

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Periodically, I am invited to speak to people about hymns – which I am always happy to do. One point I always mention is that another name for hymn is congregational song. The names are interchangeable and the message is that hymns are the songs of the people – of the congregation. Hymns belong to us, the folks in the pews. For that reason, I always encourage my listeners to take congregational song seriously. Whether we are singing melody or harmony, there is a give and take within the singing community, which requires us to listen carefully and to modulate our voices with the voices around us. Singing together in worship is an act of care and trust, almost a covenant relationship, albeit unspoken. Further, I encourage singers to pay attention to the words they are singing, and to take ownership of those words. Ask yourself: do I believe what this text is saying? Does its message resonate with me? Certainly, we count on our clergy and staff to think about these things on our behalf when they plan worship, but that doesn't mean we should sing mindlessly. When we are singing to God we should sing with integrity. I tell singers that if they are not comfortable with the words they are singing, this is a starting point for serious reflection, and for a respectful and supportive conversation.

I think of Congregationalism in a similar way. As Congregationalists, we enter into a covenant to walk together (consider “sing together”) as a Christian community. Under the guidance of the Spirit, we are responsible for our congregation and we take ownership of the decisions that we make. There is no higher earthly authority telling us how to run God's church. Each of us, whether we sing melody or harmony, has a role in shaping the spiritual health of the whole – individually and in collaboration with others. We each need to pay attention to what the community is

doing and participate in the give and take of congregational life. When the community is considering moving in a new direction, we have a responsibility to ask questions and carefully listen to the answers. As with hymns, we have clergy, staff, and elected leaders who we count on to handle many decisions for us, but that does not absolve us from the need to be attentive. Humility is important too – when we voice our concerns, we may persuade others to new thinking, or we may be persuaded by others to amend our thinking. Ultimately we may need to accept that we are a lone voice within the community.

There are always compromises. I sing hymns that make me uncomfortable because I know that they are meaningful to others in the community. When I criticize a hymn, I try to do that with caution. More than once I have said, “I don’t like that hymn,” only to hear, “Ooooooh, that was my grandmother’s favorite hymn.” Oops. It is not essential that we have 100% agreement on every topic – and some tension is healthy – but we are covenant people and we try to live out that covenant in trust, love, and mutual respect.

Independence comes with immense responsibility and at Plymouth Church, that responsibility is in our hands. Congregationalism, like congregational singing, only works if each of us relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and participates thoughtfully, faithfully, and lovingly.

~Jacque Jones