

WHY I CHOSE A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

I'm a child of the Eighties, a decade known then and now for being both sardonic and sincere. But even during these formative years I could sense the crumbling of the Pax Americana, illustrated by the mill closings in my hometown of Waterville, Maine and the school assemblies teaching us about the dangers of AIDS and drugs. A boy in my class found his father dead of suicide one weekend, and that unnamed sense of truth you get at times, even not knowing anything definite, made it not surprising. Vietnam memoirs like *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* were our preferred boyhood reading, and there were older men who sat smoking in the all-night donut shop who wore olive drab. All our dads had old Army clothes hanging in closets, the seldom-used upper hallway closets for items no longer wished to be seen but still kept.

We didn't go to church, although we gave money to the "Congo" church. *My parents are so intelligent, I thought, they don't make us go to church.* We did get baptized at age eight at home; my twin brother and I attended a parochial school where religious education was included; we went to Boy Scouts in the basements of a Lebanese and a Methodist church, but otherwise that was it for religion. It was completely irrelevant to my entire circle, even if some friends had "CCD" some nights and couldn't meet up to play. Back then you could ask people what religion they were and most people had an answer, even if they never went. If you ask people that question now, they look at you strangely. It's now vogueish to say you are "irreverent," as though it takes much courage to be so today. The shattering of truth brought on by post-modernism hit mainline churches hard, and they let it happen. And I was there, giving approval.

In college I discovered the album *John Wesley Harding* by Bob Dylan, and the quiet testimony got to me. It made me a believer, with its spare depiction of personal struggle, apocalypse, and social collapse. Reading totemic scholars on early Christianity in the college library helped too, the Desert Fathers

in particular. The wisdom was compelling and the auto-didacticism fit my bookish ways. A philosophy minor, the pursuit of wisdom mattered to me as I watched the civic norms I grew up with fail further. In my twenties I sought out various congregations, mostly Evangelical. I like Evangelicals: they are serious about faith and try to alter the world for God. I wasn't keen on the fact that no one stays in student-focused churches for long, nor is there much rigor to the sermons.

Moving to Brooklyn I looked up (in the Yellow Pages) Congregational churches. *Right on my subway line*, I noticed, *some place called Plymouth*. I had the lowest expectations ever, an hour a week and some opportunities to volunteer. Since there was a lot of that, I stayed. The focus on the personal journey, and the hands off approach about how it's done, is something I think Congregationalism gets right. Admittedly I'm biased as I grew up in New England with its town meetings and placid deliberateness to life, but I enjoy the self-autonomy of Congregationalism. I mostly regard Plymouth as a nondenominational place though; we're all business and it never matters, just do the work. The work of the Kingdom is what always matters. Those harvest fields are perennially white.

John Leighton