



let it shine

Puritans and Pilgrims

2007 Anno Domini will mark the 50th anniversary of our United Church of Christ. One of many mergers, this 1957 success brought together the Congregational Christian Churches derived from the English Reformation and the Evangelical and Reformed Church from the European Reformation. Let's look here at our inheritance as Congregationalists, and also focus on the Pilgrims and the Puritans.

"*Congregational churches*," say some historians, started in New Testament times, in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, etc. In 1581, the term "Congregational" appeared in Robert Browne's church in Norwich, England, with ideas of covenant relationships, independent churches, the local congregation as its own governor, electing pastors, teachers, elders and deacons — ideas that were identified with the Separatists. Jesus Christ is head of the church, not a pope or a monarch. The Bible is the source of authority, revealing God's will.

"*Pilgrim*," historically, was not a widely used name until about 1840. Previously, Pilgrims were known as "Forefathers," "First Comers" and "Saints." This distinguished them from the non-believers among them, called "Strangers," who constituted most of the 102 passengers on the "Mayflower" as it sailed to "New Plimoth" in 1620, after living in exile and refuge in Amsterdam and Leyden, Holland since 1607. John Robinson, their Separatist pastor and teacher did not sail with them. Later, he wrote to them, "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." (Today, the United Church of Christ likewise declares: "God is still speaking!") Under the spiritual leadership of Elder William Brewster, the Mayflower Compact was created to define their form of civil government. It later influenced the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut (1639) that, in turn, influenced the creation of the Constitution of the United States of America (1787).

"*Puritan*," generically, included both groups, describing what their "purifying" intentions were, and they were officially named such in 1563. It reflected on their dissatisfaction with the Reformation of Queen Elizabeth

I, criticizing the undisciplined clerical practices, as well as the Anglican Church's liturgy and ceremonies. Other descriptive names for them included "Dissenters," "Non-conformists" and "Independents," still used today in England. "Puritan" became more associated with those who were non-Separatists and who tried to stay within the Church to "purify" it. Led by John Winthrop, they arrived in New England in 1629, settling north of Plymouth in the Massachusetts Bay area, where Boston now stands. As part of the Massachusetts Bay Company's commercial enterprise, in 1630 alone, 13 ships arrived with 1,000 new residents—triple the number of settlers who had come to Plymouth during the preceding decade. The competition was so overwhelming that in 1691 Massachusetts obtained a charter taking Plymouth within its borders and ending the Pilgrims' separate colony status for the purposes of expansion and development.

Reflections:

- Can you identify Jesus or other Biblical persons as "pilgrims" and "puritans"?
- What can you say about yourself as a 21st century "pilgrim" and "puritan"?
- How are John Robinson's words ("The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.") relevant for us today?

Resources:

- George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers*
- Barbara Brown Zikmund, Series Editor. *The Living Theological History of the UCC, Vol 3: Colonial and National Beginnings*
- John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957*
- Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*
- *History and Program* (PO678) from UCC Resources, 800-537-3394

"*Puritans and Pilgrims*" was written by the Rev. Dr. Evans Sealand, Jr., Pastor Emeritus of First Congregational Church in Canton Center, Connecticut. He currently serves as Archivist of the Connecticut Conference, United Church of Christ.

Our Heritage and History

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