

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

My favorite church memories from the time I was a toddler include bamboo! To date, my favorite chapel is the one in El Guacio Presbyterian mission in the town of San Sebastián, Puerto Rico just a few towns over from my hometown of San Germán. With just a simple wooden cross and twenty concrete benches, this open-air Presbyterian chapel—both humble and breathtaking—sits atop one of the highest points in the town overlooking the lush green rolling hills and river below. Enveloping the chapel to date is one of the most majestic bamboo canopies you'll ever see.

In fact, my parents met there during a Presbyterian church retreat! They eventually married there, and it was at that chapel and surrounding grounds where I spent most summers. I remember it vividly like it was yesterday—skipping up and down the hills, singing to the beat of a tambourine at morning *matutinas* (songs and prayers at dawn), reading the Bible as the whistling wind joined us, singing its way through the fronds.

When you grow up surrounded by bamboo you learn a lot about it. It's soft, but sturdy. It holds the soil together. If a hill is crumbling, you want to plant bamboo to prevent erosion. If a river needs to change course, you plant bamboo to steer the waters to a new path. It can withstand droughts. And when a hurricane comes, it is the mighty bamboo that survives the storm. While other trees break and snap, the bamboo bends to the terrifying gusts. When the storm breaks, even after the bamboo has gotten whipped and snapped about, it regrows quickly and bounces back, stretching out its fronds, reshaping its loving, welcoming canopy once again.

It is no wonder I have always associated the mighty bamboo with the resilience of the congregational body. No matter how fierce the storms and challenges that come our way, "*todo lo puedo en Cristo que me fortalece.*" (Filipenses 4:13; "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13). Faith, like the bamboo, anchors itself unwaveringly, strengthening the foundation below even through the darkest days.

I recall being asked this past Lent if the COVID-19 crisis made me feel like I was in "winter" (feeling cold and trapped) or in "spring." Being raised on an island and not relating to either of these metaphors or seasons I replied, "Neither. It's hurricane season."

Just as a hurricane would, a (public health) “storm” of apocalyptic proportions turned our lives upside down. As a church, we’re doing what anyone on an island routinely does after a hurricane: we rebuild. We pick up the pieces, sort and clear the debris, and—one prayerful day at a time—we go on because... it’s what you do! Because losing hope is simply not an option. Because through Christ we can prevail and grow once again.

And, we did it! *We were the bamboo!*

We held our faith soil together, bending to the wind but never breaking. Withstanding an incomprehensible storm, we nevertheless anchored ourselves in the Word, rose from the debris, and branched out to the community through every care call, every volunteer effort, every prayer, every mission offering, every act of love for our neighbor.

And we continue to do it.

Together.

Every.

Day.

We are Plymouth because we are the **bamboo**. The mighty bamboo. And that’s what congregationalism means to me.

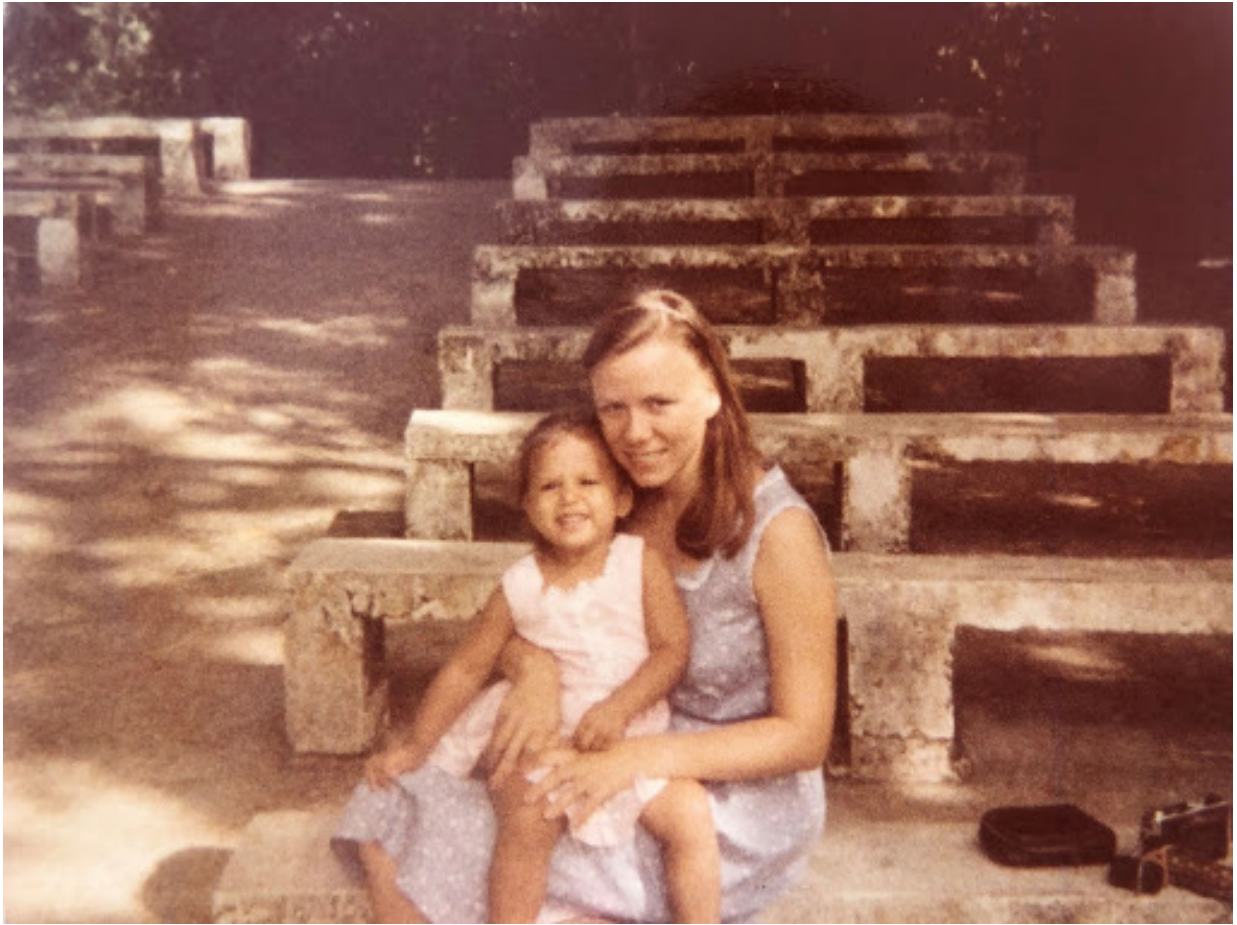
Molly Anna Martínez Hardigree (San Germán, Puerto Rico)



El Guacio chapel, 1976.



El Guacio chapel, 1976. View of the valley below when you stand next to the chapel cross.



My mother and I at *El Guacío* chapel following a worship service, 1982.