

WHY I AM A CONGREGATIONALIST

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.

~ John Witty