Services and Societies

in

The First Church of Christ

Middletown, Conn.

1870-1890

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Robert Clarke, archivist of the First Church of Christ, who gave me access to records there, the friendly librarians at the Wesleyan Archives, and the Kistlers and others of the Karatana Community who acted as a sounding board for ideas, offered housing, and encouragement in so many ways during the writing of this paper. Many thanks to all!
American Protestant churches experienced a change in the nineteenth century away from their covenantal beginnings. By 1850, community life had been secularized as seen in the breakdown in the strict observance of the Sabbath and the increased moralizing in sermons. Also a separation between religious life and social and political life had occurred. No longer was the community ruled by an oligarchy of church elders. The similarity in status of church members limited the previous broad social life. Wanting to 'socialize', churches played down the theological aspect of the churches' life and emphasized activities. Particularly in the latter part of the century, organizations grew and became a big part of church life.

These generalizations touch on some of the trends of the Protestant churches during the eighteenth century. I wish to focus on one of them, the importance and growth of activities, with respect to one church, the First Church of Christ, Congregational in Middletown, Connecticut from 1870-1890. By looking at the services and societies of First Church, I hope to shed light on the changing religious emphasis of the church and to document the rise of organizations. The minutes of the First Church for the years 1870 and 1891 and the annual reports for the years intervening served as the basic source of information on these aspects of church life.
By services, I mean times of corporate worship at which the pastor(s) officiated. On Sundays at First Church, two worship services took place—one at 10:30 A.M. and the other at 7, or 7:30, probably depending on the time of year. The 'Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper' was a part of these services on the first Sunday of alternate months beginning in January. Other rites, such as baptism, and the acceptance of new members, took place from time to time in these services. There were also several services which were scheduled during the week which were under the direction of the pastor. One of these, the Communion preparatory lecture, was held the Thursday or Friday before Communion Sunday. Then on Wednesday nights there was a prayer meeting.

These services and meetings were regular happenings between 1870 and 1890. Little change was made in their scheduling or format. The only new addition to the list of services was a service for Swedes begun in 1885. However, an outside minister conducted them and when the Swedish church was built the Swedish congregation moved on.

The written beliefs of the church, as found in the manuals of 1870 and 1891, barely changed in wording and material during this time. The most significant wording change was in the title of the section relating information on beliefs. The 1870 title "Confession of Faith and Covenant" became "Forms of Faith and Usage" in 1891. In 1891, a more full description of the baptismal rite was included. The church outwardly
outwardly believed the same things in 1891 as in 1870.

The major innovation in services during this time was the increased use of music. In 1883, song was added after a visiting instructor in vocal singing gave public singing lessons. These lessons were carried on by the organist among the young in 1884. Also around this time a book entitled "Spiritual Songs for Social Worship" began to be used in chapel and parlor meetings. The worship of the whole congregation received a boost in 1889 when a book entitled the *Laudes Domini* replaced the *Book of Praise*.

From this evidence the services appear to have remained the same from 1870 to 1890, although the introduction of song in the eighties livened up worship. Although an important part of the church's life, the services were not the only or growing part of the church. Other areas need to be looked at for this.

Prayer meetings may have been one form in which the life of the church was manifest. Two are on record as meeting during this time. The Young People's Prayer Meeting began in 1875 and continued through 1890. The Ladies' Prayer Meeting probably existed before 1875 although that is when it first appears in the annual report. It must have stopped meeting in 1888 because no mention of it is made in years after that. Because of the lack of information on the function and attendance of these groups it is hard to tell much about how these groups might have contributed to the spiritual life of the
church.

The societies of First Church deserve examination at this point. Although considered separate organizations of the church they involved many members of the church and were a regular part of its calendar. The Ladies' Home Missionary Society was the oldest of the societies, organized in 1830. It met twice a month to prepare items of clothing for barrels which were sent to missionaries in settlements throughout the United States. Two years Indians were the recipients of their barrels. Through dues collected (two cents per meeting) and other offerings, they acquired money which was sent to missionaries and churches out West and to the Woman's Department of the Home Missionary Society in Washington, D.C. During the eighties they were particularly concerned with getting more money to send to the Washington society and more members. The situation looked better in 1887, when attendance was reported as being larger and a legacy was received.

The Bee Society was organized in 1874, to raise money by its activities for the needs of the church. Essentially, the money raised went for things like a new organ, carpets, and silverware. Each year the society would make money pledges to the church for specific items. Beyond the sewing work which they made at their meetings and sold, they raised money by sponsoring fairs, entertainments, and lectures. During the seventies the group made payments on the church building fund and on finishings.

The next oldest society, founded in 1870, was the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. This group met once a month on
Sunday afternoon for an hour of prayer, singing, readings, and sharing of news about missionary work. They read letters from the missionaries sponsored by the church, and on occasion had speakers. The money collected from dues (twenty-five cents a meeting) went for scholarships and to the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions to sponsor women missionaries. This group apparently was quite serious because no mention of food was made until its twenty-fifth anniversary. Another interesting fact about this society is noted by Nora Hill in her paper on the Bee and Missionary societies. She writes that in spite of the group’s missionary zeal the worshiping Swedes with their loud singing greatly disturbed the women one meeting.7

Five other organizations popped up in the church during this time. The Gleaners, organized first as the Juvenile Missionary Society in 1867, emerged in 1876 in the form it was to keep at least until 1890. Its emphasis was on “charitable efforts at home and abroad”8 Not much other information is available on this organization.

The next society to come into being was the Social Fraternity in 1877. Its purpose was “to promote the mental and social welfare of young people.”9 To this end the group of men who made up the Fraternity sponsored social, literary, and musical activities. In a sense, they were the male counterpart of the Bee Society only with a different outreach. Joint activities between the two societies are reported as having taken place.10
The Ten Times One Society, begun in 1830, was another organization with an emphasis on missions. Its members were young boys. It met monthly to hear lectures and raise money for missionaries.

Another significant organization was that called the Christian Endeavor Society, formed in 1887. Its aim was "to promote an earnest Christian life among its members, to increase their mutual acquaintance, and to make them more useful in the service of God." Its members were particularly young people. In this respect, their concern was similar to that of the Social Fraternity. Their aim was to fit young people to participate in the government and work of the church.

This organization was not particular to the First Church. The South Congregational Church had a similar group which was connected with a larger group in Hartford. In the First Church the Society met before the evening service on Sunday and accordingly stressed that it was not trying to be exclusive. It was, I think, a new expression of faith and perhaps was trying to make up for some of the lack in the services and other parts of church life.

A final new, yet old, organization was the Maternal Association. Apparently, mothers had been meeting together once a week to discuss common concerns since 1835. Finally, in 1889, they became an association and were entered in reports along with the other societies. This may be a reflection of the desire and need for organization that arose in the late
eighteen-hundreds.

These societies of the seventies and eighties number eight. Four were brand new, two were old groups either formally organized for the first time or reorganized during this period, and two existed in an organized form before 1870. Thus, there was a definite rise in the number of organizations. Two societies (the Bee Society and the Social Fraternity) were predominantly social groups, four were related to missions, one to Christian nurture, and one (the Maternal Association) existed for the mutual support of its members. From the variety of societies it can be concluded that the interests of many were effectively carried out by by organizations.

An organization that exhibits much of the vitality of the church during this time, was the Sabbath (later Sunday) School. In the 1891 manual, the Sabbath School was written up as "an important branch of the Church..." which "...shall be under its oversight." It maintained its own organization. Its board of directors (not including teachers and officers) consisted on an average of about ten members from 1871-1890, which was larger than the board that ran the entire church.

The Sabbath School was considered so important because it was a major means of bringing the Christian faith to a large number of people. Children of parents who attended church and also children with no affiliation with the church
were enrolled at an early age. The Sabbath school proved an effective way of getting children to join the church and of interesting parents in attending.

The foremost concern of the Sabbath School was teaching Bible lessons. In addition, they also taught some of the rudiments of reading and writing. The growing interest in education was not left out of the churches. As time went on the Sabbath School engaged in recreational activities, such as excursions and picnics. Also, the practice of taking up collections among the students to encourage giving to charity at an early age and to add to the church's library. Music and art activities were added to the program in the eighties.

Although begun in the 1820's the Sabbath School was still growing tremendously in the 1870's and 1880's. The growth in the number of officers and teachers as well in the number of students attests to this. (see Graphs 1 and 2) Another aspect of growth was the development of the Home Department of the Sabbath School. In 1884, it was suggested in the annual report that a program should be started for children who could not make it to church on Sundays. In 1885, the program was initiated and students were allowed to complete Bible lessons at home. The program was successful and was continued in following years.

From the above information one can gain some insights into life at First Church during the 1870's and 1890's. The evidence shows a stability in the services of the church. They existed
as established parts of the church prior to 1870 and probably after 1890. Their content as judged by the fact that the ritual changed little, remained much the same. Although singing appears to have grown in popularity. The study of sermons given during the period, which time did not allow, would give more information about the content of services.

The number and variety of societies point out their importance in the church during this time. The growth of societies and the Sabbath School perhaps point to a new focus of church life. Through small organizations, which were on the rise throughout the country in the secular world, churches were continuing their teaching and ministering efforts that are so much a part of their call. Churches were trying to be effective in a new way in a changing society. In First Church the means for doing this was through activities sponsored by the societies. During this period and the eighteenth century in general religious life is to be seen in terms of them and not the covenantal community.
Graph 1. Number of Students Enrolled in Sandham School, 1871-1880.
Footnotes


3. Smith, p. 75.


5. The name "First Church of Christ, Congregational" was changed from "First Congregational Church" in 1886.

6. One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the South Congregational Church, Middletown, Conn., 1747-1897, p. 74.


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