy of the local church is part of our heritage thankfully received. Yet it is more than an inheritance; it is a living conviction by which we continue to order our corporate life. Nevertheless, the fact that we value highly the autonomy of the local church does not interpose a barrier to our full participation in the quest for Christian unity-or for church union. The United Church of Christ is itself a union of Churches; and it understands itself as a uniting Church as well. It values the principle of the autonomy of the local church as an important contribution to the understanding of the nature and ordering of Christ's church; but the principle of autonomy is not the sole contribution of the United Church of Christ to a fuller union.

The United Church of Christ is now a full participant in the Consultation on Church Union. The objective of the Consultation is to prepare for the consideration of the participant communions a plan of union for a church "truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed." Such an objective is clearly much more than a merger of institutional structures and church organizations. It requires openness to renewal which is the work of the Spirit of God; it requires commitment to a greater obedience in mission; it requires desire for a fuller apprehension of the gospel. It poses to each of the participant communions the question, "What do we have to contribute to such a more fully united church?"

The participation of the United Church of Christ in the Consultation on Church Union is not the only, but certainly an urgent, reason for clarifying what we understand and what we do not understand by the autonomy of the local church. We need to undertake this task both for ourselves and for the other communions participating in the Consultation. We cannot assume that the principle of the autonomy of the local church is never misunderstood or distorted. Perhaps we have been too prone to put so much emphasis on its negative aspects that we have failed to keep before ourselves and others the positive aspects of this principle.

If the urgency of our effort to make clear what is meant and what is not meant by the principle of local autonomy is inspired by the conviction that the principle has its living roots in the intention of Christ for his church and therefore is a contribution of the United Church of Christ to a united church, truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed, we will hold ourselves responsible for making our testimony as clear and cogent as possible. This is a task for both the local churches and the larger body.

The Theological Commission has taken the work thus far done by the Consultation on Church Union made available in the booklet, "Consultation on Church Union" as the concrete context for a clarification of the principle of local autonomy. This setting has several advantages. The issues are those which arise from discussion with communions concerned to plan for a united church. The setting provides a stimulus to explore in depth the basis of the principle of local autonomy. We trust that this statement will help to make clear to the other member Churches of the Consultation on Church Union what we understand by the principle of local autonomy. We also hope that it will provide a stimulus and an aid to a fresh inquiry into the meaning of the principle on the part of the local churches.

The Theological Commission has tried to keep before it these guidelines:

a. The principle of local autonomy is to be understood in the light of a total understanding of the church. Such major biblical images of the church as "the people of God," "the new creation," "the fellowship saints," and "the body of Christ" contribute richly to what the principle of local autonomy means and does not mean. Local autonomy is grounded in the awareness of the gracious personal presence of God with his people gathered in the local church. It is based on a divine gift--God's reconciling work in Christ made effective through the Spirit. The freedom recognized in local autonomy is freedom under Christ--and therefore freedom to respond to the demands of Christ. Local autonomy does not mean the rejection of all authority in the name of freedom. It does mean the affirmation of freedom in order that the fullest possible response to the authority of God can be made by the local church. The meaning of local autonomy comes to be known in its reality as the local church uses its freedom to participate in God's redemptive and renewing work for all men. The fullest understanding of the church provides the correctives for distortions and misunderstandings of the principle of autonomy.

b. The positive aspects of the principle of local autonomy are to be emphasized equally with the negative aspects. If one aspect of the principle of autonomy is a rejection of a too emphatically juridical understanding of the church, in another it is an emphasis on a community whose vital principle is love. If one aspect is freedom from external authority, its other aspect is freedom for full obedience to the service of men in the service of Christ. If one aspect is the rejection of any attempt to violate conscience, other aspect is openness to the persuasion of the Spirit of Christ. If one aspect is the rejection of a coerced unity, the other is a freely given commitment to unity.

2. The Understanding and Misunderstandings of Local Autonomy

In the theory of the United Church of Christ all authority in the church lies, under Christ, in the church's members. This established it as democratic in polity, though it is not so in the ordinary secular sense, since the authority of the people is secondary to that of the living Christ. Nor is it democratic in the classical Greek sense, since, in the first place, the authority "of the people is secondary to that of the living Christ; and, in the second place, the people do not necessarily exercise their authority directly and do appoint officers and representatives to govern them in ways which accord with the will of Christ declared in the Bible and maintained by the Holy Spirit.

In practice this means that within each congregation the majority of the adult members determine the corporate life of the group, always with due consideration of the will of any minority. When there are differences of opinion which threaten the unity of the local church, it is the responsibility of all to seek for a consensus of the Spirit and through study and consultation to seek the wisdom of the wider church. Groups with conflicting views may separate; but that is an extreme step to be taken with sorrow and pain only when no hope for consensus or co-operation seems possible; and even then never without the continuing hope and genuine prayer that the separated may be again be united by the Spirit of Christ. The United Church of Christ believes that this is the best way to translate Christian love into the framework of government.

These intra-congregational relationships become a paradigm for relationships inter-congregational. The local churches are primary segments of the total church; such groups as Associations, Conferences, and the General Synod are representative of the local churches. In these groups the members are more than liaison persons. They have responsibilities both to the local churches which they represent and to the groups where they represent them. Often there is an inescapable tension between these responsibilities. The delegate who represents his local church is not to refuse to listen to others but rather to be open to their insights and views. It is therefore bad churchmanship for a local church to "instruct" its representatives to vote according to a certain pattern at any meetings of the representative groups—as it would be equally bad churchmanship for any of these groups to refuse to hear any message sent to it by any of the local churches—since either of these procedures would violate the liaison. The representative members are related to the groups themselves just as the members of a local church are related to the totality of that church.

The majority of the members determine the corporate action of each group—local church, Association, Conference, or the General Synod—following the will of Christ as they conceive it, but always with a decent regard for any minority. Under the ecclesiology of the United Church of Christ, according to the principle of local autonomy, a congregation is not compelled without its own consent to accept any action of a body to which it sends representatives. This arrangement is fixed upon in the belief, again, that it best transcribes Christian love into the juridical framework of the organized church.

So much for considerations that are essentially negative; though they must be mentioned to make the description complete, they are only the dorsal side of autonomy. Freedom, even Christian freedom, being no end in itself, we now ask to what use local autonomy shall be put.

A local church is free in order to be at its catholic best. If it has relationships with the larger church simply because it is an administrative part of a Region, or Association, or Conference and maintained in the ampler context only by outside forces, it is surely wanting in the grandness that comes to any congregation which of itself devotes its energies to the interests of the whole church of Jesus Christ and the whole world for which he lived and died and lives again. The United Church recaptures in its own way an emphasis long since made by the Eastern Orthodox Churches: it is aware that the point at which Christ is most likely to keep contact with his whole church is the local congregation, where, especially in the Eucharist, he identifies himself with his people in a far more personal way than possible at the diocesan or Association or Conference or any other level. A local church, turning away from all selfish and introverted ideas, uses its freedom to make itself one in love and service with the total church in its historic and contemporary development, it comes to know the reason for the meaning and direction of its local autonomy. Our local autonomy is completely misunderstood when it is regarded as a means to isolate a congregation from the rest of the church. Only the free know the fullness of love; and the local congregation has its freedom in the United Church of Christ

in order that there may be no shadow of outer coercion, but only the inner compulsion of love, in its relationship to the church of the ages, the whole ministering church of this age, and the needs of humanity ministered to.

Specifically, "the local church is a school in the life of the Spirit." If it closes its mind to the rest of the church, it is comparable to a university that in an insane moment should shut itself off from the findings of scholars in other universities. The universal church through the totality of its experience is a source of inspiration and enrichment for the life of any local church. The local minister is a channel through which the things of that great church are mediated to his congregation. Here the medium is indeed the message; the minister is an ambassador from the whole church. Local autonomy is not a banner of self-sufficiency; it is local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church.

Local autonomy provides for diversity in unity within the church. There is a positive aspect of the local church's freedom to differ from any decisions of a representative body to which it sends delegates. This positive aspect is that the local church can follow its own insight as to procedure or even as to doctrine before the insight wins its way in the representative assembly. Generally speaking, the judgment of the representative body will be better than that of the congregation for the reason that it has the advantage of broader perspective. But this is not always or necessarily the case; sometimes, especially when the secular world outside is undergoing change, insight may be given to the local church as to procedure or even as to doctrine, before the representative body is prepared to appropriate the insight. This was the event in many denominations, for instance, when a century ago the sense of responsibility for the evils of slavery was beginning to invade the Christian conscience. Some local churches set up their underground long before their denomination dared to act; in some instances they set up their underground even in defiance of their denomination.

According to the churchmanship of the United Church of Christ, the local church (or the Association or Conference or the General Synod) holding its ground according to the insight given to it, will keep its mind open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the matters of difference. It will welcome the possibility of growth in the church which invariably takes place at points of tension. For that reason it will recognize the importance of due process-procedures established not to prevent tensions but to facilitate their constructive resolution. In its acceptance of tension and its processes for their constructive resolution local autonomy celebrates its greatest victories.

Another point of flexibility in the United Church is illustrated in the fact that local churches--and their representative bodies, for that matter--may assign any rights and responsibilities to others willing to accept them. A congregation might claim the theoretical right, for instance, to call its own minister without consulting the Association or Conference, but the experience of generations, not to say centuries, has taught that the calling of a minister to a congregation is not the concern of the local church alone; his coming to that church is of moment not only to the other congregations in the neighborhood but to the communion at large. It is therefore far better for a local church to associate itself with its Association and/or Conference in the calling of its minister and this is indeed standard procedure. At this point the local church wisely chooses to use a procedure which recognizes its own wider concerns as well as the concerns of the wider bodies. . . .