

Talking Points
on
400 Years of Congregationalism in America
(Suitable for use in interviews)

Q: What is this Quadricentennial, or 400-Year Celebration, about?

A: In 1620, English Congregational Christians we now call “The Pilgrims” landed in Massachusetts after crossing the Atlantic on a ship called *Mayflower*. They wrote the Mayflower Compact, a document that created civil government with “just and equal laws . . . for the general Good of the Colony.” This set the precedent for America’s autonomous political life. In religion, the Pilgrims were Congregationalists, and we Congregationalists today are their spiritual descendants. ***So 2020 is really the 400th Anniversary of Congregationalism in America.***

Q: And what is special about Congregationalism coming to America?

A: The Pilgrims’ theology was similar to that of other Reformers, but their view of power and authority in the church was unique. ***They said each local church could, and should, exercise all the powers Christ gave to the church at large. They practiced that belief through church governance by members with voice and vote—always submitting to God’s will as understood through prayer and scripture.*** This self-governance was a radical idea at the time; but it became a “golden thread” woven into American democracy from the Mayflower Compact of 1620 onward. That’s one reason we Americans today confidently voice our convictions and vote our conscience, in church and society.

Q: What about the Pilgrims and the Native Americans?

A: ***The Pilgrims were not the first Europeans the Native Americans encountered; but they were the first Europeans who arrived with a positive, non-exploitive agenda.*** They wanted to build a permanent colony, living in harmony with the people who were already there. Later reality did not always match those early hopes, but the Pilgrims tried to keep faith with the Native peoples, whom they respected as their benefactors and allies.

Q: How are Congregationalists different from other religious groups?

A: Each local Congregational Christian church has been ***gathered by a company of believers who pledge themselves to live in covenant***—a specific local covenant, usually written—with one another under God.

Q: What do today's Congregationalists believe?

A: Although early Congregationalists were mainly Calvinist in their theology, **today's Congregationalists hold an astonishingly wide variety of views, both spiritual and political. We take this diversity as a source of strength. In our meetings we listen respectfully to one another,** believing the Holy Spirit speaks to us even through those with whom we disagree. In controversies that might otherwise divide us, we remember the words of the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, who said, "God hath yet more light and truth to break out of his Holy Word."

Q: Who are some well-known Congregationalists?

A: Among many others—

William Bradford, long-time governor and historian of the Plymouth Colony

John Winthrop, long-time governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony

Jonathan Edwards, Colonial-era New England preacher considered by many to be America's greatest theologian

John Adams, second president of the United States

Abigail Adams, John's intelligent and outspoken wife

John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States, who late in life argued before the Supreme Court for the freedom of the captive Africans on the slave ship *Amistad*

Charles Grandison Finney, America's most noted evangelist of the 19th century

John Brown, dedicated abolitionist who embraced violence as a way to free the slaves

Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* powerfully denounced slavery before the Civil War

Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained to Christian Ministry in the United States

Katharine Lee Bates, who wrote "America the Beautiful"

Washington Gladden, social-reforming Ohio minister who championed the rights of industrial workers in the late 19th century

Calvin Coolidge, thirtieth president of the United States

Lloyd C. Douglas, 20th-century minister and novelist, author of *The Robe* and other best sellers