Congregational churches became widely established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, later New England. With their insistence on the independence of local bodies, they became important in many reform movements, including those for abolition of slavery, and women's suffrage. As of the early 21st century, Congregationalism in the U.S. had split into three major bodies: the United Church of Christ, which most local Congregational churches affiliated with, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, a fellowship of churches and individuals formed to continue and foster classic Congregationalism as the merger that created the UCC was being debated, and the Conservative.

Congregational dynamics in the early tradition of independency.

This study investigates the nature of congregational care within the membership of the earliest congregational-style churches in England during the period 1550-1689. The purpose of this research is to analyze the causes of their survival or demise that may be found within the congregational dynamics of the early separating churches. Having separated from the Church of England, and living on the fringes of the Puritan movement, these congregations experimented with new forms of polity and created unique roles for their pastors and members. New membership dynamics thus emerged. This research answers the question: What were the early manifestations of separatist ideology and independency that allowed some independent congregations to thrive under Tudor and Stuart repression, while others failed to survive? The uniqueness of this study is its search through primary documents for the bases on which the body-life of the congregations were predicated, and for specific indications within their records as to how this body-life was lived out in mutual support and care of members for each other. Previously no other study has brought this information together in one project. Nor has anyone revealed the correlation between membership nurture and care, and local church polity as a cause for the growth or demise of a congregation. My hypothesis was that, where faithfulness to one's gathered community of faith was implemented through the dynamics of mutual care and support, survival through jeopardous circumstances was possible, even while church leaders were imprisoned. However, where the dynamics of mutual care and support failed, the group failed to thrive, or even survive. The conclusion is that, in order for these churches to have survived and grown into stable congregations and associative bodies, they entertained a unique ecclesiology, a theology of suffering, and a form of mutual congregational nurture and care, beyond what could have been carried out by the pastors and elders alone, which occurred within the congregations, and they formed supportive associations among independent churches. The records of the early congregational-type churches, such as those at Gainsborough, Scrooby, Spitalfields, Southwark, London, Bristol, and others presented herein, substantiates this conclusion.

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