

## **“TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT”**

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A seminal era of our First Congregational Church, UCC is the 62 year ministry of our first pastor Moses Mather, and especially his role in the American Revolution. After the battle of Brooklyn, all of Long Island fell under British control. In turn, the Brits grew rather fond of making sporadic raids upon our Connecticut shore. In Middlesex parish--our name before the word Darien occurred to anyone—both Tories and patriots dwelt side by side. The Tories didn't flinch to betray prominent patriots into the hands of the British. This meant Dr. Mather was a marked man.

In 1779 five loyalists who also happened to be members of this congregation took Dr. Mather and his four sons prisoner. They survived the imprisonment and returned to Middlesex parish after five weeks. But Dr. Mather suffered imprisonment again on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1781 as a raiding party supported by the local populace surrounded the church during the afternoon worship and took 50 men prisoner. Not long after, 25 were released in a prisoner exchange, including Dr. Mather. Later, 19 more were freed. Alas, six perished in the New York's Provost Prison.

I ask you: how do you feel about your pastor or church taking sides in global entanglements? Of course, this incident is not a fair sample because of our natural sympathies as Americans, because we know which side won, and because we have a fine painting glorifying Dr. Moses Mather's stand in the Morehouse Room.

William Faulkner observed, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” He said that because the question of how we as church engage the world is ever with us. We live today amid all of those tensions. A recent visitor reminded me of this. A woman with a heavy accent visited our office weeks ago asking us to post a flyer. She is selling pierogis and stuffed cabbages to “support the Ukrainian army defending the world from the evil of Russian fascism.” We sympathized but didn't post it. She stopped in last week asking why. Admiring her pluck and resourcefulness, we explained the church doesn't usually raise funds for standing armies. In fact, we generally move in the other direction, away from violence, as we can.

But her evident passion impressed me. Was God prodding me with her visit to consider how we Christians faithfully relate in a deeply conflicted world? After all, it's World Communion Sunday. We do well to stretch our vision beyond ourselves. Since then I've learned both the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches are at the heart of the struggles around Russia usurping its neighbors since December.

The patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church in Moscow, a powerful man named Kirill I, has buddied up to Putin and the Kremlin to reestablish the ROC in Russia. He barely distinguishes between the interests of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church and actually lives in the Kremlin. In a recent address, Patriarch Kirill blended the purpose and role of his church with mother Russia using the

term “Russky mir”, meaning “the world of Russia”. He used that geopolitical concept “Russky mir” 38 times in that speech while mentioning God just three times.

Patriarch Kirill operates explicitly out of national ideology over Christian thought. “For them,” writes Antoine Arjkovsky, “democracy is a danger. They invented a new mythology, the new ideology of ‘Russky mir’...a new.... theology of politics.” It’s an old story. The church blesses the nation-state and expects blessings back. It is a devil’s bargain. They won’t respect us in the morning. It compromises us.

One of the reasons the world has been so slow to respond to the crisis in Syria is because of the strong dissent voiced by Russia. Why was Russia so reluctant? Because of Patriarch Kirill. Representatives of the ROC spoke out strongly against any intervention. They took divergent views from the West in almost all of the details. This close axis of church/state is why that girl punk band staged their raucous protest concert in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior back in 2012.

But what about the Ukrainian side? They are known as the Bible Belt of Russia. Communism had the most difficulty enforcing their official atheism in this region. Did you know that the Russian Orthodox Church began in Kiev? In 988 Prince Vladimir was the first baptized, a full 150 years before Moscow was a settlement.

The rallies in Kiev’s Independence Square-the *Maidan*-have united the Ukrainian Orthodox, the Ukrainian Catholics, and the 500,000 Protestants, including groups like the growing Pentecostals. A Baptist, Olexandre Tourtchinov has been elected President of their National Assembly and President ad interim of the republic.

Lots of priests and pastors gather in the *Maidan* in ecumenical prayer meetings. An ecumenical prayer chapel was built there at the outset of the demonstrations. After Russian agents destroyed that, another tent was raised as a funeral chapel to hold the memorial services for the dozens who were murdered by sniper fire. Cardinal Lubomyr Husar explained amid the massive protests against Russia’s incursions it is necessary to distinguish between God’s kingdom and Caesar’s.

All of it is instructive for Christians about our terms of engagement with the world. So I ask: how do you feel about your pastor taking sides in global entanglements? Moses Mather teaches us we cannot remain above the fray of what is happening in our own day. We can bring a Christian social witness, in the world but not of it.

Patriarch Kirill reminds us that as we look for benefits from whatever empire the church lives in, thinking we advance the cause of Christ’s church, we easily get coopted. We lose our spiritual integrity, trading transcendent theology for earthly ideology. That act is the same whether we do so in Russia or in America. Will Willimon says church complicity--even cooperation--with government is like porcupines making love. When it happens, it had better be done very, very carefully.

Yes, we need to respond to the vital issues of our time. But we reflexively tend to do so from the left side of this or the right side of that. We must begin and make our way from another place, with another agenda, disappointing both liberals and conservatives in one moment, but maybe learning something from them the next. We're Jesus' followers. Our politics are embedded in scripture and our practices.

I close with my Willimon/Hauerwas church-in-the-world quote sent in the Flash last week. "In saying, 'The church doesn't have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy,' we want to indicate an alternative way at looking at the political, social significance of the church. We seek to influence the world by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Jesus Christ. The best kind of church seeks to make visible to the world a people who are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God ...A church at its best shows the world a radical alternative in the congregation's determination to worship Christ in all things. As Jesus showed, the world, for all its beauty, is basically hostile to the truth. The church at its best is a church of the cross. The cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God's account of reality more seriously than Caesar's account of reality. The cross stands as God's (and our) eternal no to the powers of death, as well as God's eternal yes to humanity, that is, God's remarkable determination not to leave us to our own devices." Amen.