

# FORMED BY FAITH AND WORDS

## MY LIFE WITH THE CONGREGATIONALIST

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It is important to know where you come from, because it shapes where you are going. My father wove the foundational pieces of my life early, as I watched him practice a living faith marked by a willingness to risk everything for what he believed.

By the time I reached my teens, we were living in Springfield, Massachusetts, where my dad served as minister of Wachogue Congregational Church. He published a weekly church newsletter called *Smoke Signals*, combining church news with thoughtful reflections on the changing world through a Christian lens. I return to those writings now and treasure the way he placed himself within the unfolding drama of his time.

In the 1960s, I began to recognize my father's deep investment in the written word. He spent long hours crafting editorials, trying to understand how God was working through a rapidly changing culture. That spirit of reflection and involvement became, for me, a defining part of Congregational identity: thinking deeply while remaining fully engaged in the world.

Through him, I learned that Congregationalism is not a rigid system, but a living expression of faith held together by mutual respect across a wide range of beliefs and practices. I watched my father embody that openness every day.

Over time, his interests led him more deeply into the history of Congregationalism and eventually into the work of *The Congregationalist*. I still remember opening the church door and smelling the cherry tobacco from his pipe while he proofed pages for the magazine. There was no glamour in the work, only the careful labor of shaping text and preserving the thoughts and stories of our churches.

Later, I realized that *The Congregationalist* is one of the oldest continuously published magazines in America. More importantly, it serves as a living record of Congregational life – celebrating mission work, sharing ideas, and creating space for both agreement and disagreement. Through its pages, local churches become connected to something larger than themselves.

That connection became personal when Wachogue shared its evolving Sunday School program in the magazine. The article described a creative curriculum involving drama, mapmaking, and immersive biblical storytelling. I remember how vividly those lessons brought scripture to life for me.

In many ways, that experience captures what *The Congregationalist* has meant to our churches. The magazine strengthens a shared identity by giving voice to the many expressions of Christian thought and practice held in common across Congregational life.

My years in Springfield shaped me profoundly. During the turbulence of the 1960s, the church gave many of us stability and purpose. Conferences on race and religion opened doors to relationships across divisions that had long separated communities. At a time when racial discrimination and religious intolerance remained painfully visible, adults and youth worked together to build understanding and trust.

As youth president of SAY, I helped organize neighborhood cleanups and voter registration drives. I was also mentored by Dr. Walter English, Springfield's Director of Human Relations, who taught me the power of relationships in creating meaningful change.

Wachogue itself was changing too. The church welcomed its first African American family into membership, and choir exchanges between Black and white churches created opportunities for shared worship and fellowship.

The wider Congregational community became an important part of my life. Through Northeast Fellowship gatherings, national Pilgrim Fellowship events, and mission projects, I experienced churches in cities and small towns across the country. Those connections showed me the breadth of Congregational life and deepened my sense of belonging.

Youth fellowship was especially important. Inspired by South Church in Hartford, Wachogue transformed a formal room into a youth center we built ourselves. It became a place where faith, friendship, and purpose came together for many young people.

When I later left Springfield for college and eventually served in Vietnam, Congregationalists from across the country supported me through letters, prayers, and care packages. What had once seemed like separate churches had become an extended family.

Today, when I write for *The Congregationalist*, I still think about my father standing over those galleys, carefully shaping each issue. Today, just as it did then, the magazine continues to connect congregations, preserve shared memory, and encourage thoughtful engagement with faith and society.

I return to Springfield now aware of how deeply those experiences formed me. Whether visiting churches across the country, participating in mission work, or celebrating the diversity of Christian expression in local congregations and ministries, I continue to see the strength of the Congregational tradition: many voices held together in shared faith, respect, and common purpose.