

## COVENANT: WHAT LIFE-LONG CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

I was raised attending First Congregational Church of Webster Groves, MO. My grandfather and great-uncle, both children of a Congregational minister, were also members. Each Sunday my family attended worship and Sunday School; my parents served on countless committees, searches, ministries and task forces, and participation in church choir was mandatory for anyone named Fales.

Recently I asked my dad how we came to that particular church. The answer was simple enough: we joined because his father was a member, and Grandpa joined because Uncle Will was a member. Since the 1960's it has been a Fales family church home. The east-facing sanctuary wall holds a stained-glass window in dedication to the Reverend Ira D. Fales and his beloved wife Betty, my great-grandparents.

My earliest memories include saying the congregational covenant in unison. At First Church we did this every week just before the children's sermon. Every fiber of my body remembers it. *'We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.'*

For me, Congregationalism is all about covenant. What does covenant mean? Dictionaries define it as "a formal agreement," or "to solemnly

vow.” It is both a noun and a verb. I find this particularly interesting because covenant is more than just a thing – it is a sacred, contemporary action we take. We covenant both with God (and God with us) and one another. In this way, we bind together as a worship community, in our collective action of faith.

One of the important features of Congregationalism is that each individual church decides its own covenant. This is an expression of Congregational autonomy. At Plymouth, we use the Salem Covenant of 1629 as our own. *‘We covenant with the Lord and one with another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His blessed word of truth.’*

We are a democratic people – we make the church function by our involvement and our equal votes. While the Annual Meeting and church elections are focal points of our governing structure, these are also vital expressions of our Christian faith. The Congregational Way reaches beyond organization of duty and rests in our love – our very active love – for each other. This active love, *‘to walk together in all His ways,’* may even be described as a physical embodiment of the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Another facet of our covenant is the phrase *“according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us.”* To me this idea is distinctly Congregational. It speaks to the autonomy and ecumenism of the Congregational Way. My experience of God is unique and deeply personal, and intended to be so, just as each person’s experience is specifically intended for them. No outside doctrine defines it, no other person can judge it.

The past year has presented the world with unforeseen challenges. Lifesaving safety measures have mandated changes to our regular

Plymouth routines and beloved traditions. I know I am not alone in feeling frustrated by current restrictions on our church participation. For Congregationalists, these shifts limit our expression of faith and can leave us feeling adrift. How to solve this problem may not be the important question here. Perhaps, in the true Congregational Way, it is more purposeful to ask the question: Are we collectively doing enough?

~ Maggie Fales