

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

When I talk about Plymouth to new friends or acquaintances and they ask me, what does that mean, to be Congregational? I always struggle for a concise answer. Usually I say something about how it means that people don't need anyone to intercede for them with God, that a personal relationship is welcomed and that we are not fussy about baptism. That there is no kneeling or genuflecting, just quiet presence with God. That singing is part of worship, and there are responsive litanies. That the Congregational church is part of the Protestant faith and was associated with New England, though they are everywhere now and that the leadership is handled somewhat democratically. That the buildings are traditional looking and usually white.

I grew up going to the Old Road Congregational Church in Stonington, Ct. It was an old building, painted white, with fields around it bordered with stone walls where the pony rides would go every year at the church fair. The glass in the windows was so old it had run downward, pooling in bumpy convolutions at the bottom of each leaded pane. I never knew that glass could flow like a slow liquid, I spent many hours in church running my fingers along those panes of glass. There was a belfry, and there were bats. I loved it there.

There were not many young people at the Old Road Church so I was something of an oddity there, but also I could tell I was cherished. I was welcomed into the church choir in my high school years and heard most of the sermons from the choir loft from then on. My job at the church fair was usually serving up clam fritters or leading the pony. The pastor, J Merlyn

Billhorn, was a mechanical engineer during the week. His sermons were always interesting and had much to do with the glory of creation. He was the kind of person who might know that glass is not a liquid but an amorphous or disorganized solid, a state of matter somewhere in between liquid and solid. There was a weeknight youth group, mostly consisting of young people who did not attend the Road Church, but came for the games, fun and chocolate. I was expected to memorize all the books of the Bible in order and was rewarded for it with Hershey bars. There was no confirmation class, but I did have meetings with Pastor Billhorn at some point where we talked about prayer and the Bible and other things regarding faith. That must have been where I got some of my ideas about Congregationalism. I grew up knowing that I could pray anytime, anyplace, and God would hear me. That I could say anything in prayer, that the triune God was my companion through life, that nothing I could say would ever turn God away from me. That I was important to God.

Finding my way back to Congregational church, to Plymouth, has been a gift for me. I love the building at Plymouth too. I have more of a sense now of the congregational part of the church. I love the community of parents I have met at Plymouth that Julia fosters so beautifully. I have loved seeing my children be part of a thriving group of young people. I feel I have learned even more deeply that God shows a part of the Divine self in each person in the congregation. Every person I have met at Plymouth has something to teach, something to give or show. I always appreciate having so many different people be part of leading worship--even hearing the same words from a different person helps me hear them a little better. Reverend Brett's sermons are always interesting and funny and deep, so much so that my teen now enjoys sitting with me and hearing them each week. I feel welcomed to show what I can, to be as God made me, to find my path to God in my own way. I am helped along by the faith community, even now

when we are largely apart. But I look forward to gathering again when it is safe to do so, as being together in the same place allows for things to perhaps be fun, or funny, or even joyful. I think that might be what Congregational means to me now.

~Inga Knets