

GOING HOME

Going to a Congregational church is, for me, like going home. I grew up in Congregational churches, attending worship every week as well as Sunday School. I went through Confirmation as a teenager. I sang in church choirs, went away to church camps. Church was not only a center of community life in the small Midwestern towns where I grew up, but Congregational churches became a thread of continuity in my life, as my family and I moved from one place to another.

Here I am now, a senior citizen, and despite many changes in my life, I still get to sing hymns and read texts that I learned as a child. It feels like going home.

My dad was a Congregational minister. Being a preacher's kid was a mixed bag for me. There was all that moving every 5-7 years, which was disruptive and hard, though it also gave me a broader perspective than if we'd always stayed in one place. Among age mates, I encountered frustrating stereotypes – that preachers' kids would be self-righteous and excessively virtuous. To this day, my dad's occupation is one of the later things I want to reveal to new friends. And if my husband is occasionally appalled by my salty language, I chalk it up to the years I was trying to defy expectations.

On the other hand, because of my dad's associations, I met lots of other Congregational ministers and found them to be among the more interesting adults I knew. They were people who, when they asked "How are you?" seemed to want a real answer.

So, it happens that my experience with churches was not only grounding, but also broadening. Serious thought and questioning were accepted, even encouraged. Respect for other races, nationalities and religions was encouraged. The Congregational churches I knew were all affiliated with the United Church of Christ, and I appreciated their outspokenness on social justice issues.

While these and other Christian values were well embedded, by the time I was in college, my own thought and questioning led me toward agnosticism. Still, I would gravitate toward churches as caring communities. Sometimes

I would just join the choir. Or I'd be attracted to social justice ministries. I didn't become a member, though, because I wasn't prepared to take oaths about my beliefs.

There were also stretches when I didn't attend church at all. Ultimately, it was family losses and the trauma of 9/11 that pushed me to find a new church home. It helped that I had married someone who'd also been raised in the church, had drifted away, and experienced losses. After searching around, Tom and I landed at Plymouth in 2004, and soon became members.

I appreciated that Plymouth was Congregational (though not UCC), that it was welcoming, had a great preacher (David Fisher then), and it was non-creedal; I was accepted with my doubts! I was happy to covenant "to walk together in God's ways" as far as they are revealed to us. Tom and I jumped in with both feet and have participated in many ways. And my faith has grown.

One dark night, as I was coming home late, I encountered a friend sitting by herself on a park bench, obviously downcast. She explained that she was feeling deeply hurt by the unkind action of a friend. Wanting to comfort her, I found myself saying "You do know that God loves you, don't you? We humans will fail you, but God loves you." Though I couldn't have clearly said who or what God is, I knew that this was the only authentic answer to her pain. And I've never meant anything more sincerely.

Aided by the many saints-in-action at Plymouth, my faith continues to grow. I've been touched, not only by inspiring preaching, but by the living examples of kindness, generosity, deep thought and commitment that I've witnessed here. This is a home that's helping me become the person God wants me to be.

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