

What we will take away from church to college  
By the Class of 2013  
Youth Sunday, June 9, 2013  
Congregational Church of Needham

Below are a selection of reflections given by members of the class of 2013 about their church experience.

**Noah Baker:**

The Congregational Church has played a constantly evolving role in my life. We came here from St. Joe's when I was little, and at first it was the alternative church to me and my brothers: the one where we made art projects and waited for Donut and Oreo hour. Then it was the dreaded routine. We'd tiptoe past Mom, and maybe if we didn't wake her up we wouldn't have to go. As I came into high school, I became more involved in Youth Group, which had gone all over the place with many different directors. I decided to go to Guatemala as a sophomore, with my Mom, a few church members, and 4 seniors. I didn't know them that well, but we all got along instantly, and I could tell that they shared a lot of the same values as me. It wasn't obvious, but I think many of these were based in the church. We had grown up hearing about other cultures, and were encouraged through mission trips and other activities to look beyond our church to find community in a larger sense. This was the largest takeaway for me, how far community can expand. In Guatemala especially, our community was defined by sharing a sense of history. We weren't doing them favors out of pity, we weren't patronizing their achievement by being there. We were one community, we knew each other, our friends knew each other, and we shared equally. I learned the value of communication, simple, honest communication. So no, we didn't paint a school, or look in from the outside, we immersed ourselves in the village. For the value inherent in the human relationships. This church was teaching me the value of that, even when I couldn't tell.

**Holden Barth:**

Good morning. For those who don't know me I'm Holden Barth. I have grown up in this church. I have been baptised here, gone to Sunday School here, got confirmed here, and participated in the youth group here. This church has become one of the communities that I associate myself with.

What I think I will take to college from church is being open-minded to others and a desire to know a diverse group of people. Being a part of this church and the youth group allowed me to connect with a variety of people every Sunday. Specifically, being a part of the youth group has allowed me to meet and create friendships with kids people who I may not normally seek out. I have now grown up, learned, and had so many experiences with this group as I went through high school.

The best example I can give you of being open-minded and being with these individuals are any of the mission trips that the youth group has gone on each summer. These trips to Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Vermont have allowed me to gain experience with community service and hearing the stories other people's struggles and triumphs. I have become more interested in hearing people's stories and learning about someone who may be completely different than me. These mission trips have also allowed me to bond with a group of people who I now consider my friends in unexpected ways. By sharing these experiences we are able to grow

closer as a group and break down the social constructs that may have restricted us from making closer bonds.

So what I will be taking to college is the desire for new experiences with a diverse community of people.

### **Taylor Bowers:**

Hello, I'm Taylor Bowers, and I'm a pretty odd guy. This church, and this congregation, have helped me become that way. I'm not trying to accuse anyone here—not trying to blame you guys for my propensity to drink obscene amounts of chocolate milk, or my unfortunate habit of using yips to call for the ball on the soccer field. No. When I said odd, I meant it in the most endearing way. We all file into this building for different purposes, and when my parents lugged me here in my earlier days, I didn't have one. But the sermons I saw, mission trips I marred, and quirky nights at youth group that I disrupted—they have, surprisingly, molded me to a great extent. I say surprise because, being a senior, this whole speech was a shock, and was of course written after the due date. Anyways, I was sitting outside, under the stars, pondering what mature-sounding college nonsense I could bloat my speech with when I got a real shock. The shock, or epiphany, was perfectly timed—because I realized the lesson this community has given me was to be genuine. That's the common thread I've found weaved throughout my church-related memories. At first, I thought the theme was, “How weird are these people?” because, indeed, normal people don't brawl with sleeping bags zippered over their heads. However, I have learned that weirdness is usually a symptom of passion—and this community is abnormally full of passionate people. So, despite the simplicity of the lesson, I owe you all a lot—because you've given me a need to follow the things that make me happy, a guiding need that will spirit me through college and beyond.

### **Maggie Boyd:**

In my opinion, there is nothing that tops the holiday season. You might think it's my favorite time of year for the typical reasons – impending vacation, traditions of baking sugar cookies and decorating the tree, Christmas music on every station, those first few magical snowflakes, the inevitable ‘waking-up-on-Christmas-morning’ feeling, and that whole holiday spirit of anticipation, generosity and excitement. And you would be right, for the most part. But, after years of participating in the Advent workshop, being an angel in the pageant, and singing for Shepherd's Staff during the various services, I've picked up a few of the more integral components of the six weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas and I can confidently say that it is these main ideas that I will carry with me as I venture to college and into my own life.

Love, joy, faith, hope. Those are the themes of advent, the words that exemplify the holiday season, the meaning of Christmas, and what this church has given me. Love, in the form of the friends I have made through the church, some of whom are my very best friends in the world, and the supportive “church family” that we are all a part of and we are all surrounded by. Joy, in the form of the good times I have had, traveling around the country helping others through both youth group and choir, playing games and making friends, laughing and bonding and loving. Faith, in the form of the stories I have heard of incredible resiliency, of people rebuilding their lives and their homes after natural disasters, of people overcoming incredible obstacles, of each of you who have taken time out of your lives to be here today and every week because you believe in something that can never be proven. And finally, hope – hope for whatever future I desire, hope for a better world, a feeling of hope that is instilled in me through

church service and community service that I can make a difference and that I will. This church has provided for me a safe, welcoming, supportive, second home where I can be myself, I can say what I think, and I can become whoever I want to be. In school, you're so focused on memorizing and reading and doing and knowing, you lose sight of the big picture. Church has taught me so much more about living, and that is what I'm going to take with me as I continue to grow and change and live. Thank you all for being a part of my life.

### **Julia Dunlavey:**

Many of you probably don't know me as well as you know my other classmates because I don't live in Needham. You might think that this would lessen my experiences at church, and you would be somewhat right. For instance, my friends will be talking about "J Harb" or "clusters" and I will have no idea what they mean. I like to think that by now I have become reasonably versed in Needhamspeak. But for the most part, going to church in a different town has given me the opportunity to be a part of a whole new community. As much as I love my Natick friends, it's been a real blessing to be able to spend my Sundays with people who won't know to remind me about the huge lab report that's due the next day.

Over the past year, I've revamped my views on religion and spirituality, and I'm still a little fuzzy. Even the simple word "God" has so many meanings and connotations, not all of them positive. So I've been reimagining my perception of God. And if there's one thing that church has taught me, it's that exploring your own spiritual journey is good. One thing that I've been taught year after year in Sunday school is that God is love and God is all around you. And looking back on all of the Sundays I've spent with you, that sentiment has never been more evident. The laughter and adrenaline you feel when the grog is chasing you, or the incredible elation and camaraderie when you're singing the Dead Bird Song – that's God. The peace you needed before starting the week when you're listening to John Kirk on the guitar – that's God. When you find yourself nodding earnestly in agreement during Susan's sermon – that's God. When your church friends try to drive all the way to Natick just to see you before prom – that's God. Looking out at the congregation on Youth Sunday, knowing you have to go graduate in a couple hours, but wanting to stay and thank every single person who helped raise you to where you are today – THIS is God. "What have you taken away from church?" you ask? Above all, I've taken away a clearer answer to the eternal question, "What is God?". Thank you.

### **Sam Evans:**

What did I take away from church?

- Self-Control – Joy took my mountain dew, Brandon helped dispel energy with dodge balls
- Mature Friendships – looking up to the older kids (choir and youth group)
- Music – Cory, Joy, Jamie, entertaining and teaching in Guatemala
- Attitude – open, positive, friendly, exploration, adventure, sometimes a gentle disregard for a rule or two
- Tradition – pageant, birthday – can count on it, give security, (even when it may seem rote) helps you keep track
- Larger than You – Mission trips PA, VT, Guatemala, giving back (service, and not forgetting younger kids who look up to)

**Will Fernandez:**

After going to this church for almost the whole time that I have lived in Needham which, for me is since second grade, the church has taught me a lot. The thing that I'm going to take with me most is the experiences I have had on the mission trips. When I went with the senior high youth group to Louisiana the whole trip was amazing and extremely eye opening. Years after Katrina seeing the massive amounts of work that still had to be done was unbelievable. There was one moment during the trip where I volunteered to take a trip with our job supervisor named Zain to Lowes for supplies. At first I was a little worried the car ride would be long and awkward, however that was not the case. To my surprise Zain and I made very easy conversation, talking about all kinds of different things, from school to family even about what my current girlfriend status was. After that Zain went on to talk about his job and how he got to be where he was. He told me that I should never end up doing a job that I do not like. The money will take care of itself you will find a way to support your family, but you should never force yourself to do a job you don't love. For Zain that was carpentry, he took his knowledge of carpentry and his desire to help people and combined them to take this job helping the hurricane victims. I have yet to figure out what that is for me but taking this idea into college will help shape the way I take classes and move further and into adulthood.

**Erica Koljonen:**

Growing up in the church I learned a lot about friendships and the value of being a part of a community. But one thing I specifically learned through working on the mission trips is that being able to make a difficult situation fun is always possible. Last summer on our mission trip to Vermont my work group was assigned to build a deck for a woman in a wheelchair. Coming to the work site the first day we quickly discovered that the building instructions were inadequate and we lacked a majority of the necessary tools to build the deck. While this was extremely frustrating, our group was able to remake the instructions and build most of the deck all in one week. This particular situation stuck out in my mind because of the whole trip what I remember the most was how much fun I had. I will take this knowledge with me to college because I will be on my own with new people. And in new and in new and most likely difficult situations, I know that I will be able to get through them and have a fun time.

**David Meehan:**

This church has provided me with some wonderful experiences. I've found a mentor in Frank Arren during the confirmation process. I was able to travel to Mississippi with the youth group thanks to the tireless efforts of Reverend Jamie. And, when my father passed away this year, my family received much needed support from this incredible church community. I would especially like to thank Susan for leading a wonderful memorial service and tribute to my father. All this I will carry with me, these lesson and gifts, thank you.

**Kate Oetheimer:**

Some of my favorite memories are from church. The Christmas pageants, mission trips, winter retreats, Australian Hand Tennis, playing games on Sunday nights. The list goes on and on. But although I loved these activities, the thing I will miss the most about this church next year is the people. Through this church, I have been able to become friends with so many people in my own grade that I wouldn't have ordinarily been friends with. Church also gave me a way,

as a shy freshman and sophomore, to make friends with upperclassmen. And these friendships extended beyond just Youth Group. My sophomore year, I was the only sophomore on the varsity field hockey team, and I was nervous that I wouldn't know any of the upperclassmen on the team. Luckily, I knew Devon Oberle and Emma Cotton from Youth Group, and they reached out to me and helped me feel less intimidated by the seniors. And this situation wasn't unique to field hockey. In chorus, Fermata Nowhere, and even while visiting colleges, I could always count on church upperclassmen to help guide me through the process of being a high schooler. During Confirmation Class my freshman year, my Mentor, Carla V-K, told me that when she was growing up, her church burned down, and had to be rebuilt. The new renovation plans made me remember this story. I, personally, am very emotionally attached to the physical church building. But when Carla's church was rebuilt, she realized that what made her church special was not the physical building, but the people inside of it. And the same is true for this church. Every person I've interacted with in this congregation has had such a profound impact on the person I've become, and I'm so thankful we're all in each other's lives.

**Andrew Olson Evans:**

I did not grow up in this church. I spent most of my first years going to various United Methodists churches, only to end up being confirmed an Episcopalian. When we moved in the midst of my Sophomore year, my family decided that we might as well continue in the spirit of new things, so I came to attend a UCC church. I'm sure many of you can imagine, but moving in the middle of high school is not the most desirable of situations for a teenager to be in. Awkward lunches alone and hordes of unfamiliar faces wanting to meet the new kid gets old after a while. I can't say it really felt like home. I can say, however, that for 7 to 8:30 on Sunday nights, I felt welcome. This church provided room for me to make friends, form bonds, and grow roots in Needham. With each passing Sunday of highs and lows and frantically fun games of grog, I found myself feeling more at home in Needham. It didn't take me long to value this place that existed outside of the social cliques and expectations of high school, where people could be their wonderful (at times weird) selves.

More than any other thing, I want to take with me the attitude that this church practices on a daily basis. I want to be every bit as welcoming to others as this community has been towards me.