

## **FT-8420, Congregational Polity Spring '09**

**Rev. Mark W. Harris**

### Course Description:

This is a course in the history and development of Congregational Polity in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. How did Congregational Polity evolve and what were the differences in the Unitarian and Universalist approaches to governance? How have we handled issues of centralized authority and bureaucracy? We'll look at how religious communities make decisions, support their leaders and define ministry. With ministry we will ask about power, gender and ethics, the call, and the meaning and context for worship and rites of passage.

### Congregational Polity Syllabus

Rev. Mark W. Harris

### Course outline -

Requirements: reading assignments for each week, and a reflection paper on the topic for the week.

References here to "POSTED" means items that are posted on website. This includes the readings listed below, and most weeks there is also lecture material from my own work.

Every student is asked to write a weekly reflection paper based on the question for that week. These papers should be partly a response to the weekly readings, but also be a personal reflection based on the student's individual experience of congregational life and ministerial experience or training. The length of the reflection paper should be approximately 500 words or one page single spaced (more or less). It may only need to be a paragraph or two, but some might be longer.

Final assignment: 10 page sermon or term paper on one of the weekly topics researched and reflected upon in greater depth, with an emphasis upon how this topic fits into our overall understanding of a UU "doctrine of the church," or some other church governance issue that helps you formulate a "doctrine of the church."

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### **Week 1: Forms of Church Government - European and Puritan background - Significance of Cambridge Platform**

**Paper:** What makes congregational polity different from other kinds of church government?

## **Week 2: Covenant/ Mission**

**Paper:** How do you understand the difference between covenant and mission?

## **Week 3: Unitarians and Church Governance**

**Paper:** What is the effect of religious individualism on how our churches are governed?

## **Week 4: Universalists and Church Governance**

**Paper:** How did its lack of centralization affect Universalism in both positive and negative ways?

## **Week 5: Unitarian Universalist Association**

**Paper:** How do you identify Unitarian Universalism as a religious movement - denomination, church., sect, association - and why?

## **Week 6: Church Membership**

**Paper:** Write a newsletter column on why people should join the local UU congregation (what does it mean to join a UU church?). Could you also comment briefly on who is welcome in our congregations, and why?

## **Week 7: Sacraments - Baptism and Communion**

**Paper:** What does the word Sacrament mean to you, and do we have any UU sacraments today or the equivalent?

## **Week 8: Ordination**

**Paper:** Who determines what makes a minister in our denomination - the call, the fellowshiping process, the ordaining power? Have the congregations lost their authority in recent years? What does it mean to be ordained, but not serving a congregation? How does polity influence the notion of call? Are ministers employees or self-employed?

## **Week 9: Leadership – Who’s in Charge?**

**Paper:** What is the difference between influence and power in the ministry? Who really runs the church? Are there differences or issues with gender? What about multiple staff issues?

## **Week 10: Congregational Worship - Whose service is it?**

**Paper:** What is the role of the minister in worship, and how does she/he make it the people’s work?

## **Week 11: Rites of Passage**

**Paper:** What is your theology of death? What are you trying to do in a memorial service?  
OR What is your theology of marriage?

## **Week 12: Sources of Authority - Where do we derive our authority as ministers, religious individuals, congregations? Is there a UU Canon?**

**Paper:** What do you call upon for sources of authority in your ministry?

## **Week 13: Practice and Ethics of Ministry**

**Paper:** What do right relationships mean to you (both between parishioners and between parishioners and clergy)?

## **Week 14: Final Questions, Concerns, etc.**

**Sermon or paper due on:** an aspect of Congregational Polity researched in greater depth with commentary on its relationship to a doctrine of the church for liberals.

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### **Required Books to Purchase:**

Hughes, Peter, editor. *The Cambridge Platform*. Boston: Skinner house Books, 2008.  
ISBN 1-55896-537-8

Conrad Wright, *Walking Together*. Boston: Skinner House Books. ISBN 1-55896-129-1  
(These books available from the UUA Bookstore, <http://www.uuabookstore.org/> or 800-215-9076. Also available at the UC/GTU Bookstore; call 510/642-9000.)

On UUA Commission on Appraisal website, [http://www25.uua.org/coa/reports\\_issued.html](http://www25.uua.org/coa/reports_issued.html)

The Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*. Boston: UUA, 1997.

The Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. Boston: UUA, 2001.

**Additional Recommended Reading:**

Conrad Wright, *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practices*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997.

**Threshold Areas:**

This is a basic course in UU traditions and understanding of the role of ministers and their relationships with traditions, congregations and individuals.

