

PLYMOUTH IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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 1880's 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 1780’s 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.

~ James Waechter