

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

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 5 children (2 older brothers, 2 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 & 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 & Grace, Carl & 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.

~Brian Flanagan