

Our Church, a Survey of Congregational History and the History of the Church in Colebrook
January 17, 2016
Colebrook Congregational Meetinghouse
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. Luther nailed 95 Thesis to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral, and we have Lutheranism. There were those who felt that he did not go far enough, and we have the Anabaptists, better know as the Mennonites, Brethern, & Amish. Zwingli changed the view of Communion, and we have the Reformed Church. King Henry VIII wanted a divorce, and we have the Anglicans or Episcopalians. And then we have Swiss reformer John Calvin, whose influence reached many movements throughout Europe.

Where we Congregationalists come from involved all of 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. 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 of 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-Comformists in England and those 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. This laid the foundation, supplying the Congregationalists with organizational blueprints. 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 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, which set up how Congregational churches would organize themselves, and it copied the Westminster Declaration's statement of faith, which is the foundational creed of Presbyterianism. That is the one difference between us and them. Our theology and mission is the same, we are only different from the Presbyterians 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 yet 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 establishment of Connecticut, over disagreement with Massachusetts' enforcement of what it considered pure faith, while still agreeing with the fundamentals of Congregationalism. So Connecticut congregations, using the same model of theocracy as Massachusetts, did not go around enforcing uniformity in matters of faith, like how Massachusetts did, allowing them to develop, experiment, and adapt in a more open environment. Connecticut 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 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 responding 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, information that 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 Center 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 Meetinghouse 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 of 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...”

I recently read a document called, *Memories of Colebrook 1868-1877* by Jane E. W. Smith, a former resident of Colebrook. She wrote:

“Our social life in those days centered largely on the church. We had morning and afternoon services with Sunday school in between, but no evening service. The short interval between Sunday school and afternoon service was our visiting time. The men met at the horse sheds and talked over the things that interested them, while the women were welcome at Grandma Smith’s, near the church. She was a most cordial hostess and interested in the affairs of both old and young.”

The older girls had visits with their beaux in summer out under the lovely great elm trees that graced the lawn in front of the church, and in winter around the big wood stoves in the rear of the church auditorium. Later these stoves were taken to the basement, boxed, and connected by large pipes with registers in the church.

The pews had doors with buttons to close them, and it was the custom for the mother to go in first while the children filed in after her and the father entered

last and closed and buttoned the door.

“At the end of the afternoon service the men went to the horse sheds to get their teams, and the procession proceeded to the church horse block where the women folks were loaded in, and they started homeward. Sometimes the women were so busy visiting that they did not appear when the team drove up. Then the driver drove ‘round to the rear of the procession, and waited his turn. I always imagined that these laggard ladies got a lecture on the way home. The minister had to stop and talk and shake hands with everybody, so we were usually about the last to leave the church.

The choir sat in the gallery in the rear, and it was considered good form to turn around and gaze at them during the singing. Mary Coy always played the cabinet organ in accompaniment. On Communion Sundays the choir always sat below, and the organ was not used. It was reported that once when the organ was used at this service, Mrs. Seth Whiting, to show her disapproval, rose and left the church.

“The greatest amusement interest of the years I am recording was the ‘Band of Hope’, which met once a month in the basement of the Congregational church. People of all ages were admitted if they signed the pledge and paid their dues. The pledge was against tobacco as well as intoxicating liquors,

This band was a great forum for our youthful geniuses. A stage was erected in the basement of the Congregational church where the meetings were held, and a dressing room provided on either end by means of heavy curtains strung on wires. This basement was also used as a balloting place on election days, and our souls were tried by having to remove our stage for these occasions. The prayer meetings, which were held here, did not interfere, as the attendance was never so large but that the minister could sit in front of the stage.”

Our most enjoyable amusement during the summer was the Fourth of July picnic at the church, to which everybody, old and young, went. A collection was taken up beforehand for lemons and sugar, and the young men of the parish made the lemonade in great new wooden tubs lent by storekeepers for

the occasion. The boys also put up the strong swings on the lawn in front of the church, which at that time was shaded by beautiful great elms.

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

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 in this country has had Congregationalists in the middle of it.

Today, there are 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.

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 couldn't see where the money was going, and they always seemed 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. But, since 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 this church is a leader. You are in direct control of the finances, the missions, the programming, and the direction for the coming 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.

Psalm 36 - King James Version (KJV)

36 The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes.

2 For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful.

3 The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit: he hath left off to be wise, and to do good.

4 He deviseth mischief upon his bed; he setteth himself in a way that is not good; he abhorreth not evil.

5 Thy mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.

6 Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep: O LORD, thou preservest man and beast.

7 How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.

8 They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures.

9 For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.

10 O continue thy lovingkindness unto them that know thee; and thy righteousness to the upright in heart.

11 Let not the foot of pride come against me, and let not the hand of the wicked remove me.

12 There are the workers of iniquity fallen: they are cast down, and shall not be able to rise.

John 2 - King James Version (KJV)

2 And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: 2 And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. 3 And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. 4 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come. 5 His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. 6 And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece. 7 Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it.

9 When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, 10 And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now. 11 This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.

12 After this he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples: and they continued there not many days. 13 And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: 15 And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; 16 And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. 17 And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.

18 Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? 19 Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. 20 Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? 21 But he spake of the temple of his body. 22 When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus

had said. 23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. 24 But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, 25 And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

Isaiah 62 - King James Version (KJV)

62 For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.

2 And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name.

3 Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.

4 Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.

5 For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee.

6 I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence,

7 And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

8 The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou hast laboured:

9 But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the LORD; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

10 Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people.

11 Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the

daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.

12 And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.