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ARTICLE IX.

THE PROGRESS AND PRESENT STATUS OF
TRI-CHURCH UNION.

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THE meeting of the Congregational Council at Cleveland last October and the more recent meeting of the National Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church at Pittsburgh in May make the present a favorable opportunity to review the effort that has been made to effect a union of the Congregational, United Brethren, and Methodist Protestant denominations.

The first General Council of the three denominations was held at Dayton, Ohio, in February, 1906. At this Council a declaration of faith was adopted, the outline of a plan of union agreed upon, and committees appointed to work out this plan in more complete details. A second General Council was held in Chicago in March, 1907, attended by over two hundred delegates representing the three bodies. At this Council definite articles of agreement for the united churches were reported by the Committee of Sixty-three, and after three days' discussion were adopted with great enthusiasm and without a dissenting vote, these articles covering all the points necessary for a working organization.

The Declaration of Faith as adopted at the meeting of the General Council at Dayton, Ohio, was reaffirmed and adopted without change. This has already been printed in this magazine for April, 1906. The Articles of Agreement as adopted at Chicago are as follows:—

ARTICLE I.

"The name of this organization shall be The United Churches, comprising the Congregational Churches, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and the Methodist Protestant Church.

ARTICLE II.

"For the purpose of realizing the fellowship of the churches, and to provide for their coöperation, they shall be organized into District Associations, Annual Conferences, and a National Council.

ARTICLE III.

"District Associations shall have their boundaries, composition, duties, and prerogatives defined by the Annual Conferences, of which they shall be subdivisions.

ARTICLE IV.

"1. State Associations of the Congregational Churches and Annual Conferences of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and of the Methodist Protestant Church shall be recognized and continued as Annual Conferences under this organization until such time as the National Council may, by the consent of the parties concerned, arrange new boundaries. They shall have the right to maintain intact their present modes of organization and operation in local affairs, but they shall be known and styled as Annual Conferences of the United Churches, comprising the Congregational Churches, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and the Methodist Protestant Church; and they shall make effective this union by coöperating with the National Council in all matters affecting the general interests of the churches.

"2. Two or more State Associations or Annual Conferences may, by mutual consent, unite to form one Annual Conference, with power to make rules and regulations for its organization and operation in local affairs.

"3. All Annual Conferences shall have power to make rules and regulations for their organization and for the conduct of all their local affairs.

"4. Ordination to the ministry and ministerial standing shall be in Annual Conferences, except where it is preferred to delegate or leave these to local bodies.

ARTICLE V.

"The National Council of Congregational Churches and the General Conferences of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and of the Methodist Protestant Church shall continue their legal existence as long as may be deemed necessary.

ARTICLE VI.

"1. The National Council of the United Churches, comprising the

Congregational Churches, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and the Methodist Protestant Church, shall assemble in on the third Thursday in May, and regularly thereafter on the same day every four years. It shall be composed of representatives as follows: Each Annual Conference shall be entitled to one ministerial and one lay representative for every five thousand members and major fraction thereof, within its bounds, to be elected as itself may prescribe. *Provided*, that each Annual Conference shall be entitled to at least one ministerial and one lay representative; and *provided*, that the National Council may at any time change the ratio of representation.

"2. A majority of the representatives in attendance shall constitute a quorum of the National Council, and ordinary questions shall be determined by a majority vote; but no vote shall be passed contravening or modifying this Act of Union unless a majority of the representatives from each denomination represented in the union agree thereto. And whenever requested by a majority of the representatives of any one of these denominations, the vote shall be by denominations, and a majority of each shall be necessary to carry the question pending.

"3. The National Council shall elect at every quadrennial meeting a president, a secretary, a treasurer, and such other officers as may be deemed necessary, who shall hold office until their successors are elected, and who shall perform the usual duties of their office and such other duties in the service of the churches as the Council may determine.

"4. The National Council at its first meeting shall proceed to organize societies and boards for the conduct of the general business of the churches, such as missionary, evangelistic, educational, church building, Sunday-school, publishing, and other benevolent work; or it may adopt for any of these purposes societies and boards now existing, if a majority of the representatives of each denomination consent.

"5. In organizing these societies and boards the National Council shall name for membership therein those who now constitute such societies and boards in the denominations represented in this union wherever similar societies and boards exist; and in others membership shall be distributed among the denominations in due proportion. This arrangement, however, shall be only temporary and for the purpose of facilitating the combination of the interests involved and preventing confusion and interruption in the work of any existing society. As soon as may be, consistently with the interest of the work, the membership of these societies shall be reduced to a basis of economy and efficiency of administration, and the National Council shall at every quadrennial meeting determine how many and who shall constitute these societies and boards.

"6. All societies and boards now existing in the churches represented in this union shall, as soon as possible after the adoption of this Act of Union, and the organization by the National Council of the societies and boards indicated in this article, cease their active operations in collecting funds from the churches. They shall hand over to the corresponding societies and boards organized in pursuance of this article the income of all their funds and the use of the property and equipment now used in the prosecution of their work, wherever this may be lawfully done pursuant to their corporate purpose; and in general it is understood that they will cooperate in carrying out the true intent and purpose of this union, to consolidate all the active operations of the three denominations in general church work. But nothing herein contained shall direct nor authorize any diversion of trust funds from the spirit of the purpose for which such funds were donated.

"7. The societies and boards organized by the National Council shall meet at the call of the president of the Council as early as practicable after the adjournment of the Council, and elect officers. They shall secure charters in pursuance of the instructions of this article and appoint secretaries and agents for the prosecution of the work assigned them. They shall arrange for the visitation of churches and Annual Conferences by their agents in the interest of their work, and take full charge of all the work now performed by corresponding societies and boards in the denominations represented in this union. They shall make a full report to each regular meeting of the National Council, and shall be responsible to that body.

"8. The National Council shall make rules and regulations for the conduct of its business and for the prosecution of all the general work of the church; it shall counsel, warn, and appeal to the churches on questions of religious and administrative concern, and in general shall represent the churches; *provided*, that nothing be done in contravention of this Act of Union.

ARTICLE VII.

"Ministers in good standing in any denomination represented in this union shall be ministers in this organization. Licentiate shall retain their standing for the period of their licensure. Ministers under censure must look to their own denomination for relief.

ARTICLE VIII.

"This union shall be consummated by the adoption of this Act of Union by the denominations represented, in accordance with their rules and regulations; and when the moderator of the National Council of Congregational Churches, the bishops of the General Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and the president of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church

shall have announced that this Act of Union has been adopted by the proper bodies representing their respective denominations, these officers shall unite in filling the blank in Article VI., Section 1, fixing the place and time for the meeting of the National Council, and publish the same, together with a call for the election of representatives, according to Article VI."

The name is long and cumbersome, but for legal reasons it seemed advisable to include the full name of each of the present societies.

The central object of the union is stated in the second article. District associations, annual conferences, and a national council are organized "for the purpose of realizing the fellowship of the churches, and to provide for their coöperation." It is not a central legislative body, but a means of orderly coöperation for the purpose of mutual helpfulness and efficient service.

ANNUAL CONFERENCES.

As described in Articles III. and IV., the plan of union is to be worked out through the annual conferences of the three bodies corresponding to the state associations of the Congregational Churches. These are to be left intact as at present existing in the three churches until such time as they shall by mutual consent decide to merge together or to change their boundaries. In some instances this would very likely be brought about within a few months or years, and in other instances a much longer period would elapse. In any community where they prefer to retain their present separate annual conferences they can do so, and yet all meet together in the same National Council and coöperate in their benevolences through the same national societies. By this method the United Brethren and Methodist Protestants might continue their present plan of assigning ministers to the churches each year without affecting the Congregational churches located in the same state

and yet be in fellowship and coöperation in the general activities and benevolences of the united churches. This seems to be a very happy solution of a somewhat difficult problem. The individual customs and wishes of each denomination are respected and protected, and yet all are brought together for general fellowship and coöperation.

INDIVIDUAL CHURCHES NOT AFFECTED.

There has been some inquiry as to the effect of the union on the individual church. Each of the three denominations is naturally attached to its own methods of conducting church service and managing church affairs. A careful examination of the Articles of Agreement reveals no encroachments on the liberty of any individual church. The Act of Union is designed to affect the churches, not in their individual activities, but only in their coöperation with each other for mutual helpfulness and for the better administration of their benevolent activities. The individual church remains unaffected as to name, ownership, control of its property, the selection of its pastor, and the free administration of its own affairs.

There is, however, a strong and rapidly growing feeling among Congregationalists that better provision should be made than at present for the propagation of their church polity, the orderly conduct of their church business, and especially for giving systematic aid to such churches as may be in temporary need of assistance. While the present polity has worked well with strong, self-reliant churches which are able to stand alone, it has often broken down with feeble churches which frequently need advice or help in time of special adversity.

This desire for better organization is already finding expression in many of our states in the appointment of com-

mittees on pastoral supply, and in some cases in the appointment of a salaried superintendent who shall look after the welfare of any church needing temporary assistance. It is not the exercise of authority by a central hierarchy, but the offer of voluntary assistance which in almost every instance needy churches are very glad to accept.

The tendency of all Protestant denominations is gradually toward each other. Essentials are emphasized more, and non-essentials less. The itinerary is less mandatory now in all churches which practise it than it was forty years ago, and it seems not improbable that it will finally become in form what it is now largely in fact,—an advisory action to the church and minister interested. On the other hand, the Congregationalists have no organized method of bringing together churches without a pastor, and pastors without a church; and it is generally recognized that an agency for this purpose, with advisory powers, would be of great service to the denomination. It, therefore, seems probable that the natural development of the three denominations will in a comparatively short time bring them into substantial harmony on this most marked point of difference.

THE BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES.

The most radical departure from the present Congregational practice in the proposed Articles of Agreement is the change in the control of the benevolent societies. The six societies of the Congregational Church grew up independent of united church action, and for the most of their history they have remained independent bodies not directly representative of the churches of the denomination. The fact that the societies looked to the churches for their support has kept them responsive to the wishes of the churches; but it is generally

recognized that the relation is not the proper one, and all of the societies must soon become directly responsible to the representatives of the churches. The proposed Articles of Agreement provide for having all of the societies directly responsible to the churches as represented in the National Council. The propriety and advantages of this arrangement are so manifest that few will be found to criticise it.

ACTION OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.

The Act of Union as agreed upon at Chicago was referred to the three denominations to be considered by them at the next regular meetings of their national organizations. The National Council of the Congregational Churches was the first of the three national bodies to meet, and the report of the General Council came before them for consideration at their meeting in Cleveland last October. The council referred the report to a special committee of twenty-eight. This committee gave public hearings for several days to all who wished to present their views, and over ninety delegates spoke before the committee. After very full discussion and consideration the committee presented a report to the Council signed by twenty-four members, which was all who were present at the Council when the report was completed. This report, which, after some discussion, was adopted by the Council, was as follows:—

“REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF TWENTY-EIGHT.

“The National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States, in session at Cleveland, Ohio, October 8-17, 1907, having heard a remarkable volume of testimony from all parts of the country, hereby records its conviction that our churches will go forward to consummate union with the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Methodist Protestant Church.

“We recognize in the Act of Union adopted by the General Council of the United Churches at Chicago the fundamental principles by

which such union must be accomplished. The aim of that act is the desire of our churches. The act provides for a representative council of the united churches, combines their benevolent activities, and conserves their vested interests. It makes provision for the gradual amalgamation of their state and local organizations, leaving the people of each locality free to choose their own times and methods for the completion of such unions. It contemplates, as the result of a continued fellowship of worship and work, a blending of the three denominations into one. This is the end to which the Act of Union looks forward, and these are essential means of its accomplishment.

"We recognize that, for the consummation of this union, each denomination is prepared to modify its administrative forms. Among our ministers and churches there have arisen divergent opinions both as to the interpretation of certain clauses and as to the effect of certain provisions in the Act of Union; while of some details therein proposed important criticisms have been made.

"We recognize, further, that the other church bodies, when they convene for consideration of the Act of Union, may likewise find that certain of its features can be improved.

"We, therefore, invite the other two denominations to unite with us in referring the Act of Union to the General Council of the United Churches, to afford opportunity for perfecting the plan of union; the General Council to report its results to the national body of each denomination.

"We also recommend the adoption of the following resolutions:—

"1. That the Committee on Comity, Federation, and Unity to be appointed by this Council be authorized to act with representatives of the other two denominations in procuring the reassembling of the General Council of the United Churches, and also to act in behalf of the National Council in aiding the consummation of the proposed union, and in the further advancement of the cause of Comity, Federation, and Unity among various Christian bodies.

"2. That, in case the Committee on Comity, Federation, and Unity find it desirable to add to its members for special service, it have authority to do so.

"3. That our membership in subsequent meetings of the General Council of the United Churches be thoroughly representative of our churches and elected in their state organizations, the securing of such elections on a proper ratio of representation in the various state bodies, and the filling of vacancies, to be in the hands of the Provisional Committee.

"4. That a committee consisting of Rev. Drs. Washington Gladden, William Douglas Mackenzie, and William Hayes Ward be appointed to present this action to the United Brethren and the Methodist Protestant Church."

It will be noted that the only criticism of the plan of union is contained in a single sentence of the third paragraph, and is to the effect that divergent opinions have arisen as to the interpretation of certain clauses and provisions, while important criticisms have been made of some of the details. The report does not state the particulars of these divergent interpretations and criticisms, but most of them may be gathered from the addresses made before the Committee of Twenty-eight. The most important, and the one that found largest expression, was that the annual conference was given too much authority and the district conference too little. The annual conference is authorized to elect delegates to the National Council and to define the boundaries and duties of the district associations. At present the National Council of the Congregational body is composed partly of delegates elected by the state bodies and partly by delegates elected by the local or district associations, and it is thought by many that the local associations, which are nearer to the churches, are more likely to be truly representative of them. The principal argument in favor of the method proposed is that it is more simple to carry into effect. There are necessarily many complications in the attempt to bring three bodies with different plans of organization into one harmonious union, and these will be aggravated by having a complicated system of electing delegates. Confusion will also be likely to arise unless there is a clearly defined definition of the respective duties of the annual conferences and district associations. For these reasons it would be easier in working out the plan of union to accept the method as defined in the report and then later to enlarge the scope and power of the district associations if it were found desirable.

Some have expressed a fear that the autonomy of the in-

dividual church was in danger of invasion. Any such fear comes from reading into the Articles of Agreement a meaning which the authors never intended. This point was fully discussed by the committee that prepared the articles and in the General Council at Chicago, and all were agreed that no present right or liberty of the individual church would be surrendered by the Act of Union. As we have explained elsewhere in this article, the union is designed to affect the churches in their coöperative work with other churches and not in their individual activities or control. Besides it would not be possible for any Act of Union of this kind to take away from the church the liberty of action or property rights which it already enjoys.

Objection has been made to the fact that the present national bodies are to continue their legal existence after the union is formed (Article V.), and some have thought that this implies that there is to be no real union. This action was taken solely for the purpose of meeting any legal complications that might arise, and would in no way interfere with the complete union of the denominations in all of their organized activities.

Another objection is that the different annual conferences are permitted to continue indefinitely side by side in the same territory. How could it be otherwise if the union is to be the voluntary act of the different denominations and churches interested? The whole genius and history of each of the three denominations is opposed to any act of coercion. The churches in any locality must be left free to continue their present organization or to unite with those of the other denominations as they shall prefer. It is probable that in many of the states the union would be brought about almost as soon as the bodies are brought together, but, if in any state several

years should elapse, it will in no way interfere with the fellowship and coöperation, which are the chief ends sought by the union.

Except for the criticism of the unimportant details which we have mentioned, the report of the Committee of Twenty-eight was highly commendatory to the plan of union. It states that "the Council hereby records its conviction that our churches will go forward to consummate union with the churches of the United Brethren in Christ and the Methodist Protestant Church." It recognizes in the Act of Union "the fundamental principles by which such union must be accomplished. The aim of that Act is the desire of our churches." It recommends the reassembling of the General Council of the United Churches for "perfecting the plan of union." It appoints a new Committee on Comity, Federation, and Unity to "act in behalf of the National Council in aiding the consummation of the proposed union," and, finally it appoints a special committee, consisting of Doctors Washington Gladden, William Douglas Mackenzie and William Hayes Ward, to present this action to the United Brethren and Methodist Protestant churches.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE ON POLITY.

Even more significant than the report of the Committee of Twenty-eight was the action of the Council upon the report of the Committee on Polity. This committee was appointed three years ago by the Council at Des Moines, and brought in a series of eleven resolutions designed to unify and strengthen the Congregational churches in their organic and coöperative activity. After full discussion, and with a separate vote upon each resolution, all of these recommendations were adopted by the Council with substantial unanimity. The

first resolution recommends the adoption of the name "Annual Conferences," for the local organizations, and "District Associations" for the local organizations, thus securing uniformity of name throughout the denomination and adopting the nomenclature proposed in the "Act of Union" with the other denominations. It is also recommended that increased responsibility be placed upon the district associations, so that they may perform many of the functions now referred to special councils of the churches. The tenth and eleventh recommendations are so important that we give them entire.

"X. That the state organizations become legally incorporated bodies; and that under a general superintendent and such boards as they may create, and acting in coöperation with committees of local associations and churches, they provide for and direct the extension of church work, the planting of churches, the mutual oversight and care of all self-sustaining as well as missionary churches, and other missionary and church activities, to the end that closer union may insure greater efficiency without curtailing local independence.

"XI. That the administration of the benevolent interests of the churches be directed by the representatives of the churches in national organization, and that this Council appoint a commission of fifteen, including a representative from each of our benevolent societies, who shall report at its next regular meeting such an adjustment of these societies to the body of the churches represented in this Council as shall secure such direction, care being taken to safeguard existing constitutional provisions of these societies and the present membership of their boards of control, but also to lodge hereafter, the creation and continuance of these administrative boards in the suffrage of the representatives of the churches."

It will thus be seen that the Council by its action at Cleveland has already adopted several of the most important changes involved in accepting the Act of Union, including increased responsibility by the district associations and annual conferences and such a re-organization of our benevolent societies as shall provide that "the benevolent interests of our churches be directed by the representatives of the churches in national organization."

ACTION OF THE METHODIST PROTESTANT CHURCH.

Since the above was in type, the Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church has been held in Pittsburgh. At this meeting, overtures for union were received from the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, then in session in Baltimore, from which church the Methodist Protestants had separated in 1828. This proposal is part of a general scheme which seeks to unite all of the different bodies of the Methodist name or polity in this country, and includes also an invitation to the United Brethren Church.

With this new proposition before them, the Methodist Protestant Conference adopted the following resolutions:—

“That we express our affectionate esteem for the brethren of the Congregational Church and for the deep interest they have shown in the movement for church union; but that we deem it inadvisable at this time to send back the Act of Union for revision.

“That we respond heartily to the proposal of the Methodist Episcopal Church, not unmindful of the difficulties to be overcome before a satisfactory conclusion can be reached, but ready to go as far and as rapidly in consummating a universal Methodism as the interests and integrity of our own denomination will permit, and to pray continually for the full realization of their and our hope.

“That a commission, consisting of nine members, be appointed by this conference for the purpose of meeting with a like commission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, of the Methodist Episcopal Church South and of all other Methodist churches in this country, to promote and complete so far as may be possible the reunion of Methodists in America.

“That since we have had such assurances from the United Brethren Church of their cordial feeling for us and their deep interest in church union, we hereby empower this commission to meet with a like commission of the United Brethren Church, with the view of promoting organic union with them and enlisting them in this movement.

“That this commission shall report to the next General Conference.”

This action of the Methodist Protestants probably closes the effort for union between the Congregational, United Brethren,

and Methodist Protestant denominations. If, however, this effort proves in any measure instrumental in bringing about the larger union of the different branches of the Methodist Church, it will many times repay the time and labor which have been spent. The spirit of union is growing in modern Christian churches, and there is much ground for the hope that this spirit may lead to the gradual bringing together of all religious bodies which profess the name of Christ.