

## **BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME**

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 procession 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

herd 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 Younger