

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

Without knowing all the motives behind it, all of a sudden, when I was 8, we became a church family. My two older brothers and I were volunteered to sing in a classic British style men and boys choir at Trinity Episcopal Church, Toledo, Ohio, practicing 3 times a week. We were paid 15 cents a rehearsal for bus fare. On Sundays and at weddings and funerals we wore cassocks, surpluses, tall starched collars, big satins bows. Soon after, my mother started teaching Sunday school and my father was part of the vestry.

Trinity was a “low” Episcopal church. No genuflecting, no incense, no stations of the cross, but still a Gothic structure with stain glass windows and plenty of adornment. Silver chalices were used for communion as were tasteless but tastefully embossed wafers.

But that is not when my Christian education began. My mother had come from a church going family and went to a women’s seminary school affiliated with Kenyon College. (My father’s family were not church goers.) Raising what eventually became a family of 8 children, my mother did her best to inculcate in her brood Christian ethics and morals. Long before I started going to church, I was taught the “golden rule” and to “turn the other cheek” and the parables (I knew them as bedtime stories or moral lectures) of the good Samaritan and Lazarus and the Prodigal Son.

Not unlike many of my peers, by the time I began college, I had become a teenage agnostic. Which isn’t to say that I unlearned what my parents and Trinity had taught me about being a good and moral person but that the lessons became ethical and humanist, no longer spiritual.

When I first came to Plymouth I had little idea of what a Congregationalist was. Wendy and I had been looking for a church for some time. Speaking for myself, I had lost a brother, a sister, a small daughter, and a marriage in the last decade and a half of the 20th century and my mother was slowly failing. I felt the need for a safe and holy place to try to understand and come to terms with that. Did I care what brand of Protestantism it was? Not too much.

The things that attracted me to Plymouth were David Fisher's preaching, the welcome we received as visitors from members at coffee hours, and the outward facing part of Plymouth that looked to the community and to those less fortunate than our congregation, in those days primarily the Christian Help Committee, the Blood drives and Habitat projects. And that last aspect continues to be an extremely important part of Plymouth life to me as I have participated in and watched others develop a whole range of programs such as the interfaith partnerships after 9/11, the anti-trafficking ministry, the thrift store, the racial justice ministry and more.

Self-government didn't seem particularly important to me (even though I was recruited very soon after joining to be on the Council), until I became a member of the most recent search committee. Although I understood in principle that a Congregational church chose its own senior minister, being a part of the lengthy but very successful process with such a wonderful cooperative group of fellow members was truly a sacred experience.

As to the worship in Plymouth, I enjoyed the music and most of the service but missed the pageantry. And I must admit I missed even more the creeds, the act of stating out loud one's beliefs, reminding oneself in one fell swoop the content of one's faith, that reminder every Sunday of the whole course of creation, the birth of Christ and the resurrection. As a famous theologian

said of the Apostles' Creed, its sets forth the doctrine "in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassable brevity, in beautiful order, and with liturgical solemnity".

Nevertheless, I value the fact that modern Congregationalism gives one space to question, to doubt and to figure out what you believe. It encourages community, and at the same time has room for members who are in very different places in their faith journey. And I value the sermons that guide us to understand what the Christian teachings and beliefs mean in the here and now, the current troubling world, and in our struggling lives.

~Tom Bettridge