

## **WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME**

I was raised in Bardstown, Kentucky, a town settled in 1780 by French Catholics. It once served as the first inland diocese in the country, covering the area from the Allegheny Mountains to the Mississippi River.

Monsignor Willett ruled much of our predominately Catholic town. He ran the cathedral and oversaw the parochial schools. He set skirt lengths for girls and the dating age for teenagers. Heaven forbid someone got pregnant: banished from Catholic life and sent to Louisville for delivery and adoption of her child. Upon return she joined us in public school.

I was curious about the rituals and catechism my Catholic friends followed (still am) but troubled by how the church treated its children – relieved that we were Protestant.

My grandmother Fuller taught Bible class at Spruce Pine United Methodist Church in the North Carolina mountains. My mom was raised in Fuller's church. She attended Bardstown United Methodist Church with my two sisters and me, leading the choir at one point. Like her mother, she was a woman of strong conviction, ahead of the church in ways that matter.

I was a fitful young church member, pinching myself to listen to sermons but never making it to the end. I felt far less holy than the "perfect" family that sat in the front left pew, well-dressed, so attentive.

Upon leaving Kentucky for college, I followed a path that led north, back south, north again and eventually to Brooklyn Heights. I love architecture and history, particularly Lincoln and the civil rights struggle, and found both at Plymouth a couple blocks away.

Our children attended Plymouth Church School and I went to service now and then for years, drawing solace from sermons by ministers including Frank Goodwin.

I began to visit more often about 10 years ago, encouraged by my neighbor Lois Rosebrooks. Al Bunis befriended me. We had coffee once at Vineapple and talked about joining the church. I wondered whether it would be right because I wasn't sure I believed in God. Al embraced me saying: "Join the crowd". So I did.

I got involved in Plymouth. Grace Faison and Jim Waechter welcomed me to their pew. In a men's Bible study group I read Paul's letters and followed his travels on the map, which brought Christianity to life for me. Sitting with others around Brett and Carol's dining table one Saturday morning, I felt for the first time guided by God's hand as if there were no other choice. Plymouth enabled this and more.

I attend my wife Lynn's Catholic service at times, drenched by its mysticism. Yet I choose Plymouth as home because of my longing for the sermons and, as I've discovered, because Plymouth members help decide how we worship, minister, serve and celebrate.

I know that I remain a restless work in progress, in some ways like Plymouth itself over the years: never perfect, sometimes receding, often aspiring and achieving, clay for the shaping with many Congregational hands at the wheel.

~Allen Kraus