

A View from the Pew
By Jim DeLine
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As I sit here in my red Plymouth Congregational chair, I often reflect on Congregationalism. It has really come a long way but, at its core, is as true and meaningful as ever. Earlier this year, Kathy Farnum and Lisa Bolton Hunt gave a great series of talks on the history / the evolution of Congregationalism. I hope you caught a few of those sessions. I want to talk this morning on why we are here. Why Christianity, why Congregationalism, why Plymouth.

Christianity is great. Isn't it? And it is probably the most simple faith on the planet Earth. We have the Great Commandment. Matthew 22:36-40.

³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

What could be more simple? What do we Christians do? We worship, we serve, and we spread the word. We love the Lord our God and we love our neighbor as our self. Pretty simple.

But, on the other hand, Christianity is probably the most complex faith on the planet Earth. We know it is a monotheistic faith and we believe in the trinity. It is a monotheistic faith and we believe in the trinity. The trinity.

There is the Holy Spirit. I don't think the Holy Spirit gets the credit and the press it deserves. It's a big thing. You've seen Star Wars. The Holy Spirit is "The Force." May the Force be with you. May you plug into that spirit that binds us all together. That power that overwhelms us, that gives us goosebumps, that gives us strength. You and I rely on the Holy Spirit a lot more than we realize.

And then there is God, the Father. I know that is sexist, but the analogy is the most appropriate thing our feeble minds can grasp. "He" is so complex

that we need to dumb it down. Our language doesn't have a good word. "He" is wrong. So is "she." So is "it." But He / God is our patriarch / our parent. He establishes our rules, gives order, blesses us with things like beauty, music, math and (thanks to a couple of our famous ancestors) the knowledge of good and evil. And what is a truly very complex idea to grasp, is that "He" loves us. That, folks is a very complex God.

He is the God of time and space. He is everywhere. That, we can grasp. geographically anyway. Okay, God is in currently in Lansing and He is currently in London. Got it. But he is also currently in 2012 and he is currently in 1865 and he is currently in 2065. So He knows our decisions. But he answers prayers. So He knows what we are going to pray for. Complex? You betcha.

He is Infinite. That's pretty complex. Psalm 102 24 - 27 "So I said, "Do not take me away, my God, in the midst of my days; your years go on through all generations."²⁵ In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.²⁶ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded.²⁷ But you remain the same, and your years will never end." Infinity. What a concept.

That brings us to Jesus – the Son. Our faith is so complex, we needed something / someone we can relate to, our connection, our Lord, our Savior. You know what? Yes, we have Jesus. We don't need any other connection. So says Congregationalism. But we will get to that in a minute.

And the Bible. The Bible is pretty complex isn't it? Have you read Revelation? The Bible is so complex that people are able to pick out parts that can be twisted to justify beliefs that they are going to hold anyway. People have found Bible verses which they used to justify slavery, to justify discrimination against women in the pulpit, to justify discrimination against gay marriage. You got a position you want to justify? I'll bet you can find a Bible verse in here to back you up.

And then there are those Christians who take Genesis literally. How can they believe that Jesus taught in parables and allegories, but then look at that book of the Bible and tell us that God's word doesn't speak to us parables and allegories?

What about different Bible interpretations? King James is poetic and so very cool, but the New International Version and others may be more accurate interpretations of the original Greek and Hebrew. Which interpretation is “the word of God”? It’s all pretty complex.

There are four gospels that give the same story of the life of Jesus from different points of view. That is very Congregational. We Congregationalists grow our faith by depending on others in the congregation to share their faith stories / their points of view / their interpretations with us.

So let’s talk Congregationalism. Yes, we worship, we serve, and we spread the Word. But we Congregationalists will add another thing on the Christian “to do” list. We will add that we are Pilgrims. We acknowledge that we are Pilgrims on a faith journey.

And to be a good pilgrim, we are encouraged to get different interpretations from others in the congregation. We depend on each other to aide our Pilgrimage, to aide us in our faith journey. Because faith is a journey.

We are encouraged to hear different viewpoints. We are encouraged to hear the viewpoint of the person in the pew next to us, the viewpoint of the pastor on Sunday, the viewpoint of the eleventh grader in PF. It’s in the covenant that we have with each other.

Did you know that in the colonial Congregational churches, they did not adjourn their meetings until the vote on that meeting’s particular issue was unanimous? They believed that that important Holy Spirit would guide everyone’s thinking and eventually they would agree 100%. Personally, I think they were able to reach unanimity based more on the fact that the pews were hard and they had no air conditioning more than on the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Today, we decide issues on one or two votes even though there are votes on either side of the issue. I think that is good. If you feel that the Spirit is speaking to you differently than the Spirit is speaking to your neighbor, that’s okay. In fact, that’s Congregationalism, right? Getting different stories / different points of view / different interpretations from others in the congregation.

Making that individual direct link to hear what God is saying to us is why we don't have a Pope or a denominational doctrine or creed to be followed by our churches and church members. Each church in our association is autonomous.

In order to foster that direct link to hear what God is saying to us is why early Congregational churches skipped much of the symbolism we enjoy. Churches were bare bones. No stained glass and no crosses. You've seen the pictures. Those churches were really stark.

Strange, isn't it, that the Congregational Church came from the Puritans with their discipline and their witch trials? Those Puritans valued the autonomy of the local church ... and they valued education and that was probably their downfall. Education means reading. Reading means exposure to new ideas.

Congregationalists believe in education. Colleges founded by Congregationalists include Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and Amherst. Colleges supported by our Congregationalist association today are Olivet College here in Michigan and Piedmont College in Georgia.

Education and providing intellectual insight is so important that each year at the annual meeting of the national association, they make a point to offer bible lectures. Dr. David Fredrickson presented this year's to us. He was a professor who knew Greek and helped us go back to original Greek / Hebrew scripture.

He talked to us about the Great Commission. Matthew 28:18-19. ¹⁸ "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

So Dr. Fredrickson got us to thinking. Do you think the original language said, "make disciples of all nations" ? Of course not. There were no nations in the Roman empire. The original Greek scripture was more like "make disciples of all ethnic groups or tribes or even constituencies." We need to educate ourselves. We need to look at things from different perspectives.

Looking at things from different perspectives was something Congregationalists did on social issues as well. Congregationalists were on the forefront of several social issues including abolitionism, the suffrage movement, and even temperance. I am very proud of our Congregational heritage in the social stand they took in two of these issues. The temperance movement didn't turn out so well.

Clearly, the Congregational church took a lead in the anti-slavery movement. Do you know the story of the Amistad?

In 1839, the slave trade was technically illegal in Spain but some enterprising Spanish business leaders had a boatload of people who had been kidnapped in Africa and now they were aboard the schooner, the Amistad. They were sailing to a Cuban port to sell those people as slaves. It did not work out. The Africans rebelled and took over the ship. They let the businesspeople live on one condition: that they sail the ship back to Africa or to a country where they could be set free. That did not work out either. The ship went up our East coast and a US ship intercepted the Amistad off the coast of New York, thus beginning a real legal quagmire. Had a crime been committed? By who? Did the US even have any jurisdiction? The Spaniards wanted their property returned to them – the ship had wine, saddles, gold, silk and, of course, slaves. The African people went to jail and a trial began. It was the talk of the town. Our Congregational ancestors saw a group of people in danger of being labeled “property” and returned to slavery. They formed the Amistad Committee. (You know how we Congregationalists like committees and boards.) Thanks a great deal to the financial support and legal assistance from the Congregational church's Amistad Committee, those people were freed. The committee even had the 1840 version of garage sales and fudge sales to raise the money necessary to return them home.

Congregationalists constantly ask themselves, “What is God saying to us? Is what is happening here today what God really wants? What is God telling me I should do?” That is our heritage. That is who we are. I'm proud of that.

We don't have all the answers. We are on a pilgrimage and we are asking the tough questions.

If you want a church that claims to have all the answers, you came to the wrong place. If you want a church that just validates all of your present beliefs, you came to the wrong place.

Just as we depend on each other to further our faith journeys, the member churches in our national association should depend on each other, not a home office.

You may have heard me report that the NACCC is cutting back due to its financial situation. Our new model relies more on reaching out and helping member churches with the expertise already available in our fellow churches rather than depend on a large staff at the national office. Those colonial Congregational churches didn't call the home office to solve their problems. They called other Congregational churches.

Not only should our churches reach out to each other, but we also need to reach out to different constituencies. At this summer's national meeting, we heard from Dr. Ed Stetzer. Dr. Stetzer grew up in a church much like Plymouth. Conservative. Demur. But his students ventured out and joined different Christian churches that they wanted him to experience and they invited him and he attended.

One of those churches in an area of New York City was similar to a 2010 version of a beatnik church. They did not meet on Sunday morning. They met on Thursday night. The members wore mostly black, had tattoos and so many piercings that Dr. Stetzer remarked that some of them looked like they fell into a tackle box. But there they holding a Christian church service. Worshiping the Lord and learning how to further their individual faith journeys. Dr. Stetzer told us that he was thinking to himself, "these are not my people." But also he realized that every Christian church doesn't have to be "my people." Christianity and particularly Congregationalism is about hearing different stories, different interpretations of what the Bible is saying to me and what God is saying to me.

Our churches have an association not hierarchical command center. Each church is autonomous. Each church reaches its own constituency.

Plymouth once had a major presence in the national association and is still recognized as making a major contribution. I encourage you to attend a national meeting. Not sure it is for you? Ask Maggie Whalen, Lisa Bolton

Hunt, Margaret Hedlund, Reverend Joy, Mary Bandfield, Noreen and / or David Boes, or myself. The meeting is held each June toward the end of the month. Next summer, it will be in Orlando, then Omaha, then Salt Lake City, then Southeast Michigan (maybe even Detroit). Then perhaps to Piedmont College in Georgia. Though having a grown up conference where most people will be staying in college dorm rooms will be an interesting idea to propose.

It is very Congregational to be in a variety of places, hearing a variety of voices. It is right for the Congregational church to be on the forefront of church sharing where the other church in your building approaches Christianity from a different perspective.

It is right for the Congregational church to be on the forefront of church planting, starting a brand new church to deliver the Christian message to a new and different constituency. There are brand new Congregational churches forming every year. And there are those 150 years old.

That's us. Plymouth Congregational Church. We actually are unique. We have a tradition with more symbols. We proudly display our stained glass from the downtown church. We proudly parade and display the cross.

In the Congregational tradition, however, we encourage education with scholarships. You've heard Stan Freburg talk about the scholarships from the Plymouth Memorials Foundation. You've heard Lisa Bolton-Hunt and her start up drive for new scholarship funding.

We use amazing music to praise and worship. And what talent we have here. When David Bandfield, Darlene or John Dale get on those keyboards, it's magic. And, being one who was not gifted with any vocal talent whatsoever, I so appreciated the beautiful voices we are blessed with each Sunday.

Yes, we have had more structure. Our practice is to use Acolytes and doing church service with more pomp and circumstance. We are a little more "high church" and that is okay with the Congregational association. Each church is autonomous.

Maybe sometimes we are a little too reluctant to change how we do things or how we arrange the furniture. Remember, it's not the symbols. It's not

the structure. It's the listening. What is God telling me that will further my faith journey. What is the spirit saying to me?

Where are we headed? I think we are headed back to being more congregational. We are getting a bit more bare bones. And maybe we are hearing different voices and approaching things with a different perspective. We now rotate in a glory service. That's cool.

We have different assistant pastors that maybe we should hear from more often. We need to take advantage of our assistants, our lay ministers. We like hearing from Maggie, Kathy and Lisa. We like hearing from our associate pastor, David Bandfield. And even Betty Briggs has had a turn at the pulpit.

Through the years, each of our senior pastors have had their perspectives and worship styles. They have worked with our Board of Deacons to tweak the Sunday service time and time again.

Plus I think guest speakers are great. A settled minister is important to bind us together and, as Ed Crouse has pointed out, act as a needed head administrator. But that in-between time before Joy got here, Bill Baldwin lined up some interesting speakers, a different one every Sunday. Let us be open to a new pastor with a new perspective and a new tweak to our Sunday service.

Besides worship our pilgrimage, of course, is aided by our fellowship where we learn from each other. For example: Girlfriends. "So what do you think of that book, that politician? Where do you think Plymouth is headed?"

Men's Morning Manna. "So what do you think of that book, that politician? Where do you think Plymouth is headed?"

Family Movie Night. "So kids. What did you think of that movie?" My boys and I had a great discussion after seeing the movie, Hugo, at Family Movie Night. They had some problems with it. But that's okay.

At Plymouth, we do have more committees and boards than our church sharing partner, Unity. That's okay. We hear from each other. A lot. We have differing views. We aren't all "on the same page." That's good. Our votes aren't all unanimous. That's okay.

We have town meetings, Moderator forums, fall and spring meetings. We discuss what is important to us, in what direction would like to see Plymouth Congregational Church go and how can we get there? It is important to hear a variety of opinions. From Penny Draper, from Win Stebbins, from Dorothy Rice, from Judy Evans, from Marilyn Korroch, from Daun Ketchison, from Chuck Gabler, from Catherine Hawkins and probably soon from Sarah Love Yeagar.

Besides worship and our pilgrimage, do we maintain those other Christian responsibilities here at Plymouth? Yes, we do.

Service. Look at Benevolences, food pantry, Operation Santa, Clothing closet, hosting Mobile Food Pantry. Are you aware of David Bandfield's worship services at retirement centers? Of Pat Carrow's work with hospice? With Betty Briggs work with Christian Services?

Spreading the Word. Do you stand up like you should? How did bullying ever get to be a problem if good Christians stood up every day? Do you take your Christianity to work? To the voting booth? I hope so. Evangelizing isn't something we traditionally emphasize at Plymouth. Maybe we should.

I like being here with you. We have chosen Christianity, Congregationalism and Plymouth. And it feels right.

That's my view from the pew. Yours is likely different. Cool. I encourage you to continue putting up with me and I will put up with you. I have a covenant with you to that end. I respect so much those of you who have been long time members of Plymouth. We certainly have heard differing voices and styles through the years and soon we will welcome in a new Senior Pastor who will have their own style and their own perspective. Cool. Christianity, Congregationalism, Plymouth church. Each has so much going for it. But **the most important thing we have is each other.** Thank you for listening.