

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Plymouth and Me at 18, years that is, making music for worship with all of you and encouraging everyone to sing as part of their worship experience. Plymouth has a long thread of a music tradition and I have been lucky enough to be part of that thread with you.

My first experience with Congregationalism was in Lansing, Michigan where I was Minister of Music at a Congregational Church for the first time. It also had a long, strong musical tradition of choirs and congregational hymn singing, as well as a healthy respect for the sound of a mighty pipe organ. The first thing I was leery of was a Christian tradition that didn't have a specific creed that the congregation lived by as a community, like the Apostles's Creed or the Nicene Creed, which the congregation would affirm every Sunday. Growing up in the Lutheran tradition, a set of beliefs was very important to our identity as Christians. As I lived with the Congregationalists in Michigan, I came to learn how freeing it was to question each individual's creed and also to learn what the common core aspects were between and among individuals. Everyone came to show and describe their faith on their own terms, and we learned from each other day by day, about how God can be experienced in separate lives, yet still be the one God that we worshipped.

The same thing happens at Plymouth in Brooklyn - we all share our individual experiences of the Divine and these combine to create a broader understanding of our Creator and Savior.

Of course, for me it all revolves around music, and the way music helps enrich the worship experience. I have enjoyed the privilege of building a music program that reaches from the youngest singers (the charmers who remind us that God does, indeed, condone laughter in church) to the oldest singers and ringers who have the music of the church inscribed on their hearts from their many years of faithful service. It has been my honor to

help nurture that love of music in worship. And it is always a joy to add to our hymn repertoire.

I would be remiss if I failed to talk about how much I, personally, am fed by playing the grand Aeolian-Skinner organ each week. It is a particular pleasure to seek specific pieces that speak to the theme of each Sunday's worship focus, and this instrument makes accompanying choir anthems as well as congregational singing a pleasure and a sacred time for me.

Choirs are not just made up of people who want to make music to the best of their ability; they also are people looking for community and support in their daily lives. I see this happen all the time with our choirs and I feel that I am a part of their caring network. Whether it's children dealing with growing up or adults dealing with their own aspirations and place in the world, the choirs are a safe place for anyone to express themselves. Even though I'm constantly bossing people around to shape the music as I think it will best communicate with listeners, I experience the ups and downs of people's lives in an intimate way that wouldn't happen if we didn't have the medium of music to give us purpose. I thank Plymouth for this life experience every day and don't know where else I would find it except in a Christian community like Plymouth's.

Bruce Oelschlager