

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

First Parish and First Congregational Church stand on either side of the village green on Canton Avenue in Milton, Massachusetts; twin monuments to a spare, proudly protestant, New England spirit. The churches were founded as one in 1680 under the leadership of the Reverend Peter Thatcher, who provided the local Puritan congregants with spiritual and also corporeal support: he was their minister, doctor and also veterinarian. Over 150 years later, in 1834, A theological dispute within the congregation caused a permanent fissure, with the Unitarians remaining in the original building and the trinitarian Congregationalists decamping across the green where they would build themselves a new meetinghouse.

It was in the choir lofts of these two white clapboard churches that my journey to Plymouth Church began. I started as a substitute soloist at First Congregational in 1987 while a student at the New England Conservatory in Boston. A few years later, a permanent position opened at First Parish where I sang until moving to New York City in 1998.

It took me some time to understand and appreciate the differences between Congregational and Unitarian; I was often confused on one hand by the puzzling concept of the Trinity and on the other, the inclusion of so many different faiths in one service. I had been raised with little to no religious education by my secular Jewish parents, proud atheists who had rejected the traditions of their immigrant parents. I came to church to pursue my musical, not spiritual, journey.

Years later, now married with young children, I joined the Plymouth Choir as a section leader and soloist. My children followed me to church on Sunday mornings and soon I was running from the loft after the anthems, to the basement of the Hicks Street building where I would play guitar and sing bible songs for Discoveryland. I was also directing the Christmas pageant, volunteering for vacation bible camp and spending more and more time in the company of Plymouth Church families. Someone suggested I join the Wednesday Women's Bible Study and that small group soon become a sanctuary for me of study and fellowship. It was also a space that challenged my atheist world view, and where I grew to admire the strong faith of my friends.

To understand more about Plymouth, I joined the new members class (twice) and there I learned about the history of the church, and the Salem Covenant, and that as a friend of the church I could participate fully in the life of the church—except on one day. On the day of the annual meeting, I could observe but I could not vote. If I wanted to participate, I would have to become a member. And to become a member, I would need a baptism, something that was (for a secular Jew) not a step to be taken lightly. Every year I sat through the annual meeting and watched the church members debate (and sometimes shout) as they discussed important decisions for Plymouth. They demonstrated their Congregationalism through civic engagement and self governance. As the years went by I sat and watched and thought more and more about that next step.

That day did finally come, over twenty years after the first time I sang in the choir loft at First Congregational Church in Milton. On a warm summer morning in 2010, as I stood in a circle made by the women of the Wednesday Bible Study, I was baptized by the Rev. David Fisher; I became a member of Plymouth the following fall.

What does it mean to be a Congregationalist? For me, it means to come to the meeting and be ready to vote, to speak out (and sometimes to shout).

~Sadie Horton