

Polity and Power

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Protestant church polity is about the distribution and use of power in ecclesiastical institutions. Officially, Protestants don't believe in human authority; they look to Jesus Christ as their source of theological direction. But they do respect human power, and they spend inordinate amounts of time and energy reorganizing and perfecting their institutional structures. The United Church of Christ, for example, is only 53 years old, yet in every one of those years committees have been at work evaluating, proposing, or rearranging its internal power relationships. The publication of Clyde Steckel's book, *New Ecclesiology and Polity*, (Pilgrim Press, 2009) is certain to extend that tradition for at least another half century.

For the first 40 years of its life, the UCC was embroiled in a continual series of power struggles between its General Synod and President's office, on the one hand, and its two major mission boards, (World Ministries and Homeland Ministries) on the other. The mission boards, formed within the Congregational Christian tradition, were well endowed and legally independent corporations that had agreed to be "recognized" by the new denomination in 1957 but not supervised by any ecclesiastical body. Moreover, the UCC Office of the President had been so structured that its institutional power was far weaker than that wielded by the mission board executives. This imbalance not only aggravated many presbyterial-oriented Evangelical and Reformed members; it exacerbated a long smoldering conflict among free-wheeling Congregational Christians. Committees on structure found popular support in many quarters.

This inherent structural conflict was complicated over the years as racial-ethnic and gender based caucuses multiplied and petitioned for seats at denominational decision-making tables. Advocates for these groups discovered more flexibility in the General Synod and its instrumentalities than in the mission boards, and their inclusion under the president's office tipped the original balance of power. By the late '90, the World Board had repositioned itself through an alliance with the Disciples of Christ while the Homeland Board had been disbanded through a series of internal legal maneuvers. A "New UCC" for the new century had been born.

Designing the structure for this new multicultural, multiracial, open, affirming, and accessible church, however, generated its own conflicts. One reason was the commitment by many caucuses to preserving or expanding their spheres of influence. These competing claims might have been resolved were it not for a steady decline in denominational revenues. Despite a barrage of public-relations and identity campaigns, the institutional burden of the new scheme could not be financially supported. Within a decade structures were "streamlined" as substantial numbers of staff and volunteer positions were eliminated. It is into this breach that Clyde Steckel has chosen to step.

Thus far, the UCC's polity battles had been confined to the national arena, leaving relationships with and among state conferences, associations, and congregations intact. A major reason for avoiding denomination-wide restructuring is a clause in the UCC constitution declaring the congregation the basic unit of the Church and guaranteeing absolute autonomy for every individual congregation (and by implication for their associations and conferences). The 2000 edition of the Constitution and Bylaws, however, attempted to modify that guarantee by declaring all expressions of the UCC to be in covenantal relationship with each other, requiring each to extend mutual regard for the others. Steckel's purpose is to draw out the implications of this covenantal declaration and, through Constitution and Bylaw changes to rearrange and

regulate power dynamics throughout the denomination.

This systematic effort to identify and resolve anomalies of UCC polity would be enough to command the attention of denominational decision-makers. But Steckel has embedded his proposals in a theoretical context that raises its own anomalies. His basic argument is that the mission of the UCC is impeded by its polity, a polity erected under modernist assumptions but now rendered impotent in an era of post-modernity. He describes modernity “as a cluster of assumptions, beliefs, and values gathered under the banner of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe and North America.” Its “foundations were laid in the late middle-ages and the Renaissance [and Reformation] in Europe...” and the Copernican revolution. Modernity emphasized science, reason, objectivity, natural law, and individual autonomy. Steckel's readers should expect a vigorous critique of the culture and the churches as they have evolved under these values over the past 500 years.

What Steckel's readers might balk at, however, is the way he dismisses the power of modernity's assumptions and idealizes the efficacy of post-modernity's alternative culture. Post-modernity, he claims, cherishes and affirms diverse cultures and their histories, rejecting hierarchies and pursuing a diversity of ends according to their inherent values. For those of us who remember “the greening of America,” this vision is not new. But neither is it sustainable. Like the realm of God, it represents something that Christians reach for, but do not depend upon.

In Steckel's brave, new world of post-modernity, mission is no longer a subject to be studied, rationally determined, and systematically pursued; it is an image that is apprehended and incorporated into the lives of churches. Thus, the need for the powerful old mission boards is obviated. But as his book concludes, he proposes a radically new location for denominational power: the association.

UCC associations are a holdover from Congregationalism. They are not judicatories in the Presbyterian sense, but small, geographic collections of autonomous congregations. They are, however, the only ecclesiastical bodies responsible for recording the standing of UCC churches and ministers. They are generally ignored by both congregations and the larger conferences of which are a part as quaint relics of the past. But an earlier observer of UCC polity noted that with the provision of covenantal relations in the 2000 edition of the Constitution, associations had become the de facto basic units of the denomination. Without acknowledging that observation, Steckel builds upon its reality. He proposes that associations strengthen their duties by diversifying the scope of their operations and employing part-time staff to oversee progress toward multicultural goals. The result, if enacted, would be stand UCC polity on its head. Power would immediately flow to the associations, engendering fierce resistance from both congregations and conferences. Unless, of course, post-modernity has actually kicked in. Only time will tell.

Theodore H. Erickson
Box 124
Laughlintown, PA 15655
themeh11@yahoo.com
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