

Our Church, a Survey of Congregational History and the History of the
Church in Colebrook

January 17, 2015

Colebrook Congregational Church
Annual Meeting / Heritage Sunday

Many years ago, I attended one of the General Synods of the United Church of Christ. Those of us from Connecticut decided that we would disperse ourselves during one of the dinner presentations, not clump together as one group, in order to get to know the delegates from elsewhere. The table I chose to sit at had two older ladies, who, when they saw my badge that showed I was from Connecticut, said to me, "Oh, you are from New England! You must be one of those Congregationalists! You guys are too chaotic!" I looked right at them and said, "Yes! Thank you!"

The origins of Congregationalism must be viewed as a movement, and a chaotic one at that, instead of an orderly founding and progression like our Protestant cousins. The Protestant Reformation began to take hold with Martin Luther nailing Ninety-Five Theses that he wanted to debate to the doors of Wittenburg Cathedral. He did not intend to spark the Reformation, especially since others before him who attempted reforms were silenced...permanently. The critical difference with Luther's situation was that Germany was not neatly organized, but was a bunch of different principalities...and Prince Frederick of Saxony protected Luther and kept him alive. And thus we have Lutheranism.

Luther's ability to successfully rebel against the Catholic Church led to others following suit. Various radical reformation groups we collectively call Anabaptists had sprung up around Europe. These are the Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, and Brethern, but NOT Baptists. There was a Swiss reformer named Zwingli who led the Reformation in Switzerland. He differed with Luther only on the theology of Communion. Those who followed him are called the Reformed Churches. Then there is another Swiss reformer named John Calvin, who also differed with both Luther and Zwingli on Communion. Calvin's influence though was more widespread, and affected many other movements all over Europe. Also, Calvin & Hobbes

creator Bill Waterston said he named Calvin after John Calvin. Lastly, King Henry VIII wanted a divorce, so began the Church of England.

Where we Congregationalists come from involved all these. Luther sparked off Zwingli, which allowed an environment for Calvin to surpass him and influence communities in northern and western Europe, we incorporated some elements from the Anabaptists, and finally the lack of enough reform in the Church of England led to the reaction of groups against it, that starts off our theological heritage.

The Puritans began during the reign of Queen Elizabeth as an effort to reform the Church of England even farther than the Tudors were willing to go. During the brief resurgence of Catholicism under Queen Mary, the leaders of what became the Puritans had sought refuge with Calvin in Geneva. The Puritans sought a more simple Bible-based religion, criticizing the Church of England's emphasis on traditions and overly elaborate ceremonies. They changed how a church was organized, rejecting hierarchies and increasing the role of lay leadership in worship and governing. They also demanded a higher quality of clergy, emphasizing educational qualifications.

These Puritans were not all on the same page. Some conformed to the Anglican Church and passively resisted, hoping to persuade them to their way; these would later become the Presbyterians. Some did not conform, giving up on reforming the Anglican Church, but some were active, and some were passive; these became the Baptists, and the Puritans and the Pilgrims that settled in Massachusetts. But there was a lot of connection between all these groups, and they did not really distinguish themselves from each other all that much, they were all mashed up early on.

In the late sixteenth century, the non-conformists in England and exiled in Holland became known as Separatists, led by Pastor Robert Browne. This movement supplied most of the clergy, theologians, and laity that would travel to New England and found Congregationalism. It laid the foundation, supplying the Congregationalists with organizational blueprints, and then disappeared. There was also non-Separatist groups, led in part by Theologian William Ames, trying to reform the Anglican Church, and supplying the

theology for the Congregationalists. During this time, both groups were suppressed and persecuted by the English government.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, there was the English Civil Wars. It was Parliament and the various types of Puritans versus the crown and the Anglican Church. In 1653, Oliver Cromwell declared the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, & Ireland. Cromwell was inclined toward and supported the Congregational Puritans, and this allowed them to come out of the shadows and prosper. The other Puritans, the Baptists & Presbyterians, as well as the Anglicans were left alone as long as they did not disturb the public order. In 1658, there was the Savoy Declaration, set up how Congregational churches would organize themselves, and it copied the Westminster Declaration's statement of faith, which is foundational creed of Presbyterianism. That is the one difference between us and them. Our theology and mission is the same, we are only different in how we organize our churches. They are like the representational democracy of the Roman Republic, and we are like the direct democracy of Athens' city-state.

After the Restoration of the English monarchy, the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists found themselves being persecuted against again. Meanwhile, the Pilgrims established the Plymouth Colony in 1620 to escape the persecutions, followed by other types of Congregationalists from England who set up other settlements around Massachusetts Bay. Many English-educated Congregational Puritan pastors fled to New England where they could preach without being repressed, which was called The Great Migration. Soon, the civil and church governments were merged, with the intention of creating a "city on the hill," to be an example of a Christian society, led by Governor John Winthrop.

This soon led to theological disagreements, which led to the expulsion of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson to Rhode Island. It also led to the establishment of Connecticut, which did not agree with Massachusetts' enforcement of what it considered pure faith, but did agreed with the fundamentals of Congregationalism. So Connecticut congregations, while using the same model of theocracy as Massachusetts, they did not go around enforcing uniformity in matters of faith like Massachusetts did, allowing

them to develop, experiment, and adapt in a more open environment. Connecticut was also allowed town governments to develop less restrictively, where non-church members could vote and participate.

Because Congregationalists were no longer being repressed, there was a lot of attempts to define what is Congregationalism. In 1648, Connecticut and Massachusetts produced the Cambridge Platform, which, like the Savoy Declaration, endorsed that Westminster Declaration, but also changed how church is organized. In the following decades, non-Congregational churches, mostly Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, were being increasingly established in New England, leading to pressures to recognize the necessity and value of cooperation with their fellow Protestants. This also led to lots of arguing over matters of theology amongst all the clergy, whether they were Congregational or not. There were even moves to form a union of all the different churches, led by Cotton Mather, who felt that if all godly people, no matter their creed, could agree on the basics, they could work together for the betterment of humanity.

The Great Awakening began in 1737 in England and spread to Europe and America. This was not limited to just the Congregationalists, but all Protestant groups responded to the preaching of British Evangelist George Whitfield. Previously, pastors read sermons that were theologically dense and advanced a theological point or interpretation. Leaders of the Great Awakening like James Davenport and Jonathan Edwards did not want to only engage the listener's intellect, but also wanted to evoke an emotional response that would result in proof of God's saving grace and also in works of Christian love. Some historians see the Great Awakening as a precursor of the Revolution, with its emphasis on democracy, free press, that information should be shared freely without bias, and also religious freedom. It also saw the start of experiments with benevolence societies and missionary societies that take off at the turn of the century during the Second Great Awakening.

At about this time, Our Church was founded. Colebrook was the last town in Connecticut to be settled. In 1760, the area was surveyed by the original seventy-nine inhabitants who came from Windsor, and the permanent settlements began in 1765, and was incorporated in 1779. The community

gathered on the Sabbath in people's homes and hired preachers as they were able. There was a Great Awakening type revival in 1783, and they hadn't even built the church yet! For fourteen years, starting in 1780, they could not figure out where to put the church...even while they were building it! The first four years were just arguing, and then they started to build in 1784...while still arguing where to put it. Nine years later in 1793, a third official location was chosen and the church was dragged by 150 oxen through the town.

Back when I did an architectural survey of all the Congregational Churches in Litchfield County, I remember a story I either read or was told about this incident, but I could not find it again for this survey. It went that while the church was being dragged down the street, it was realized that there was no way to stop the church from continuing with gravity and landing on the oxen when it got down to crossing the brook. The oversight made the congregation decide that they should push the church back a little bit and just leave it in the middle of the road.

So, in 1795, the Congregational Church was organized. It had twenty-two members and called Jonathan Edwards, Jr., son of the great Jonathan Edwards, as their first settled pastor. This church experienced the revivals of the Second Great Awakening, more than doubling its membership.

During the time when Chauncey Lee, their second pastor, there were more revivals in 1806 and 1813, adding many more members during both times. I have to share a direct quote that shocked me from the 1822 Annual Report: "In the intervals between these periods, a general stupidity prevailed; similar to that into which we have again relapsed, and which marks our present state." That 1822 report ended with details of how 1815 was a very good revival year, increasing the membership to 172.

Our Church also responded to the calls from the Great Awakenings for benevolence activity in 1818, with "The Colebrook Church Charitable Society." Their constitution stated, "The church, impressed with the duty of taking a distinguished part as a church, in aid of the Missionary cause, by increasing their liberality and exertions to extend the blessings of the gospel

to the heathen and the destitute;--for this important end resolved, and formed themselves into a charitable society...”

Many of the histories that I have read of our church have ended with a similar sentence, so I will do the same: The current building was erected in 1842.

Meanwhile, Congregationalism, working very closely with the Presbyterians, spread across the country, shared their clergy & members, and recognized their essential sameness, agreed not to compete with each other, but to cooperate in their efforts to spread the faith and serve those in need. They even divided the country between themselves as their areas.

Some other items of note from Congregational history: The first African-American to be ordained was Lemuel Haynes in 1777 at First Congregational Church in Torrington. The first woman to be ordained was Antoinette Louisa Brown in 1851 at a Congregational church in New York. Connecticut Congregationalists were instrumental in assisting the former slaves in the Amistad incident. And Congregationalists help lead the Social Gospel movement in the 1890s, denouncing injustices and exploitations of the poor. Every social reform movement has had Congregationalists in the middle of it.

Today, there four Congregational affiliations. Most Congregational churches joined with a dozen other types of churches to form the United Church of Christ in 1957. There is our denomination, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, made up of the churches that chose not to join the U.C.C., objecting to how it is governed. There is also the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, that broke away in the forties over issues of sin and salvation. Lastly, a Congregational church can choose to be independent, unaffiliated with other churches, which is the type I grew up in.

Even though there are differences between Congregational churches, we have more in common. We believe in being independent, managing our own affairs, while recognizing that we can rely on one another to help us if we need it. That we are free to define ourselves and our beliefs without someone from somewhere else coming in here and telling us what we should do or

believe. We are active in our communities and are responsive to those in need.

This independent spirit distinguishes us from how other churches manage themselves. I remember a story from a friend who grew up in the Slovak Lutheran Church. She told me about how her grandfather was concerned how they do so many fundraisers, but he doesn't see where the money is going, that they are always seeming to be lacking money. He wanted to see the church budget. He was told to sit down and shut up. In our churches, you practically have to force members to look at the budget! During my time at divinity school, the official in charge of the connected seminary for Episcopalian students was fired for embezzling funds. Because he was friends with an archbishop, he was immediately assigned to be the Dean of St. John the Divine, the largest gothic cathedral in the world. Their members had no say in this, they were stuck with that guy.

One of our most important defining characteristics is happening today. The Annual Meeting. Every one of you that is a member of our church is a leader. You are in direct control of the finances, the missions, the programming, and the direction for this year. You will select who will be the custodians of your authority that you give them with your votes. There is no one person making the decisions, it is a group, following the collective mandate you are about to give them. The choices are yours, no one else can do it, only you.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

O God, we pray that your Spirit descends upon us and help us with the decisions we are about to make about the direction of your church; help guide the thoughts of our minds, the affections of our hearts, and the words of our mouths, so that we can discern your will for us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Long Prayer

O, my Lord,

This is thy Sabbath day, the heavenly ordinance of Thy rest and ours. O my God, These blessed hours are even the open door of worship; these record of our Saviour's resurrection; these sacred hours are the seal of the Sabbath that is to come and the day when thy saints upon earth, and those in heaven unite in endless song.

My dearest Lord, while I come and bless Thee we remember our past misuse of sacred things. Our worship, -- how often has been irreverent, and how base has been our gratitude. When we ought to have praised thee with our whole heart, how cold and dull was we in thy presence! When light and love streamed upon us, and thy Word was precious, how often hast thou found us cold and indifferent. O sprinkle all our past Sabbaths with the cleansing blood of Jesus and may this day, the Lord's own Sabbath, witness a deep change and improvement in us.

Give us in rich abundance the blessings the Lord's Day was designed to import; May our hearts be fast bound against worldly thoughts or cares. O flood our minds with peace beyond understanding and may our meditations be sweet, my acts of worship life, liberty, and joy, and may I drink deep of the life giving streams that flow from Thy throne.

Continue the gentleness of thy goodness towards me, and whether I am awake or asleep, suffer Thy presence to go with me and Thy blessing to attend me all the days of my life. Thou hast led me on and I have found all thy promises true. And when I have been sorrowful, it was Thou that wast ever my help. When fearful Thou was mine exceeding strong reward and my deliverer from all my fears. And when I was despairing and sinking down, in pity and tenderest mercy Thou didst lift me out of the horrible pit and put my feet upon solid ground, and directed my paths. Thy vows are ever upon me and I will praise that God of my salvation.

We petition thee to remember our brothers and sisters in need:

We shall Arise then, and go with them in joy and peace to feast upon Your precious Word and let it be thy defense and shield. O may our hearts be more bound to You, our Lord and our God, through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the blood of the Lamb. Amen.