

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

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 15-501 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 good-bye 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.

~Eliza Gray