



let it shine

The Missionary Society of Connecticut

Our Heritage and History

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Psalm 133

The Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ has its roots in the notion that churches, like individual Christians, benefit from being in communion with one another. In the same way that members of local churches are strengthened and nurtured to be followers of Jesus as they worship, learn, and serve together, so is the larger church strengthened and nurtured by consultation, collaboration and cooperation.

As Christian churches were originally gathered in our “Constitution State,” that concept was affirmed very early on in a document we know as the Saybrook Platform. On September 20, 1709, twelve ordained ministers and four lay “messengers” met at Saybrook, as directed by an order of the Connecticut General Court, to establish a form of church governance that would be binding throughout the colony. The Saybrook Platform proposed that ministers, in association with one another, examine and authorize candidates for the ministry, and that countywide consociations of ministers and lay men have the authority to resolve disagreements in churches, to look after vacant churches, and to exercise discipline among ministers and churches as necessary. The Platform also provided for a General Association of *ministers*, composed of one or two delegates from each county consociation in the colony, to meet annually.

Those early consociations established by the Saybrook Platform are the predecessors of our 15 present day *associations* of churches. Those associations are the only gatherings of the United Church of Christ that have “authority over” member ministers and churches.

As early as 1751 there were calls for a colony-wide gathering of churches to be composed of *both clergy and lay delegates*. Those calls eventually led to the establishment of the Missionary Society of Connecticut by the General Association in 1798. In 1802, the General Assembly of the State

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of Connecticut directed that the affairs of that society be incorporated and governed by six ordained and six lay delegates (our present day Board of Directors). The mandate given to the newly formed statewide association of churches was to “Christianize the heathen of North American and to support and provide Christian knowledge in the new settlements within the United States.” Missionaries were sent to work among the settlers of Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Connecticut (present day Ohio). Mainly those missionaries gathered and preached in churches, established schools and libraries, and distributed literature.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th Centuries, as the needs of our communities evolved, the General Association and the Missionary Society would reorganize themselves for a variety of purposes—abolition, evangelism, church growth, women’s rights, the care of retired clergy, and poverty among them.

In the early years, the Saybrook Platform had been concerned with order and discipline. But as the predecessor organizations of our present Connecticut Conference evolved, the focus turned to evangelization, missionary service, and the needs and interests of member churches. In 1879-80, the Missionary Society of Connecticut became the basic financial structure of the General Conference of the Congregational Churches of Connecticut.

The Connecticut Conference of Congregational Christian Churches became the Connecticut Conference of the UCC in 1961. Our heritage is one of both autonomy and collaboration. We have a history of concern for the propagation of the Good News of Jesus Christ as well as the changing concerns and needs of the world. Our legacy of a deep sense of responsibility for the common good leads us into dialogue and cooperation with all who seek to make this world a community of justice and peace. While we recognize the reality that we imperfectly embody God’s dream for the human family, we believe the ancient psalmist was right. *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”*

Reflections:

- How does your church cooperate with others?
- What are the benefits? What are the liabilities?
- What does living in unity mean to you?

“The Missionary Society of Connecticut: Our Heritage and History” was written by the Rev. Dr. James S. Harrison, Pastor of the First Congregational Church of Woodstock.

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