

MY CONGREGATIONALIST JOURNEY

At an 8am staff meeting in downtown Manhattan, I distinctly heard a loud metallic ‘bang’ from outside. Through the window, I saw sheets of paper descending from the sky. American Flight 11 had struck the North Tower. Our building’s PA system directed us to stay in place. When the second plane hit, some people started to cry. The PA told us to evacuate.

Thirty-nine years old, I had never attended church regularly. I had no religious upbringing to speak of, other than celebrating Christmas and Easter each year.

I had a friend at the office who had previously worked in one of the WTC buildings. He was going to funerals for months after that day. My wife Tania and I had a neighborhood friend whose husband, a firefighter, was killed trying to rescue people. In the ensuing days, we took part in a candlelight vigil. Feelings of grief, sorrow, shock and loss were palpable in our Park Slope community.

In many ways, 9/11 was the start of my Congregational journey. Previously, Tania and I had been sporadically ‘church shopping’—we felt a cultural obligation to get our kids baptized. None of the churches we visited felt right. After 9/11, the task of finding a church took on greater importance. We were New Yorkers whose spirits were battered and bruised, in need of salve for our souls.

Tania attended a meeting at Plymouth Church for a non-profit she volunteered for, and came home and told me about the place. We started attending Sunday services. The sermons, the music, the people, the history, the children’s programs—it all clicked. It was a tremendous gift to be able to

step back from the day-to-day, listen to a thoughtful sermon, and reflect on life's bigger issues: mortality, suffering, humility, renewal. The message of God's stubborn, unswerving commitment to establish 'shalom on earth' resonated in us. 'Slow to anger & abounding in mercy'—that was a God we wanted to connect with. Our young boys relished 'Discoveryland' (aka 'Sunday School').

Congregationalism suits my disposition. I am not a fan of ritual. The notion that members of a local church have the right to decide their church's forms of worship and confessional statements, choose their own officers, and administer their own affairs seems eminently sensible to me. I thoroughly enjoyed learning [the history of Congregationalism](#)* at my New Members class, courtesy of Edith Bartley. I like the idea of being on a journey seeking to discern God's will. The idea of a covenant relationship between God and each one of us as participants together in the church's mission works for me.

I have had the good fortune to volunteer in various ways at Plymouth and gain lifelong friends along the way. I have witnessed Congregationalism shape souls and move faith. I've seen that God is not an uncaring 'cosmic sky God,' but on the contrary is among us and acting through us. I can attest that He is guiding us, comforting us, and inspiring us to make a difference in Brooklyn & in the world. That's what Congregationalism means to me.

~ Tony Kleckner

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational_church