

# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

## WHO ARE WE AND WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

### **The Puritans**

Puritanism was founded as an activist movement within the Church of England. Puritanism played a significant role in English history during the first half of the 17th century. They were adamantly opposed to the Catholic practices used within the Church of England. While they were not allowed to affect those changes in England within the Church of England they did take those beliefs and efforts to the New England colonies in America. The name Puritans was not used at that time but rather they referred to themselves as “Godly ones” or “Saints”. They settled in what is now the greater Boston area called the Mass Bay Colony in 1629. Later settlements were established throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont until 1640.

The **Puritans** believed that God had formed a unique covenant, or agreement, with them. They believed that God expected them to live according to the Scriptures, to reform the Anglican Church, and to set a good example that would cause those who had remained in England to change their sinful ways.

The most prominent of the Puritan leaders in Massachusetts Bay Colony was John Winthrop.

### **The Pilgrims**

The Pilgrims who established the Plymouth Bay Colony in 1620 were referred to as “Separatists”. Unlike the Puritans who wanted to **reform** the Church of England, the Pilgrims wanted to **separate** from the Church of England. They believed it was a corrupt church and had lost its Christian values.

The most prominent of the Pilgrim leaders in Plymouth Bay Colony were William Bradford and William Brewster.

### **The Congregational Church:**

In the United States, the Congregational tradition traces its origins mainly to [Puritan](#) settlers of [colonial New England](#). Congregational churches have had an important impact on the political, religious and cultural history of the United States. Their practices concerning church governance influenced the early development of democratic institutions in New England, and many of the nation's oldest educational institutions, such as [Harvard](#) and [Yale University](#), were founded to train Congregational clergy. In the 21st century, the Congregational tradition is represented by the [United Church of Christ](#), the [National Association of Congregational Christian Churches](#), and the [Conservative Congregational Christian Conference](#). With their insistence on independent local bodies, they became important in many [social reform](#) movements, including [abolitionism](#), [temperance](#), and women's [suffrage](#).

In 1648 in the Cambridge Platform, a summary of principles of church government and discipline was drawn up. Congregationalist took a leading part in the great awakening that, in New England was started in 1743 by the preaching of Jonathon Edwards. In 1750, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony stipulated that a new community must “settle a learned and orthodox minister in said township within 5 years in order to legalize ownership of land” As a result the congregational churches were widely established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and other provinces.

The model of Congregational churches was carried by migrating settlers from New England into New York and the Old Northwest regions that now include Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois.

### **Congregationalism or Congregational Polity:**

A form of Protestant Christianity that is based on the idea that each local church should have the right to control its own affairs. Some other Christian churches have bishops or other leaders who oversee many churches in a district or area. Although "congregational rule" may seem to suggest that [pure democracy](#) reigns in congregational churches, this is seldom the case. It is granted, with few exceptions (namely in some Anabaptist churches), that [God](#) has given the government of the Church into the hands of an [ordained](#) ministry. What makes congregationalism unique is its system of checks and balances, which constrains the authority of the clergy, the lay officers, and the members.

Most importantly, the boundaries of the powers of the ministers and church officers are set by clear and constant reminders of the freedoms guaranteed by the [Gospel](#) to the laity, collectively and individually. With that freedom comes the responsibility upon each member to govern himself or herself under Christ. This requires lay people to exercise great charity and patience in debating issues with one another and to seek the glory and service of God as the foremost consideration in all of their decisions.

The authority of all of the people, including the officers, is limited in the local congregation by a definition of union, or a covenant, by which the terms of their cooperation together are spelled out and agreed to. This might be something as minimal as a charter specifying a handful of [doctrines](#) and behavioral expectations, or even a statement only guaranteeing specific freedoms. Or, it may be a [constitution](#) describing a comprehensive doctrinal system and specifying terms under which the local church is connected to other local churches, to which participating congregations give their assent. In congregationalism, rather uniquely, the church is understood to be a truly voluntary association.

Finally, the congregational theory strictly forbids ministers from ruling their local churches by themselves. Not only does the minister serve by the approval of the congregation, but committees further constrain the pastor from exercising power without consent by either the particular committee, or the entire congregation. It is a contradiction of the congregational principle if a minister makes decisions concerning the congregation without the vote of these other officers.

## **Summarized History**

### **Central Square Congregational Church**

Central Square Congregational Church was officially founded in 1821; however, the origins of our church and Congregationalism can be traced back to a number of key historical events that took place at the advent of the Protestant Reformation. To fully appreciate our heritage we should consider the importance of these events and how they led to the birth of our church in the New World.

In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety Five Thesis to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany and sparks the Protestant Revolution. Unfortunately this radical change in theological philosophy leads to a prolonged period of persecution and bloodshed across Europe and Great Britain.

A series of political events, between 1524 and 1535 in England, under the reign of King Henry VIII leads to the creation of the Church of England and the separation from the Catholic Church in Rome. A monarch is now the leader of the church in place of the Pope. This eventually leads to dissention and a group known as Separatists leave England and resettle in Holland to avoid persecution. Another group, referred to as Reformists remain in England but push for change within the Church of England.

In 1620, in search of religious freedom, William Bradford sails to the New World with the Separatists and settles in Plymouth and establish Plymouth Bay Colony.

In 1630 John Winthrop leads a large contingent of Reformist, later called Puritans, to what is now Boston and establishes the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In 1648 the elders of the Mass Bay Colony and the Plymouth Bay Colony convened the Platform of Church Discipline in the Synod at Cambridge in New England. At this meeting the first Summary of Church Practices for American Congregationalism were set forth.

In 1645 the Old Colony Court granted a tract of land including what is now Bridgewater to certain inhabitants, who then purchase the land from the Indians in 1649. Actual settlement began soon after, near what is now West Bridgewater Center, and in 1656 Bridgewater was incorporated, the first interior town of the Old Colony. The exact date of the origin of the Church cannot be given, since the early records have been lost. About 1662, Mr. James Keith, then probably a “student in divinity”, came to Bridgewater, on the recommendations of Dr. Increase Mather of Boston, who afterwards spoke of Mr. Keith as, “that gracious, faithful, humble servant of God.” By vote of the town in 1664, he became the settled minister, and continued to serve until his death in 1719, after the organization of the South Parish.

### **The Church in the South Parish**

The settlement of the part of the old town which is now Bridgewater began about 1665 and by 1700 the population had much increased. The inhabitants, however, continued to worship with the original church for fifty years or more. June 1, 1716, the General Court incorporated this part of town as the second precinct, or parish, with the provision, “That the whole town stand oblige to an honorable maintenance of Rev.

Keith, their present aged minister, if he should outlive his powers and capacities of discharging the office and duty of their minister.”

A meeting house was erected and was dedicated June 14, 1717, Mr. Keith preaching the dedication sermon. The first minister in the new parish was the Rev. Benjamin Allen, who preached his first sermon August 18, 1717. This would be known as the Scotland Church. The Church then numbered 53 members, 26 men and 27 women. During Mr. Allen’s pastorate, which lasted until 1730, there were 75 additions to the Church, 33 men and 42 women. These numbers would seem to indicate that as a preacher and Pastor Mr. Allen was successful in commending the teachings of the Gospel to those to whom he ministered. It is said that his pastorate, but brief for those days, was terminated because lack of business ability involved him in repeated financial difficulties from which the parish wearied of extricating him.

Mr. Allen’s successor was the Rev. John Shaw. Mr. Shaw having become enfeebled by age, in 1778, he was given a colleague, Rev. Zedekiah Sanger, who after Mr. Shaw’s death, which occurred in 1791, became minister of the South Parish Church in Scotland. During Dr. Sanger’s pastorate, which lasted until 1820, the schism between the Trinitarian and Unitarian wings of the Congregational Church was developing throughout the denomination. While Dr. Sanger does not appear to have been extremely radical in his views, his sympathies seem to have been with the more liberal teachings, so much so that during the latter years of his ministry a few members of his Church withdrew, and organized a new Church, known traditionally as the “Conant Town Church”, on a strongly evangelical basis. It is probable that the separate existence of the Church was very brief, and its

services were probably largely, if not wholly, neighborhood prayer meetings.

### **The Church of 1821**

On Dr. Sanger's death, he was succeeded by the Rev. Richard M. Hodges. His coming was at once followed by the withdrawal of another group who were joined by the Conant Town Church (this eventually would become the Central Square Congregational Church). A Council was called on October 17, 1821 at the South Parish Scotland church, and asked for recognition as a separate church and in doing so give two reasons for their request:

***"1<sup>st</sup>. That the Church, as such, took no part in the call and settlement of the Rev. Mr. Hodges, & therefore they consider his ordination an infringement of the unalienable right of churches to elect their own pastors***

***"2dly. That the Doctrines inculcated by Mr. Hodges are contrary to the plain instructions of the Scriptures; particularly on the subjects of the Trinity, Regeneration, Election, and those doctrines inseparably connected with them, usually designated as the Doctrines of Grace."***

It should be noted the first grievance above is a striking reaffirmation, after more than two centuries, of the protest of the original English Separatists against the control of the Church by a Civil Authority.

On April 28, 1822, the Church adopted the name, The Trinitarian Congregational Church in Bridgewater. Within 10 years after the Church was organized in Scotland, the question of erecting a Meeting House at the Center of town began to be discussed. A Committee was appointed in 1831 which carefully considered the matter, and reported

strongly in favor of taking such action. Finally in July 1835, a majority voted in favor to remove to the Village. A vigorous minority of over 30 members dissented earnestly. After repeated exchanges of propositions between the majority and the minority, the members who constituted this minority were dismissed, and organized the Scotland Trinitarian Congregational Church in Bridgewater.

The first services in the Village were held in the hall of the old Academy Building, Feb 28, 1836. Steps were at once taken for the erection of a Meeting House. The lot which is now occupied was acquired, and a building was erected then dedicated, on August 31, 1836.

August 6, 1860 the Meeting House was burned. The next day the Church voted to extend a call to Rev. Ebenezer Douglass. He accepted the call on Aug. 17 and became a member of the Church Jan. 6, 1861. But was not installed until June 26, 1862. Presumably, the installation was deferred in order that it might take place in the new Meeting House.

One who reads the early records of the new Church is impressed by the earnestness of its leaders, and by their sense of the obligation which rested on its members to maintain the Church, and, in the words of their Covenant, "to comfort, assist, warn, & reprove each other." Some examples are:

In 1823, a member "having been found guilty of an act of intoxication was rebuked before all and made humble and satisfactory acknowledgement"

In 1825, a committee was appointed, "to see if a more punctual attendance at church meetings cannot be secured."

In 1830, “The question, whether sleeping in meeting on the Sabbath be a subject for discipline, was freely and fully discussed.” Unfortunately, the conclusion was not recorded.

In 1840, a Committee reported that certain members were neglecting the Communion on account of dissatisfaction with certain other members, and that in another case they had found “difficulties and hardness” between two members. “After various explanations and remarks these several cases were referred to the Committee,” A week later, the Committee reported “that they had seen the individuals concerned, & effected a mutual reconciliation, & forgiveness; which report as accepted & adopted.

In 1845, “At a regular meeting of the Church resolutions expressive of our belief that American Slavery is a sin of great magnitude...that all persons are bound to do what can be done to terminate as soon as possible...& that we cannot commune with slaveholders as Christians, if after due admonition they persist in this sin...were passed with great unanimity...no one dissenting.”

### **Incorporation**

In accordance with the general practice, a Society was formed, within a week after the organization of the Church, to co-operate with the Church in the support of the preaching of the Gospel.

This Society, which took the name, The Trinitarian Society, had at the beginning 22 members, the majority of whom were not members of the Church; it continued for more than forty years, during which time it had more than one hundred members. Realizing that as members of an



unincorporated organization they were individually responsible for its obligations, the members of the Society in 1864 became incorporated as The Central Square Society, which continued until 1904.

The Supreme Court of the Commonwealth had decided that under the old Parish system the ownership of all Church Property was vested in the Parish, not in the Church. Under this decision, it had happened in many cases that a Unitarian majority in a Parish had held the property, while a Trinitarian majority in the Church had withdrawn, leaving the property behind it, and had formed a new Church. Probably to avoid any such occurrence in this Church, certain of the male members of the Church, of voting age, in 1826 became incorporated as the Trinitarian Congregational Church, Incorporate, in Bridgewater. Thus, for nearly eighty years, there was a triple organization, an ecclesiastical church, an incorporated church, and a society, at first unincorporated, afterward incorporated.

Under the authority of Chapter 187, of the Acts of 1904, The Incorporate Church took the name The Central Square Congregational Church of Bridgewater. The Society transferred all its property, real estate and personal, to the Church; the Church accepted the property and assumed all the existing financial obligations of the Society. The Society was then dissolved. Under the previous arrangement, the Church had owned the Meeting House and had leased it to the Society without any payment, except that the Society was to keep the building repaired and insured, the Church, however, furnishing the money for the latter purpose, in the more recent years.

I hope this abbreviated history of our Church has been informative. I encourage you to visit our Historical Library and learn more about this fascinating and wonderful church of ours.

Respectfully,

Rich Sullivan

Board of Stewardship.

#### Acknowledgment:

The information contained in the document was derived from on-line informational resources such as Wikipedia; documents found in the Central Square Congregational Church Historical Library such as the Historical Sketch of the Central Square Congregational Church printed in 1921; the Platform Of Church Discipline of 1648.