

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

I grew up in central Connecticut and attended the First Congregational Church of Farmington Connecticut – an iconic white structure with a tall, graceful spire situated center village on the green. The church dates to 1652. The bell in the tower summoned people to church every Sunday and often I watched as one of the men put his full weight on the thick rope to ring that heavy bell that you could hear all over town.

As my parents organized and ran the Sunday School when I was young, there was no other activity in scope for my sisters and I on Sundays. There was Sunday school in the morning and youth group afternoons during my teen years. I remember skimming quickly through my Sunday School lessons late Saturday night while half asleep-- not a very good student, but I did love the hymns and the youth group! Scattered throughout the year there were numerous potluck dinners. After the dinners the parents went upstairs to discuss “church matters.” Meanwhile the kids played games downstairs. Every June the church had a marvelous strawberry festival held outdoors on our lawn; the women baked shortcakes and hulled pounds and pounds of strawberries. The whole town came.

The church sanctuary was called the “meeting house” because in colonial days the congregation met in the sanctuary to worship on Sunday but just as important the “meeting house” was used as the assembly place where the town fathers (all land owning men) gathered to conduct town business: they voted on sending troops to the revolutionary war, they voted on zoning ordinances of a growing village; town business was conducted in “the meeting house.” I learned the history of Congregationalism with its

emphasis on self-governance as central to our Church. It was routine for me to overhear my parents discussing church matters: the calling of a new minister, the organization of fellowship hour after services, the budget, or organizing a post-Vatican II joint worship service with our Catholic brethren down the street. I was growing up in a church where the members made the decisions and participated.

Early in my career, I distanced myself from my New England background while exploring the world. At one point I judged my church upbringing as conservative, with a touch of New England's puritanical strictness. In retrospect, however, that view is incorrect. During my teen years, the early 1960's, this church provided me with a number of impactful experiences. One of our astute youth leaders took us into Hartford to hear Mahalia Jackson – Oh my gosh- I was dazzled, hearing gospel music from one of the masters with an entire concert hall clapping in rhythm! Then there was the mission trip down the East Coast to South Carolina where I saw a “Whites Only” sign over a drinking fountain- the reality of segregation silenced this group of white teens momentarily but stimulated discussion on our bus ride home. And there was the “summer camp” experience volunteering at a mental hospital realizing people had health challenges beyond my teenage comprehension. At the time I did not appreciate how much these experiences were molding me nor the dedication of parents to organize and chaperone the activities. Parents were responding to the world we teenagers were entering by showing us the world through the Christian lens.

Over time as I travelled and moved for my career, I felt the impetus to look for a new church home. I floundered for a while attending services without being satisfied. Was I searching for a community? for new friends? a faith group or was Sunday morning worship just a habit? When I landed in

Brooklyn I eventually visited Plymouth. Immediately I knew this was the church for me not because of Plymouth's Congregational heritage and governance structure, rather I was drawn to the worship service. What I was missing was the act of worshipping. It's been quite a few years since I joined Plymouth and I am loving worship services, the music, Bible study, the community, the friends, the outreach activities. And not to be undervalued are the picnics on the Beecher lawn as pedestrians, who with curiosity and perhaps envy, stop to take in the scene of us eating, laughing, enjoying fellowship!

As I have participated in the life of Plymouth, whether serious budget meetings or social activities, I discovered the more you participate the more you love your church. Plymouth is my "church home."

~Sandra Deming