

Our Church, a Survey of Congregational History and the History of the Church in Colebrook
January 15, 2017
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, primarily in the home of Samuel Rockwell, and hired preachers as they were able, but not exceeding twenty Sabbaths per year. There was a Great Awakening type revival in 1783, and they hadn't even built the church yet! For sixteen years, starting in 1780, they could not figure out where to put the meetinghouse...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, so it just sat in someone's backyard somewhere down Smith Hill Road. Nine years later in 1793, a third official location was chosen and the 40 ft by 40 ft meetinghouse was dragged by 150 oxen through the town.

Back in college, I did an architectural survey of all the Congregational Churches in Litchfield County, and I remember a story I either read or was told about this incident. It went that while the church was being dragged down the street, it was realized that there was no way to stop the meetinghouse 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.

According to Bob Grigg's History Bytes, this incident was understandable, and should change how we just pictured this story in our heads. We all

probably pictured this 40ft by 40ft meetinghouse coming down Smith Hill Road, merging onto Colebrook Road, and having the moment of realization somewhere very close to the Parsonage.

I remember Bob frequently telling stories about how the highway through Colebrook was not always where it is now. So when the Meetinghouse was dragged into the current center, it went down Rockwell St and took a right after the Woodbine Cottage. The road is not there anymore, but it ran north behind the Store and the Rockwell House, then took a right past the meadow behind the Pease House to a point where the current road is, just north of the Parsonage. The road crossed the brook in the same location, went up about a third of the hill, then took a sharp right turn to run next to Rockwell's mills, then at about the Bodycoat's property, the road turned north again up the steep hill.

The top of that hill was their destination. The Mathers, who lived at 593 Colebrook Road donated to the Ecclesiastical Society $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre for the sole purpose of siting the Meetinghouse. Bob took measurements and discovered that this plot was actually in the middle of the highway. Anyway, considering all that, it is understandable why the endeavor was deemed impossible or at least ill-advised. So, the Mathers re-deeded the same plot to become the Center Cemetery; and the Meetinghouse was just left where it stood, the exact location unknown; and then the roads realigned themselves into what we know them today.

So, at the end of 1795, the Congregational Meetinghouse was finally physically 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 also found 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.

There are some other items of note from our Congregational history: The first African-American to be ordained was Lemuel Haynes in 1777 at First Congregational Church in Torrington. The first Hawaiian Christian was a Congregationalist, Henry Obookiah, who also inspired the founding the Foreign Mission School in 1816, which operated in Cornwall, CT. 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. Congregational Churches were among those fire-bombed for taking a stand during the Civil Rights Movement. 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 40:1-11 - King James Version (KJV)

1 I waited patiently for the LORD;
and he inclined unto me, and heard
my cry.

2 He brought me up also out of an
horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and
set my feet upon a rock, and
established my goings.

3 And he hath put a new song in my
mouth, even praise unto our God:
many shall see it, and fear, and shall
trust in the LORD.

4 Blessed is that man that maketh the
LORD his trust, and respecteth not
the proud, nor such as turn aside to
lies.

5 Many, O LORD my God, are thy
wonderful works which thou hast
done, and thy thoughts which are to
us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up
in order unto thee: if I would declare
and speak of them, they are more than
can be numbered.

6 Sacrifice and offering thou didst not

desire; mine ears hast thou opened:
burnt offering and sin offering hast
thou not required.

7 Then said I, Lo, I come: in the
volume of the book it is written of me,
8 I delight to do thy will, O my God:
yea, thy law is within my heart.

9 I have preached righteousness in the
great congregation: lo, I have not
refrained my lips, O LORD, thou
knowest.

10 I have not hid thy righteousness
within my heart; I have declared thy
faithfulness and thy salvation: I have
not concealed thy lovingkindness and
thy truth from the great congregation.

11 Withhold not thou thy tender
mercies from me, O LORD: let thy
lovingkindness and thy truth
continually preserve me.

Gathering

Thus beginneth ye geathering of ye saints in worship of our Lorde. Geather
in Peace, & Love, and holiness, and do not weary of hart and spirit.

(Pilgrim service, 1711)

John 1 - King James Version (KJV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which

taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God. Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples; And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone. The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me. Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.