

What is a Congregationalist Christian?

By Jan Piercy

Catholics may be required to say ten “Hail Mary’s” or five “Our Fathers” as a form of contrition. Some churches routinely recite the Apostles or Nicene Creed. As a young Baptist, I remained silent during part of the recitation of our creed that prohibited the use of alcohol. Ministers here at Ingle Chapel have often been opposed to the weekly recitation of the “Lord’s Prayer.” There is a Congregationalist reason for that, not just stubbornness. Congregationalists, while truly believing in those creeds and prayers, prefer using spontaneous, personal prayers and praises to God so that our prayers always remain real and genuine and don’t become rote recitations that requires little thought or soul. Certainly those prayers and creeds can be said with reverence and conviction, but the congregational practice is generally to avoid them routinely, although not altogether.

So how else is being a Congregationalist different from being a Baptist, a Catholic, a Presbyterian, or a member of many other denominations?

Congregationalism began with the Pilgrims and Puritans and their dissatisfaction with the Church of England and many of its rites and practices. They sought a relationship with God that was voluntary and personal. Freedom of worship and freedom from coercion were paramount. The church they established has Jesus as the sole head and the Bible as the guide for belief and action. Unlike other churches, then and now, each individual congregation has the freedom to determine, with the help of the Holy Spirit, how the scriptures are interpreted and practiced. So although Congregational churches have similarities, no two are exactly the same. Each member within the church may be equally diverse and has the right and responsibility to serve and worship God and interpret the Bible as his or her own personal conscience dictates.

Before you decide that Congregationalism is a “free-for-all” in which any church or any individual can do or believe whatever, there are a few common practices within and among the congregations. First and foremost is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and came to earth to establish a new covenant (agreement/promise/contract) with God’s children. His death established a Covenant of Grace in which we people of God, although expected to behave as He would want, are not saved by our

own works, but by the Grace of God because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Another core belief is that it’s not the style, nor content of our worship that matters most, but our personal relationship with God and each other. Key to that relationship is our Covenant. Just as God entered into a covenant with us when Jesus died for our sins on the cross, Congregational churches were organized around a covenant. That covenant is stated in our constitution and by-laws. It was not imposed upon us by others, but written and agreed to by our congregation.

Another factor that sets Congregationalists apart from some other churches is their belief in the “Priesthood of all Believers.” That means that, although we have differing gifts and differing degrees of spiritual maturity, all who are faithful are spiritually equal. As equals, all of us have not just the privilege of sharing the good news about Christ, but the responsibility to do so. Does that mean we need to go preach on street corners? Serve on the Deacon Board? Sing only from the hymnal? Raise our hands to God in worship? Testify to all our friends? Maybe. As Congregationalists, we get to choose, with the help and guidance of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit, the best way for each of us to do our part sharing in **“the worship and work of God.”** We may do so in as many diverse ways as there are members. We each are personally answerable to God, so we need to act upon the promptings of our own conscience and encourage and support, not judge, our fellow Christians.

Ingle Chapel’s Structure of Leadership

Jesus

The real head of the Church, Who makes His will known through the Holy Bible

Congregation

Members and friends who attend 2 meetings annually- (budget & annual) as well as special meetings when called. The congregation can review and overturn, by vote, any decision made by Council, Boards or Committees with a majority vote.

Church Council

Headed by the elected Moderator, it consists of the officers of the church and at least one member from each board and standing committee. It is in charge of the day to day running of the church and its mission and programs. It meets quarterly or more, at the direction of the moderator. It serves as the executive committee of the congregation but is subject to congregational review. It is open to members and friends whose voices may be recognized for discussion, but not for voting on financial or personnel matters.

Standing Boards

DEACONS: Generally in charge of the worship service, membership concerns, aiding in the spiritual and physical well-being of members, and pastoral care. Includes 5 elected men 5 elected women, one of which is voted Chairperson by their membership.

TRUSTEES: Responsible for business and financial affairs of the church including preparing and overseeing the budget, accepting and managing properties, establishing policy for personnel, issuing yearly contracts, and handling investments. Consists of 5 elected voting members, 1 of which is elected chairperson, plus the Treasurer and Financial Secretary, and pastor if he/she wishes, as non-voting members.

MISSION BOARD: Oversees the Outreach of Ingle Chapel, both locally and beyond. Informs members of the larger needs of the family of God. Consists of 1 chairperson, 4 members, & 1 youth representative

Church Officers

This includes the Pastor and Church officers including Moderator, Vice Moderator, Treasurer, Clerk, Financial Secretary, and Christian Education Superintendent/s who all work in full partnership to accomplish the work and mission of Ingle Chapel in day to day operations.

Committees

BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS: Responsible for the long range planning of church property and equipment and maintenance of all church properties and grounds. Changes to the physical nature of the church go through them.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: Responsible for the general education program of the church for both youth and adults

MEMORIAL: Responsible for the acceptance of memorial gifts, and working with the Trustees, and others may help decide where they will be used.

SOCIAL: Works to foster a wholesome social life and activities among all members and segments of the church. (In practice, works closely with the Women's Auxiliary.)

NOMINATING: Seeks from members of the Church, people to fill the vacant positions for yearly elections. Includes Moderator, junior member of each board, and 2 members appointed at large by the Moderator.

AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY: Meets as needed to accomplish their work and missions. They have their own officers and budget. In practice, they work closely with the Social Committee to facilitate most social functions in the church.

MOPS: A group approved and budgeted to support moms as they try to effectively raise capable and empathetic young Christians while supporting each other.

Membership in Ingle Chapel

It is the goal of Ingle Chapel "to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing in the worship and work of God." Those who choose to become members of Ingle Chapel promise to "serve the church and the wider community through offerings of their time, talents, and treasure." They also covenant with Ingle Chapel and God to specifically serve the church through 1. Prayers, 2. Presence at worship and other functions, 3. Financial support of the church community and benevolence, and by 4. Christian service in daily life offered to all God's people. Aspiring members shall be publicly introduced and received at a Sunday morning service at which time they must confess their faith before the congregation who in turn publicly accepts them as members and agrees to support them in their Christian walks. If you are interested in membership, see the Pastor, a Deacon or our Moderator or Vice Moderator. Ingle Chapel is happy to embrace you and encourage you as you worship and engage in doing the work of God.

Information for this Brochure was compiled from THE ART AND PRACTICE OF THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY by the Rev. Dr. D. Elizabeth Mauro (which can be viewed online at the NACCC.org website), and from Ingle Chapel's Constitution and By-Laws (copies of which are available in the Pastor's office), both of which you should read if you want to become an informed member.