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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Church-Building and the Consolidation of the United States, 1865–1900

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Abstract

In the decades that followed the American Civil War, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians across the Northern United States embarked on a massive centrally coordinated church-building program. Just as capitalists and politicians poured resources into the American West and South to consolidate and cohere the newly reunited nation under a single economic and political order, these Northern Protestants also hoped to bind the republic's sections with a homogenous faith by bankrolling a continental network of church edifices across the country.

This article explores the role of the postbellum Protestant church-building endeavor in the broader process of national consolidation. It argues that the movement was nationally consolidative in three ways. Firstly, by pooling and re-distributing capital from wealthier congregations to their needier counterparts, the church-building organizations themselves brought greater uniformity and unity to the process of Protestant expansion in the United States. Secondly, the movement was compelled by a powerful religio-political philosophy of church-building the author terms "republican ecclesiology," which endowed the Protestant edifice with a key infrastructural role in national reunification as a stabilizing bastion of piety and patriotism, especially in the American West. Finally, church-building advocates believed that the cross-continental financial networks forged between benefactors and beneficiaries consolidated the nation spiritually by creating a more united body of Protestant believers all invested – emotionally as well as financially – in their compatriots' salvations.

Keywords: churches; Protestants; charity; American frontier; home missions; Gilded Age

I. Introduction

In the three and a half decades that followed the American Civil War, Protestants across the Northern United States undertook what must have been, by any quantifiable measure, one of the largest and fastest co-ordinated church-building endeavors in the history of Christendom. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and the Northern Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians had each established a centrally directed church-building organization that either lent or gifted money to

needy congregations who could not afford to construct a house of worship on their own, facilitating the erection of thousands of church buildings throughout the United States.[1] Though eligible congregations across the country benefited from these funds, external church-building resources were particularly welcomed in the nation's "peripheral" regions, namely the Western Frontier and the Reconstruction South, where adverse political and financial conditions regularly prohibited independent edifice construction.

The postbellum West and South were peripheral regions in the sense that many Americans at the Northern "metropole" imagined them as the frayed and unfinished edges of the republican tapestry in need of development and reconstruction. After the Civil War, both the West and South were objects of feverish economic boosterism, infrastructural investment, and political reorganization as both capitalists and politicians alike aspired to fuse these regions with the North into a contiguous national economy based on corporate American capitalism.[2] Postbellum attempts to reconstruct and integrate the republic's various sections economically, territorially, and politically were part of a broader process of national (and international) consolidation that scholars have long-argued fundamentally transformed the United States from a nation of isolated and intimate small-town communities into a more urbanized, bureaucratized, industrialized, and interconnected nation-state.[3] Titanic infrastructural developments like the transcontinental railroads and telecommunication lines physically facilitated this process of consolidation, cinching the sprawling Union – North, South, East, and West – more tightly than ever before and increasingly binding it to global networks of commercial and informational exchange.[4]

[1]This article focuses on five of the largest and most influential Protestant denominations in the Northern United States. Three of these – the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the Baptist Triennial Convention, and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) – were 'Northern' churches insofar as they were the denominational products of antebellum ecclesiastical schisms over slavery and secession. While ostensibly a non-sectional denomination, the National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States was traditionally strongest in the Northeast. Alternatively, the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA was arguably the least sectional church, having reunited with Southern schismatics post-Appomattox, but the overwhelming majority of its financial support for the church-building endeavour and the home mission cause more generally came from Northern dioceses (with the notable exception of the Bishop Robertson Memorial Fund, founded by a single donation from one Mr Willard E. Winner of Kansas City, Missouri, see *ACBFC 21st Annual Report September 1st, 1901* [New York: The Church Missions House, 1901], 7–12). It is therefore counted here as one of the 'Northern' churches for the sake of terminological consistency.

[2]Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (New York: Viking, 2016); Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Emma Teitelman, "The Properties of Capitalism: Industrial Enclosures in the South and the West after the American Civil War", *The Journal of American History*, 106, no. 4 (2019): 879–900; R. Scott Huffard Jr., *Engines of Redemption: Railroads and the Reconstruction of Capitalism in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[3]Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007, 25th Anniversary ed.); Andrew Heath, *In Union There is Strength: Philadelphia in the Age of Urban Consolidation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); on military consolidation, see Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 361; on contemporary critiques of consolidation, see Frank Towers, "The Threat of Consolidation", *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 9, no. 4 (December 2019): 612–632.

[4]Elliott West, *Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023); Richard R. John, *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); John A. Britton, *Cables, Crises, and the Press: The*

While entrepreneurs and statesmen devoted considerable resources to the nation's postbellum economic and political consolidation, Northern Protestants likewise invested large quantities of capital in pursuit of its *religious* consolidation. The primary instrument Northern Protestants used to establish a homogenous religious and cultural order across the Union was the home mission movement, a domestic counterpart to the more well-known foreign mission movement abroad.[5] After the Civil War thousands of mainly white and middle-class Northern Protestants donated millions of dollars to their respective denominations' home mission agencies, bankrolling the establishment of a Protestant civilization from sea to shining sea.[6] Laboring to convert and acculturate a diverse range of "heathens at home," including unchurched frontier settlers, Freedmen, "mountain whites" in the South, immigrants, Mormons, and indigenous Americans, home missionaries and their supporters imagined a republic full of men, women, and children who looked, thought, dressed, spoke, and worshipped more like them.

Though compelled chiefly by Christ's Great Commission to spread the gospel and save benighted souls from a sulphurous fate, Northern Protestants were also moved to support the home mission cause from a deep and abiding sense of patriotism. "Home Mission work is patriotism reduced to practice," one Presbyterian from Cincinnati named Mary Elizabeth Wampler wrote in 1898. "'Our land for Christ' is our watchword. Every patriot heart burns in the presence of its national banner."[7] Northern home mission advocates like Wampler earnestly believed that Protestantism was more naturally compatible with republican democracy than any other religion, and that a multi-faith, multicultural

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Geopolitics of the New Information System in the Americas, 1866–1903 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013).

[5]The literature on postbellum American home mission activity is vast. See, for example, Joe Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861–1890* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008, 2nd ed.); Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873* (Chapell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); James McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 2nd ed.); Paul William Harris, *A Long Reconstruction: Racial Caste and Reconciliation in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015, Updated Edition), Chapter 2; Daniel Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863–1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Protestant Clergy in the Great Plains and Mountain West, 1865–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Susan Yohn, *A Contest of Faiths: Missionary Women and Pluralism in the American Southwest* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995); Derek Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation: Evangelical Missions and the Problem of Race in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Andrew Short, *'To Spread Abroad the Gospel': The Home Missionary Enterprise in Gilded Age America, 1870–1902* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, 2022); Mark Teasdale, *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation: The Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1860–1920* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014); Michael C. McKenzie, *A Country Strange and Far: The Methodist Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1834–1918* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022). This scholarship, however, has traditionally been balkanised along denominational or geographic lines that obscure the movement's ideological (if not necessarily organisational) unity. For a more bird's-eye overview of the Northern Protestant home mission endeavor after the Civil War as a whole, see Gwion Wyn Jones, *Home Missions and the Religious Reconstruction of the United States, 1865–1900* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, 2024).

[6]Mark Teasdale uses the abbreviation 'WMCNB' – 'White, Middle Class, Native Born' – to describe home mission supporters. See Teasdale, *Methodist Evangelism*, 2.

[7]*Home Mission Monthly*, January 1898 (New York: Woman's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, 1898), 67.

society inevitably encouraged territorial fissiparity, secessionism, and civil strife. A homogenous Protestant culture, on the other hand, would ensure political concord and social harmony throughout an ever-growing and ever-changing republic. The historian Derek Chang has labelled this ideology "evangelical nationalism," and it provided a potent motivational engine that saw the home mission movement reach unprecedented heights of cultural, political, and financial power in the decades following Appomattox.[8]

Church-building played an indispensable role in the home mission movement. If evangelists were its infantry, church edifices served as its fortresses. In 1868, the Rev. Thomas Tasker, Vice-President of the Northern Methodists' Church Extension Society put it in no uncertain terms that "the Church Extension Society and the Missionary Society are twin sisters. They cannot live and prosper apart, but are essential each to the other."[9] Church edifices permanently entrenched the invisible spiritual gains won by domestic evangelists. "It is useless to think of, much less try to do, a permanent work, without accompanying our missionary labors with the erection of suitable houses of worship," complained the Baptist home missionary C.C. Chaplin in 1881 from Brenham, Texas, while requesting more support for church buildings. "Not to do so would be as unwise as to settle swarming bees with no hive for them to work in."[10] Churches rendered the home missionary's labors permanent, and brought some much-needed stability to the tumult of Christian proselytization on the national margins.

Besides entrenching hard-fought spiritual gains and denominational growth, many Northerners also believed that Protestant – and *only* Protestant – churches played an important infrastructural role in the nation's geopolitical consolidation, inculcating a common standard of civility and republican virtue wherever they were built. This was especially apparent in the American West where they provided a crucial moral brace for weak-legged infant settlements struggling with the violent vicissitudes and chronic political instability of frontier life. Churches physically transformed the settler community's landscape with their lofty steeples, a spiritual infrastructure designed not only to provide local congregants with the religious services they longed for, but to impress sinners with the reach and majesty of Christian power. This sort of architectural flexing was desperately needed out on the frontier, where Satan's chapel – the saloon – threatened to populate the growing Union with a deluge of enfranchised drunkards and sinners, imperiling both the republican experiment at home and the providential destiny of the United States to eventually evangelize the world beyond. In a time of untrammeled economic growth, rapid territorial settlement, and frenetic infrastructural development, a sufficient number of Protestant churches had to be built to keep pace with the nation's material prosperity lest the republic fall to the corrosive allure of Mammon.

This central conceit – that the Protestant edifice was as essential to the maintenance of self-government and social stability as the homestead, the school-building, or the court-room, and that a national network of these edifices served as nothing less than the country's moral mudsill – can be described as a 'republican ecclesiology'.[11] Promulgated

[8]Chang, *Citizens*, 7.

[9]*3rd MEC CES Annual Report, 1868* (New York: Printed for the Society, 1869), 21.

[10]*Baptist Home Mission Monthly*, January 1882 (New York: American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1882), 20. Henceforth *BHMM*.

[11]There are two distinct definitions of 'ecclesiology', both of which have inspired the way I use it here. The first is a more specific meaning as "the science of the building and decoration of churches", used by the Cambridge Camden Society – or 'Ecclesiologists' – in the mid-nineteenth century to promote neo-Gothic ecclesiastical architecture. (Quote from Paul Avis, "Introduction to Ecclesiology" in Paul Avis ed. *The Oxford*

through a boosterish church-building print literature and the missionary press more generally, republican ecclesiology provided a potent ideological justification for a more organized church-building effort after the Civil War by transforming it into an urgent matter of national security, persuading ordinary Americans to bankroll the systematic encastellation of the continent with a chain of Protestant citadels as an expression of both their piety and patriotism.

Republican ecclesiology was the natural outgrowth of a long-standing conflation between American Christianity and the language of republican liberty that the historian Mark Noll has termed "Christian republicanism," a tradition that he traces all the way back to the mid-eighteenth century.[12] This distinctly American form of ordered liberty, a republicanism tempered and restrained by Christian virtues, was – so its advocates contended – superior to the violent atheism of Revolutionary French liberty.[13] Republican ecclesiology, then, was a deliberate attempt to apply this long-standing assumption in the United States that Christianity was necessary for stable popular government to the specific problems raised by national expansion and consolidation after the American Civil War.

This article identifies three ways in which the postbellum church-building endeavor served as an instrument of national consolidation: structurally, ideologically, and spiritually. Firstly, by establishing a nationwide financial infrastructure that pooled capital and thereafter redistributed it between congregations across the continent, the church-building societies introduced a much greater degree of organizational coherence and integration to the process of Protestant expansion throughout the United States. Secondly, republican ecclesiology endowed church edifices with an important ideological role in the nation's political and cultural consolidation by suggesting that they brought a much-needed stabilizing influence to new settlements and ensured the country's sustainable expansion. Finally, the church-building endeavor forged deeply personal and intimate links between benefactor and beneficiary congregations despite often being located thousands of miles from each other. Church-building advocates believed that these connections consolidated the nation spiritually by forging a more faithful and pious communion of believers all invested – both financially and emotionally – in the fates of each other's souls.

Architectural historians like Brian Christopher Zugay and Jeanne Halgren Kilde have studied the Northern church-building societies before, but they have done so chiefly to evaluate their aesthetic and doctrinal contributions to the transformation of American church designs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[14] Analyzed within the broader

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Handbook of Ecclesiology [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 3); on the Ecclesiologists, see William Whyte, *Unlocking The Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Sacred Space* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 11–14). By this measure, a 'republican' ecclesiology refers to a *political* science of church-building that promoted the idea that sacred spaces exerted a stabilising moral influence on democratic communities. But my own use also invokes its more preponderant definition today as "The section of Christian theology dealing with the theory of the church" (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* [Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2017, 6th ed.], 451); likewise, 'republican' ecclesiology represented a religio-political theory of the Protestant church's purpose within a democratic polity based on popular government.

[12]Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73–92.

[13]Ibid., 87–88.

[14]Brian Christopher Zugay, *Towards a "New Era" in Church Building: Architectural Reform in American Protestantism in the Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth Centuries* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, 2004);

context of continental consolidation, however, the postbellum church-building effort provides an opportunity to incorporate religion at long last into a narrative that has heretofore been told almost exclusively in secular terms. For example, Brian Schoen and Frank Towers have recently observed that "national consolidation" occurred "as the result of conscious actions taken by political actors with access to the modern technologies of control – capital, transportation, legal processes, and most especially military power."[15] But religious actors – with access to their own capital and "infrastructural technologies" – also played a significant role by financing the construction of a continental lattice of church edifices designed to bind the fast-growing nation under a hegemonic Protestantism.

Northern Protestants also clearly attached as much symbolic significance to the logistical process of church-building as they did to the churches themselves; it meant a great deal to contemporaries that the *way* in which ecclesiastical infrastructure was built – and not only *what* was eventually built – cohered and unified the nation. In their view, centrally-organized church-building societies with pooled capital would foster mutual co-operation and sectional integration. Historians of religion, of course, do not need to be reminded of the powerful symbolic importance of church edifices.[16] But this study does invite them to consider how Christian communities in their own diverse times and places similarly endowed the mechanisms they used to fund and found houses of worship with wider spiritual, cultural, or political purposes, just as Northern Protestants did in the postbellum United States.

II. Organization and Methods

The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America inherited two traditions of antebellum church-building from its Old and New School forebears. In May 1844, the Old School General Assembly began its own church erection work before organizing a new Board of Church Extension in 1855 in an attempt to revitalize the cause. A year earlier in 1854, the New School's General Assembly had established its own church-building Board with an impressive $100,000 endowment, augmented with another $25,000 donation soon after. These two Boards continued to operate throughout the Civil War until denominational reunification in 1870, when a single organization was formed: the Board of the Church Erection Fund (BCEF).[17] The American Congregational Union (ACU) was founded in 1853, a product of the Albany Convention a year earlier where American Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians had terminated the Plan of Union that united them.[18] The ACU was originally envisioned not only as a church-building organization but as a society for the cultivation of a stronger denominational identity among American Congregationalists.[19] In time, however, the organization came

Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[15]Brian Schoen and Frank Towers, "Introduction: The United States Civil War Era and Sovereignty on the North American Continent", in Schoen, Towers, and Jewel Spangler eds. *Continent in Crisis: The US Civil War in North America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 10.

[16]See, for example, Whyte, *Unlocking the Church*.

[17]*10th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (New York: Board of Church Erection, 1880), 5.

[18]*Church-Building Quarterly*, July 1894 (New York: The Congregational Church Building Society, 1894), 140. Henceforth *CBQ*. (New York: American Congregational Union for quarterly issues published pre-April 1892).

[19]*Manual of the ACU* (New York: American Congregational Union, 1871), 7.

to focus exclusively on its church-building role, eventually renaming itself the Congregational Church Building Society (CCBS) in 1890.[20]

The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) ended up establishing what was, by sheer numbers, the most successful organized church-building endeavor of the era. The MEC's General Conference first made plans to organize an auxiliary in 1864. The resulting Methodist Church Extension Society (CES) was officially incorporated by the Pennsylvania State Legislature in March 1865, although it would not make its first disbursements until the following spring and would later be reorganized and renamed the Board of Church Extension (MBCE) in 1872.[21] The Northern Baptists first made a commitment to organized church-building in 1853 when the American Baptist Home Mission Society Executive Committee passed a resolution to raise funds for the cause. Unlike its peers, the work remained a department of the main home mission society rather than as a separate incorporated organization.[22] Finally, the Protestant Episcopal Church was a relative latecomer in adopting a centrally co-ordinated church extension scheme, establishing the American Church Building Fund Commission (ACBFC) in October 1880.[23]

The scale of the postbellum church-building effort was impressive. The Methodist Board of Church Extension reported that it had received, between 1865 and 1900, nearly $7 million in contributions and returned loans, aiding the construction of 11,677 churches across the country, by far the most numerically successful of the church-building societies.[24] Roughly 2/3rds of this amount had been distributed by donations and a third through loans.[25] By 1898, the Presbyterians reported that they had made 7,675 appropriations toward the construction of 6,305 churches since 1845, amounting to $3,814,139 in disbursements, property that they collectively valued at a remarkable $14,119,338.[26] Between 1852 and 1900, the Congregationalists received $3,681,530.36 toward church and parsonage building from contributors, funding the construction of 3,093 churches and 691 parsonages.[27] In 1900, the Baptists announced that, over the previous twenty years alone, they had aided 1,705 churches through gifts, loans, or a combination of both.[28] Finally, by 1901, the Episcopalians had distributed a total of 595 gifts and loans to 568 churches in total, with a permanent fund that had by then grown to a total of $367,218.13.[29] Altogether, by the end of the nineteenth century, these institutions had assisted the construction of well over 20,000 Protestant edifices across the whole breadth of the growing republic.

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[20]Henceforth, ACU will be used to refer to the organisation pre-1890, while CCBS will be used post-1890.

[21]*Church Extension Annual, 1879* (Philadelphia: Church Extension Rooms, 1880), 5. Henceforth *CEA*; *7th MEC BCE Annual Report for the Year 1872* (Philadelphia: Methodist Episcopal Book Room, 1872), 5.

[22]*Baptist Home Missions in North America; including A Full Report of the Proceedings and Addresses of the Jubilee Meeting, and a Historical Sketch of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, Historical Tables, etc., 1832–82* (New York: Baptist Home Mission Rooms, 1883), *Sketch* by Henry L. Morehouse, 371.

[23]*Board of Managers of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S. of America: Reports of Standing Committees, Recognized Auxiliaries, and Missionary Bishops, 1880–81* (New York: Bible House, 1881), 580.

[24]*Christianity in Earnest*, November–December 1900 (Philadelphia: Board of Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1900), 217. Henceforth *CiE*.

[25]For ratio, see *CiE*, July–August 1899, 44.

[26]*28th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (1898), 13.

[27]*CBQ*, January 1900, 44–45.

[28]*69th ABHMS Annual Report* (New York: American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1901), 121.

[29]Unique church figures calculated by deducting number of churches aided with a second or third loan (27 in 1901) from total. *ACBFC 21st Annual Report 1901*, 6.

Despite some important strategic and ideological differences, the church-building organizations were largely united on the biggest questions of method and principle. For example, none of the societies covered the *total* cost of a church edifice. Disbursements – whether loans or grants – were always envisioned as a helping hand and not a handout; the money they supplied from without would always supplement grassroots fundraising by congregants on the ground. The Congregationalists, for example, made it a clear policy of theirs to only subsidize "Last Bills."[30] In other words, applicants had to prove that they had exhausted all local options of fundraising that did not involve borrowing before they were eligible for ACU funds. This was more than just a practical matter of maximizing the numbers of churches they could aid with their limited resources. It also reflected a deeper conviction in the necessity for communal self-help and individualistic responsibility. As the Methodist CES justified it, the "true way to help others is *to help them to help themselves.*"[31]

Guided by these values, the church-building societies developed an arsenal of financial strategies and regulations that allowed them to consolidate donations and efficiently redistribute them wherever they were most needed. One of the most important financial decisions a church-building organization could make was whether to loan money to an applicant with interest or simply gift it outright with no legally enforced expectation of repayment. Most of the societies came to believe that loans and gifts were better-suited to certain situations and so decided to use a mixture of both in their disbursements as the circumstances demanded. By 1899, the Methodist Board used both a General Fund comprised of collections and other individual contributions, which was used primarily for donations and administrative expenses, as well as a Loan Fund, which was distributed at a 6 percent interest rate to needy churches.[32] By 1900, the Loan Fund held a total sum of consolidated capital amounting to $1,136,954.62[33] which compelled Bishop Charles Cardwell McCabe to describe the Fund appropriately as "a great church bank."[34] The Baptists eventually possessed both a loan and gift fund; loans were made for a period of between one and five years, normally at 7 percent interest[35], while gifts between $100 and $1000 were made only on several conditions: that "the church shall be well located, shall be needy, shall give promise of permanence and usefulness, shall do all that it can for itself, and that the gift from the Society shall leave it free from debt."[36] Until the Panic of 1873, the Baptists had predominantly used loans as their chief method of disbursement, but bitter contests between defaulting churches and the Mission Board encouraged them to prioritize grants post-1881, though loans continued to be made where and when necessary.[37]

Both the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists similarly experimented with their own disbursement policies. Initially, the Congregationalists favored the grant system, but gradually came to appropriate loans repayable in annual, semi-annual, or quarterly instalments more often, partly because they assumed that such a plan would draw more business support.[38] The Presbyterians' General Fund – composed of annual contributions

[30] *CBQ*, July 1888, 72.
[31] *4th MEC CES Annual Report, 1869* (New York: Printed for the Society, 1870), 49.
[32] *CiE*, September–October 1899, 56.
[33] *CiE*, November–December 1900, 218.
[34] *CiE*, May–June 1900, 120.
[35] *BHMM*, April 1896, 118.
[36] Ibid.
[37] *Baptist Home Missions in North America*, 'Sketch', 377–378.
[38] *Manual of the ACU* (1879), 14–15; *CBQ*, September 1886, 95.

– made both grants and interest-free loans. According to the Assembly's rules, grants could not exceed $1,000, nor could they amount to more than 1/3rd of the value of the church to be built; in the mid-1890s grants averaged around $500 each.[39] In 1891, the General Assembly approved the creation of a Loan Fund to supplement the Board's General Fund, based on a bequest by the philanthropist Mary Stuart.[40] The youngest of the church-building organizations, the ACBFC had the advantage of being able to observe what its peers had been doing for decades before settling on a hybrid system from the outset. As one of the Commission's board members explained, the Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians had "thoroughly tried the different systems of gifts and loans, so that we have the benefit of their experience, and are travelling over old ground."[41] The ACBFC used the interest from their Fund to provide gifts, while parts of the principal itself would be loaned and repaid at a reasonable rate.[42]

Whether to give a loan or grant was largely a matter of practicality. For weaker churches, it seemed more fitting to bestow a donation outright, so as to not impose more financial stress on a fledgling congregation than it could bear, while churches with a decent prospect of prosperity in the near-term future were more likely to be loaned the funds. The societies deliberately lent money at lower interest rates in order to provide churches with a less ruthless and exacting creditor than secular alternatives. Frontier conditions were inimical to the indigenous establishment of a spiritual infrastructure precisely because stratospherically high interest rates meant that the cost of borrowing for building was often prohibitively steep. The low rates offered by the church-building societies provided a welcome alternative source of credit that bypassed these western loan sharks. The Episcopalian LeBaron Bradford Prince, founding board member of the ACBFC, argued in October 1887 that the Fund's 6 percent interest rate, pegged to the average borrowing cost of eastern financial establishments, was a much-needed relief for frontier churches. As the chief justice of the Supreme Court of the New Mexico Territory, later appointed its Republican Governor in 1889, Prince was well-placed to speak on the subject.[43] "[As] a rule it is impossible to raise money on Church property at all," Prince explained, directly addressing eastern critics of the ACBFC who wondered why needy frontier churches could not simply borrow from their own local banks. The Episcopalians' 6 percent was a welcome relief from the first-class mortgages offered by Western institutions with interest rates ranging from 10 percent to as much as 18 percent. "This is not for lack of excellent security," Prince elaborated, "but because in a new country there are no estates, no moneyed institutions, and no accumulated capital, seeking such investment."[44]

Clearly, the alternative system of credit offered by the church-building societies allowed edifices to be built in places where adverse local conditions inhibited organic

[39]*Church at Home and Abroad*, April 1894 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1894), 275. Henceforth *CAHAA*.

[40]Ibid., 15, 81. For more on the relationship between investor and corporate capitalism and the home mission movement in a Presbyterian context, see Andrew Short, "Investments in the Kingdom of Christ': Home Missionary Fundraising and Investor Capitalism in the Late-Nineteenth-Century USA", *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 16, no. 5 (2023): 665–681.

[41]L. Bradford Prince, "American Church Building Fund Commission", *The Church Review*, No. 178, October 1887 (New York: Baum & Geddes, 1887), 426.

[42]See Ibid., 413–426.

[43]See Walter John Donlon, *LeBaron Bradford Prince, Chief Justice and Governor of New Mexico Territory, 1879–1893* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1967).

[44]Prince, "American Church", 424.

growth. A similar logic guided investments in the Southeastern US. Dominated by Southern Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, the region generally received less investment from the Northern church-building societies than the trans-Mississippi states and territories. But external church-building funds did allow some black communities in the South, for instance, to bypass the effects of local prejudices. In 1883, having appropriated money for the establishment of sixteen Freedmen's churches in Virginia and both North and South Carolina, the Presbyterian Board of Church Erection explained that "In most cases these buildings answer the twofold purpose of Church and school, and are a wonderful help to these poor people, who find it impossible to rent or borrow a hall or church from the whites. A building of *their own* of some kind is indispensable."[45]

The church-building organizations, then, were purposely and deliberately designed to consolidate resources and distribute them systematically across the country, redirecting capital from places of abundance to those in need of a helping hand. Officials routinely advertised the practical advantages of this centralized system, and its quintessentially American virtues as an instrument of nation-building and republican consolidation. "The mutual dependence of different parts of this great country is well understood," the Presbyterian Board of Church Erection explained in 1896. "Its importance and salutary influence is dwelt upon by Washington in his wonderful "Farewell Address," which has lately upon the hundredth anniversary of its publication attracted renewed and wide attention. And what is so manifestly true in business and political circles is still more emphatically the case in respect to the Christian Church or any particular branch of it that reaches to all parts of our common land." The Board elaborated:

> The stronger churches in the Eastern States are as truly and largely concerned in the extension and establishment of Christ's kingdom throughout the West as in the more obvious duty of strengthening and building up its interests around their very doors. As then it is manifestly the case that the older synods embrace within their bounds by far the larger number of churches that have means over and above their own support…in what more effective and remunerative way can the surplus resources of the Eastern fields be used than in holding and fortifying the newer weaker regions but latterly colonized and opened to the gospel?[46]

The church-building societies, then, created a continental system that redistributed the "surplus resources" of the nation's wealthier regions to subsidize the establishment of soul-saving infrastructure elsewhere in the country – a kind of ecclesiastical federalism that imitated the Founding Fathers' own political conception of an interdependent national union.

For the Methodists, this consolidated system of nationalized philanthropic aid resonated particularly well with their own theological principle of "connectionalism," a system of both financial and spiritual interdependence that had structured the Methodist church polity and its extensive benevolent machinery since its origin.[47] But well-worn connectionalist precepts could be neatly repackaged after the Civil War to describe benevolence as a tool of nation-building and republican consolidation. "This society is worthy of our confidence because it secures the homogeneousness of our Methodism and

[45] *13th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (1883), 9. Italics in original.

[46] *CAHAA*, December 1896, 411.

[47] For more on connectionalism see David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), especially Chapter Five.

makes our churches one, binding our people together in faith and works," Bishop Willard Francis Mallalieu celebrated at the anniversary of the Methodist Board of Church Extension in November 1884. "The funds are gathered from all parts of the country; from Maine to the Pacific coast."[48] The very corporate act of giving enlisted scattered Americans and the nation's constituent parts in a common cause for the republic's redemption. Consequently, the consolidative mechanisms of the church-building societies aided the nation's own consolidation more generally by bringing Protestant benefactors and beneficiaries together in an interconnected benevolent architecture.

III. "Christ, Church and Country": Republican Ecclesiology

Ultimately, the church-building societies elaborate and consolidated financial architecture all served one clear purpose: to fund the construction of as many Protestant churches as possible across the country. Besides appealing to denominational loyalties and Christian fidelity, the societies persuaded people to back the cause financially by developing an ecumenical religio-political philosophy of church construction best described as a "republican ecclesiology".[49] This ideology transformed the Protestant edifice into a guarantor of communal safety, political stability, and an instrument of national consolidation. Republican ecclesiology was broadcasted to metropolitan audiences primarily through the mainstream home missionary press, as well as specially printed church-building publications, including the Congregationalist *Church-Building Quarterly* (1883) and the Methodist bimonthly *Christianity in Earnest* (1889).[50]

According to republican ecclesiology, the Protestant edifice radiated a moral and spiritual power in whichever community it was built. Spread out across the breadth of the whole continent, a network of these Protestant bulwarks could collectively consolidate the Union by performing the role of a religious police power in protecting the republic's citizens and institutions. "The very presence of a place consecrated to God in any community is a moral power," argued Edmund Janes before his fellow Methodist bishops in 1868.[51] As the "safeguard of virtue" and "the only conservative power by which our institutions can be preserved and the morals of the nation secured," it was a matter of urgency that every settlement – old or new, rich or poor – possessed such a spiritual bastion.[52]

The ability of a church to bring social stability and a clear moral rectitude to incipient communities meant that it was an important weapon in the home missionary arsenal. "The church building is a means of grace to the new community" the Presbyterian periodical *Church at Home and Abroad* editorialized in January 1887. "Every missionary will testify that his influence and power are doubled if he has a 'meeting house' (a good old name) that he can call his own – a pulpit to be his 'throne,' and thus can announce that he is there to stay. The presence of such a building, however small, if it bears its character

[48] *Manual of the MEC*, January 1885 (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885), 38.

[49] There were, of course, limits to the ostensible ecumenicism of the Protestant church-building movement, just as there were in the home mission movement broadly. See Jones, *Home Missions and the Religious Reconstruction of the United States*, 31–34. But the chief ideological components of republican ecclesiology – anti-saloonism, anti-Catholicism, and the conviction that Protestant edifices were quintessentially democratic institutions – crossed denominational boundaries.

[50] *CBQ*, January 1883, 1; *CiE*, January–February 1898, 42.

[51] *3rd MEC CES Annual Report 1868* (1869), 16.

[52] Ibid., 17.

upon its face, changes the whole aspect of a frontier village; and, if put to its true use, will soon show its influence in the character of the inhabitants."[53] This spiritual 'influence' manifested in practical ways, primarily as a police power that quite literally kept townspeople safe. "A church in a community wins its way because it is the *most efficient police*," the illustrious Methodist minister Charles Henry Fowler argued in 1875. "The power that makes it possible for a number of people to meet in a public assembly and return home in safety and peace, is not the few hired watchmen that patrol your streets, but the spirit that goes out from these churches. It is this restraining presence of God that takes the missiles out of the air and the bludgeons out of the assassin's hands. It is this that secures your possessions and keeps holy watch over your nightly slumbers."[54] The Presbyterian New School Board agreed, suggesting in 1868 that the church was "[t]o the ungodly who throng the street…a reminder of eternity – of a Hell to be shunned and a Heaven to be gained. Into the dens of drunkenness and vice, the ringing notes of its sabbath bell will penetrate rebukingly, and yet invitingly."[55]

Church builders constantly invoked Western examples of republican ecclesiology in practice when trying to persuade their supporters to lend their aid to the cause, reflecting both the region's role as the primary recipient of Northern church-building funds and the formidable grip it had on the imaginations of contemporary Americans more generally. A boundless empire of extraordinary potential that nevertheless had the power to benight and primitivize rugged settlers from the east more interested in gold than God, the West offered an inexhaustible repository of captivating images and stories that emphasized to donors in an especially stark way both the major threats to religious consolidation and the morally salubrious effects of Protestant churches.

Perhaps nothing encapsulated these effects – as well as the broader consolidative pretensions of the church-building movement – so succinctly as the life membership certificates the ACU issued its more generous supporters upon a donation of $25 or more (see Figure 1).[56] The certificate's symbol-ridden decorative engraving was divided into three images. In the middle stood the idealized church edifice on a Sabbath morning – simple and neat, but also solid and permanent, serving the needs of a sober and hardworking frontier community. To its left was a depiction of the Pilgrim landing at Plymouth, referencing the origins of Congregationalism on the continent, while to the right was an image of the perfect bucolic western settlement replete with a school-house and an ox-driven pioneer wagon in the distance. The garlands that wreathed each picture were infused with their own meanings: typical New England evergreens encircled the Pilgrim landing, while oak leaves and acorns wreathed the Western town, representing settler hardiness and sturdy character. Both evergreen and oak united beneath the central church edifice, symbolically uniting East and West in the church-building endeavor.[57] As the ACU itself explained in 1869, the design "represents the spirit of the Pilgrim fathers, stretching far away into the new settlements of the West, laying there the foundations of Puritan churches, which, in subsequent years, rise up in honor and glory from city, town, and hamlet, and dot the prairies with heavenward-pointing spires." In short, the engraving provided a pictorial representation of the church-building endeavor as an instrument

[53] *CAHAA*, January 1887, 47.

[54] *CEA*, *1875* (1876), 117.

[55] *Manual of Church Erection*, *PCUSA* (New York: Wm. C. Martin, 1868), 17.

[56] "ACU Sixteenth Annual Report" in the *Congregational Quarterly*, July 1869 (Boston: Congregational Rooms, 1869), 474.

[57] Explanation in ibid.

of national consolidation, binding the nation's regions with webs of philanthropic aid; it "tells the story of the noble work of the *Congregational Union* in collecting and transmitting the material sympathy of the sons and daughters of New England to the new churches rapidly springing up throughout the west," allowing those incipient congregations

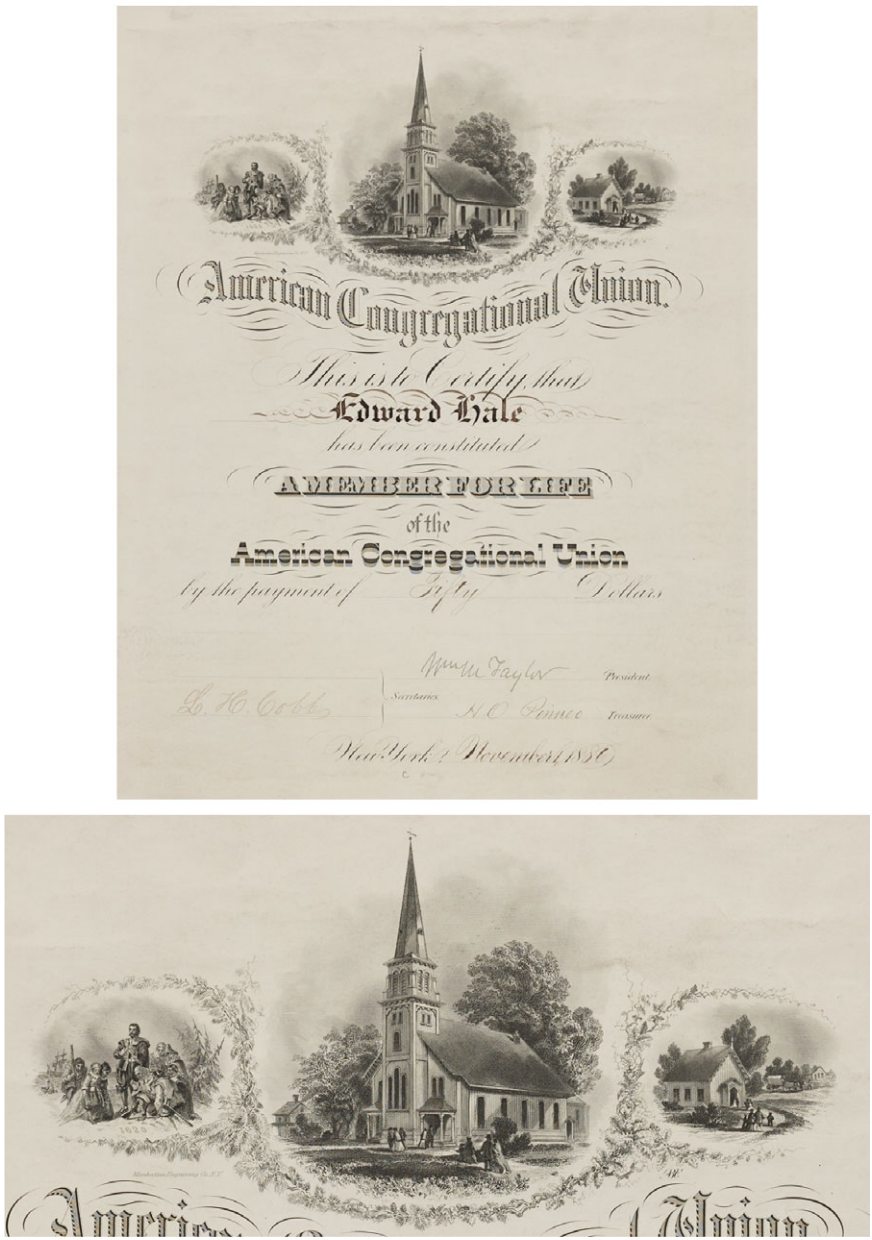

Figure 1. American Congregational Union, *Certificate of Life Membership Issued to Edward Hale*, November 1, 1886. Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum.

to build for themselves "citadels from which the battles of liberty, justice, and truth may be waged against error and ungodliness in all its forms."[58]

The best heroes always have a good villain to fight, and the church-building societies found a perfect foil in the form of the frontier saloon. This "devil's chapel" was the stock antagonist of republican ecclesiology – an anti-church that stood for all the things the Protestant edifice waged an unending war against: vice, violence, greed, intemperance, and disorder. "There is no mistaking the attitude of these two institutions toward each other" noted an 1890 issue of *Christianity in Earnest* unambiguously. "It is one of open, irreconcilable hostility, and the one or the other must go down."[59] Church-builders even measured their own success (or failure) by the parallel progress of their reviled adversaries. "Are there 1,700 towns in all the West that have no liquor saloon, or worse place?" the CCBS exclaimed frantically in 1891. "The Home Missionary Superintendents can tell where to find that number of towns that have no house of worship, and no resident pastor to use it if there was one."[60] The bimonthly *Earnest* was perhaps one of the more obvious ways in which church-building was explicitly yoked to the cause of saloon-suppression, not only ideologically but institutionally. In its first few volumes, the church-building periodical provided extensive commentary on the progress of temperance in the United States, whether cultural, religious, political, or legal. After a period between 1893 and 1894 when the MBCE decided to devote the publication exclusively to the cause of church-building, the decision was eventually made to give the MEC's Permanent Committee on Temperance and Prohibition eight pages per issue to expound the cause of temperance, sharing the net costs of publication between them.[61]

Readers of the *Earnest* would have been well informed, then, not only of the political and social progress of the temperance cause, but of the ways in which church-building contributed to its ultimate victory by providing an infrastructural bulwark against the saloon. As the *Earnest* itself editorialized in 1891, "Church Extension and Saloon Suppression complement each other and go hand in hand…While prosecuting the work of Church Extension *Christianity in Earnest* has sought to lift up a standard against the saloon."[62] Other publications, such as the *Church-Building Quarterly*, made similar causal connections between church-construction and temperance. In July 1890, for example, the ACU's Field Secretary George Hood wrote in the *Quarterly* that churches countered the emasculating effects of liquor on young settlers, and the resulting havoc it wreaked on a frontier town's gender order. "With a church-building you have a chance to *save young men*," Hood explained impassionedly. This impressionable constituency, flooding the new towns of the West, were often "led away by the saloons – nickel-plated, electric-lighted – magazines on the table, a concert every evening, and you don't have to drink unless you choose; yes, the black devils, and the scarlet devils, who are worse, will soon twine their arms around the young men where the Church has no sheltering arms." A solid house of worship on the other hand – a persistent tickler of consciences – reaffirmed proper manhood by ensuring sobriety. "Give them the buildings quick!" Hood beckoned the *Quarterly*'s readers. "Catch their splendid manhood for Christ and their future riches for the Kingdom."[63] In subsidizing the church-building cause, ordinary citizens had the opportunity to transplant

[58]Ibid.
[59]*CiE*, March–April 1890, 60.
[60]*CBQ*, October 1891, 162.
[61]*CiE*, January–February 1898, 43
[62]*CiE*, May–June 1891, 66.
[63]*CBQ*, July 1890, 133.

metropolitan middle-class ideals of proper masculinity to those peripheral regions in most need of them.

Protestant edifices also had the power to pacify yet another perceived threat to national cohesion and societal stability: Native Americans. In 1884, for example, the Presbyterian Board reported that they had aided the construction of a dozen churches among Indian tribes over the previous year.[64] A civilizing and Christianizing mission might have compelled them to make these investments in the first place, but the Board also emphasized to its supporters the ability of Protestant infrastructure to neutralize indigenous violence, safeguarding white settlers more effectively than military action ever could. "Had we but a tithe of the money expended annually by our Government in warfare to keep these poor people in subjection, with which to build school houses and chapels, there would be more security of property and life to our white settlers," the Board bemoaned in 1885, "and the Church would be greatly strengthened by these Red men of the forest converted to the faith of Christ."[65] According to republican ecclesiology, then, church edifices for Natives had a dual advantage – they played an invaluable role in saving souls for Christ, while the State in turn profited from the peace and security they ensured.

Besides these practical threats, republican ecclesiology contended that churches also functioned as exterminators of political and social ideas that threatened national security. "The seventy-two thousand churches in our country are its bulwark of safety," the American Home Missionary Society had argued in January 1886. "A leading socialist let fall a significant fact, the other day, when he confessed 'that earnest working churches' where 'the rich and the poor meet together' are the most serious hindrances to the success of 'our ideas'."[66] But socialism was just one of many "isms" that Protestant churches eradicated.[67] "Rum, Rationalism and Romanism are the American triumvirate in evil," Charles Henry Fowler proclaimed categorically in November 1875 at the Church Extension anniversary meeting in Camden, New Jersey.[68] "These are our great enemies," Fowler elaborated, and those "unhoused and dauntless thousands who are out on the border, empire founding, and the unhoused and patient millions just up from the land of Egypt [freed slaves in the South] – these hold the key of fate."[69] Whether Western frontiersmen and Southern Freedmen were godly or reprobate, rum-ridden or sober, would determine the ultimate destiny of the most important nation on earth. "They are a fort in the pass between the present and the future. Whoever gets in wins, and dictates law to mankind. The Board of Church Extension will put us in the fort."[70]

The Congregationalists explicitly argued that postwar church-building was the natural continuation of their recent defense of the Union. "[I]n the late civil war, it was the iron and tonic in the blood of all the North and Northwest, flowing down from the Pilgrim Fathers, that saved the nation from final overthrow," the ACU's 1880 Manual explained. "And it is equally certain that in the difficulties and dangers of the perhaps no distant

[64] *14th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (1884), 6.

[65] *15th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (1885), 4.

[66] *Home Missionary*, January 1886 (New York: American Home Missionary Society, 1886), 320.

[67] On the perceived danger that 'isms' posed to the American Republic in an earlier context, see Michael F. Conlin, "The Dangerous *Isms* and the Fanatical *Ists*: Antebellum Conservatives in the South and the North Confront the Modernity Conspiracy", *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 4, no. 2 (June 2014): 205–233.

[68] *CEA, 1875*, 118.

[69] Ibid., 121.

[70] Ibid., 121–122.

future, if the 'ship of State' is to outride the storms, we must plant churches over the West and Southwest that, come what may, will stand for God, and man, and liberty, and truth, and justice."[71] In the same year, the Presbyterian Board argued that the "protection of our new States and Territories against communism and all the insidious forms of infidelity and false religion make it imperative upon the church to diffuse the light of the gospel and establish the influences of Christianity in every direction."[72]

The patriotic fervor of the Northern church-building project crescendoed toward the end of the 1890s, reaching a fever pitch with the Spanish-American War as the societies extended their operations abroad.[73] "We do not forget that the Prince of Peace is 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords;'" wrote the MBCE's Corresponding Secretary A.J. Kynett at the outbreak of hostilities, "and if it is His pleasure to commission one nation to correct another, who shall reply against God?"[74] Quick to embrace the fundraising potential enabled by this sudden burst of enthusiastic patriotism, the MBCE Assistant Corresponding Secretary W.A. Spencer noted in the *Earnest* that just as "our Board sprang into existence to meet a great emergency, caused by the War of '61, we shall doubtless need very greatly to enlarge our work in the near future, and every pastoral charge in all our Conferences ought to help this great national benevolence, that must build fortifications for the churches wherever our flag goes. Make your patriotism useful and practical by taking a splendid collection for Church Extension."[75] At a special meeting of the Board of Church Extension convened on May 29th, 1899, the Board called on "our people and all friends of Christian and patriotic work in the Republic to place upon the altars of religion and patriotism for Church Extension under the administration of this Board," aspiring to raise $1 million for the cause over the following three years to lead the charge into the next century.[76] The Board adopted the pithy "Christ, Church and Country" as the building crusade's war cry. The *Earnest* showed just how politicized the cause of church extension had become with a bold and colorful new cover it debuted in the summer of 1899 (see Figure 2).[77] "The first page of the cover places the cross above the flag and the Church; the national flag under the cross, and the Church under both the cross and the flag," the publication explained. "The cross and the Church have made the flag and what it represents possible, while, in grateful return, the flag protects the cross and the Church."[78] An unrepentant evangelical nationalism powered Northern-led postbellum church construction, one that viewed the relationship between Protestant churches and the American state as mutually-constitutive.

Accordingly, the church-building societies interpreted gifts to the cause as quintessentially patriotic acts. In December 1899, Mary Knox Robinson donated to the MBCE after having listened to an address on the subject at the Bedford Street Church in New York City, a contribution that was to be spent on the erection of a memorial church in Manila, the Philippines, named after her father. Overjoyed, the Board's account of the gift was riddled with imperial braggadocio. "So it appears that while little Americans are

[71] *Manual of the ACU* (1880), 9.

[72] *10th PCUSA BCEF Annual Report* (1880), 11.

[73] On the 'Christian Republicanism' that underpinned Protestant justifications for the Spanish-American War, see Benjamin J. Wetzel, *American Crusade: Christianity, Warfare, and National Identity, 1860–1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), Chapter 3.

[74] *CiE*, May–June 1898, 90.

[75] *CiE*, July–August 1898, 141.

[76] *CiE*, July–August 1899, 1.

[77] Ibid., front cover.

[78] Ibid., 3.

Figure 2. The cover of *Christianity in Earnest*, first published in the bimonthly July–August 1899 edition.

protesting against expansion and imperialism, broad Americans with Christian views of duty and destiny are providing for the extension of the benefits of our civilization to the inhabitants of our new possessions," the *Earnest* editorialized.[79] "Every Methodist Church erected on any acre of God's earth is a fortress of the defense of civil and religious liberty. It will be an inspiration to Protestantism to have a church in the Philippines bearing the name of Knox."[80] Similarly caught up in imperial fever, on December 12th 1898, the Baptist Board of Home Missions passed a resolution calling on the churches to raise $10,000 for missionary and church edifice work in Puerto Rico and Eastern Cuba.[81]

[79] *CiE*, November–December 1899, 89.
[80] *CiE*, March–April 1900, 48.
[81] *BHMM*, January 1899, 1.

Given that republican ecclesiology presupposed the necessity of Protestant churches to the moral, cultural, and political consolidation of the continental US, it made sense that Northern Protestants advocated their extension overseas to assist with the remaking of these benighted regions in the metropole's image. As American power grew across the Pacific and the Gulf, Protestant edifices in places like the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico became physical milestones of imperial progress, and ordinary Christians within the United States now had the opportunity to participate in this new national experiment directly by bankrolling their construction.

As the Spanish-American War made all too clear, a virulent anti-Catholicism defined republican ecclesiology. The church-building organizations liberally peddled historic prejudices in their attempts to draw more supporters to the cause, at times verging on the conspiratorial in both the substance and tone of their arguments. If Northern Protestants did not build a formidable network of churches to mold the moral destiny of the country in their own image, then an alternative imperial Catholic superstructure of distinctly *un*republican temples would be erected instead, sowing the seeds of spiritual servility and political peonage in a free soil allotted by God to the cause of liberty. "Our Roman Catholic brethren are acquiring so great an estate in the United States, and acquiring it so rapidly, that it becomes a matter of public concern how they get it and what they will do with it," warned James Parton in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1868, an article that was reprinted in the manual of the Presbyterian New School's Board of Church Erection.[82] In 1875, at the Tenth Anniversary Meeting of the MBCE, Charles Henry Fowler was more florid in his description of the Catholic threat: "With the face of a woman, but painted and brazoned like a harlot…[s]he purposes to corrupt and control the ballot-box, that she may enthrone the Scarlet Woman on the ruins of the republic."[83]

To support the building of *Protestant* churches, on the other hand, was to resist the naked designs of this lecherous imperial ecclesiology. "As a political power Romanism is the chief menace to the principles of civil liberty and to the perpetuity of our Republican form of government," the *Earnest* explained in no uncertain terms in the wake of the Spanish-American War.[84] "Every Methodist Episcopal Church is a protest against Romanism and a menace to politico-ecclesiastical Romanism, because it stands for both civil and religious liberty…It is a menace to the idolatry of religious Romanism, because it teaches a free salvation, without intervening priesthood or mariolatry."[85] Americans could express their commitment to the republic by bankrolling the cause with much-needed donations: "[n]o more important and effective work could be done in this Republic to entrench Protestantism and patriotism than to put a million dollars, within the coming three years, through the agency of the Church Extension Board, into Methodist churches where they are most needed."[86]

The Episcopalians even embraced republican ecclesiology's unrepentant nationalism to deliberately offset their association with a wider Anglican communion that had a whiff of Old World aristocracy about it. In 1883, William G. Low defended the newly-created Commission against sceptics who viewed it as "an outburst of American enthusiasm of the 'spread-eagle' character."[87] Instead, he presented the ACBFC as a way for Episcopalians

[82] *Manual of Church Erection* (PCUSA) (1868), 10.
[83] *CEA, 1875*, 119.
[84] *CiE*, July–August 1899, 7.
[85] Ibid., 6.
[86] Ibid., 7.
[87] William G. Low, "The American Church Building Fund", *American Church Review*, No. 140, January 1883 (New York: American Church Review Association), 34.

to finally end the disapprobation they had long endured "from the prejudice excited by our intimate connection with the Church of England."[88] A national church-building enterprise – one that acknowledged that "the members of the Church in the United States [are] bound together by a tie peculiar to themselves and in addition to those which unite them to all their brethren in Christ" – would prove beyond doubt the Episcopal Church's unimpeachable *Americanness*.[89]

Patriotic Protestants were clearly compelled by the dictates of republican ecclesiology to bankroll the cause, and often said so in their own words. Some donors were acutely aware of the geopolitical stakes of church-building, especially in the aftermath of the Civil War when the need for some sort of physical instrument of cultural and spiritual consolidation to reunite the still-fissiparous Union seemed most acute. "I send you a draft of $20, to aid in the work of church-building in the West," wrote one Congregationalist donor in 1870. "This is from a lady who does not wish her name to appear. I am glad thus to be able to encourage you in your labors, which seem to grow with the growth of our ever-expanding country." Just five years after Appomattox, "[t]he Congregational Union and the American Home Missionary Society must gird themselves for a vigorous advance upon the rising West, for there is no time to be lost. It seems to me all-important that the treasuries of these societies should be replenished at this time when such momentous interests are trembling in the balance." For this donor, the cause was of incalculable value. "The work already done by the Union is one that Eternity alone will reveal to us in all its bearings; and multitudes of newly gathered churches will reach out their hands for your encouragement as years roll around. May your heart rejoice in the glorious results of a work so auspiciously begun."[90]

The sentiment was long-lasting. "The work in which [the ACU] is engaged is one of vital importance to the cause of Home Missions and to the best interests of our country," wrote one newly-made life member of the ACU in 1891. "As the salvation of this country, both in a religious and political sense, depends upon the universal prevalence of the Gospel of Christ, and as this last depends upon the work of the American Home Missionary Society, so the work of the American Home Missionary Society depends largely upon the American Congregational Union, just as really as the railroad requires the presence of the depot and round-house."[91] The supporter's explicit conflation of Protestant expansion with other types of consolidative infrastructure like the railroads highlights how many American Protestants saw them as inextricably linked – and equally consequential – mechanisms of nation-building.

IV. Benevolence and Spiritual Consolidation

Besides maximizing financial efficiency and ideological coherence, the centralized church-building effort also enabled the country's *spiritual* consolidation by binding loyal Protestant benefactors with far-off needy beneficiaries in a communion of souls all invested – both financially and emotionally – in each other's salvations. "The contributions to the Fund have come from every quarter of the Church, both at home and abroad, and have been given by the poor and the rich," the Episcopalian periodical *Spirit of*

[88]Ibid., 35.
[89]Ibid., 34.
[90]*Manual of the ACU* (1870), 13.
[91]*CBQ*, October 1891, 176.

Missions editorialized in 1895. "In this way something more than the gathering of money is being accomplished – a spirit of unity and of fellowship is developed."[92] The church-building organizations did not simply act as distributors of cash – they actively cultivated bonds of intellectual, emotional, and religious sympathy between distant congregations across the continent, often by bringing them into direct relations with each other.

To entrench these deeper ties, the Congregationalists in particular regularly republished in their *Quarterly* letters of thanks written by beneficiary churches so that interested benefactors could learn more about the spiritual gains won with their donations, nurturing longer-term inter-congregational relationships. A typical letter of thanks was the sort sent by J. Frank Locke, the Congregationalist pastor at Pillsbury, Minnesota, to the Ladies' Society of the First Church of Springfield, Massachusetts, which had "adopted" the Pillsbury church by giving a five hundred dollar benefaction through the Woman's Home Mission Association of Boston.[93] The letter was republished for wider consumption in the *Quarterly* in July 1890. "That you may know your labor is not in vain in the Lord, your gifts appreciated, and earning rich dividends, I am constrained to write to you," Locke explained before outlining what had been achieved with Springfield's benefaction.[94] "From the very hour that it was decided to arise and build, a revival spirit prevailed; souls were converted, backsliders reclaimed, opposition overcome, and now by God's grace we number 49 members, have a good congregation and Sunday-school, and the change in the community is wonderful indeed." Alongside the immediate spiritual rewards for Locke's congregation, the strategically-effective investment in Pillsbury had also returned compound dividends by advancing mission work in the surrounding hinterland. "The work has spread to other towns," Locke reported, resulting in four mission Sunday-schools and signs of religious progress at nearby Round Prairie and Swanville. "So you see that the little Pillsbury vine you so kindly nourished is running over the wall."[95] Letters of thanks such as Locke's constituted one of the most important print connections that bound the Northern metropole and the national peripheries, allowing supporters the chance to catch detailed glimpses of what had been achieved with their donations, while in turn providing a platform for those far-off beneficiaries to establish sympathetic connections with their wealthier co-denominationalists.

In May 1895, the recently-aided Alvaretta Church in Oklahoma expressed its own thanks in a letter to the CCBS, and in particular the metropolitan Sunday-schools that had provided the aid. "The Alvaretta Congregational Church, by an unanimous vote, extend to you, and through you to every Sunday-school that has so kindly and generously contributed toward the Alvaretta Church enterprise, the sincere thanks and prayers of the Church for the Christian charity which has so recently been bestowed upon us, in the form of a grant for four hundred dollars," wrote C.H. Cutler and D.W. Boyer, members of the Alvaretta church committee.[96] Besides providing an update on the newly-built church itself, Cutler and Boyer also gave their benefactors information about the wider political context of the newly-opened Indian Territory where they were based. "[I]t will doubtless interest the Sunday-school children to know that since September 16th, 1893…this vast prairie wilderness has been peopled by natives of nearly every State in the Union…As a

[92] *Spirit of Missions*, November–December 1895 (New York: Church Missions House), 723.
[93] *CBQ*, July 1890, 119–120.
[94] Ibid., 120.
[95] Ibid., 121.
[96] *CBQ*, October 1895, 203.

matter of fact, they have been compelled to suffer for want of numerous temporal as well as spiritual blessings."[97] Institutions like the CCBS, the writers explained, were crucial to meeting this great want for spiritual sustenance in the newly-settled portions of the country, including Alvaretta, which had been "stimulated with such substantial encouragement as the Sunday-schools have given in the form of contributions."[98] These letters of thanks, then, provided young supporters of the cause not only with intimate knowledge as to the effects of their hard work fundraising, but also general information on the spiritual and political conditions of their country and their own role in the nation-building project.

The Alvaretta Church was categorized by the CCBS as an 'Endeavor Church', so-called because it had been funded with money raised by a chapter of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. Founded in 1881 by the Congregationalist Francis Edward Clark, YPSCEs were religious youth organizations whose members would pledge themselves to Christ, attend weekly prayer meetings, and fundraise for Christian causes. Chapters could be found in all the major Protestant denominations across the country; by 1906 membership had ballooned to about 4 million youths organized in 67,000 societies globally.[99] YPSCEs proved to be a precocious and lucrative source of capital for church construction, and further personalized the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary.

Indeed, these Endeavor Churches on the frontier were, in a sense, "adopted" by metropolitan YPSCEs, whose members were subsequently kept informed of the fruits of their labors through republished letters of thanks. "The ninety-three Endeavor Societies that sent us contributions which we put into this church will be interested to read a letter from the pastor, giving his experiences at the start, and see a picture of the church they helped build at Pond Creek, Okla. Ter," the *Quarterly* informed its supporters in a July 1895 edition devoted to Christian Endeavor.[100] The letter, sent by W.C. McCune – the first Congregationalist home missionary in the region newly-opened to white settlement – provided the YPSCEs with a detailed overview of the transformation their money had wrought. McCune had initially preached standing on dry goods boxes in the street until "by the kind aid of the YPSCE Societies through the Congregational Church-Building Society, our church edifice was finished and we had a church home of our own." With that money, the flag of Christ had been permanently planted on Oklahoman soil. "It is a very nice church for a frontier town, and is often spoken of in our local papers as an ornament to the place," McCune wrote proudly. "It is not plastered, but ceiled with wood, unpainted but varnished, which gives it a unique appearance," elaborating to the Young Endeavorers how it was "difficult in this climate to plaster so that the winds will not break the plaster."[101] Perhaps most importantly, McCune emphasized that the spiritual rewards of their labor had been great, resulting in a "marked increase in the size" of the Pond Creek congregation and the establishment of a YPSCE of its own, dividends that McCune explicitly attributed to the church's munificent benefactors. "Thanks to you, hearty, loving thanks, young people of the Societies of Christian Endeavor, who have given us your kind, generous aid."[102]

Practically, letters of thanks informed benefactors of the religious transformations their money had begotten in faraway settler communities. But they also revealed the

[97]Ibid., 203–204.

[98]Ibid., 204.

[99]See Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2010), 167.

[100]*CBQ*, July 1895, 140.

[101]Ibid., 141.

[102]Ibid., 142.

extent to which beneficiary communities – despite their apparent isolation – relied on the immaterial sympathies and spiritual assistance provided by their distant compatriots. These supportive relationships were by no means unidirectional; in fact, benefactor churches were just as likely to testify to the spiritual rewards *they* had reaped for donating as they were to receive such testimonies from the recipients of their aid. In April 1890, having recently listened to an address by ACU Field Secretary George Hood at one of his many church visitations across New England to galvanize financial support, the YPSCE of Blackstone Park Chapel in Providence, Rhode Island – according to its president Benjamin W. Gallup – "found our enthusiasm and patriotism stirred into new activity and power; we felt a desire to do something for the Master and for our country."[103] Having committed to raise $500 to assist in building a church in the South or West, the YPSCE pursued an elaborate fundraising campaign, using "weekly collections, festivals, sales, entertainments, etc." to raise money for the cause.

In Gallup's view, the simple act of raising money for the churching of strangers had produced unparalleled blessings for the Blackstone Park Chapel community. The whole enterprise "has had all the fascination of certain muscular contests, but on a much higher moral plane," Gallup described the fundraising process. "More than twenty such persons have contributed, some of whom do not profess to be religious at all. This leads me to think what a splendid thing in any community is a good church or Sunday-school. How it sheds its light on all the neighborhood, and gathers up and makes effectual influences and forces that would otherwise be scattered and lost." Moreover, the spiritual effects of having gathered together to fundraise were everywhere to see – even in the smallest of acts and expressions of faith. "This effort has really been to us a means of grace; we have made it a subject of prayer, and have put into it a large amount of work, and have not been afraid of the contribution box…Our society has sung better, prayed better, and worked with more heart and enthusiasm, on account of this blessed task."[104] By subsidizing the establishment of a church elsewhere on the continent, this small Rhode Island congregation had experienced its own spiritual awakening in return.

The Blackstone church's benevolence eventually went on to aid the acquisition of a church in Pataha City in Washington State. In 1895, the church clerk, Maggie Spedden, dutifully provided the CCBS with an update on the congregation's development. Having initially held services in a public school building for eight months, the Pataha congregation had, with the Blackstone church's donations, purchased in November 1890 a half-finished edifice that had been under construction by the Methodists for $1800. "Please permit us to express through you our sincere gratitude to the YPSCE of the Blackstone chapel, Providence, R.I., for their gift of five hundred dollars toward paying for our church," Spedden wrote.[105] Having procured a physical house in which to worship, Spedden assured her distant benefactors that the church had prospered, establishing a Sabbath-school and YPSCE of its own, while congregation numbers had "increased much beyond our expectations."[106]

Some benefactor-beneficiary relationships were even more direct, such as the one between Brattleboro, Vermont and a congregation in Washburn, Wisconsin 1,200 miles away, which had received a $400 ACU loan funded by the former. In 1890, Rev. C.O. Day of the Centre Brattleboro Church laid out the reasons why his own flock had chosen to

[103] *CBQ*, October 1891, 77.
[104] Ibid.,
[105] *CBQ*, October 1895, 202–203.
[106] Ibid., 203.

support the Washburn congregation in a letter published in the *Quarterly*. Day was well-versed in the moral dilapidation of faraway Washburn, and its urgent need for a house of worship. "Washburn, Wis., has been, through its embryonic and early stages, a town of sodomic and sulphuric character," Day explained. "Satan not only had his seat, but lay around on the sofa and took his vacation there."[107] Riddled with violence and drunkenness, Day even claimed that the need for a church building had been so self-evident that his own loyal New England congregation had poured forth contributions unhesitatingly. "The $400 was so easily raised, too, by the village church in the East," he wrote, if only because ignoring the Washburn congregation's plight "was antagonizing the God of the Nation, and doing despite to the Spirit of Grace."[108] But the act of fundraising had also been a good investment that had spiritually reinvigorated the investor as well as the recipient. "An investment like that of this $400, paying at both ends, and with all its measure of special, local, definite views and interest, most richly at the Eastern end, suggests a Western opportunity which had better be taken every time. Such mutual associations reveal New England shrewdness, and New England Congregationalism also – pure, simple, and at their best."[109] Summarizing in plain economic terms, Day listed the dividends gained for both benefactor and beneficiary from this one judicious act of benevolence: "[t]he above gift; a meeting-house erected; a church saved, growing, aggressive; with the return, also, of a large and solid satisfaction to the party of the second part in the East, bearing interest every year."[110]

In turn, the Washburn church's own pastor described the spiritual effects the investment had begotten on his own community in a letter to the ACU. "You would hardly recognize the church and congregation now," he reported proudly. "Ever since we got into the new church we have had excellent congregations, and a real spiritual life has begun among us." The pastor elaborated. "A great many young men are now attending the church. More are to unite with us at our next communion." With a large attendance at both the church's YPSCE and its Wednesday evening prayer-meetings, the Pastor observed that "[i]n short, we are beginning to look and feel like a church." Moreover, he attributed these hefty spiritual rewards specifically to the stimulative aid rendered by their distant benefactors. "I think this had its start in a large measure from the thankfulness that went out from the hearts of this people for the aid rendered us by the Brattleboro church. Their gift was real Home Missionary work."[111]

V. Conclusion

The church-building movement continued apace into the new century, but by then the nature of its consolidative ambitions had begun to change. By 1900, new threats to national coherence and unity emerged beyond the republic's Western and Southern "peripheries." As we have seen, the Spanish-American War brought new regions into the American orbit that demanded urgent Protestantization and Americanization of the large populations of non-white Catholics that lived there. The logic of republican ecclesiology naturally propelled the church-building endeavor into the Pacific and the Caribbean,

[107] *CBQ*, July 1890, 145.
[108] Ibid., 145–146.
[109] Ibid., 146.
[110] Ibid., 144–145.
[111] *CBQ*, July 1889, 118.

where the establishment of a Protestant infrastructure could help consolidate the now-distended imperial republic by bringing free religion to regions polluted by centuries of Romish despotism. Just as Steven Hahn has argued that Reconstruction in the West and South served as "proving grounds" for America's imperial experiment in 1898, Northern church-builders likewise understood their efforts to reshape the religious landscapes of these lands as the intuitive extension of what they had already been doing for decades on the continent: building Protestant churches that strengthened and cohered the republic.[112] As the Methodist Board explained in 1900, "Our churches in this country have been educational centers for the people and have constituted one of the chief factors in shaping our civilization and in determining the character of our civic institutions in the extended territory where new states have been constituted."[113] What had proven true at home might now also prove true abroad. "Every Methodist Episcopal Church is a fortress of civil and religious liberty. We are to have an opportunity to emphasize this fact in our new national possessions."[114]

Another threat to national cohesion emerged from *within* the continent itself: increased urbanization and immigration. While home missionaries had long labored in the inner cities, bewailing the moral corrosion that accompanied tenement squalor, Northern Protestants responded to the more intense levels of urbanization and immigration during the Gilded Age by positioning the inner city as a "new frontier" of the home mission movement.[115] "Brethren, a new situation confronts us," preached Rev. Thomas McLeod in a sermon at the Congregational Home Missionary Society's Annual Meeting in Cleveland in June 1898. "The problem of the churches of America to-day is the American City, and the kind of character and destiny ahead of the Republic is to be determined by the way in which we go about the solution of this problem."[116]

The church-building societies acknowledged this development by focusing more intensely on urban edifice construction toward the century's end. In 1886 for example, the ACU endeavored to raise a $100,000 National Council Exigency Loan Fund for municipal work, to correct a heretofore neglected endeavor. "Failure to do this has lost to us and our work the hold we once had, or might have had, in several of the most important towns between Chicago and the eastern border," the Union bemoaned."[117] The Methodists agreed, committing themselves to an aggressive fundraising drive to meet the coming century's new demands. "The Church Extension Board has not thus far in its history been able to aid extensively in church building in the great cities and centers of population," the Board confessed in the summer of 1899, "but when the Twentieth Century Thank Offerings are in the treasury, it will gladly take hold of this important work."[118]

These two new frontiers were, of course, inter-connected. Failure to ensure religious consolidation on the continent would spell disaster for America's ability to politically and

[112]Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, 487.

[113]*CiE*, July–August 1900, 123.

[114]Ibid.

[115]Mark Teasdale, *Methodist Evangelism*, 151. On urban evangelisation, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Benjamin Hartley, *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860–1910* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011); Thekla Ellen Joiner, *Sin in the City: Chicago and Revivalism, 1880–1920* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

[116]*Home Missionary*, July 1898 (New York: Congregational Home Missionary Society), 8.

[117]*CBQ*, December 1886, 114.

[118]*CiE*, July–August 1899, 10.

culturally consolidate its new possessions overseas. "More territory abroad calls for more righteousness at home: increased responsibility among the nations demands an increase of Christianity under our own Western skies," the Presbyterian Rev. R.F. Coyle exclaimed before the Synod of California in San Diego in October 1898 in support of home missions. "Greater America will never stand the strain of its expansion unless it becomes purer America." [119] In particular, Coyle argued that the stability of this 'Greater America' was especially contingent on the moral leavening of the nation's metropolises. "In 400 rapidly growing cities of our country one-third of our entire population is massed," Coyle explained. While 'country' evangelization remained important, the nation's urban centers posed peculiar dangers. "These cities are the centers of political influence and power. They are the nesting places of Socialism and Anarchy. Here Dives sits in luxury and fares sumptuously every day; and here Lazarus lies at his gate, smarting under sores, which he will not always tolerate." There was only one cure to this volatile "heartlessness of greed, on the one hand, and…the fury of outraged poverty on the other," and that was "the gospel of the Son of God."[120]

The organized church-building efforts of the major Northern Protestant denominations after the Civil War reveal the central role many Americans thought religion could and should play in the nation's consolidation and reunification. The financial structures of the church-building organizations themselves forged lasting material and spiritual connections between benefactors and beneficiaries across the continent, establishing a system of mutual philanthropic interdependence and emotional sympathy that advocates believed would bind the fractured country together. This infrastructural and spiritual consolidation was accompanied by a powerful and compelling ideology of church-building – a "republican ecclesiology" – that envisioned the Protestant edifice as essential to the nation's political consolidation and the continued survival of popular government. By investing in the cause, Americans could actively participate in the creation of a moral police power across the continent, one that would assure the cultural hegemony of Protestantism in the United States for all time. While tracks and cables might have knitted the continent together physically, churches remained the most important sort of consolidative infrastructure of all, for they served as the altars of a chosen people and laid the solid foundations of the Kingdom of Heaven on republican soil.

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[119] *The Assembly Herald*, June 1899 (New York: Presbyterian Building), 365.
[120] Ibid., 366.

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