

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Like so many members of Plymouth Church, my family was drawn here by our children. It was to provide them with a spiritual home, that “third place” that would offer things that school or home could not, that we first came to explore the church. Indeed, Plymouth lived up to our hopes- we found a friendly and welcoming community, diverse across generations and full of energy, with plenty going on to engage our boys.

In some ways, that alone would have been enough, and I could have called our mission a success, but for the fact that in discovering Plymouth, I discovered more than just a new family hang-out. The Congregationalist expression of Christianity was new to me, and the more I learned about it, the more I found to like. I was raised in a much more structured, centralized, and hierarchical tradition, one full of ritual which was sometimes beautiful but at other times seemed a bit empty. At Plymouth, I experienced a Christianity that felt more stripped down to its essentials, with few rules and an absence of man-made obstacles placed between the individual and God. Simple worship, and an emphasis on scripture (wow- Bibles in every pew?!?) and inclusivity were among the things I found most attractive. These hallmarks, combined with Plymouth’s self-determining governance structure, provide for me an answer to the question which I am sure that I am not alone in asking: “What might it have been like to have lived as a Christian in the early days of the Church?”

Now, I want to be careful not to overdo the analogy of Plymouth to the ancient Church. To do so would be a disservice to Plymouth, its history, and its promise for the future. And while much of the meaning that I find at Plymouth is about the relationship between the individual and God, there is more to it than that. For me, additional insight comes from the connection that Plymouth provides to history and from the opportunities it provides to serve in the present and to build for the future. Plymouth grounds its members in “Big History”- the Pilgrims’ landing in Massachusetts, Henry

Ward Beecher, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and much more. It also connects each of us to a smaller though equally important history—the evolution of New York and brownstone Brooklyn and to those lived in and cared for this neighborhood at times when it was not as comfortable, secure, and stylish as it has become. It is an honor to be a part of such an institution, and we have a responsibility to “pay it forward” through service. I did not expect ever to say this when I first entered the doors of 75 Hicks St., but I am grateful to say that the opportunities that Plymouth has provided me to serve as a Council Officer and in other ways have been among the most rewarding experiences of my adult life. I am confident that others who come to Plymouth with open ears, mind, and heart can find the same things here that I have found.

Jonathan Insull