



FIFTY-TWO PANDEMIC BLESSINGS

PLYMOUTH CHURCH

2020–2021



Brooklyn, New York



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These writings on Congregationalism are part of what helped Plymouth Church members stay connected through the COVID-19 lockdown.

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PREFACE



“How many of these essays do you think there will be?” asked Brett Younger, Senior Minister, Plymouth Church. I told him I had no idea. It was fall, 2020, and every church event, including speakers, receptions, tours and dinners that our History Ministry had planned to observe the 400th anniversary “of the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620, had been cancelled. There were no in-person worship services, Sunday School, or physical meetings of any kind taking place at Plymouth. The entire world was in lockdown.

It was Brett’s suggestion that a way to celebrate was to have some of our members write essays about the legacy of the Pilgrims and what being a Congregationalist in 2020–21 means. We now have a year’s worth of member writings by 28 women and 24 men; the youngest writer is in high school and the oldest just turned 97 years old. There are essays by longtime members and some by the newest to join Plymouth.

Each essay is a distinct and special piece of the Plymouth story, although not the whole story by any means; there are hundreds of members whose stories are not part of this collection. These essays are however a good snapshot in time of what it means to be members of a healthy and vibrant urban church during a pandemic. In 2022 Plymouth will be celebrating our 175th anniversary. My hope is that these essays/stories will inspire those who celebrate Plymouth at its 200th or 300th anniversaries by giving a glimpse of their predecessors from 2020–21. The pandemic has turned out to have at least 52 blessings.

James Waechter

CONGREGATIONALIST ESSAY SERIES
| 1 | NOVEMBER 19, 2020



PLYMOUTH IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

James Waechter

What does this mean? Plymouth's History Ministry plans to explore this question with a series of essays by Plymouth members on what being a Congregationalist means to them.



I grew up in a Congregational Church in Western North Dakota. It was founded in the 1880s by settlers from Ohio including my great grandparents, Melcena and Parker Wickham. Both great grandparents had grown up on farms near Marietta, Ohio. They had four children and were living in Cleveland when in 1884 they simply got on a train and moved West. They had a fifth child, Inez, my grandmother, after arriving on their homestead in Glen Ullin, Dakota Territory. I'm in the midst of doing research on my Wickham family tree and keep learning more about how and, more importantly, why my great grandparents made the trip West.

It is growing clear to me that being Congregationalists is a key part of their story.

As a little kid I knew the stories about the Pilgrims landing in 1620 at Plymouth Rock. I remember seeing a painting of the

Pilgrims, although I can't remember if it was in the church basement or one of my school classrooms in Glen Ullin. The painting was a copy of George Henry Boughton's *Pilgrims Going to Church*. We never discussed why the men in the painting were carrying muskets or the relationship between the Pilgrims and Native Americans. In the decades that followed the Pilgrim's landing they and the Puritans, who settled further north in Salem, Massachusetts, colonized all of New England.

I just recently read the David McCullough book *The Pioneers* which tells the story of the migration in the 1780s of New Englanders down the Ohio River to settle Marietta, Ohio, and what was called the Northwest Territory, now the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan. "Northwest" is a matter of perspective when you live in New England. The most prominent church in Marietta was the Congregational Church, and the leaders of this movement West were all Congregationalists. I am awed by the courage it took to leave known places and move on. Once again, faith was a very important factor in this geographic expansion.

My perspective on being a Congregationalist is that I can have a relationship directly with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, but that I am not equipped to be in that relationship alone. I need to be part of a faith community including ministers, family, other members and Congregational Churches, that challenges, educates, cares for and loves one another and our fellow human beings. I am an inheritor of a religious heritage that took remarkable faith and courage to move from England to New England to Ohio to the Dakota Territory and then to Brooklyn, New York.

I am humbled and pleased to be a Congregationalist and a member of Plymouth Church.



“It has been a delight to see this project develop from 5 to 15 to a total of 52 essays,” Jim comments. “It’s a truly collaborative effort quite unlike anything I’ve been involved with in the past and it’s a pure joy.”

CONGREGATIONALIST ESSAY SERIES
| 2 | NOVEMBER 25, 2020



FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF THE MAYFLOWER AT PLYMOUTH ROCK

What Congregationalism Means to Me

Caroline Koster



I won't lie. I wish we were celebrating the 400th anniversary of the 1620 landing of the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock with dancing and feasting. We could invite the Packer Jazz Band like that one year at the Yankee Gala. Maybe Sally Larson could roast us a duck and we could graze on corn pudding and some kind of boozy cake we'd falsely attribute to Mrs. Beecher. At this point, I'd allow the History Ministry to recite the deed to the Lost Acre if we could eat a meal together. "We Gather Together" seems a long way from "The Shining Shore." Come to think of it, I'd settle just for singing.

Our Mayflower remembrance was cancelled, of course, in 2020's viral stormy seas.

But our Congregationalism was not.

I leave it to the experts to tell you what that means as doctrine or liturgy. No doubt it's something about Martin Luther and that pesky church door, the Salem Covenant, and the Kansas City Statement of Faith, seasoned with a dash of the Pilgrims and sprinkled with our shard of Plymouth Rock. The

Rolling Stones may have also been involved. Or did I get that wrong?

Anyway, I don't have the "-ism" part down too well. But I understand the "congregate" part just fine.

At Plymouth, we know how to gather. Around our feasts and playgrounds, in our grand meetings and small groups. On our history tours, picnics and galas. In our raised voices, communal prayers and whispered fears. In our Sunday school rooms and greenings. Around each other as we suffer and mourn. Over pageants and pancakes. With our neighbors and needy strangers as we reach out with God's promise, once learned together, hard not to share.

It's not always easy, this congregating. Our 1620 traditions mean we argue like pent up Puritans over budgets and slights. But these same traditions bond and covenant us, one with another, and with God, honed by common promise of faithfulness, strong enough to leave a sliver where the spirit can come in.

2020's separateness has tested our bonds, our gathering traditions, our shared journey. Dispersed, we rely on the faith of 400 years of our Pilgrim ancestors, who stepped onto the doorstep at Plymouth Rock, carrying a faith for the ages, to keep us whole. The knowledge that it will do so is what Congregationalism means to me.

This year, like all others, no matter where we came from, who our parents were or how we got here, the blessing of Congregationalism and our faith is that we are all Mayflower people.



“This community nourishes me,” says Caroline. She loves sitting in the Beecher Garden, especially when it blooms and the sun is out. “I can still smell the burgers, hear the laughter and feel the joy from that first homecoming picnic in the fall 2021 after being scattered for so long,” she adds.

CONGREGATIONALIST ESSAY SERIES
| 3 | *DECEMBER 3, 2020*



WHY CONGREGATIONALISM IS IMPORTANT TO ME

Boyd Johnson



Historians credit the Puritans with having brought the Congregational tradition to America in the 1600s. Regardless of its precise origins, there is no doubt that Congregationalism has had a significant impact on the religious, political, and cultural history of this country. Being a Congregationalist is important to me for at least two reasons: first, the local autonomy it guarantees churches like Plymouth, and, second, the reliance on voluntary covenant rather than required creed to bind church members together in faith and works.

Congregationalism affords each church the right to identify, develop, and implement its own vision of a faithful community. It was this tenet of local autonomy that cloaked and protected Plymouth in the Civil War Era, liberating its founders and Henry Ward Beecher to create a Cranberry Street church with the courageous calling of ending American slavery. It is this same Congregational right of local autonomy that has led today's Plymouth to serve our community creatively through the Racial Justice and Anti-Human Trafficking Ministries, Bloom Again Brooklyn, Brooklyn Delivers, and so many other good works.

Congregational churches like Plymouth are bound together

by voluntary acceptance of a covenant expressing their promises to God and to each other. As William Ames described: “Believers, simply as an assembly, do not constitute a church even though they may regularly meet together. Only unification through covenant, with its shared commitment to perform requisite duties toward God and toward one another, creates church estate.” Congregationalism challenges local churches to develop their own, unique covenants of faith and rejects the use of a preordained creed to test one’s faith. Plymouth has embraced this challenge and fashioned a covenant calling us to know God, to grow together, and to live out our faith boldly and generously in the world.

Congregationalism grants Plymouth the right to be self-governing and to choose its own covenant but also the responsibility that comes with those rights. What does that responsibility mean for us today? Plymouth’s founders accepted their responsibility and chose conviction against slavery, risking their fortunes, their reputations, and their own freedoms in the process. What will we choose at the new Plymouth? How will we continue to action the words of our modern Plymouth covenant through our daily lives? What are we prepared to risk?

To me, whatever answers we prayerfully divine to these questions, Congregationalism is important because the questions are ours to ask, and ours to answer. And I take strength and comfort from knowing that our Plymouth family will struggle with all of these questions together.



“Dear friends spoke to us about how welcoming and sincere Plymouth was about serving Christ and the community,” says Boyd, “so we visited and joined in 2013.” “Watching the first ZOOM worship service, alone in my house, made me realize that a community of Christ can come in many wonderful forms,” he adds.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST: WHAT IT MEANS TO ME

Keith Wright



I was not raised in a religious household. It was quite the opposite; religion was not only absent it was poorly explained and misrepresented. As a child growing up in progressive Silicon Valley in the 90s, any mention of God, any mention of a divine moral influence, was being actively removed from my surroundings and the public school system. Left in the twilight of darkness, I was on my own when it came to developing an understanding of the nature of God.

By the time I reached my mid 20s and into my 30s, I had led a rough life of all “logic” and little “love” that was starting to take a toll on me. A curiosity for a higher nature and spiritual truth was unfolding within me. It started with the beauty of church architecture catching my eye. I would enter these beautiful churches across the US and Europe, but they still felt empty and cold. I knew the seed was in me, but I was still lost as to my own transformation process: germ, bud, blossom, and fruits. It still seemed far-fetched.

In 2018 I moved to Brooklyn Heights from Chelsea,

Manhattan. I needed a slower pace of life in my neighborhood. Shortly after moving, I went on a walking tour to learn about the history of my new neighborhood. One of the last stops was Plymouth Church. The guide tells the story of Henry Ward Beecher as an abolitionist showman conducting staged, reverse slave auctions. He mentions that the Plymouth basement was still intact as it once was when it served as a station on the Underground Railroad. Later that day I began researching Mr. Beecher and the story of our congregation. The next day, which was a Sunday, I attended Plymouth Church and upon arrival met the wonderful Grace Faison. It was a simple church visit but the beginning of a journey.

Beecher's story was brilliantly laid out for me after reading Debby Applegate's book, *The Most Famous Man in America*. However, it was Beecher's own words to his congregation that sparked in me a new found thirst for spiritual knowledge. I started reading his sermons from the 1860s and 70s. The more I read, the more I felt my conception of God building itself up with new attributes, dispositions, a clearer character, and a recognizable line of conduct.

My evenings and weekends became dedicated to hunting down and consuming the body of work left behind by Beecher's stenographers. This meant constantly scanning eBay for old books and a lot of time spent dwelling in the library archives of the Brooklyn Historical Society.

So what does being a Congregationalist mean to me? It means to me love, loving myself, my neighbors, my family, and all of the wonderful surroundings that God has blessed this earth with. It is the foundation of my faith that we are God's children and that the kingdom of God is within us. It has

helped me understand the fruits of life's suffering and the benefits of giving back to our collective community.

Here are a few examples of books from Plymouth's archives that, for me, capture the essence of what it means to be a Congregationalist: *Sermons by Henry Ward Beecher, Freedom and War, Evolution and Religion*, and *The Life of Jesus, The Christ*.



Joining the church in 2018, Keith has taken time during the pandemic to study Henry Ward Beecher's published sermons. "It has helped me find clarity in truth and hope in a world of mass confusion and fear," he states.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

A Life-Long Commitment to Plymouth Church

Valerie Velazquez de Louzonis



As far back as I can recall, and at every stage of my life, I remember Plymouth. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of events that took place in the elegant, classically-inspired buildings on Plymouth's grounds. Aside from my home life, Plymouth was the center of my world. I remember my first Sunday school class in a room that had a mural depicting Noah's ark. I was fascinated by the colorful animals marching two by two around the four walls to the waiting ark at the back of the room. We sat listening to Bible stories while feasting on apple juice and Oreo cookies. I remember singing in the Junior Choir where I was a frequent soloist. I still remember all the lyrics of my role as the donkey who "... carried his mother uphill and down..." in the children's nativity carol. The treasured books of Biblical stories we received as annual Christmas gifts have been in my "library" throughout the years. I just recently mailed them off to my grandnieces.

As time went by, I became one of the "official" Plymouth

baby-sitters. My favorite job was taking care of my Sunday school teacher's son. He always asked for a banana split and I was sure to make two. I remember the Yankee Fair at which I would always find treasures. I still have the tiny Christmas stocking I bought the year my youngest brother was born. It hangs on my tree every year. I was filled with the mysticism of the Maundy Thursday service with the beautiful white rose that was handed to us on our way out and loved dressing up in a new outfit, complete with a fancy hat, on Easter Sunday. In my confirmation year we formed a neighborhood youth group that would gather to play ten pins on cold winter Saturdays in the warm interior of the bowling alley. And I remember the navy blue dress with an ecru collar that I wore at my first dance held in the "75 Room" where we got to dance with boys.

Although the concept of Congregationalism was not clearly formed in my mind, I knew it was different from the religions of three of my neighborhood friends. In the summer months I would walk my Catholic friend to confession and stand at the doorway of the sumptuous Assumption Church on Cranberry Street and watch her go into the booth with a lace doily on her head. It didn't take long: we were thirteen—she had nothing to confess. My second friend described herself as being culturally Jewish. I was very curious about Judaic traditions and asked her mother so many questions that the family hosted a Hanukkah dinner for me complete with candle lighting. It was their first. My third friend was a Unitarian who attended the stately stone church on Pierrepont Street. It was considered the "cool" church because they got to celebrate every holiday—Christmas, Passover, Diwali... I believe they still do.

Many years later, I have a better idea of what it is to be a Congregationalist and in the last year and a half that I have

spent doing research on the stained glass windows in the sanctuary, I have encountered many of the Pilgrims, Puritans and early Congregationalists who settled New England and beyond. Their form of Congregationalism was a bitter pill to swallow. God was a wrathful God, jealous, vengeful and relentless in his cruelty. It was Henry Ward Beecher who helped promulgate the image of a loving God, a compassionate God, a patient, and forgiving God, the one who sent us the epitome of human existence in his Son, the very embodiment of love. I consider myself blessed to be a Beecher Congregationalist, a Plymouth Congregationalist where former adherents of other faiths can feel at home, feel accepted, and feel loved. What keeps us together are the two greatest commandments: our love of God and our love for one another. And now, having entered my “extended middle age,” serving on the History Ministry with my husband and dear friends, anticipating the joy of returning to choir, doing research on the sanctuary’s glorious stained glass windows, and attending worship service, albeit remotely, I find that Plymouth is still at the center of my world.



Valerie’s most meaningful time at Plymouth is Good Friday. She says, “I appreciate the quiet time it affords me to contemplate what it means to be a Christian when the trumpets are silent and all the flowers have faded.”



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Hattie Bollerman



When Jeff and I became Plymouth members, now ten years ago, one of the most frequent questions I posed to him after church, or more accurately, after any formal meeting of church members was: “so, who is in charge at that place? Seriously, where does the buck stop and who is the big boss?”

Not being able to deduce this based on title or seniority, I assiduously observed the non-verbal cues for illumination; sometimes I just asked point blank about the hierarchy, seeking a senior someone whose yea or nay made things so at Plymouth. Truth be told, I wanted a “church boss,” so that I could be absolved of any real responsibility. My attachment to hierarchy was secured early on. The eldest of five children, I was raised by a lapsed Catholic and a polite Episcopalian, both turned Presbyterian, then turned Baptist; my spiritual upbringing was brimming with Boards of Deacons and Sessions of the Church and Elders. I was cradled in the arms of religious structure.

I had no idea (until I was 36!) that I was so addicted to

someone else being in charge. I mistakenly believed I was a liberated, self-reliant, can-do New Yorker. And yet when it came to the business of the church, although possessing a seminary education and what I hoped was a sincere love of God, I very much wanted to outsource the big decisions. So finding myself in this new world order, a Congregationalist community, was for me an exercise in self-awareness and trust. All this to say that if you are asking what it means to be a Congregationalist, I believe that first and foremost, it is to be part of group that demands that you own your faith and requires you to ready yourself to take a position and be willing to compromise, for the good of the world. Congregationalism is no check-the-box system, this is a roll-up-your sleeves and get-ready-for Christ-inspired action.

I believe that Congregationalism carries with it a different level of responsibility than other denominations and certainly being a member of Plymouth is a different commitment than other affiliations. It is transcendent. I carry the belief, heavier in my heart each year, that we need each other, and are responsible to each other at Plymouth. Although we will not always get things right, together we do get things better.

Ultimately, we believe that God is good and is for us and works through us. But this theological miracle is not an excuse to dial it in and assume good old God will save the day.

Congregationalism feels very messy because is it seeks to involve everyone—the type-A people, the annoying people, the loud people, the proud people, the holier-than-thou people, the late people, the patient people, the hurting people, the loving people. Oh so very messy, this priesthood of believers. But in this congregation, everyone's gifts are required and desired.

This Congregational structure demands that one show up, be willing to debate, to serve, to commit.

Plymouth, for all its messiness, offers us the chance to continue the centuries-long story and to find out how together we might be the kind of people memorialized in stained glass. I used to puzzle over our sanctuary's windows teaching of the Puritans and the founders of schools and abolitionists. Weren't we to learn of the saints, the apostles, the trinity, as we sat daydreaming in church? Once again, I wanted to default to the "bosses." But now these stained-glass ghosts feel like the fellow members they are—members of the capital C Congregation; our distant relatives who harken to all of us, "Come on—work this faith, embrace this gift of one another—and get busy seeking justice and expressing generosity in this world." They did it and they didn't even have the internet.

Being a Congregationalist is to be inspired to change the world because it is in our denominational DNA. But the Congregationalist does not go it alone. First, we as Congregationalists must look around and embrace each other, because it is together that we will be a bright light in this dim world.

Congregate in love.



Hattie is a member of Plymouth Church.



COVENANT: WHAT LIFE-LONG CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Maggie Fales



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 1960s 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, and 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?



As a Congregationalist and part of an interfaith family, Maggie was looking for a church where her whole family would be comfortable. She is happy to report that each member of her family feels surrounded by the same love and unconditional acceptance.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Grace Gray Faison



When I was eight years old my mother took my brother and me to California to visit my grandmother, Grace Andrews. She was adorable, just a lovely person, and we had a great time. The most amazing aspect of the visit turned out to be my visit to Sunday school. The teacher was a charismatic woman who took one look at me and said with conviction that has stuck with me all my life, “God loves you.” Knowing that made me so joyful, I skipped all the way to grandma’s house. That was the beginning of my abiding comfort in my personal relationship with God. The home of that relationship became Plymouth Church.

I grew up in Brooklyn Heights. After we joined Plymouth, my grandmother let me tag along as she offered Sunday dinner to person after person, searching for someone new to the church to ask home for that afternoon’s dinner, which was her way.

I was married at Plymouth Church. After 13 months following my husband to navy bases, I returned home as a widow with my baby. We lived at 12 Clark Street where a neighbor of mine invited me to join a sort of social club that met in the

church basement on a weekly basis. That is where I met a group of four young men that lived on Monroe Place and worked in Manhattan. They adopted me, so to speak, and included me and my son in all their gatherings. They were distressed that I had not officially joined Plymouth Church on a personal basis—they encouraged me to do so, and I did.

Plymouth has always been the heart of what I care about. With the support of Plymouth, it allows me to feel safe in loving God. I am endlessly grateful for all the friendships I have made there, grateful for the privilege of striving to enhance such a humble yet magnificent house of worship, and I am grateful for the sanctuary that makes me feel closest to God.

At 96 years old my mantra is this: We are all connected. We all need each other. We cannot do it alone.

It is a comfort that Plymouth Church is the core of my life.



A member for more than 70 years, Grace loves arriving well before Sunday morning worship to watch the sanctuary come alive with activity.



BECOMING A
CONGREGATIONALIST—
WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Jacque Jones



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 shows up early for events at Plymouth because she loves sitting in the sanctuary when it is completely empty. She and Norm joined the church in 1987.

CONGREGATIONALIST ESSAY SERIES
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BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Sadie Horton



First Parish and First Congregational Church stand on either side of the village green on Canton Avenue in Milton, Massachusetts; they are twin monuments to a spare, proudly protestant, New England spirit. The churches were founded as one in 1680 under the leadership of the Reverend Peter Thatcher, who provided the local Puritan congregants with spiritual and also corporeal support: he was their minister, doctor, and also veterinarian. Over 150 years later, in 1834, a theological dispute within the congregation caused a permanent fissure, with the Unitarians remaining in the original building and the trinitarian Congregationalists decamping across the green where they would build themselves a new meetinghouse.

It was in the choir lofts of these two white clapboard churches that my journey to Plymouth Church began. I started as a substitute soloist at First Congregational in 1987 while a student at the New England Conservatory in Boston. A few years later, a permanent position opened at First Parish where I sang until moving to New York City in 1998.

It took me some time to understand and appreciate the differences between Congregational and Unitarian; I was often confused on one hand by the puzzling concept of the Trinity and on the other, the inclusion of so many different faiths in one service. I had been raised with little to no religious education by my secular Jewish parents, proud atheists who had rejected the traditions of their immigrant parents. I came to church to pursue my musical, not spiritual, journey.

Years later, now married with young children, I joined the Plymouth Choir as a section leader and soloist. My children followed me to church on Sunday mornings and soon I was running from the loft after the anthems, to the basement of the Hicks Street building where I would play guitar and sing Bible songs for Discoveryland. I was also directing the Christmas pageant, volunteering for vacation bible camp and spending more and more time in the company of Plymouth Church families. Someone suggested I join the Wednesday Women's Bible Study and that small group soon become a sanctuary for me of study and fellowship. It was also a space that challenged my atheist world view, and where I grew to admire the strong faith of my friends.

To understand more about Plymouth, I joined the new members class (twice) and there I learned about the history of the church, and the Salem Covenant, and that as a friend of the church I could participate fully in the life of the church—except on one day. On the day of the annual meeting, I could observe but I could not vote. If I wanted to participate, I would have to become a member. And to become a member, I would need a baptism, something that was (for a secular Jew) not a step to be taken lightly. Every year I sat through the annual meeting and watched the church members debate (and

sometimes shout) as they discussed important decisions for Plymouth. They demonstrated their Congregationalism through civic engagement and self-governance. As the years went by I sat and watched and thought more and more about that next step.

That day did finally come, over twenty years after the first time I sang in the choir loft at First Congregational Church in Milton. On a warm summer morning in 2010, as I stood in a circle made by the women of the Wednesday Bible Study, I was baptized by the Rev. David Fisher; I became a member of Plymouth the following fall.

What does it mean to be a Congregationalist? For me, it means to come to the meeting and be ready to vote, to speak out (and sometimes to shout).



“The Women’s Bible Study moved to Zoom when the pandemic made it impossible to meet in-person. It’s wonderful that we have been able to get together uninterrupted,” says Sadie, “Thank you Zoom.”

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BECOMING A
CONGREGATIONALIST—
WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Lee Scott



I come from a central Pennsylvania Dutch background; my grandparents on my Dad’s side were Church of the Brethren, while my mom’s family were Lutheran. In those days, you all did what your “daddy” did church-wise, so rather than attend the lovely Hollidaysburg Presbyterian Church just three blocks from home where some cousins went (and I knew lots of the kids, and my parents knew lots of the parishioners and the minister, all of whom were our neighbors), we attended the Brethren church in Altoona, six miles away. It was very plain (women even wore little white caps). The minister was a failed insurance salesman with no special training as a minister, but a good Christian, and the Sunday school was a great background for getting all the Bible stories straight and memorizing Bible verses, sometimes a whole chapter.

Sunday School was fine, and as a teenager, I helped with the classes for the younger kids, but for Church (Junior church stopped when you were 13), I and my two girlfriends who were the same age, sat in the balcony most times, and read our

novels during the really uninteresting, boring sermons (from a teenage point of view for sure—don't know what the grown-ups thought!).

When I went to college at Denison, I first heard a fabulous sermon...from Harry Kruener who was just leaving Denison to come to Plymouth, I think. His successor was also quite good, so obligatory Thursday morning chapels were not hard to attend, especially since you got a credit if you didn't miss more than three a semester. I pretty much skipped church while in law school, but after marrying Peter and moving to Brooklyn, I was delighted to attend Plymouth, especially since the choir was terrific, and Harry was the preacher!

We made lots of wonderful new friends, I started singing in the choir, church was a great experience each week, and I paid attention to the sermons, even after Harry left. All of his successors have been wonderful people and preachers, even in the 70s when we had a female for a year or so, which was a whole new concept at that time.

I love Plymouth and have come for at least 46 years, and I especially love it that there are so many wonderful people involved! We've made lots of friends over the years, and the choir has been a special favorite of mine...love singing with such terrific folks and their excellent voices!

Not to mention how much it's improved my music reading ability.

For me, there are six truly special things about PLYMOUTH. The first is the building itself, then the history, then the organ music, the choir, and the wonderful sermons! And the extraordinary people I've met there over all those years... many of whom have become very special and amazing friends.

Thank you all for your part in making Plymouth such a great place to worship God and enjoy life on earth!



Lee came to Plymouth fifty years ago to have her daughter baptized. She had heard Harry Kruener preach at Denison University and loved his fabulous sermons. "Fortunately," Lee adds, "most of his successors have been wonderful preachers too."

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| 12 | FEBRUARY 4, 2021



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Tom Bettridge



Without knowing all the motives behind it, all of a sudden, when I was eight we became a church family. My two older brothers and I were volunteered to sing in a classic, British style, men and boys choir at Trinity Episcopal Church, Toledo, Ohio, practicing three times a week. We were paid 15 cents a rehearsal for bus fare. On Sundays and at weddings and funerals we wore cassocks, surpluses, tall starched collars, big satins bows. Soon after, my mother started teaching Sunday school and my father was part of the vestry.

Trinity was a “low” Episcopal church. No genuflecting, no incense, no stations of the cross, but still a Gothic structure with stained- glass windows and plenty of adornment. Silver chalices were used for communion as were tasteless but tastefully embossed wafers.

But that is not when my Christian education began. My mother had come from a church-going family and went to a women’s seminary school affiliated with Kenyon College. (My father’s family were not church goers.) Raising what

eventually became a family of eight children, my mother did her best to inculcate in her brood Christian ethics and morals. Long before I started going to church, I was taught the “golden rule,” and to “turn the other cheek,” and the parables (I knew them as bedtime stories or moral lectures) of the good Samaritan and Lazarus and the Prodigal Son.

Not unlike many of my peers, by the time I began college, I had become a teenage agnostic. Which isn't to say that I unlearned what my parents and Trinity had taught me about being a good and moral person, but that the lessons became ethical and humanist, no longer spiritual.

When I first came to Plymouth I had little idea of what a Congregationalist was. Wendy and I had been looking for a church for some time. Speaking for myself, I had lost a brother, a sister, a small daughter, and a marriage in the last decade and a half of the 20th century and my mother was slowly failing. I felt the need for a safe and holy place to try to understand and come to terms with that. Did I care what brand of Protestantism it was? Not too much.

The things that attracted me to Plymouth were David Fisher's preaching, the welcome we received as visitors from members at coffee hours, and the outward facing part of Plymouth that looked to the community and to those less fortunate than our congregation, in those days primarily the Christian Help Committee, the Blood drives and Habitat projects. And that last aspect continues to be an extremely important part of Plymouth life to me as I have participated in and watched others develop a whole range of programs such as the interfaith partnerships after 9/11, the anti-trafficking ministry, the thrift store, the racial justice ministry and more.

Self-government didn't seem particularly important to me

(even though I was recruited very soon after joining to be on the Council), until I became a member of the most recent search committee. Although I understood in principle that a Congregational church chose its own senior minister, being a part of the lengthy but very successful process with such a wonderful cooperative group of fellow members was truly a sacred experience.

As to the worship in Plymouth, I enjoyed the music and most of the service but missed the pageantry. And I must admit I missed even more the creeds, the act of stating out loud one's beliefs, reminding oneself in one fell swoop the content of one's faith, that reminder every Sunday of the whole course of creation, the birth of Christ and the resurrection. As a famous theologian said of the Apostles' Creed, it sets forth the doctrine "in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassable brevity, in beautiful order, and with liturgical solemnity."

Nevertheless, I value the fact that modern Congregationalism gives one space to question, to doubt and to figure out what one believes. It encourages community, and at the same time has room for members who are in very different places in their faith journey. And I value the sermons that guide us to understand what the Christian teachings and beliefs mean in the here and now, the current troubling world, and in our struggling lives.



Tom is a member of Plymouth Church



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Susan Egan



I was raised in a Congregational Church in Nutley, NJ, which was interestingly called Saint Paul's. I married a man who was raised Catholic and we married in my home church. When I moved to NYC I did not attend church but when my son was seven years old I decided it was time to find one. I was at second grade Packer picnic and two women were talking about their church. I was intrigued because they said it was Congregational. I attended and felt immediately at home. There was no church shopping. Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims is where I decided to stay.

My son, Jack, is now 37 years old and my daughter, Julia, is 26. Raising them at Plymouth is an important part of our family. Although my husband is not a member, he attends every important event, loves a Plymouth party, and cooked the Yankee Fair dinner a few times back in the day.

Since I have been a member so long, I have served on just about every committee and ministry. I have also been on search committees, participated in many small groups, and attended many retreats. And, to me, this participation and service is the true meaning of Congregationalism. All of our hard work and

devotion, our common drive to do God's work, and the successes that we have achieved, makes me very proud.

Reverend Al Bunis, one of our previous assistant ministers, once likened a Congregational church to a co-op board. I know what he meant, but to be honest, I was a bit offended. I believed that what we do is sacred. However, in fact there are parallels—we do come together for the common good and all have a voice and a vote in how we conduct our business. This self-governance is an important reason I choose Congregationalism.

I love our diversity and inclusion. I love our progressive history and I love that we continue to be progressive in our work for human rights and dignity. I love that we think not only of our own needs but give to those in need in Brooklyn and beyond. For me, being a part of Plymouth's community means that we join together to worship, work and serve together to express through our church and our individual lives our love and faith. As part of the Plymouth Church Covenant says "... to walk together in all His ways..."



Parents from her son's 2nd grade class were talking about Plymouth, and Susan, who had grown up as a Congregationalist, decided to attend. That was 30 years ago. Early in the pandemic Brett organized a virtual meeting for readers to help find new books to read. "This kept me connected with the people I love and missed," Susan said.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Brett Younger



During an ecumenical gathering, an administrator rushes in shouting, “The building is on fire.” The Baptists yell, “Where is the water?” The Methodists gather in the corner to pray. The Quakers quietly thank God for the blessing of fire. The Roman Catholics pass the plate to cover the damage. The Episcopalians form a processional and march out. The Christian Scientists conclude there is no fire. The Presbyterians appoint a chairperson who is to appoint a committee to look into the matter and bring a written report. The administrator grabs the fire extinguisher and puts the fire out.

The divisions in the Christian church may be amusing to us, but in scripture unity is a big deal: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:5–6). Paul’s high-sounding words, “one body and one Spirit,” do not describe our present situation. Far from being one body the church has divided and subdivided many times. (When my mother said “mixed dating” it meant going to a movie with a Methodist.)

John Calvin thundered, “There cannot be two or three churches unless Christ is torn asunder,” and then Calvin started his own denomination. The “one body” has been dismembered with arms and legs strewn all around.

We hope that God smiles over our foolishness, because the dark side of our divisions is that we are tempted to measure other groups by how close they are to our group. The walls churches build seem permanent, but Plymouth belongs to a tradition that knows better.

Think of it this way. The best cattle ranchers understand they can keep their herds together by either putting up a fence or digging a well. Some Christian denominations put up fences. They insist that you have to believe certain things. If you believe the wrong things, then you cannot be in the family. Some denominations spend enormous energy building fences.

Congregationalism gathers around the well—the source of joy, hope, and peace. God’s love is at the center of the family. The focus is on caring more than creeds, on direction rather than definition. Congregationalism is an invitation rather than a boundary.

Plymouth Church’s Senior Ministers have come from a variety of backgrounds. Henry Ward Beecher was a Presbyterian, as was Newell Dwight Hillis. Dick Stanger’s background was in the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Sharon Blackburn was in the Episcopal Church for a time. Stanley Durkee, Harry Kruener, David Fisher and I were Baptists. As far as I know, no member of our present staff has been a member of another Congregational Church. We have never really counted, but it seems that about 20% of the members of Plymouth have Congregational backgrounds. Our church welcomes

people with diverse experiences. We are grateful for our differences.

What is at the heart of what we believe? In our best moments, the center of our hope is the one true God. We know that there is not a Catholic God and a Lutheran God and a Congregational God. We know there is one God, and that one God draws us together. That is why I am glad to be a Congregationalist.



Brett came to Plymouth Church as Senior Minister in May 2016. He enjoys going into the sanctuary when it is empty and reading in the second balcony. "I really need to take a pew cushion up there," Brett explains.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Alex Yaggy



I grew up in a divided house. My mother Catholic, my father Episcopalian, a controversial union by church standards in the heady days of 1967. This meant my brother, sister, and I attended Catholic church services, including CCD at 10:10 am every Sunday. I loathed it, all of it, with its humorless, severe, and strict compartment.

However, Christmas Eve was usually reserved for the far more welcoming farm church my Father attended, with its occasional live sheep for the Christmas Eve pageant and, unlike the Catholic church, cushions on the pews. The origin of my parents' arrangement was simple. My mother, an Irish descendent with a maiden name of O'Donovan felt obligated to carry on in Catholicism while my father, whose own mother was a Duncan likely of Scots Presbyterian descent, felt the same. Bull-headed, the lot of us.

Becoming intellectually conscious in the 1980s while growing up independently in farm country breeds suspicion of authority. Skepticism around religion ran strong in my blood and

matured into cynicism. I watched Jim and Tammy Faye Baker abuse their power; Oral Roberts demand money to avoid being “called to God”; and, more closely, the Catholic church we attended spend lavishly on an upgraded entrance driveway to celebrate the Monsignor’s 25th anniversary. Our church had two collections, one for the church itself, and one for the poor. The donations for the church always well exceeded that for the poor.

In my heart, reared by fields and trees and endless skies, I felt a higher power. Yet bound in the walls of that church I, perhaps unfairly, repeatedly found the people false and selfish. I still cannot reconcile the idolatry of church architecture alongside the tolerance and ignorance of poverty. It is completely incongruous with what I understood Christianity to actually ask of its people.

My wife had a far more hospitable view of the church than I. For years it was a point of contention. I write all of the above to make it clear I resisted the walk up the hill to Plymouth. So it came to pass, as they say, when Rebecca asked if I would accompany her one Sunday. And we’ve come ever since that day. For the first time in a house of worship I felt spirituality, a welcoming, and an intellectual maturity about the mystery of faith.

What Congregationalism means to me is freedom from central authority and a rejection of the inevitable abuse of power that comes with structure and titles. I deeply appreciate the writing on the wall of the Reception Room:

“These buildings are presented to the people of Plymouth Church in recognition of what Henry Ward Beecher did to save the Union.” —John Arbuckle

Beecher had his flaws, but he was instrumental in abolishing the scourge of slavery. He made a positive difference in the world. Arbuckle made his fortune in the coffee industry but generously gave to Plymouth's people, not for the "glory of God" to access heaven through glorious buildings, but to sustain a community. That enables Plymouth to make a positive difference in the world.

Early in *The Congregational Way of Life* by A. Rouner, he writes that the flaw of viewing Congregationalism through the lens of freedom and liberty is that it becomes easy to forget why we are gathered in the buildings, physical and virtual, to begin with: worship of Christ, which to me includes the generosity of spirit in the Sermon on the Mount.

Back when we still gathered in The Sanctuary every Sunday, one Sunday Rev. Brett Younger delivered a sermon that basically told us we were probably being bad Christians for forgetting this. I thanked him afterwards. Rev. David Fisher did this on occasion, and I thanked him too. A reminder of why we are here.

Congregationalism enables the freedom to make good choices and to participate in the governing of the church at an approachable scale. My wife served on Christian Help and Council, I have served on Finance and now on the Council myself. I'd like to think we've helped the institution make better decisions with the financial capital we are so blessed with, and I appreciate greatly that I could ask Brett if we could display the United States flag on Veterans Day in the same way that I appreciate he does not have a higher-up mandating that he do the same every week. I also greatly appreciate that a few weeks ago, Plymouth found its bank account less troubling than it was a year ago and we arranged for a material donation to help

feed the thousands in our community so greatly in need of help in this crisis. Plymouth again, as many times in the past, makes the world better.

To the extent my CCD teachers remember me, they'd be shocked that I say the Lord's Prayer daily, with emphasis on "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" and occasionally sing the Gloria Patria when running or riding my bike. Yet I do. Congregationalism means to me the freedom to make our own decisions while retaining the responsibility to hold closely to the original goal: keep close to Christ.



"For a brief time during the pandemic the Beecher Garden was un-mowed and the grass grew tall," Alex says, "it reminded me of the ever presence of life amongst the loss all around us, the earthly connection we all have, and the timeless beauty, stability and strength of the Plymouth campus and its congregation."



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Allen Kraus



I was raised in Bardstown, Kentucky, a town settled in 1780 by French Catholics. It once served as the first inland diocese in the country, covering the area from the Allegheny Mountains to the Mississippi River.

Monsignor Willett ruled much of our predominately Catholic town. He ran the cathedral and oversaw the parochial schools. He set skirt lengths for girls and the dating age for teenagers. Heaven forbid someone got pregnant: banished from Catholic life and sent to Louisville for delivery and adoption of her child. Upon return she joined us in public school.

I was curious about the rituals and catechism my Catholic friends followed (still am) but troubled by how the church treated its children—relieved that we were Protestant.

My grandmother Fuller taught Bible class at Spruce Pine United Methodist Church in the North Carolina mountains. My mom was raised in Fuller's church. She attended Bardstown United Methodist Church with my two sisters and me, leading the choir at one point. Like her mother, she was a woman of strong conviction, ahead of the church in ways that matter.

I was a fitful young church member, pinching myself to listen to sermons but never making it to the end. I felt far less holy than the “perfect” family that sat in the front left pew, well-dressed, so attentive.

Upon leaving Kentucky for college, I followed a path that led north, back south, north again, and eventually to Brooklyn Heights. I love architecture and history, particularly Lincoln and the civil rights struggle, and found both at Plymouth a couple blocks away.

Our children attended Plymouth Church School and I went to service now and then for years, drawing solace from sermons by ministers, including Frank Goodwin.

I began to visit more often about 10 years ago, encouraged by my neighbor Lois Rosebrooks. Al Bunis befriended me. We had coffee once at Vineapple and talked about joining the church. I wondered whether it would be right because I wasn't sure I believed in God. Al embraced me saying: “Join the crowd.” So I did.

I got involved in Plymouth. Grace Faison and Jim Waechter welcomed me to their pew. In a men's Bible study group I read Paul's letters and followed his travels on the map, which brought Christianity to life for me. Sitting with others around Brett and Carol's dining table one Saturday morning, I felt for the first time guided by God's hand as if there were no other choice. Plymouth enabled this and more.

I attend my wife Lynn's Catholic service at times, drenched by its mysticism. Yet I choose Plymouth as home because of my longing for the sermons and, as I've discovered, because Plymouth members help decide how we worship, minister, serve, and celebrate.

I know that I remain a restless work in progress, in some

ways like Plymouth itself over the years: never perfect, sometimes receding, often aspiring and achieving, clay for the shaping with many Congregational hands at the wheel.



Drawn to learn more about God, Jesus and Christianity, Allen joined Plymouth in 2015. During the pandemic he led a Lenten small group on Zoom and loved gathering with other members at the September 2021 picnic, one of the first major social events reopening the church.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Brian Flanagan



I have never considered myself a churchy person, even though the church, in one way or another, has been a part—I may even say a major part—of my entire life.

I was born in 1978 and raised in a faithful Catholic home in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota—located 220 miles northwest of Minneapolis and 45 minutes directly east of Fargo, North Dakota. I am the youngest of five children (two older brothers, two older sisters), and my parents were married for 42 years before my dad passed away in 2010. We were the minority in the local religious community, being surrounded primarily by Lutherans and a handful of Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists. At that time I couldn't tell you what a Congregationalist is, and I would probably have just as difficult a time trying to give you a coherent answer now.

But I can confidently say Plymouth is a Congregational Church. (It's true—I looked it up.) The congregation was founded by some bold men (and certainly some anonymous women of influence and esteem) when, in 1846, it was determined that

Brooklyn needed a second Congregational church. Our first pastor, Henry Ward Beecher, was all of 34 years old when he came from Indianapolis to give his first sermon on Sunday, May 16, 1847. I was around the same age when I first attended Plymouth.

I imagine Beecher and I each had versions of our own skepticism upon entering Plymouth our first time. I only hope his embrace was as warm and inviting as mine.

Immediately following the service led by Dr. David Fisher I was greeted by long-time member Jane Boutwell. Before I could make up an excuse for a fictional place where I didn't need to be, Jane ushered me by her arm to Hillis Hall. She asked me to grab a coffee for each of us and invited me to sit with her at the table where I met Jim and Grace, Carl and Forbes, and Pete Valentine. I believed then as I do now that I was sitting at the cool-people table. It wasn't a social club—it was more than that. I felt that day's exchanges and conversations demonstrated Congregationalism to me.

That day, I knew I met my new congregation.

Like the pilgrims in their own rite 400 years ago, I strive to improve my life. While my journey may appear less risky and romantic—what, with access to the modern benefits of vaccines, vitamin C, and Google maps—my need for community, belonging, love, compassion, expression, and connection are no less personal to me than it was to those 130 men and women who endured traveling aboard the *Mayflower* for 10 weeks as they crossed the Atlantic those last months of 1620.

Plymouth was founded at a time of great national chaos by people who were unapologetically fighting for rights and equality as a congregation more than one hundred years before the

late senator John Lewis coined good trouble after meeting Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1958.

I think it takes a community, a congregation, to improve my life, my world—our lives, our world.

The principles I see driving the identity of the congregational community of Plymouth Church are love for one another, kindness, music, worship, diversity, praise, sharing of resources, strength in family, inclusion, honest and loving interpretation of the Bible, trust, acceptance, examination, celebration, vulnerability, fairness, free expression, equal rights for all.

To me, this defines a Congregational church and excites me as I comfortably warm into becoming a churchy person.



“Tuning in on Sunday mornings for worship online gave me a feeling of normalcy, stability and routine,” says Brian. “I would text with other friend members and they with me. It was a very simple feeling of connection that was very absent during the pandemic,” he added. Brian joined Plymouth in February 2017.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Inga Knets



When I talk about Plymouth to new friends or acquaintances and they ask me, what does that mean, to be Congregational? I always struggle for a concise answer. Usually I say something about how it means that people don't need anyone to intercede for them with God, that a personal relationship is welcomed and that we are not fussy about baptism. That there is no kneeling or genuflecting, just quiet presence with God. That singing is part of worship, and there are responsive litanies. That the Congregational church is part of the Protestant faith and was associated with New England, though they are everywhere now and that the leadership is handled somewhat democratically. That the buildings are traditional looking and usually white.

I grew up going to the Old Road Congregational Church in Stonington, CT. It was an old building, painted white, with fields around it, bordered with stone walls, where the pony rides would go every year at the church fair.

The glass in the windows was so old it had run downward,

pooling in bumpy convolutions at the bottom of each leaded pane. I never knew that glass could flow like a slow liquid; I spent many hours in church running my fingers along those panes of glass. There was a belfry, and there were bats. I loved it there.

There were not many young people at the Old Road Church, so I was something of an oddity there, but also I could tell I was cherished. I was welcomed into the church choir in my high school years and heard most of the sermons from the choir loft from then on. My job at the church fair was usually serving up clam fritters or leading the pony. The pastor, J. Merlyn Billhorn, was a mechanical engineer during the week. His sermons were always interesting and had much to do with the glory of creation. He was the kind of person who might know that glass is not a liquid but an amorphous or disorganized solid, a state of matter somewhere in between liquid and solid. There was a weeknight youth group, mostly consisting of young people who did not attend the Road Church, but came for the games, fun and chocolate. I was expected to memorize all the books of the Bible in order and was rewarded for it with Hershey bars. There was no confirmation class, but I did have meetings with Pastor Billhorn at some point where we talked about prayer and the Bible and other things regarding faith. That must have been where I got some of my ideas about Congregationalism. I grew up knowing that I could pray anytime, anyplace, and God would hear me. That I could say anything in prayer, that the triune God was my companion through life, that nothing I could say would ever turn God away from me. That I was important to God.

Finding my way back to Congregational church, to Plymouth, has been a gift for me. I love the building at Plymouth

too. I have more of a sense now of the congregational part of the church. I love the community of parents I have met at Plymouth that Julia fosters so beautifully. I have loved seeing my children be part of a thriving group of young people. I feel I have learned even more deeply that God shows a part of the Divine self in each person in the congregation. Every person I have met at Plymouth has something to teach, something to give or show. I always appreciate having so many different people be part of leading worship—even hearing the same words from a different person helps me hear them a little better. Reverend Brett’s sermons are always interesting and funny and deep, so much so that my teen now enjoys sitting with me and hearing them each week. I feel welcomed to show what I can, to be as God made me, to find my path to God in my own way. I am helped along by the faith community, even now when we are largely apart. But I look forward to gathering again when it is safe to do so, as being together in the same place allows for things to perhaps be fun, or funny, or even joyful. I think that might be what Congregational means to me now.



Attending a musical evening to hear a college friend in recital is how Inga discovered Plymouth. She was pleased when we were first able to come back and worship in person, although distanced and masked. “I felt the organ music in my bones,” comments Inga.



BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST— WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

Sandra Deming



I grew up in central Connecticut and attended the First Congregational Church of Farmington, Connecticut—an iconic white structure with a tall, graceful spire situated center village on the green. The church dates to 1652. The bell in the tower summoned people to church every Sunday, and often I watched as one of the men put his full weight on the thick rope to ring that heavy bell that you could hear all over town.

As my parents organized and ran the Sunday School when I was young, there was no other activity in scope for my sisters and me on Sundays. There was Sunday school in the morning and youth group afternoons during my teen years. I remember skimming quickly through my Sunday School lessons late Saturday night while half asleep—not a very good student, but I did love the hymns and the youth group! Scattered throughout the year there were numerous potluck dinners. After the dinners the parents went upstairs to discuss “church matters.” Meanwhile the kids played games downstairs. Every June the church had a marvelous strawberry festival held outdoors on

our lawn; the women baked shortcakes and hulled pounds and pounds of strawberries. The whole town came.

The church sanctuary was called the “meeting house” because in colonial days the congregation met in the sanctuary to worship on Sunday, but just as important the “meeting house” was used as the assembly place where the town fathers (all land-owning men) gathered to conduct town business: they voted on sending troops to the revolutionary war, they voted on zoning ordinances of a growing village. Town business was conducted in “the meeting house.” I learned the history of Congregationalism with its emphasis on self-governance as central to our Church. It was routine for me to overhear my parents discussing church matters: the calling of a new minister, the organization of fellowship hour after services, the budget, or organizing a post-Vatican II joint worship service with our Catholic brethren down the street. I was growing up in a church where the members made the decisions and participated.

Early in my career, I distanced myself from my New England background while exploring the world. At one point I judged my church upbringing as conservative, with a touch of New England’s puritanical strictness. In retrospect, however, that view is incorrect. During my teen years, the early 1960s, this church provided me with a number of impactful experiences.

One of our astute youth leaders took us into Hartford to hear Mahalia Jackson—Oh my gosh, I was dazzled, hearing gospel music from one of the masters with an entire concert hall clapping in rhythm! Then there was the mission trip down the East Coast to South Carolina where I saw a “Whites Only” sign over a drinking fountain— the reality of segregation

silenced this group of white teens momentarily but stimulated discussion on our bus ride home. And there was the “summer camp” experience volunteering at a mental hospital, realizing people had health challenges beyond my teenage comprehension. At the time I did not appreciate how much these experiences were molding me or the dedication of parents to organize and chaperone the activities. Parents were responding to the world we teenagers were entering by showing us the world through the Christian lens.

Over time as I travelled and moved for my career, I felt the impetus to look for a new church home. I floundered for a while attending services without being satisfied. Was I searching for a community? For new friends? A faith group? Or was Sunday morning worship just a habit? When I landed in Brooklyn I eventually visited Plymouth. Immediately I knew this was the church for me; not because of Plymouth’s Congregational heritage and governance structure, but rather I was drawn to the worship service. What I was missing was the act of worshipping. It’s been quite a few years since I joined Plymouth and I am loving worship services, the music, Bible study, the community, the friends, the outreach activities. And not to be undervalued are the picnics on the Beecher lawn as pedestrians, who with curiosity and perhaps envy, stop to take in the scene of us eating, laughing, enjoying fellowship!

As I have participated in the life of Plymouth, whether serious budget meetings or social activities, I discovered the more you participate the more you love your church. Plymouth is my “church home.”



When the church physically shut its doors at the beginning of the pandemic, a small “cares team” began calling members to check in on needs that could be filled. Even though in-person meetings are happening this outreach to members continues.

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WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Josh Myers

1 Corinthians 12:46–

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”



In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes of the “house”, the “hall” and “rooms.” The “house” is Christianity, the “rooms” are various denominations, and the “hall” is the waiting area that precedes the choice of a denomination. He goes on to say the following:

And above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and paneling. In plain language, the question should never be: “Do I like that kind of service?” but “Are these doctrines true: is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due

to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?"

The passage from 1st Corinthians and Lewis's story of the house are key markers for what worship at Plymouth means to me. Lewis unlocks deep insight when he asks "is holiness here?" I too often try to see holiness through an intellectual lens. While I believe thinking is a necessary element of faith, at its root, faith is a relationship with God that flows through the soul. The Plymouth community has invited me to consider times when over-emphasis on "thinking" faith obscures the leading of the Holy Spirit. Taken to extremes, it draws focus away from the truth at the center of our whole house—that Christ's death and resurrection alone restores us to the communion with God for which we were intended. In that communion, our deepest longing is met.

Plymouth has been my only exposure to the Congregational tradition. Worshipping here has opened me up to vulnerability, to questions of faith and doubt that live within each of our hearts, yet are all too rarely spoken. For example, even though I knew it wasn't true, I used to fear that God requires us to be a finished product before having anything to do with us, because how could it be otherwise for a holy and just God? In my time at Plymouth, I've wrestled with that fear and contemplated the truth that we're all broken and nonetheless God meets us through Christ to put us back together, if we let him.

Perhaps Brett said it best in his sermon last May:

Picture yourself as one of the disciples telling Jesus what you have been going through. Hear Jesus say, "It's time for you to be still." Picture yourself sitting on

the beach listening. Listen to the water lapping on the shore and children playing in the distance. Smell the water and grass. Feel the ground beneath your feet and the wind blowing off the lake. Slow down and listen to Jesus telling you to slow down. Hear Jesus ask, “What do you want to tell me? What are you afraid of? What’s breaking your heart?”

Through Plymouth, the vivid diversity of gifts, service, and working that exist within our community of faith have come into plain focus. I’ve been invited to engage more deeply with truths that only our hearts can hear: that God is holy, at once just and merciful, and that he perpetually loves us, seeks us, guides us, and compels us to do the same for others. I’ve begun to understand what it means to say “May God bless you with a distaste for superficial worship, so that you may live deep within your soul.”



“I fondly recall Brett Younger’s sermon in May 2020, about silence, the banging of pots and pans,” says Josh, “and the privilege we have as believers in the redemptive power of Christ’s death and resurrection to pour out our hearts before him.” Josh became a member in May 2021.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Eliza Gray



Growing up, I went to a church where people went to be seen. On Sundays, the red velvet pews in my Episcopal Church in D.C. were full of families who looked like they'd walked off a Christmas card. The little girls wore tights and Mary Janes; the boys dressed in tiny blazers.

Inside, our church was dark and gothic. Organ music played. At the children's service, our reverend, a tall man with a kind, patrician face, sat on the nave's marble steps to give the homily. We knelt on needlepoint pillows and drank wine out of sterling silver goblets at communion. We didn't talk about politics. We didn't talk about much at all.

My church wasn't a vulnerable or challenging place, but it was quiet and kind. My Sunday school classmates were gentler than the kids at school. We took a "retreat" to Delaware and prayed at the motel before heading to the boardwalk for Dip-N-Dots. I chose not to be confirmed, telling my father I wasn't going to commit to something I wasn't sure I believed.

When I got to college at the University of North Carolina, I encountered people for the first time whose identity was wrapped in their religion. "Are you a Christian?" a sorority

sister asked at lunch—like asking if I was on the soccer team. I said I was “a Christian,” but I knew that I wasn’t, not in the way she meant. I didn’t go to the big Presbyterian Church on 155–01 with the rock band and vials of grape juice at communion. I wasn’t in Young Life. My roommate, who went to Catholic school in New Jersey, joked that we should wear our cross necklaces to lunch at the sorority house to make friends.

If the Christianity of my childhood was formal and a little shallow, this version was performative and exclusive—even mean. A “pit preacher,” as we called them, called me a “dirty fornicator” from his “pulpit” in front of the school bookstore. A Christian non-profit erected billboards with pictures of deceased fetuses on the quad. My roommate’s Young Life leader tried to get her to stop dating a Jewish boy. Ambivalent about my faith before, I was now sure Christianity wasn’t for me. I said goodbye to church. And for a very long time, I didn’t look back.

After college, when Mitt Romney was running for president, an editor at the magazine where I worked asked me to write a story about Mormons. Reader, I fell in love with Mormons! O.K., some of what they believed—particularly about women and gay people—deeply troubled me. But I admired the communitarian and egalitarian elements of their faith. I heard a story about Senator Orrin Hatch waist deep in sewage helping a neighbor fix her toilet. I went to a service at a church in Chevy Chase, where Harry Reid was a member. A member of the Marriott family, wearing Loubitins, listened as a woman who worked at McDonald’s gave a testimonial about her economic struggles. There was a willingness to look at pain that I’d never seen in church before.

Eventually, I landed in Brooklyn with a new baby, and

decided to give church another try. I thought Plymouth was Presbyterian until New Members Sunday, when Pastor Younger explained Congregationalism. I'm sure I'd flunk a quiz about what it means to be a Congregationalist, but I was drawn to the idea that Congregationalists are free to interpret the bible in our own way, and that we are called to be ministers too. At Plymouth, I found the things I'd longed for in a Church: A pastor who challenged me; congregants who were willing to sit in each other's pain; a community who felt called to minister to one another, a church where you could come as you are. Jeans, tattoos—and blazers—welcome.

I've been on a twisty path looking for my faith—but at Plymouth, I've finally found it.



“Last year was a hard pandemic winter,” says Eliza, “I co-led a Lenten small group and it was the first time I gave myself permission to see my creative work as sacred work, a nice thought for an aspiring novelist.” She joined Plymouth in June 2019.

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WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM
MEANS TO ME

Lois Rosebrooks
Interviewed by Jacque Jones



In the early months of 2021, I spoke with Lois Rosebrooks about her relationship to Congregationalism. Many of you will remember Lois, a long time member of Plymouth. Over the years, Lois served Plymouth in many capacities, including leading the Sunday School and as chair of the History Ministry. Lois now lives in Delaware where she is near her family, but for those of us who know her, she is still very present and still very much a member of the Plymouth Community.

For Lois, music and Congregationalism intersect. Her roots are in Congregationalism—you might even say it is in her DNA—but her singing voice took her to many churches and denominations over the years. When she was growing up in Massachusetts, she attended the Congregational Church with her father. By the time she was 14, she had become an accomplished singer, and shortly thereafter her fledgling career as a church soloist was launched.

Lois studied music in college and continued her studies after graduation, eventually finding her way to Henry Pfohl, who was then at Plymouth. He was the founder of the adult

choir at Plymouth, and built Plymouth's choir by offering free voice lessons to anyone who would sing in the choir. Lois moved to New York City in 1957 and availed herself of this offer, studying under him for five years and cementing her relationship with Plymouth, which she joined in 1963. Even as a Plymouth member, she performed as a soloist at churches and synagogues all over New York City, including Mother A.M.E. Zion Church in Harlem, which was a personal favorite.

When she retired from her "day job" in 2000, she took on the mountain of historical information that was stored at Plymouth. Aided by local students, she worked for 15 years to catalogue and store the collection, and to build the History Ministry at Plymouth.

In speaking about Congregationalism, Lois says, "I grew up with Congregationalism so it is very natural to me. What I love most about Congregationalism is the freedom. Each congregation is in charge of how its ministers are chosen. Congregational Churches attract a variety of people from many different denominational and geographic backgrounds. Each church can choose its own form of worship and can involve the laity in worship in many ways. Overall, there is an openness in Congregationalism that I have never found anywhere else." As a church soloist, Lois was exposed to many denominations, but she always came back to Congregationalism. "There was a brief period when I had a dual membership with Plymouth and a Baptist Church, but I only did that because I was working at the Baptist Church and they required it." Lois went on to say, "I love the personal freedom that individuals have in a Congregational Church—the freedom to believe according to their own conscience. I appreciate that Plymouth does not use any of the creeds." And, of course, history is very important to Lois.

She added, “I still connect with the religious fervor of the Pilgrims.”

Lois’s passion for Congregationalism led her to be active for many years in the NACCC, The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, and organization of which Plymouth is a member. She says, “I found the UCC (United Church of Christ) to be very narrow in its views, whereas the NACCC churches embodied what I considered to be traditional Congregationalism.”

For Lois, it all comes back to freedom—freedom to make choices and freedom to worship within “The Congregational Way.”



A member of Plymouth for nearly sixty years, Lois has been the driving force behind the development of the History Ministry and the use of the church’s extraordinary history to inspire the current (and future) membership.



MY CONGREGATIONALIST JOURNEY

Tony Kleckner



At an 8am staff meeting in downtown Manhattan, I distinctly heard a loud metallic “bang” from outside. Through the window, I saw sheets of paper descending from the sky. American Flight 11 had struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Our building’s PA system directed us to stay in place. When the second plane hit, some people started to cry. The PA told us to evacuate.

Thirty-nine years old, I had never attended church regularly. I had no religious upbringing to speak of, other than celebrating Christmas and Easter each year.

I had a friend at the office who had previously worked in one of the WTC buildings. He was going to funerals for months after that day. My wife Tania and I had a neighborhood friend whose husband, a firefighter, was killed trying to rescue people. In the ensuing days, we took part in a candlelight vigil. Feelings of grief, sorrow, shock and loss were palpable in our Park Slope community.

In many ways, 9/11 was the start of my Congregational journey. Previously, Tania and I had been sporadically “church shopping”—we felt a cultural obligation to get our kids

baptized. None of the churches we visited felt right. After 9/11, the task of finding a church took on greater importance.

We were New Yorkers whose spirits were battered and bruised, in need of salve for our souls.

Tania attended a meeting at Plymouth Church for a non-profit she volunteered for, and came home and told me about the place. We started attending Sunday services. The sermons, the music, the people, the history, the children's programs—it all clicked. It was a tremendous gift to be able to step back from the day-to-day, listen to a thoughtful sermon, and reflect on life's bigger issues: mortality, suffering, humility, renewal. The message of God's stubborn, unswerving commitment to establish "shalom on earth" resonated in us. "Slow to anger and abounding in mercy"—that was a God we wanted to connect with. Our young boys relished "Discoveryland" (aka "Sunday School").

Congregationalism suits my disposition. I am not a fan of ritual. The notion that members of a local church have the right to decide their church's forms of worship and confessional statements, choose their own officers, and administer their own affairs seems eminently sensible to me. I thoroughly enjoyed learning the history of Congregationalism (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational_church) at my New Members class, courtesy of Edith Bartley. I like the idea of being on a journey seeking to discern God's will. The idea of a covenant relationship between God and each one of us as participants together in the church's mission works for me.

I have had the good fortune to volunteer in various ways at Plymouth and gain lifelong friends along the way. I have witnessed Congregationalism shape souls and move faith. I've seen that God is not an uncaring "cosmic sky God," but on the

contrary is among us and acting through us. I can attest that He is guiding us, comforting us, and inspiring us to make a difference in Brooklyn and in the world. That's what Congregationalism means to me.



Plymouth Church felt like home when Tony and Tania joined in 2003. His fondest pandemic memory was watching the Christmas Carol Service on a screen in his mother's library with his family, mother, sister and sister's family. Tony says, "We spontaneously began singing along."



PLYMOUTH CHURCH: AN AMERICAN BASTION OF FAITH AND HISTORY

Aaron Gallivan



I've been attending Plymouth Church ever since I was around two months old, when my mother brought me to her first Plymouth Service, which was also her first Mother's Day as a parent. Ever since then, the church has been an integral part of my childhood, from spending my early days in the nursery, to attending Sunday School during the latter part of Sunday worship, to spending my Sunday evenings with the Youth Group during middle and high school.

To me, Plymouth is not only a haven of worship but also of history, holding within its walls moments and artifacts integral to pivotal points in the American narrative. One such artifact is a hulking chunk of Plymouth Rock, which rests securely upon its pedestal in the arcade. Plymouth Rock is one of the most famous physical vestiges of formative America, shrouded in the mystic aura of early settlement. It is said to have been the first point of contact for the Mayflower, the most famous of colonizing ships, bringing the pilgrims to their new

home in 1620 in hope of finding a place of religious freedom not present in the old world.

The Rock stayed in that very same place on the shore of Massachusetts up until 1774 when, in order to prevent it from being completely eroded by the tide, citizens of Plymouth attempted to drag it to higher ground in their town square. As the rock was firmly rooted underground, the attempt yielded only a breakage, in which the base portion remained in its place and the top portion broke into several pieces.

Determined not to be defeated by a simple stone, the citizens brought the larger portion to the desired place in the town square, and reportedly sold the smaller pieces as souvenirs.

Common belief is that Plymouth Church's slab originated as one of these souvenirs, and the family which owned it brought it to their church, Church of the Pilgrims on the corner of Remsen and Henry Streets (now known as Our Lady of Lebanon), at a later date to be housed there. When Church of the Pilgrims and Plymouth merged in 1934, it was concluded that all artifacts would be brought and kept at Plymouth. To celebrate the moving of the Rock, members of the church engaged in a less than politically correct parade in which they dressed as pilgrims and Native Americans and walked the rock to its new home.

While almost all parts of the Plymouth Rock not still in Plymouth, MA, have taken up residence in various museums (most famously the Smithsonian), Plymouth Church's piece has remained property of the church and is on display for the public to see and touch at will in the Arcade, just as it was nearly 90 years ago.

Walking through the arcade on any given Sunday and seeing such an almost mythical piece of American history within

my reach still amazes me, and cements Plymouth's place in my mind as almost just as staggering a part of our Nation's story.



Arron, who is in high school, first came to Plymouth with his mother Heather when he was two months old. He became a member when he was confirmed in 2016 and loves coming into the sanctuary.

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WHY I AM A CONGREGATIONALIST

Nancy Trott



I am a life-long Congregationalist. My mother grew up as a member of Central Methodist Church in Detroit and my father belonged to a Presbyterian church in the Detroit area. They “compromised” and were married in a Congregational church. When I came along in 1951, they went on a quest for a church in Birmingham, MI that had a baby nursery. No luck. So... they joined with other young couples and founded the Congregational Church of Birmingham (CCB). At first, they met in homes and then in 1954 CCB rented a former Methodist church. In 1966, a new church was built.

Both of my parents served on many committees and as officers. And of course, my mother took her turn in the baby nursery. There was no question about not going to church on Sundays. But in the 1950s and 60s, unlike today, all our friends went to church. There were even two services to accommodate all the members. Although quite shy, I enjoyed Sunday school, 9th grade confirmation class, and senior high Pilgrim Fellowship.

The highlight of confirmation class was organizing a week-long vacation Bible camp in a small town in the Upper Peninsula.

I remember having a hard time understanding why my Catholic friend could not accept my invitation to attend my church. Wasn't she also Christian?

Was my church going to "infect" her in some way? Didn't God love everyone? In college I ran into the charismatic Christian movement and had fierce arguments about the concept of "being saved." They didn't like having their beliefs questioned. Again, God loves everyone of all faiths and accepts our questions and doubts.

With this background, I think it was only natural to gravitate to a Congregational Church in Brooklyn. I did not attend church for a number of years when my husband Dennis and I moved to New York.

BUT, like many families with young children, I did seek out Plymouth when my daughter was little and knew I wanted to bring her and our son up in a church.

I feel at home in a non-creedal, non-hierarchical church where the congregation is in charge. Plymouth embraces everyone of all backgrounds. I am forever grateful that Plymouth asked my Catholic husband to teach Bible classes. His experience teaching led him to get a master's in religious education from Fordham University. I am sorry that he died before he could put his degree to formal use.

I love that Plymouth is working hard to put members' faith and Jesus' teachings into action through many ministries and small groups. I've personally been involved in the homeless shelter, Habitat for Humanity builds, the Christian Help committee, tone chime choir among other activities and the Prayer Group. I've made many good friends over the years and consider Plymouth central to my life.



Having grown up in a Congregational Church Nancy was looking for a church in Brooklyn to raise her daughter and son. “Plymouth was wonderful for my kids and a home away from home for me,” she says. Nancy joined the church in 1987.

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WHY I AM A CONGREGATIONALIST

John Witty



In the sanctuary of Plymouth Church, you will see a series of stained-glass windows with important scenes from American Protestantism. In one window the Pilgrims land at Plymouth Rock. In another, some early nineteenth-century students of Williams College gather by a haystack to found a missionary movement. Before I started attending Congregational churches, I probably would have said that this is what Congregationalism meant to me: *history*, and comfortably austere tradition.

My hometown of Miami, Florida, has a beautiful Congregational Church that is also called Plymouth. It was built by a Spanish stone mason from locally quarried coral rock in 1917, and was designed to look like a Spanish Colonial church. While it is the church that my mother grew up attending, and where my great grandmother's funeral was held, Plymouth Congregational Church in Miami was not my church home as a child.

Instead, I grew up attending a Baptist Church that became increasingly large, non-denominational, and evangelical through the course of my life. Organ music and choir robes gave way to projector screens and a rock band. I experienced many loving relationships in that church, some of which

continue to be a supportive presence in my life. But I also experienced a way of looking at the world that to me felt cruelly black and white. The constant focus on who was “saved” and who was not made it so much more difficult to feel at peace in the world as it is, and to love others as they are.

During college, I stopped attending church altogether.

A few years later, I was working towards a master’s degree at Williams College in western Massachusetts. Even though I was following my passion by attaining an art history graduate degree, the stresses of the program, the small town, and the long Berkshires winter left me feeling isolated and constricted. In this difficult time, I thought about my sister, who had been lost to a tragic accident some years before. At least I had the gift of being *alive*, and I felt compelled to go to a consecrated space to thank God for that simple fact. So I tried the local Congregational Church in the tall, historic wooden building right in the middle of town. It was there that I found a practice of Christianity that I hadn’t known I was seeking, one that had been flourishing all along. I will never forget what one woman said to me on the steps of the church after the service: “this faith doesn’t mean anything if we don’t earn it for ourselves.” I have since attended Congregational churches in Atlanta, and am now a member of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. It was only after I joined Plymouth in Brooklyn that I learned that the senior pastor of Miami’s Plymouth, Rev. Al Bunis, accepted the call to lead that church after serving our community here in Brooklyn Heights!

I have found Congregational Churches to be places where questions can be freely shared, and where members of the community can embrace different points of view as we

encounter Christ. This is what Congregationalism means to me: a church with room to earn our faith for ourselves.



Joining the church in 2019, John got to know people at Plymouth by signing up for a Lenten small group on Zoom during the pandemic. John says, “It was a wonderful experience to connect with the community more deeply as we anticipated Easter renewal and another year of COVID.”



FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF CHANGE

Dick Davis



I am glad 2020 is over. I bet the Pilgrims felt the same way in early 1621. After their perilous journey in 1620, which wasn't quite as comfortable as the *Queen Mary*, and with lives lost during the crossing, the shining shores might not have seemed that shiny. We've had bad losses in our own 2020–21 and now there is light and hope ahead. As lifelong Congregationalists, Bobbi and I have been blessed finding Plymouth. I'd gone on a European tour with my Dad and met two older women from the Heights who were members of Church of the Pilgrims and had come to Plymouth through that combination. They were cheerleaders. We were looking at moving, likely to Brooklyn Heights, and Plymouth was the clincher.

How very different our faith is from that of the Puritans. They came for religious freedom and tolerance, but wouldn't give it to their own people. They argued over arcane issues like predestination and whether you could work against original sin. Anne Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts Bay for her heretical beliefs. She came to Portsmouth, Rhode Island, my father's ancestral home, around 1630. She later left for what is now Westchester County, and was massacred by

Native Americans. She is probably more well known for her namesake, the Hutchison River Parkway, than for the issues she fought for or against. My hometown, Little Compton, RI, had a problem too. Founded by Colonel Church, the famous Indian fighter in the King Phillip Wars in the 1680s, the town neglected to get a minister. Forced by Plymouth Colony, they finally found Richard Billings at Harvard in 1704 and were ever saved from damnation.

As a denomination, we have been at the center of controversy after controversy. Essentially the Massachusetts colonies were theocracies, combining government and religion as one. Current views of this arrangement bring images of Iran at its worst or Spain during the inquisition. Disestablishmentarianism was later. Getting the state out of religion. But many were “anti.” The movement is now only mildly famous because it is said to be the longest word in the English language. Next came the fight with the Unitarians over the Trinity. Amherst was founded as a result. Then came whose side to be on during the Revolutionary War, followed by slavery during Beecher’s time. Do you get why we cherish debate and discussion? It’s in our DNA.

I have seen a lot of change in my one-fifth of the 400 years of American Congregationalism. But, also a lot of enduring traditions and values. In Little Compton we had to decide whether to join the United Church of Christ. How could we, the very meaning of our faith was being able to write our own covenant with God. How would you submit yourself to someone else’s judgment? We rejected the idea. All deacons in the 1950s were men and old ones at that. They acted as ushers, mainly to make sure no one took a seat spoken for by someone else. The minister didn’t wear a robe.

Communion was served by men. Women taught Sunday School as they did elementary school. Women began filling some of those roles by the late 1950s. I'd never heard of Advent until Plymouth. There were no services for Christmas. In fact, in colonial New England children went to school on Christmas. But guess what, we had a service on Thanksgiving. Services in those times had much more patriotic music. "America"; "Onward Christian Soldiers"; "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," written by Julia Ward Howe, also of Portsmouth, RI. Some of these are kind of non-PC, but we sang them with great gusto.

Now, no one thinks much about whether women or men fill any role. Women don't wear hats and men have largely shed coats and ties—of course, not for funerals. These changes are widely accepted. In another marked shift, the all-fearing God of earlier generations has become an all-loving God.

I think it is fair so say that the religion of the Pilgrims bears scant relationship to our faith today, except its focus on God and Christ. Our modern services are much more inclusive and inviting. A feature of our current Congregationalism is its willingness to accept people at all places on their faith journey. I couldn't imagine a better way to be inviting, especially in this era of secularism.

Can you imagine how much our faith will change in the next four hundred year? I can't. While it will change in many ways, I think it will remain God- and Christ-centered. And, I know one thing—it has been relevant to me my entire adult life.



Dick and his wife Bobbi have been members since 1976. "Celebrating Easter online this past year," Dick comments, "was an awesome reminder of how all of us have adapted and prevailed during the pandemic."



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Cecily Goodrich



Congregationalism to me is Plymouth Church. I was baptized there, went to Sunday School there, sang in the children's choir, got confirmed, and even got married there. And now my son has also been baptized there, continuing the cycle. Some people have remained constant that whole time, and new faces have become part of the fabric of the church. Plymouth is a community I know is always there.

When I was little, I thought nearly everyone at church came from Congregationalist backgrounds, but I have learned over time that many people at Plymouth were not necessarily raised Congregationalist. So it seems that being a Congregationalist would include being open and accepting of others, and being open to change and evolution, while still maintaining a sense of being down to Earth, and an understanding that we are all people of equal standing before God.

I have always thought of Thanksgiving as a religious holiday. Not a biblical one, but with religious origins nonetheless. Probably because of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, a piece of Plymouth Rock in the arcade, and my favorite hymn, "Come Ye Thankful People Come." It is a holiday thanking God for

the goodness in our lives, and the optimism of being thankful for positive things. It was not until probably during or after college that I realized not everyone sees it that way. Studying abroad in Vienna, Austria, we all went around the Thanksgiving table saying something we were grateful for, and one girl said, “rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub.” A few years later, while working in Oxford, England, I hosted a Thanksgiving dinner, where the only other American attending did not even wait to say grace. I don’t say grace at every meal, but of all days in the year to say grace, Thanksgiving would certainly be one of them to me.

Now, in all fairness, I have to admit that I have rarely been to any churches other than Congregational churches. Once or twice I went to my grandmother’s Congregational church in New Jersey. And in high school and college in New England, I sought out Congregational churches when I felt moved to attend, mostly around holidays.

Theoretically there are differences between Congregationalism and other Protestant denominations, but I could not tell you what all those nuances are, nor how worship differs. In England I went to a few Anglican churches, and was struck by how similar the services seemed compared to Plymouth. I went to evensong in Oxford sometimes, which was very pretty and relaxing, but more like a concert than a service. Christmas Eve Mass at St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna was a sight to see. I have also been to a scattering of other types of churches, mostly with a service that seems more ostentatious, or a modern service not to my taste, and usually small congregations.

So what is Congregationalism to me? It is being Christian, straight-forward, with no fuss. It is a grounded way of worship and living. It is a desire to do good, to be good, kind, caring,

and humble, with a confidence that it is okay to struggle with what it means to be Christian. It is okay to be comfortable with where you are at with your understanding, or to strive for further understanding. It is an acceptance of each other, all interpreting the Bible ourselves and what it means to be a Christian, recognizing that we are each at different places along the yardstick in our own faith and where we want to be, and in our understanding of what is most important to us.



Cecily grew up at Plymouth and is now bringing her son when possible. One very fond pandemic memory is singing “Silent Night” in the Beecher Garden with candles this past Christmas Eve.



Architectural details of the Church House fourth floor have fascinated decades of members and visitors.



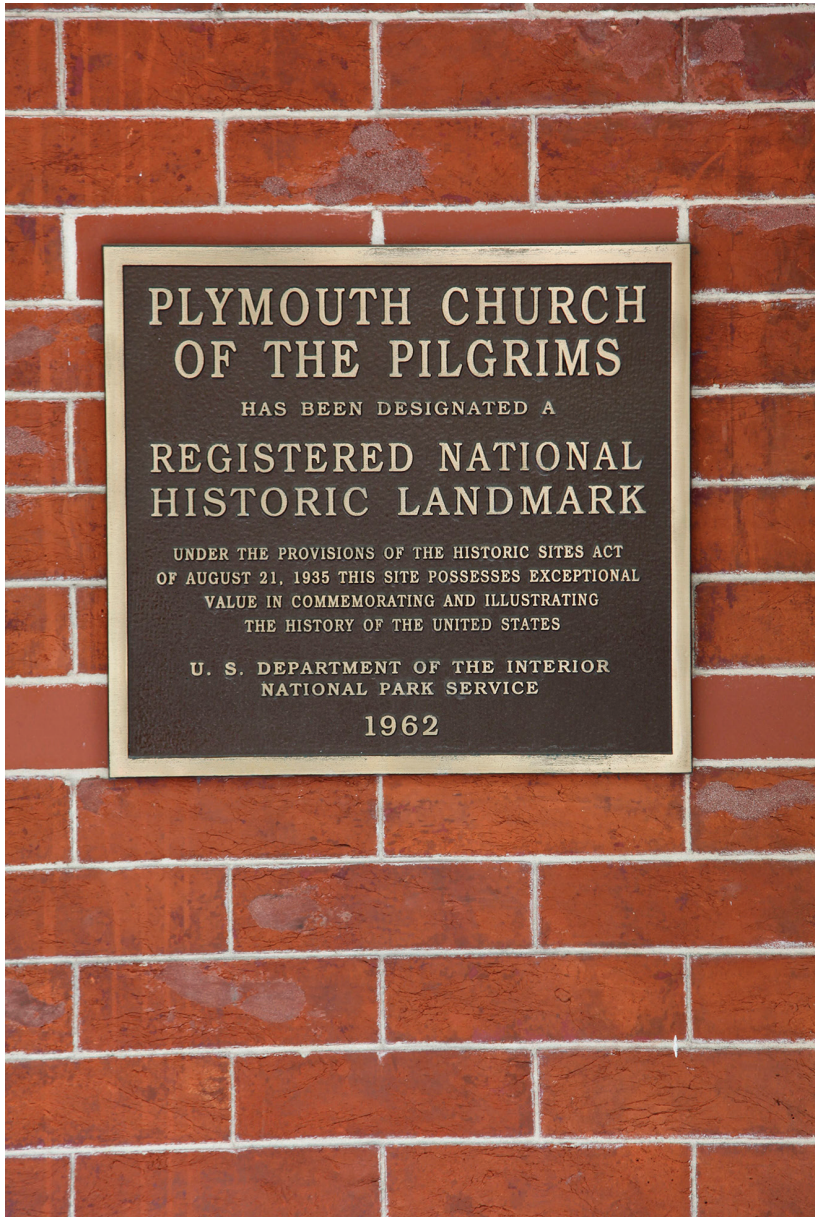
As vaccinations became available Plymouth Church was able to reopen its sanctuary doors.



The Plymouth Church House was “Erected to the glory of God and the adornment of my beloved city.” by John Arbuckle, Plymouth member and donor.



The Church House, Gymnasium, and the Arcade connecting these buildings to the Hillis Hall and Plymouth's Sanctuary were completed in 1913.



In 1962 Plymouth Church was designated a Registered National Historic Landmark. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. preached to a packed house at the dedication worship service.



In 2020, Plymouth Church, like other houses of worship closed its doors and moved to the internet for Sunday morning services.



The Plymouth Church campus, comprised of five buildings and three gardens including the 4-story Church House, Arcade and Beecher Garden, pictured here, is filled with nooks and crannies where members can pause and contemplate.



As vaccinations became available Plymouth Church was able to reopen its doors in 2021 to Sunday morning worship.



The Reverend Brett Younger leads Sunday morning worship in February 2022.



Some members arrive early on Sunday morning so they can spend time preparing for worship and greet other members.



Brett Younger, Plymouth's senior ministry, chats with members during fellowship in the Arcade following Sunday morning worship.



Leslie Ann Hix Tommey, Plymouth's assistant minister, greets members in the Arcade.



Bruce Oelschlager, Plymouth's minister of music, directs one of several choirs.



Founded in 1847, Plymouth Church dedicated its current sanctuary in 1849.



Socially distanced and vaccinated worshippers celebrate Easter at Plymouth in 2021.



Light snow heightens the contemplative nature of the Beecher Garden.



Many members find an empty sanctuary to be a tranquil place to sit and pray.



The sanctuary balconies provide members with a great view and quiet place to sit.



The first major Plymouth gathering during the pandemic took place outside in the Beecher Garden in September 2021.



The September 2021 outdoor brunch focused on Plymouth's mission partners.



Caroline Koster opens the mission partner brunch in September 2021.



Plymouth's first major gathering during the pandemic took place outside in the Beecher Garden in September 2021.

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WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM AT PLYMOUTH MEANS TO ME

Beth Fleisher



A moment of honesty: I can't answer the question I was asked to write on. I don't have much insight into other Congregational churches. I've only ever attended services at one other, when I was on the Search Committee for a new minister. We went like restaurant reviewers, undercover, to a Congregational Church in Massachusetts to see an applicant for the job in action. The church was beautiful, as you would expect: historic, white exterior, white steeple, plain clear glass windows. The embodiment of the Congregational esthetic. The pastor, not so much. We made an offer to Brett Younger. Brett, raised a Southern Baptist in a much different part of the country was the better fit for this Congregational church. The rest, as we say, is history.

History. I've done a bit of reading about Congregationalism since I've joined Plymouth. In particular, when I asked our previous Senior Minister, David Fisher, why my boys weren't learning any of the creeds that had been so important to my Lutheran upbringing. Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, nowhere to be found in the service or taught in Sunday School. That's when I learned that Congregationalism is not *creedal*. We do

not have to attest that we all believe exactly the same thing. Plymouth is a covenant community. We promise

...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.

The language is a bit cumbersome and archaic. I have some issues with the Salem community that first made this pledge (witch-hunt, anyone?), but not with the sentiment expressed here. I promise to you, deeply, in the same way I took my marriage vow, that I will walk with you in our journey toward a deeper understanding of God's truth. Each time we repeat these words to each other the simple beauty of that promise envelopes me in a profound and perfect peace.

As a Congregational Church, Plymouth "recognizes as sacred the freedom of individual members, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in matters of conscience pertaining to worship, interpretation of Scripture and doctrine, and the right of private judgment in matters of personal conduct" (from Plymouth's Bylaws). I grew up with the image of solitary Martin Luther hiding out in Wartburg Castle throwing his ink well at the Devil. I grew up getting gold stars on a chart for memorizing creeds, commandments, an entire catechism. We memorized because there was no discussion, there was only one path to follow that led to an encounter with God.

It was hard to find a place for my adult self within that rigid framework. The church might support the church but it didn't support me, or my growing family. Where could we find a religious community that would respect my husband Chris's right

to question? My right to examine? That would help us grow our children, and surround us with love?

Plymouth is a good fit for our family. A great fit, actually, like your favorite pair of shoes or your best pillow that cradles you softly to sleep each night. In a year with an inordinate amount of time spent sorting through the things in my life, Plymouth is the one that when I hold it close, in the words of Marie Kondo, sparks joy. Many of my friends have walked away from the faith and church of their youth, putting them out for Good Will to collect.

Plymouth has met me at the gate in the middle of the night, lamps blazing, and welcomed me in.

Like the touchstone piece of Plymouth Rock in the Arcade, I come back to Plymouth again and again to brush up against my faith and to embrace my friends.



“My favorite place to be at Plymouth is in the kitchen,” says Beth, “prepping for a big social event, where we all gather together in faith—and food.”



WHY I LOVE CONGREGATIONS

Carol Younger



One Saturday afternoon I was reading in the church library while my dad worked on his sermon down the hall. A book that imagined Jesus as a seven-year-old captured my imagination. The Word became exactly my age. And I wanted to know that child who talked often and honestly to God, whose spirit made friendships better, who knew a love he would never outgrow. I wanted to share my life with God like this other seven-year-old. When my dad finished his sermon, I explained to him that I wanted to grow up with Jesus. The next day I joined our congregation.

I can't name the title of that book I read, or its author. But I know that someone in our church loved that story and put it on the shelf to share. I never forgot how stories nurture our faith at every stage of life.

Discovering the ones that move us to a deeper faith and sharing them with each other is a church's ongoing adventure. I met C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* as a college freshman, then started handing it to friends when they confessed their struggles with faith. Frederick Buechner's *Sacred Journey* inspired my seminary class to write our own spiritual autobiographies more honestly. Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* taught my

small group that serious seeking is also joyful. When I couldn't write, a teacher handed me Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* to help me lift the pen again.

When I was searching for my purpose, a friend tore out two underlined pages from Kathleen Norris' *Dakota*, scribbled *These words were meant for you* in the margin, and left them in my mailbox. Through *Upstream* Mary Oliver convinced me that authors she only met through reading were her friends, and that she was part of my congregation by cutting to the chase with words that made me dizzy: *The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.*

Some of the stories we need to read fit on bookshelves. But many of them exist within our congregation itself. We recognize this in worship through sermons and reflections. We realize this whenever we sit around a table in Beecher Garden or the reception room and trade concerns or funny instances. We experience this as we compare tales about subway encounters, or confide while weeding an Urban Farm plot, or confess a fear, or describe a tedious parenting season. We know this truth when our small group meets on Zoom to discuss how we struggle and how we find strength.

St. Ignatius taught Christians to discover the story of our lives within the story of God. His approach to reading Scripture with a pen and notebook helps us slip inside the biblical story and discover the truth we hope to find. Asking what fresh word God wants us to hear in the text, and writing about that, reminds us that we can rediscover the Church's story daily. When writing groups have gathered at Plymouth to "Pray with

Our Pens,” I remember again how lively the sacred story is and how it creates friendships among us.

Our personal stories are not really ours alone. They are part of the community that is shaping them. My story is part of yours, and yours enriches mine. They all belong to God who is working on countless drafts with us, suggesting new possibilities for our plots and character. We all have a story to tell—and when we work on them within our congregation and share them with each other, we see that our stories are both larger and more holy than we realize.



“Brett and I felt drawn to Plymouth,” states Carol, “we saw the challenges, possibilities and joys of ministry here.” A favorite pandemic memory is the Blue Christmas service in 2021 when everyone sat in silence together for a significant amount of time, feeling held by God’s grace and comfort.

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“NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE ON
YOUR SPIRITUAL PATH, YOU ARE
WELCOME HERE”

Elizabeth Snypes



I was raised Episcopalian because all my family including ancestors were Episcopalian. For me it meant I went to church every Sunday and prayed the same thing every week and had Communion. At the time, it was nice to have this routine to learn and start forming my Christian faith. I enjoyed attending Sunday school, participating in Vacation Bible Camp, EYC events and Summer Camp. These activities helped me understand that you can live out your faith as loudly or quietly as you wanted. You can be yourself and God loves you.

After my husband and I had our child, we decided we wanted him to learn about Christianity and have church experiences in his life as we did growing up. This brought us to Plymouth and the Congregational Church. If you had asked me prior to attending what being a Congregationalist meant, all I would have known was the denomination came about with the Puritans.

Now I have learned it is about accepting everyone as equals. We all have an equal say on how our church runs. I appreciate

that one of the welcomings that is said during our services is “No matter where you are on your spiritual path, you are welcome here.” I love that I am able to be on my path, be supported by our community and learn more about my faith and the love of God through action and scripture.

At Plymouth, I have found specific small groups that have helped me along my path, and it has also helped me become a leader in a ministry. I have appreciated being surrounded by smart inquisitive women in the Wednesday Women’s Bible Study. We are reading through the Bible and learning and asking questions about the books.

We also listen for God’s words to each of us through our close reading of the Bible and other books we have read over the years. Also, I have loved being embraced by the volunteers of the Underground Thrift Store. Often on Fridays (pre-pandemic) while straightening up the store and sorting through lovingly donated items, we would talk. These conversations have helped me feel spiritually fulfilled and ready to walk my path through another week. Also, knowing we are at the Thrift living our history since we are supporting anti-human trafficking groups in NYC.

Having lived with the isolation of the pandemic, I have come to realize the importance of a church family. The care and consideration given at Plymouth Church to all our members has made my faith stronger and my hope for the world brighter.



Elizabeth’s fondest memory of Plymouth during the pandemic is the reopening of the Underground Thrift Store. “The community the store serves was so happy to see us back” comments Elizabeth, “it was worth all the work.”

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WHAT IS THE TIE THAT BINDS?

Jaime St. Peter



I have invited a lot of people to Plymouth in the past ten plus years that I have been a church member. Many years ago, I asked an open-minded atheist friend to church after hearing of his longing for community. I've attended Sunday worship more than once with a Jewish friend on the odd Sunday he agreed to skip his usual Sunday mass routine at St. Boniface. I have invited queer friends who had long given up on belonging to a religious community, disillusioned Catholics, and more than a few open-hearted agnostics. With each invitation, I was aware of the tension of both respecting my friends' current beliefs while at the same time inviting them to examine or challenge those beliefs. But that tension always troubled me; ten years of Sundays had done little to overcome my serious doubts about Christianity—why exactly was I recommending it to others?

As a child, my idea of who God is was based largely on the fundamentalist beliefs of our Pentecostal church. Our God was the God of Revelation—awesome and utterly terrifying. I understood Jesus exclusively through the lens of sin—specifically, my own guilt and shame. My understanding of Jesus's teachings had nothing to do with love of others—only of his

“love” for me, a “sinner,” for whom he needed to die so that I could go to “heaven.” Trying to make sense of this implausible narrative, I witnessed my church community searching for signs—like the fortune tellers we’d been warned about—of confirmation. Inexplicable coincidences, wild weather, blood moons, wars—all manipulated and morphed into prophecies or proofs of “God’s plan.” To the extent my belief could not be substantiated by omens, I just needed to have faith in the multitude of things I didn’t understand. Doubt had no value; it was only a sign of weakness—further proof I was nothing but a sinner.

It took the crushing disappointment and loneliness of the pandemic for me to find a kind of disquieted quiet in which I finally began to question these long-held doubts. I was no longer willing to pretend that the beliefs of my childhood made sense to me. But what doctrine did make sense? Did I really believe that Jesus was the son of God? Did I believe in the resurrection of the body? In Jesus’s resurrection? Why does hearing Jesus referred to as a “king” make me uncomfortable? What would happen if I couldn’t make sense of any of it? How on earth could I invite people to Plymouth when I was no longer sure I belonged there myself?

In the months I spent trying to make sense of these questions, I eventually realized the answers themselves weren’t actually all that important. The lesson was something much more vital: When I shared what I was grappling with, the Plymouth community not only held space for but welcomed my doubt. And that freedom to examine uncertainty allowed me to arrive at that kernel of belief that has confirmed for me that, I am, in fact, a follower of Christ. This, to me, seems like the most we can ask of a church, and from Congregationalism

itself: provision of a space in which we may endlessly rest and question and dream in communion with God and one another—without fear.



“Plymouth has so many spaces that feel sacred to me,” says Jaime, “our regular pew in the sanctuary, sitting in front of the fireplace in the Reception Room (a room that holds so many wonderful memories), the light filtering through the windows in the Arcade, all the strange old-timey bathrooms...I could go on!”



LOOKING BACK, THEN FORWARD

Emilie O'Murphy



Every Sunday growing up, I would put on a nicer-than-normal outfit and walk down the street with my mom and sisters to church. We would sit through the children's sermon and then run out of the sanctuary to Sunday school, where I would reunite with my two best friends and chatter when I should have been listening.

Some of my most vivid childhood memories are in church — participating in pageants, reading my confirmation speech, watching my sister get baptized or hiding under the food table during coffee hour. I thought of Sunday mornings as a social engagement, a fun weekend get-together rather than a time of reflection and worship.

It wasn't until I was older that I appreciated the ritual of church as more than a chance to see friends. As I moved from grade school to high school and then college, I realized how deep and wide-reaching the roots of my church foundation stretched. My two best childhood friends were made at church school. Last weekend, I was a bridesmaid in one of their weddings. I was married in September by the same minister who baptized me, and when he gave the homily, I knew he was speaking from a place of true understanding.

My first babysitting job was through a church family and the Director at my first “real world” job was introduced to me by a church member. Most importantly, my moral foundation and idea of myself was reinforced through time spent within the church community. My congregational upbringing gave me a stronger idea of right and wrong, of myself as a person and how I wanted to treat others, reinforcing what my parents worked to teach me as well.

Since then, I’ve happily made new memories in church. When I found Plymouth, shortly after moving to Brooklyn, I felt the same sense of belonging as I had in my old parish. I was welcomed without hesitation and immediately recognized the warmth of the congregational community.

Congregationalism has always represented a “come as you are” teaching in my mind. While that line may not be explicit in the Bible, there are variations of it that underscore this idea. “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest [Matthew 11:28],” Jesus says, an invitation to travel along his path. Later, in the book of John, Jesus issues an invitation to salvation, saying “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out [John 6:37].”

It is the Congregationalist spirit that invites us to come as we are, but it is more than that. It is an invitation to be the best version of ourselves, with support from a greater community. When I think back on my church memories and all that my congregational background has contributed to the person I am today, I am grateful. But it is in looking forward that I find the most spiritual inspiration. Every Sunday is an invitation to better ourselves, to not only be reminded of the teachings of our faith, but to put them into practice in our everyday lives.

In this way, Plymouth is not just a house of worship, but a support system for living out the word of Christ, for striving to become our best selves.



Emilie joined the church in the middle of the pandemic in April 2021. She was seeking a community and a spiritual retreat and found so many new people at a time that was otherwise very isolating. "I felt immediately welcome," says Emilie.



OF CABINS AND MCMANSIONS

Kathleen A. Wolf



(Some of you may remember Rev. Sharon Blackburn's sermon from the summer of 2001)

I was raised Catholic with a Lutheran dad in a small town in Wisconsin. My Catholic experience was positive. I remember having a persuasive conversation with our priest explaining to him that I could not have my First Communion if my daddy was not allowed to participate because he had taught us that “God loved everyone!” Everyone included the Lutherans and my daddy. Father E. nodded and my daddy was on my right side during my ceremony. I continued attending church all through college at the Catholic center on Washington Square Park at NYU. They were smart holding mass on Sunday evenings at 7:00 PM.

I married on June 30, 2001 and was “church shopping” for a church to raise our children. My agnostic, Jewish husband, Josh, agreed that I could raise our children Christian as long as it was not the Catholic religion or a fundamentalist one. I attended different services in Brooklyn Heights to find “our fit.” I thought Episcopalian would work because it is “Catholic light” after all. But it didn’t go as planned....I was invited to the church house with others and the icebreaker was: “dead or alive who

would I like to meet?" Others who attended were very polite with answers like "Jesus, Mary, Job, etc." I answered "Lucille Ball, Michael Jackson, and Adolf Hitler." The room went silent and I knew I was in the wrong place.

The search continued and Josh asked, "why are you not checking out the church around the corner?" I answered "because I don't know what the Congregational denomination is." He handed me a copy of *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* by Edmund Sears Morgan and I read it. On a Sunday in August 2001, I walked around the corner intrigued by the title of the sermon, and found the doors locked to the sanctuary. I started to walk home, but heard singing. I walked slowly through the garden and entered through the side door to find a very intimate service beginning in the arcade.

Suki Kwak welcomed me and Mary Lou Wells wrote down all my info. This is where I shall end my formal essay because my spiritual journey changed that day. God was already working on me and still is. I was meant to find Plymouth and I joined this eclectic Congregation in November of 2001.

What Congregationalism at Plymouth is to me:

~LOVE!

~CARE!

~COVENANT!

~Dear lifelong friendships!

Every Plymouth member and every person who walks through our doors on a personal journey with God!

- ~Yankee Gala 2001 in the gym (post 9/11): this event is where Josh and I made the decision that our family could belong here. Red, White, and Blue hung prominently
- Packer jazz band
- Susan Egan dancing with her son, Jack

- Robin Osborne-Mooney dancing the waltz beautifully with David Blackburn
- Valerie Velazquez de Louzonis “dressed to the nines,” lots of food
- Plymouth punch, lots of dancing, waiting for the floor to open to a pool like in *It’s a Wonderful Life*,
 - ~Metanoia ministries
 - ~Sunday morning Bible studies
 - ~Dorris’ Reid Cain’s reading class
 - ~Adult Christian Ed: Forbes Hill, Dennis Trott, Joan Roll,

Wendy Davis, Mary

Lou Wells

~Youth Group: Rev. David Huber, Jim Schneider, Andrew

Goodrich

- Appalachia Service Project
- Maine
- Alaska

OUR GUIDES:

~Rev. Sharon Blackburn and David Blackburn

~Rev. Steve Reid

~Rev. Randy Parks and Lori Parks

~Rev. Don Smith and Lori Smith

~Rev. Dr. David Fisher and Gloria Fisher

~Rev. Tom Lenhardt and Lynn Lenhardt

~Rev. Al Bunis and Lynn Bunis

~Rev. Dr. Brett Younger and Carol Younger

~Rev. Jane Huber

~Rev. Liz Coates

~Rev. Erica Cooper and Chris Cooper

Bruce Oeschlager and Rini Hughes

~Prayer Group: approx. 18 years

- Pete Valentine, Mary Lou Wells
~Wednesday Women's Bible study: 10 retreats from 20102–019
- Wendy Davis, Mary Lou Wells
~*Plymouth Nursery*: Gladys, Katie Glaeser, Angela Jones
~*Gail Rose and Plymouth Church School*: teachers/staff
~*Julia Rassman*: Discovery land, (aka: Sunday School)
~Yankee Fairs
~Snow Ball
~Advent and CHRISTmas
~Lent and EASTER
~All-Church retreats
~Lay Service
~Shelter
~Missions School of Hope: Rev. Charles Sagay
~Plymouth Book Club
~All church Barbecues and picnics
~Even annual meetings
~Grace Faison, Dick Yancey. All the elders...OUR WISDOM!

~Kalia, Amelia, and Nora Hamilton.

All the Plymouth youth and children...OUR FUTURE!

...births-deaths...

Together through it all...'til we meet again! Congregationalism is the "God" in each of us.

We are a faith community and we need each other!



"My favorite place at Plymouth is Storr's Library," says Kathleen, "I can sit there following a Women's Bible Study or Adult Christian Ed class and collect my thoughts." Her favorite pandemic memory is Avery Fingleton's high school graduation celebration in 2020 via Zoom.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Molly Anna Martínez Hardigree
(San Germán, Puerto Rico)



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.



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 Guacio chapel following a worship service, 1982.



Molly is the Executive Director of Plymouth Church.



SHOWING UP

Robin Osborne Mooney



Summer is a dangerous time to contemplate matters that rest deep in the heart—almost seems “against the rules” for a season that is meant to be lazy and easy. But the unexpected passing of Mary Lou Wells sent me into a reverie about the responsibility that comes with being in a community—more specifically, part of a congregation. During these many months of the pandemic lifestyle, *showing up*, has taken on a progression of meanings.

First, the mere physicality of “showing up” was forbidden, now having transformed into a nuanced variety of options: Tested or non-tested? Masked or unmasked? Inside or outside? Vaccinated or non-vaxxed? I imagine Mary Lou would not be confused during this time of *mass confusion*. One way or another, she always knew how to *show up*!

More than thirty years ago, my daughter, Rachael, brought me to Plymouth with her desire to join the Youth Choir. Its director, Narcissa Titman, had a reputation for creating Broadway musical extravaganzas that were a magnet for any child who wanted to perform. After being enlisted as choreographer, I realized I had rediscovered a fellowship, not unlike the one of my youth in Whittier, California, where the United

Methodist Church on Bailey Street was central to my family's daily lives. When I became a member of Plymouth in 1988, I enthusiastically threw myself into the Congregational community by joining a succession of committees (Mary Lou chaired at least three) and served one term on the Board of Deacons (just prior to Plymouth adopting the unicameral structure.) From Lee Scott, Bonnie Parsekian and I learned how to run the Yankee Fair Silent Auction. Then, there was the time Amy Talcott-Farooqi and I temporarily lost (we had put it into a safe place for the night!) the lock box with the earnings from the Auction.

For a few years, I helped Peter Stoltzfus organize music and dance concerts as outreach for the community. In more recent history, this creative collaboration found its way to our worship services and the work with our (Plymouth-grown) talented young dancers, along with Bruce's keen musical direction and Jacque Jones's knowledge of hymnal text and liturgy.

These are very nice memories for me, painting a landscape of personal identity with community, while they are not meant to be a replacement of Plymouth life today. Throughout the pandemic, I have received many emails with announcements and invitations from the church staff and members of Plymouth to worship and participate in our ever-changing environment. Vigilant care and action has kept the work and spirit of our church vibrant and relevant, which brings me back to *lazy and easy*. While I watch some sailboats slide under the Newport Bridge, I reconsider what it means to *show up*. I try to dig a little deeper and come around to the fact I have not mentioned Faith or God once. Whether the former leads to the latter, or vice versa, this is where we are asked to show up.

Plymouth's table has been set for many generations through faith and the grace of God. I am filled with humility and gratitude each time I am invited to come to it.



Robin came to Plymouth in 1987 because her daughter had joined the Children's Choir and they needed a choreographer for their musicals. Her most poignant memory during the pandemic is experiencing our worship services virtually with Brett and Carol bravely leading the service in a sanctuary of empty pews.



GOING HOME

Wendy Reitmeier



Going to a Congregational church is, for me, like going home. I grew up in Congregational churches, attending worship every week as well as Sunday School. I went through Confirmation as a teenager. I sang in church choirs, went away to church camps. Church was not only a center of community life in the small Midwestern towns where I grew up, but Congregational churches became a thread of continuity in my life, as my family and I moved from one place to another.

Here I am now, a senior citizen, and despite many changes in my life, I still get to sing hymns and read texts that I learned as a child. It feels like going home.

My dad was a Congregational minister. Being a preacher's kid was a mixed bag for me. There was all that moving every 5–7 years, which was disruptive and hard, though it also gave me a broader perspective than if we'd always stayed in one place. Among age mates, I encountered frustrating stereotypes—that preachers' kids would be self-righteous and excessively virtuous. To this day, my dad's occupation is one of the later things I want to reveal to new friends. And if my husband is occasionally appalled by my salty language, I chalk it up to the years I was trying to defy expectations.

On the other hand, because of my dad's associations, I met lots of other Congregational ministers and found them to be among the more interesting adults I knew. They were people who, when they asked "How are you?" seemed to want a real answer.

So, it happens that my experience with churches was not only grounding, but also broadening. Serious thought and questioning were accepted, even encouraged. Respect for other races, nationalities and religions was encouraged. The Congregational churches I knew were all affiliated with the United Church of Christ, and I appreciated their outspokenness on social justice issues.

While these and other Christian values were well embedded, by the time I was in college, my own thought and questioning led me toward agnosticism. Still, I would gravitate toward churches as caring communities. Sometimes

I would just join the choir. Or I'd be attracted to social justice ministries. I didn't become a member, though, because I wasn't prepared to take oaths about my beliefs.

There were also stretches when I didn't attend church at all. Ultimately, it was family losses and the trauma of 9/11 that pushed me to find a new church home. It helped that I had married someone who'd also been raised in the church, had drifted away, and experienced losses. After searching around, Tom and I landed at Plymouth in 2004, and soon became members.

I appreciated that Plymouth was Congregational (though not UCC), that it was welcoming, had a great preacher (David Fisher then), and it was non-creedal; I was accepted with my doubts! I was happy to covenant, "to walk together in God's ways" as far as they are revealed to us. Tom and I jumped in

with both feet and have participated in many ways. And my faith has grown.

One dark night, as I was coming home late, I encountered a friend sitting by herself on a park bench, obviously downcast. She explained that she was feeling deeply hurt by the unkind action of a friend. Wanting to comfort her, I found myself saying “You do know that God loves you, don’t you? We humans will fail you, but God loves you.” Though I couldn’t have clearly said who or what God is, I knew that this was the only authentic answer to her pain. And I’ve never meant anything more sincerely.

Aided by the many saints-in-action at Plymouth, my faith continues to grow. I’ve been touched, not only by inspiring preaching, but by the living examples of kindness, generosity, deep thought and commitment that I’ve witnessed here. This is a home that’s helping me become the person God wants me to be.



Wendy and her husband Tom joined the church in 2004. Her fondest memory of the pandemic is the first Sunday they came back to in-person worship after five months away.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Alexis Lum



Belonging to a Congregational Church not only grants me a place to nourish my faith, but it also wonderfully gives me a sense of belonging and community. Plymouth is a place where I can go to worship and feel welcomed.

As far back as I can remember, Plymouth Church has always helped shape parts of my life. I grew up at Plymouth quite literally. My mother was a soprano section leader in the choir when she was pregnant with me. She sang right up until my due date. She sang on a cold December Sunday morning and the very next day went to the hospital to have a scheduled C-section. When I became old enough to go to Sunday school, I would attend church with my older sister almost every Sunday. As a child, I remember collecting money in paper coin boxes for UNICEF. I loved that Plymouth made individual bouquets of flowers from the floral arrangements that were on the altar. Each arrangement was hand delivered to elderly members who could not physically attend Sunday service. I fondly remember a special minister during my childhood years who during the Children's Sermon would warmly invite us to listen to him while enthusiastically encouraging us to learn

about the Bible by asking us thought-provoking questions. We had Sunday afternoon Youth Group get-togethers and Confirmation classes. I was confirmed and baptized here as a teenager.

Through all of this, Plymouth taught me to strive to become a better person and to go beyond myself to help others.

The Plymouth community made me feel welcome, safe and encouraged. A couple of years before I moved to Pennsylvania for college, I joined my Mom in the loft and volunteered to sing in the choir. It was there that I was inspired by one of the choir directors to pursue singing while at college. I did just that and had an exciting college career. However, after graduating, I began to feel a bit lost. I knew I needed to find some faith and guidance. The Congregational community at Plymouth was there for me spiritually and practically. Spiritually, I was able to return with a more mature mind to form a deeper faith and receive guidance in a place where I felt that Love and inclusiveness guided people. Practically, I had auditioned for the opportunity to be a section leader in the Plymouth Choir and was given the position (roughly 16 years ago!). To this day, I am so thankful that I get to sing beautiful music with wonderful people. Participating in this role has given me the opportunity to do something that I love for a community that has consistently been there for me. Attending Sunday worship regularly has also allowed me to continue to feed my faith and feel a sense of belonging and community.

Plymouth Church strives to lead with love and openness. This is exemplified in the outreach efforts of the Plymouth community. During the height of Covid in NYC, a group of Plymouth members called congregants to check up on them and ask if anyone needed help. I received one of those calls.

Plymouth gives back to the community—providing warmth, shelter and home cooked meals to homeless men, collecting food to give to local food pantries. and running a thrift shop where proceeds go towards organizations that fight human-trafficking, just to name a few. These actions are a direct result of the amount of Love felt by the presence of faith which I am reminded of time and time again. This is what being a Congregationalist means to me.



“My warmest memory of the pandemic is Nancy Trott calling me and others at Plymouth,” says Alexis. “She was reaching out to make sure we were doing okay.” Alexis is a member and soprano soloist in the Plymouth Choir.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Julia Rassmann



I vividly remember the first time I walked into Plymouth Church as an adult. It was early on a Sunday morning. The building was quiet and I was struck by its austere perfection. The light marble floors and rows of tall windows were spotless. In the garden, not a branch or a blossom was out of place.

As I walked up the church house stairs, I thought, I do not belong here. Where is the Plymouth I remember from my childhood visits? That Plymouth had worn wooden floors and slightly tattered checkered tablecloths. That Plymouth smelled like freshly baked butter cookies and echoed with laughter. That Plymouth had soft, wide open arms.

Some of my childhood friends and neighbors attended Plymouth and I envied them. They invited me to holiday fairs and family dinners. They went caroling on dark winter nights. They strung warm, flickering lights along the iron fences and gates on Orange Street during Advent.

The church my family attended was by contrast, somber and seemingly eager to remind me of my many shortcomings. I went weekly, dutifully, because I could see how important the church was to my father. I admired the way he knelt and

bowed his head in earnest prayer for most of the service while I day dreamed and invented counting games to pass the time.

Just as I was beginning to fear that the Plymouth of my childhood was no more, the silence was broken. I heard and then saw a boisterous group of children running down the arcade, running to Sunday School. The adults following behind didn't yell at or reprimand them. They were chatting and looked as happy as the children. At the arcade doors, the group split by age. My daughter and I followed the younger ones downstairs. We joined the circle on the rug and were handed a cup of snack.

The teacher knew everyone's name. She asked how their week had been and listened as each child shared. She talked a little about her week—her struggles, joys and concerns that needed prayer. Then she held up a cloth board. To help tell the Bible story, she added felt characters to the board. They were full of detail and color but lived in a plain, worn cardboard box. The story to life. After the teacher carefully returned each character to the box, we held hands. The closing prayer included everyone's request.

I was amazed—blown away—and when I thanked her, she politely dismissed my praise saying, "I'm just loving on them. That's all, nothing more."

But I knew, that as I had remembered and as I had expected, that there was and is so much more here at Plymouth. So much love, so much care, so much acceptance. It is an honor and a privilege to be a part of Plymouth. I have learned so much watching this congregation take care of each other.

As my father wrote in a text last night, "Plymouth is so important for you." It is for and to us all.



“My contemplative time at Plymouth is when it is empty,” comments Julia. “In the evening, setting up for Sunday School or a special event, I feel the calming beauty of the buildings, especially the sanctuary.”



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Bruce Oelschlager



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 is the Minister of Music of the church.



WHY I CHOSE A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Eric Huang



Why did I choose Congregationalism? It offered me the best way to find God through a community. I did not know much of the history of Congregationalism—I grew up in Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. But there was something both familiar and new to Congregationalism. And as I learned more about its history and principles, it felt very authentic to how I wished to find God.

In our family growing up, we actually had two churches. My father was a choir director for a church in Chinatown—the church I was baptized in—The First Chinese Presbyterian Church. When we moved to Queens, it became too far to travel, and our new neighbors became our fellow congregants at a Reformed Church in Bayside. My father kept directing choir in Chinatown, signing in Queens periodically and my mother and my sister, and I attended church in Queens more often.

Community was the center of worship. My mother and father found God in small groups in those church communities. Bible study, singing, raising kids in the Church—these were common threads that bound congregants to each other. All with one purpose: finding god. I recall a conversation during

confirmation class with Rev. Norman Thomas in Bayside. I asked him about Hell, and he said it wasn't fire, brimstone, and suffering for suffering sake. It meant you were outside the presence of God. But he said that if you were with others looking for God, God would be there. I was young and didn't really appreciate these lessons until much later.

My first introduction to Plymouth and re-introduction to finding God was through my daughter. To be honest, my wife found it first, and I followed. In high school and college, my church attendance had waned. I thought I was growing up but did not realize for years that I was actually missing out. I missed the fellowship of others seeking God. I wanted my daughter to have the same experience and grow up knowing God and in a church community.

I learned about Congregationalism from the example of so many Plymouth members with whom I ushered, served communion, planned coffee hour, or simply talked to. What better way to worship than with others. I find God in the passing of the Peace, the unexpected long talks in the sanctuary after the service, the church picnics, the small conversations, manning a table at Yankee Fair. We are all so different but yet we are very much the same. I knew there was a Bible passage for this, so I looked it up:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

1 Cor. 12:4–7

I so enjoy learning about the gifts of each member of our congregation.



“My favorite place has always been the back of the sanctuary as an usher,” says Eric, “standing against the wall behind the pews, listening to the organ, the choir and Brett delivering the sermon.” Eric joined Plymouth in 2007.



WHY I CHOSE A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

John Leighton



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 we no longer wished to see 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.



The loss of a loved one brought John to Plymouth and he joined in 2006. John's favorite place at Plymouth is the kitchen in Hillis Hall. "It is where the real work of the church is done," claims John.



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Jonathan Insull



Like so many members of Plymouth Church, my family was drawn here by our children. It was to provide them with a spiritual home, that “third place” that would offer things that school or home could not, that we first came to explore the church. Indeed, Plymouth lived up to our hopes- we found a friendly and welcoming community, diverse across generations and full of energy, with plenty going on to engage our boys.

In some ways, that alone would have been enough, and I could have called our mission a success, but for the fact that in discovering Plymouth, I discovered more than just a new family hang-out. The Congregationalist expression of Christianity was new to me, and the more I learned about it, the more I found to like. I was raised in a much more structured, centralized, and hierarchical tradition, one full of ritual which was sometimes beautiful but at other times seemed a bit empty. At Plymouth, I experienced a Christianity that felt more stripped down to its essentials, with few rules and an absence of man-made obstacles placed between the individual and God. Simple worship, and an emphasis on scripture (wow—Bibles in every pew!?) and inclusivity were among the things I found most

attractive. These hallmarks, combined with Plymouth's self-determining governance structure, provide for me an answer to the question which I am sure that I am not alone in asking: "What might it have been like to have lived as a Christian in the early days of the Church?"

Now, I want to be careful not to overdo the analogy of Plymouth to the ancient Church. To do so would be a disservice to Plymouth, its history, and its promise for the future. And while much of the meaning that I find at Plymouth is about the relationship between the individual and God, there is more to it than that. For me, additional insight comes from the connection that Plymouth provides to history and from the opportunities it provides to serve in the present and to build for the future. Plymouth grounds its members in "Big History"—the Pilgrims' landing in Massachusetts, Henry Ward Beecher, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and much more. It also connects each of us to a smaller though equally important history—the evolution of New York and brownstone Brooklyn and to those lived in and cared for this neighborhood at times when it was not as comfortable, secure, and stylish as it has become. It is an honor to be a part of such an institution, and we have a responsibility to "pay it forward" through service. I did not expect ever to say this when I first entered the doors of 75 Hicks St., but I am grateful to say that the opportunities that Plymouth has provided me to serve as a Council Officer and in other ways have been among the most rewarding experiences of my adult life. I am confident that others who come to Plymouth with open ears, mind, and heart can find the same things here that I have found.



Jonathan's family was searching for a spiritual home, a "third place" that would offer things that school and home could not. "For the past 15 years Plymouth has been far more than just a family hangout for all of us," states Jonathan.



WHAT PLYMOUTH MEANS TO ME

“My days are gliding swiftly by, and I, a pilgrim stranger, would not detain them as they fly! Those hours of toil and danger For oh! we stand on Jordan’s strand, our friends are passing over, And just before, the shining shore we may almost discover.”

—“The Shining Shore,” David Nelson

Spencer Liu



I believe that many of us, myself included, are pilgrims and travelers through life, so it is only fitting that I stumbled across Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims and have since become a member.

Growing up, I was exposed to the Christian faith by my parents through a combination of a year in a Lutheran pre-school, regular evangelical fellowship groups held within a small Chinese Christian community, and occasional attendance at youth groups events held by larger evangelical churches within the Denver metro area. My parents were exposed to the Christian faith by distant Christian relatives, who supported them in the immigration process to the United States on student visas, and friendly Christian neighbors, who so readily helped them settle in Tuscan, Arizona, their first home. To them, the

Christian faith was rooted in kindness and generosity and a community of fellowship, trust and support. In turn, the Christianity I grew up with was a nurturing environment, but a narrow in perspective, passed down by these evangelists.

Since arriving in NYC fifteen years ago, I have accepted friends and classmates' invitations to attend various churches from time to time, but boy is it easy to de-prioritize faith in the Big Apple when you are working hard and having fun. Despite drifting from church and faith, the deeper questions of life were never far from the heart and mind.

I find myself fortunate to have stumbled upon Plymouth Church as an adult, when my wife Amy and I were looking for a minister to help officiate our wedding ceremony. What drew us back to Plymouth was the simplicity and relative familiarity of the worship service and structure, the unbelievably beautiful music service, the thought-provoking sermons and scripture teachings every Sunday, and a prayer-centered worship. Plymouth and its people, especially Rev. Brett Younger and Erica Cooper, helped re-ignite my faith for the first time since I began actively looking for it. My wife and I were both baptized in May 2018. We are glad to continue our journey learning as disciples in Christ here.

What's more, it is incredibly enriching to be a part of the Congregationalist movement and a church with such a storied legacy, dating back to America's first pilgrims, Henry Ward Beecher, and the abolitionist movement. I wonder what we can do today to be a positive force in addressing the big social justice issues of our time. It is comforting to have an inviting space and peaceful sanctuary to worship in and to celebrate the church's unique traditions (such as Tenebrae readings by candle-light on Good Friday, Christmas service, etc.). It is

uplifting to be a part of the strong, visible, diverse, and accomplished congregation that we have and to witness and participate in the grounded and active role the church and its members play in the community and abroad. It is wonderful to share faith with the current community of family, friends, neighbors, pilgrims, and strangers—in an open and vulnerable, challenging yet supportive way.

As Congregationalists, we are reminded that the church is only as strong as its members, and we hold ourselves responsible to each other in our faith. It is not all that different from the basic premise of the small fellowships that I grew up in and have personally seen grow and yield fruit. What we have at Plymouth is so much more, and what I see are endless possibilities and an abundance of opportunity, hope, and life.



“Amy and I were searching for a church community in the neighborhood,” says Spencer, “and Plymouth was it.” Since joining the church in 2018, Spencer finds the sanctuary is his favorite place to sit and contemplate.



PLYMOUTH IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Norm Jones



When I first started attending Plymouth Church one of things that seemed unusual to me was the Salem Covenant of 1629 sometimes used as part of the worship service. We still recite this Covenant together when new members join and on other significant occasions. And it is printed in the front of our current hymnals.

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.

I had never heard this covenant before. It seemed a quaint oddity from the Puritans. I was raised in the Methodist Church and this was a new and interesting covenant to me. In the Methodist Church the regional Annual Conference was the governing body we were aware of, and Bishops and District Superintendents carried out the church governance: assigning

ministers, determining financial assessments, etc. Spiritual leadership tended to be top down. So what was this Salem Covenant all about and what did it mean?

After many years of Plymouth membership I have grown to appreciate this covenant with its many pluses but also its many challenges. Binding ourselves together as a church to walk together in all of God's ways is a most appealing idea. I think that's what we all seek in a church. But the second part, "as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His Blessed word of truth" was always more problematic to me. Wow, that seems to leave a lot of latitude. I always thought God's word of truth to be black and white: a list of "Thou Shalts..." and "Thou Shalt Nots..." But it's not that simple. And we all feel at times that we have the direct line to God's word of truth and that others are wrong or misguided. Who decides what God's truth is? As members of a Congregational Church we realize that we are in a continual struggle to discern God's truths for us.

In the simple, rural Methodist Church where I grew up life seemed simpler with the "shalts" and "shalt nots." But upon reflection, even that was not really the case. The oldest generation in that church still believed dancing, playing card games and, heaven forbid, drinking alcoholic beverages were all cardinal sins. But each of these taboos slowly faded out over following generations. Times change. The challenge is what can or should change and what is God's eternal truth.

How does this work in our Congregational Church with no pre-defined orthodoxy and no higher earthly power telling us what to believe spiritually?

It can be liberating and opens our minds to always be listening to God and each other in discerning what it means to follow Christ. It allows for a diversity of spiritual views and

discussions. But it can also sometimes make for messy governance. I have seen some barn-burner budget discussions where God's blessed word of truth seemed to be revealed radically differently to different people. In the Methodist Church you could always blame the Bishop or District Superintendent. In our Congregational Church without a hierarchy we like to blame "them" when "them is really "us."

So at times I'm still a little uncomfortable with the Salem Covenant. But as members of a Congregational Church may we continue to walk together to find His blessed word of truth—as difficult as that may be. It is challenging, but it keeps the Church alive.



Norm's favorite pandemic memory is returning to the first live worship service with preaching, a live quartet of musicians, a few dauntless souls in the pews and a strange waving of hands for the passing of the peace.



WHY PLYMOUTH CHURCH?

Adrian Swift



As a child growing up in the United Kingdom, I was raised within the Church of England; an alto choir boy until the age of 8 (\$2 for a solo at a wedding!); and I attended a Church of England primary school until the age of 11. As is common for many, I then drifted away from the community of faith and worship until I returned to a flock at Plymouth Church in 2006.

New York City was emerging from the trauma of September 2001, and as a young couple we had moved from the West Village to Brooklyn seeking more space for our limited housing budget. It was a scary move “across the river.” We were looking to build connections in our new community and raise our new born child in an inspirational, compassionate, and thoughtful spiritual environment. Plymouth Church exceeded all our expectations.

So began a long and beautiful relationship with Plymouth Church for our family. Melanie (15), Owen (13), and Jackson (10) have and continue to sustain special friendships with fellow children of the congregation that are valuably distinct from the social orbit of their school and family friends. Plymouth and its community have been there for our family in times of personal joy and sorrow.

On joining Plymouth Church, the prospect of reconnecting with God filled me with great apprehension—feelings of guilt for being absent from God for so many years, fear that I would not be able to find my faith, and nervousness that I would be an outsider. Fortunately (and with admittedly profound relief) I needn't have worried on this second point. My family and I were welcomed with open arms and we quickly gained a new set of friends that are still dear to us today. The matter of faith was a slightly longer journey.

Defining faith is complicated. And its meaning is deeply personal. As a generally pragmatic and analytical person, I naturally lean towards seeking evidence-based answers to questions. The journey of personal discovery and development to a place of contentment with my faith when fundamental life questions don't have clear-cut answers may not have been possible without the inspirational worship and deep community of Plymouth.

The journey is ongoing. Who knows what curveballs in life lie ahead. But I'm confident that Plymouth will be an anchor, a trusted safe place and a center of strength for me and my faith.

It is my sincere hope that my children will also be fortunate enough to find their Plymouth as adults. Wouldn't they be so lucky as to find a community of compassion, vibrant activism, and selfless giving, like Plymouth?



“We were a young family in 2005,” says Adrian, “seeking an inspirational spiritual base that also aligned with our social values.” During the pandemic his family has continued receive a feeling of community belonging, safety and settlement in a very difficult and uncertain time.



WHAT DOES PLYMOUTH CHURCH MEAN TO ME?

James Koster



For architects, and I suppose all creative types, the creative process can invoke a spiritual connection—something akin to divine creation, but on a human scale. When the project is a church, the building is literally a spiritual undertaking. Seems grandiose? Perhaps, but monuments like ours record for posterity the shared ideals of their builders. When the bricks were laid for Plymouth’s sanctuary, and for millennia before, classicism represented democracy. Sitting in a pew at Plymouth, those slender Corinthian columns and quiet classical details speak to me of the goals of equal rights and dignity for all people.

But we know the struggle for democratic ideals is not always uplifting. It is, at times, also frustrating and embittering. Plymouth’s founders built from a desire to collect fellowship and faith, worship and works under one roof. They sacrificed to build a house for people and a house for God. No doubt they also felt taken advantage of at times. There must have been days when they resented their commitments—moments when the church was lead more by human imperfections and less by divine grace.

I have empathy for them. I, too, have bled and sacrificed to glorify God through our buildings and grounds. And if we're being honest, laboring on behalf of this congregation has not always been spiritual and enlightening. Did I find God while arguing with Landmarks about the color of our roof? Not exactly. Was sparring with the Department of Buildings to secure that permit for our beer tent a spiritual journey? Um, no.

But grace is not easily recognized without a challenge. Working to preserve and perpetuate Plymouth's spiritual legacy has transformed me—the burden has strengthened me—has given me a mission and a community and a journey that has connected me to both the founders of our past and the stewards of Plymouth's future. Like our founders and like those of us who labor for a human house, we do it to honor the house of God.

Sacrifice is the seed we sow, and faith is the harvest. Plymouth taught me that.



Jack Faison greeted James and Caroline the first time they walked into Plymouth. "Jack just made it feel like home." says James. His favorite space is the Arcade when it is quiet to sit and contemplate the masterful detailing of the pilasters, vaults, and skylights.



WINTER

Paula Sutter Fichtner

“Basically, for centuries the native peoples of New England—and the settlers who came later—had to live through winters that were long, dark, and hard.”

— Professor Robert Allison (Suffolk University)



Even Nature needs a time;
When She must pause for rest;
To hide from wind and snowstorms,
That end autumn at its best.

Stripped of brilliant red and gold,
Down to black, grey, and brown;
Her coverlet is grimy ice;
Her bed the frozen ground.

But all the while She lies in Peace;
Certain God knows when,
To drive all deathly gloom away,
And help Her rise again.



A historian, Paula felt something was missing in her life when she joined the church in 2018. “When I sit down for Sunday services and for major liturgical ceremonies,” comments Paula, “I think of the centuries of people who have been doing the same thing and I find it an inspiring experience.”



WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Jeffrey Bollerman



My ancient Celtic ancestors believed that heaven was separated from earth by a thick and impenetrable barrier, but that there were *thin places*—mountaintops or fjords—where that rigid membrane can become like a sheer curtain or a cracked door, and where for a moment we can feel God’s presence from the other side.

I was skeptical of this type of mysticism. Jaded by my years in Alphabet City, I had to endure the pantheistic musings of part-time yoga instructors in order just to exercise. Atop bar stools between Avenues A and B, I developed the superpower to sit stone-faced through tattoo origin stories meant to convey the spiritual depth of the bearer/victim (“...and then this one on my neck is Sanskrit for ‘*impermanence*’”). As an overworked corporate lawyer, I managed my commute with the precision of a man who billed his time in six-minute increments. In order to limit my five-block walk to the subway to five minutes, I would studiously avoid eye contact with my neighbors: the Falun Gong on 4th St., the Hells Angels on 3rd St., the Hare Krishnas on 2nd St., the comrades of the *Catholic Worker* on 1st St., and finally the Lubavitchers who would congregate at the

subway stop itself. My indifference to metaphysics was not necessarily an ideological commitment, but rather more like a time-management technique.

But then, during a singular infant baptism at Plymouth Church, I was reawakened to the transcendent. David Fisher held a beautiful baby aloft and led the congregation through the magnificent liturgy we used at the time. In those days, the congregation would covenant with the parents to share the heritage of Abraham and Sarah, to model our Christian faith, and to wait for the day when the child would join us as a member of the church.

That baby is a teenager now, and sadly I do not remember his name. But I do remember where I was sitting. I remember the radiance of our old liturgy and the realization that *this* is how words become *poetry*. And I remember the sudden sensation that God was with us; that He approved of us; that He would help us keep our promises to this family. In that moment, a friendship with Jesus didn't seem merely *possible*; it seemed *probable*.

Orange Street became a thin place.

But thin places are fleeting.

James Koster recently wrote movingly about how church work can be an enemy of spirituality. Plymouth's Treasurers understand this. When I occupied that lamentable office, I marveled at how I would provide people with a line-item copy of Plymouth's budget in March, only to be accused of a lack of transparency by these same people in May. Frustrated, I would gaze at the sanctuary windows depicting the history of Congregationalism in nineteen frames, searching beseechingly (but futilely) for a twentieth window portraying that great Congregationalist tradition—witch burning. But then a

voice—possibly God’s but probably Brett’s—would remind me to love my neighbors. All of them. You missed a few. Yes, them too.

Though a pandemic exile in New Jersey has exaggerated my physical distance from Plymouth, my emotional connection has been incredibly durable. Thanks to church work. In my pre-pandemic role on the Capital Campaign, I witnessed Plymouth’s profound generosity first hand. And now, when I think about a twentieth window to celebrate the history of Congregationalism, it might depict the anxiety of someone staring at a spreadsheet planning to do more with less; a nonagenarian with eyeglasses on the bridge of their nose writing a check; a teenager placing babysitting cash in an offering plate; a task force in deliberation; a volunteer committing to a sign-up sheet. It’s not easy to dramatize the thousands of decisions a Congregationalist makes in order to live by a covenant. But that doesn’t mean it’s not inspiring.

Not all thin places are serene or windswept. Some have frayed cushions and needy plumbing. And saints.



Jeff and Hattie discovered Plymouth on Palm Sunday in 2009, as folks were lining up with their palms to enter the sanctuary. His favorite place to monitor the world is a window in the third floor Storrs Library that perfectly frames the Brooklyn Bridge.



WHY PLYMOUTH? A PILGRIM'S STORY

Kunbi Sowunmi



My journey to Plymouth started about 10 years ago around the Christmas holidays. Christmas is my favorite holiday and time of the year. Growing up as a child in Lagos, Nigeria, my family held annual Christmas parties.

Big parties where everyone was welcome. In the lead up to the holidays we were part of a Christmas choir with our close family and friends, and I delighted in the performances.

I was born in London to parents who had moved to the UK from Nigeria as students in the early 60s. My parents returned to Lagos in the early 70s with my two older brothers and me. My younger sister was born shortly thereafter. Sadly, my parents divorced when we were very young. Christmas was one of the few times we would see my Dad in the years immediately following their divorce so it was especially precious for me. The joy of seeing my Dad at Christmas was indescribable.

I moved back to the UK at 16 and to New York in November 2011 for work with my partner, David (now husband). We had previously lived together in London and The Hague in The Netherlands. We moved to the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn in January 2012. I have always been a Christian

although my parents weren't church goers. My brothers and I went to a Catholic boys High school where we had mass every day. In London I attended several churches before finding my home church at Holy Trinity Brompton, Knightsbridge, a vibrant Church of England church.

On moving to NYC, I was keen to find a new home church. I worshipped at several churches but none that felt right for me. During Christmas 2013, I was strolling in the neighborhood and stumbled across Plymouth Church. I was struck by this church building that didn't look like a church. It looked, to me, like a stately home adorned with the most magnificent Christmas decorations. The little 5-year-old boy in me who has always loved Christmas was fascinated. I peered in and made a mental note to attend the Christmas Eve service. I did and loved it. I started attending regular Sunday services. I became a member about a year later.

Plymouth has become my home away from home. A place to worship and fellowship. To be still, centered, and rejoice in being a disciple of Christ. David and I were married in September 2014 by the then acting Minister Reverend Al Bunis. At the time, Plymouth had not taken a congregational vote to be outwardly inclusive church and so we could not have the marriage ceremony at Plymouth. However, the Church Committee were happy to allow Reverend Al to bless our union at a church on the Upper West side. This made our fairytale wedding even more special. I like to think that our marriage was one of the events that caused Plymouth to hold an open discussion and congregational vote to become a church that is outwardly open and inclusive and welcoming to all. This is what, in my view, being a true Christian is all about. Plymouth is a church that

uplifts and embraces all of God's children. It's a place where I feel seen, heard and welcome.



Kunbi loves sitting on the right-hand side of the sanctuary listening to the service and contemplating the steadfastness of God's love through the vicissitudes of life. "It's comforting to be reminded that God remains constant through life's trials and triumphs." he says.

CONGREGATIONALIST ESSAY SERIES
| 51 | DECEMBER 2, 2021



PILGRIM STRANGERS NO MORE

Fighting 52 Weeks of the Damn Panic with
52 Essays and a Legacy of Community at
Plymouth Church

Caroline Aiken Koster



One member of our Plymouth Church flock calls the COVID-19 pandemic the “damn panic.” That’s about as spiritual as anything else I’ve heard. Some things are so wretched they don’t deserve poetry or high-brow prose.

When the 400th anniversary of the landing of those other Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1620 rolled around, we were in the throes of the damn panic and had no idea how to gather. Our fetes and speakers and readings had been cancelled by a microscopic invader.

Jim Waechter and the History Ministry had the idea that we’d honor the #Mayflower400 with some Congregational essays. He cajoled me into writing the second one and then I wrote an essay about being “voluntold” to write that essay for the *New York Daily News* on Thanksgiving Day 2020. It was about what 1620 means to me in 2020’s stormy seas (spoiler alert: Plymouth Church) and you can read it here.

That was 52 weeks and 52 essays ago. No one ever planned

for that, but I am utterly proud and charmed that so many of you fought back by building a new normal using your tales about God and faith and Congregationalism and Plymouth. I've never felt more like a pilgrim than reading your essays, finding strength each week in your struggles, knowing you a little bit better as we isolated. Our community of stories became our salvation. With a little help from the Almighty, of course.

I was charmed by the variety. Some of you went full David Copperfield with your origin tales of childhood religion, wandering off, having kids, joining the church again. Others were more confessional, like a digital AA meeting. You shared your doubts, but you kept coming back, one day at a time.

Others spoke of deeds and a few had actually read the Bible. Some glorified the decades of service to Plymouth and others were almost bitter about searching for a spiritual component in the earthly responsibilities of tending to this New York City block maintenance hog of a real estate legacy built by our church ancestors.

I too have been frustrated sometimes. There were days where we weren't brave enough, where we didn't open these doors quickly enough and where we welcomed everyone but those who needed us most. Sometimes we Zoomed virtually when we could have zagged IRL. I may have reached my limit on packaged Cheetos and bottled water at coffee hour and yearn for a nice Plymouth punch or a lukewarm Greening casserole. And yet we worshipped with our fannies in these pews early on. We lifted our voices again in hymns this summer and opened our doors to pre-schoolers all year long. It's easy to sit at a computer and judge. It's not so simple to disinfect a school or socially distance a sanctuary or preach a

sermon relevant to a global plague. Whatever we did, we did it together.

And we wrote, of course. Weekly, we wrote.

And supported each other in real ways too. Fifty-two weeks later, we are still here. And snap, on Thanksgiving Day 2021, we're back in the *New York Daily News*, reenacting the first harvest feast of 1621 at that other Plymouth by our deeds in the Underground Thrift Store and the many Plymouth Church folk who built and donate to the Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge. You can read that at here.

I love our anniversary Sunday hymn *The Shining Shore*. I'd have the choir rip off the masks and belt it out every week if Bruce would let me. Over this pandemic year, "our days [have certainly] glided swiftly by" and we have "gird[ed] our loins, my brethren dear," but thanks to your genuine words and our tireless minister, staff and leadership and so many community deeds, we are not "pilgrim strangers."

These 52 essays are a legacy of this community of faith. Take that, you damn panic.



"When I visit the church basement and turn off the lights," Caroline says, "I can feel the presence, hope, bravery and humanity of both our church ancestors and the enslaved people seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad—they call us today to faith and justice."



OUR THANKSGIVING DAY

James Waechter



The country has just celebrated the 400th anniversary of the first Thanksgiving. A dear friend belongs to a Presbyterian church in the Eastchester, New York. Nat delivered a sermon to his congregation on the Sunday before Thanksgiving this year focused on the myth versus the reality of the Thanksgiving celebration. The myth has to do with a group of religious pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in December of 1620. They stayed onboard their ship until the spring of 1621, then came ashore, met people they called Indians, built homes, and planted crops. In the fall they celebrated, with their Indian friends, a feast they called Thanksgiving and America has been celebrating ever since.

The more complicated reality of Thanksgiving is quite another story. Nearly 50% of the passengers onboard the Mayflower perished during the winter of 1620–21. Of the 19 women arriving in Cape Cod only five survived to come ashore. The Wampanoag people who were native to Cape Cod were suspicious of the English. A young native, who the English called Squanto, had encountered the English several years earlier. He had been captured by them, put in chains and taken to England as a slave. Squanto was sold to the Spanish who later

set him free, put him on a ship and sent him back to America where he arrived a year before the Pilgrims.

No one knows exactly why the English-speaking Squanto, whose real name was Tisquantum, convinced his countrymen to help the Pilgrims. The Wampanoag taught the newcomers to hunt and fish, and to plant and fertilize native crops including corn. When fall arrived the Wampanoag were not invited to the three-day celebration of the harvest the Pilgrims planned.

The new settlers were shooting their muskets in the air and the Wampanoag arrived en masse fearing an attack was taking place. Finding it was a celebration, the Wampanoag went off and came back with several deer and joined in the festivities.

Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until the fall of 1863. Abraham Lincoln had petitioned Congress to establish the last Thursday of November as an annual national Thanksgiving Day. Until then, Thanksgiving was celebrated only regionally and sporadically. The country was now in the midst of Civil War and a New England publisher, Sarah Josepha Hale, was lobbying local and national politicians to establish the holiday. Lincoln became convinced the country would survive its greatest tragedy and that a national day of thanksgiving would be needed to heal and bind all of us together. What a compelling and real story about our national day of celebration.



“Any of the four benches in the Beecher Garden are my favorite spots for private time,” Jim says, “I’ve also had some of the best conversations with visitors and other members on those cedar seats.”

A POSTLUDE–PANDEMIC BLESSINGS

James Waechter



If there is anything I have learned by being a member of the History Ministry at Plymouth is that history is messy; there is always more to learn, and it is really important to separate myth from reality in telling our stories. This will be the last essay in this series of writings by members of our congregation to celebrate our Congregational heritage.

“How many of these essays do you think there will be?” asked Brett Younger. I told him I had no idea. It was fall 2020, and every church event including speakers, receptions, tours and dinners that our History Ministry had planned to observe the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620 had been cancelled. There were no in-person worship services, Sunday School, or physical meetings of any kind taking place at Plymouth.

The entire world was in lockdown.

It was Brett’s suggestion that a way to celebrate was to have some of our members write essays about the legacy of the Pilgrims and what being a Congregationalist in 2020–21 means. We now have a year’s worth of member writings by 28 women and 24 men, the youngest writer is in high school and the oldest just turned 97 years old. There are essays by long-time members and some by the newest to join Plymouth. A frequent comment when potential authors were approached was “I know little about being a Congregationalist.” My

response was, “Then write about what being a member of Plymouth Church means to you.”

The outpouring of weekly writings in the Plymouth e-news has regularly brought me to tears. Each essay is a distinct and special piece of the Plymouth story, not the whole story by any means, there are hundreds of members whose stories are not part of this collection. These essays are however a good snapshot in time of what it means to be members of a healthy and vibrant urban church during a pandemic. In 2022 Plymouth will be celebrating our 175th anniversary. My hope is that these essay/stories will inspire those who celebrate Plymouth at its 200th or 300th anniversaries by giving a glimpse of their predecessors from 2020–21. The pandemic has turned out to have at least 52 blessings.

