

Historical Perspectives

Eight Pioneers Founded This Church On March 26, 1836.

Four couples from New England and New York state organized a church society, gathering on Saturday, March 26, 1836, at the log schoolhouse on the banks of Battle Creek in Milton Township. They followed an agreement of 1801 by the Association of Congregational Churches of Connecticut and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to spread their beliefs in the Old Northwest. The following day, Sunday, March 27, the eight members of the society held a service in the schoolhouse. The two supply pastors who preached the first year were the Rev. Silas Woodbury of Kalamazoo, and the Rev. William Jones of Allegan. Those who signed the resolution for the society were Moses, Jr. and Mary Hall; Tolman and Lois Hall; David and Mary Daniels; and John and Betsy VanBrunt. Moses Hall, Jr. was superintendent of the church's Sunday school and remained until his death in 1860. He was active in the community, and served as representative in the state legislature. Tolman Hall was secretary of the church society for over 50 years. The same year the church formed he was elected associate judge; in 1854 was a member of the legislature; from 1861-1866 was Battle Creek's postmaster; and in 1866 was mayor of Battle Creek. David and Mary Daniels became parents of Lucy Jane in 1837, the first child born and baptized into the congregation. In 1835 only 15 families were on record in Milton Township, which included the present townships of Pennfield, Emmett, Bedford, and the city of Battle Creek. By 1837 records show 400 adults living in the township. By the end of 1836 the new church had a congregation of 21. Ten years after, the church had a membership of 236. The schoolhouse was located at what is now the southeast corner of East State and North Monroe Streets.

The Plan of Union brought together Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and grew out of a movement for alliance that began on the eastern seaboard around 1708. This relationship continued until 1850 when internal tensions finally divided the denominations. As opposed to strictly orthodox Presbyterians, Congregationalists were more susceptible to liberal influences expressed in voluntary societies which were non-denominational and cooperative. They saw their purpose as reforming society. They found works more important than doctrines. Their goals included temperance, peace and freedom, in particular, the abolition of slavery. Advances in scientific thought were also embraced by more liberal thinkers. These thoughtful, talented and energetic people were called to improve social conditions through reason and good will, without the crutches of dogma and doctrines. These ideas created conflicts between denominations.

Congregationalists have vacillated between revivalism and liberalism; a product of their continual discernment. The Battle Creek church is a member of the United Church of Christ formed by a merger in 1957 of four protestant traditions: Congregational, Christian, Evangelical (Lutheran), and Reformed. The **UCC** is a descendant of the Plan of Union. The Congregationalists still maintain local autonomy and freedom from strong central control at a national level. Members still discern their place along the debate between personal faith and Bible study vs. action to improve society as their best arena for doing the will of God. This freedom results in much diversity in Christian beliefs pulling together in worship and missions. The path of a Christian and a Congregationalist can be difficult given the freedom of belief offered by the church. Carleton Brooks Miller, former pastor from 1919-60, said, "It is harder to be a Congregationalist than to belong to other denominations because a Congregationalist has to arrive at her/his own beliefs and understanding with God through her/his own efforts." Tensions within the church led to a call for a vote in 1874. The question was whether the church should be Congregational or Presbyterian. No decision was reached. Tension continued, and finally on Nov. 20, 1883 sixty-six members of the church withdrew and formed the First Presbyterian Church.

In 1884, trustees eliminated pew rentals in favor of voluntary offerings, and on Dec. 14, 1885 the church adopted the name Independent Congregational Church and Society. The new mantra for members became "Not what the candidate might believe, but that the motive was sincere." In the same month, Sojourner Truth, former slave and great Abolitionist, was buried from the "Brick Church," as the Main Street church was popularly known. Although she was not a member, Sojourner had many friends among the congregation.

I, Too, Minister Here.

Music has always been a serious pursuit of First Congregational in Battle Creek, as significant as the endeavors of the city's opera house since the 1850s. The musical ministry began with traditional/classical music and has expanded to include other forms. Choirs for voice, bell and other instrumentals continue to deepen our worship and communal experiences. Other forms of the arts have been born, and continue to thrive, in the embracing atmosphere of the Congregational Church. The church grew musically and culturally in the 1890s, establishing itself as an independent authoritative body. In 1894, the church leased the ground floor of its building to the public schools as classrooms while No. 4 School (Jefferson) was being remodeled and enlarged. The next year, women of the church organized the first kindergarten in Battle Creek. It continued for about 10 years until the public schools set up a kindergarten program. The church also housed the first public library in the city.

By 1905, the Brick Church on Main Street had stood for 58 years and undergone extensive renovation and expansion. There was no room to increase the sanctuary's size or extend the building. The spiritual climate of the day welcomed change, and a resolution for a new building went forward. On Oct. 20, 1907, the cornerstone was laid for the present sanctuary. On Oct. 11, 1908, the building was dedicated. Breaking with the architectural trend of the day, the trustees chose a style influenced by Byzantine church builders, with a domed roof, rounded sides and a pillared portico. The interior space was oriented toward a platform and organ loft at one side, instead of centered under the dome as in the Greek Orthodox church. One feature was, and still is, its easily repositionable furniture. The building's erratic sound was finally corrected by the installation of balanced electronic amplification.

The church still provided the community with its best meeting hall for lectures and musical performances, while its uniqueness attracted top quality groups and speakers to Battle Creek. The entire Battle Creek Symphony Orchestra could perform comfortably in the building into the 1930s. Some nationally known figures to lecture here included Judge Ben Lindsay, former President William Howard Taft, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, B. Fay Mills, Elbert Hubbard (just months before he died with the sinking Titanic), and Michigan Governor Woodbridge N. Ferris. These and other speakers were sponsored by the Men's Club of the church. During pre-WWI, in the winter of 1916-17, young men of the community used the church dining room as a drill hall. The church was also active in supporting the Boy Scouts of America. The first troop in Battle Creek met in the basement.

In 1914, the church relaxed its independent stance, and applied for and received membership in the Lansing Association of Congregational Churches. The official name became First Congregational Church of Battle Creek on Oct. 4, 1915. The Lansing association later became the Michigan Congregational Conference with whom the church has maintained membership. As a church, however, it has also maintained an independent theological position.

Although both liberal and individualistic in outlook and view of Christianity, members of the church had then and continue now a deep and lively interest in moral issues, problems of evil and pain, and their own role in the community. In the 1920s, the ministers recognized this with a Question Box series that met after regular services. As many as 135 persons would remain to ask hard questions and listen to discussions. On Nov. 20, 1927, a church service was given by a small group of members in the studio of radio station WKPB. It was well received. Requests for more broadcasts were finally answered when on Sept. 7, 1930, the service was broadcast over WELL by remote line from the auditorium. The first broadcast of the series that has continued to the present was over a splice to a telephone line. It was so popular that a permanent line was strung to the station. For years the radio ministry fund scraped bottom or went momentarily into the red each week, but it has managed to survive. The broadcast was switched to station WBCK on Nov. 17, 1957.

The church's effort during WWII was extensive, and supported those in need during the war. The church's facilities hosted the Red Cross regularly in its blood collection. In February, 1945, 700 persons donated blood for plasma at the church. Gifts to the church given in memory of men killed in the war were directed

to youth recreational services. On the Sunday before the Hiroshima atomic bomb was dropped, Aug. 5, 1945, singing of the Star Spangled Banner was omitted from the service. When V-J Day ended the active struggle, the church counted 24 fatal casualties among its servicemen members. One woman in missionary service, Margaret McAllister, died in a Japanese prison camp.

Nationally, Congregationalists added 69,000 persons from 1943 to 1945 to their membership. The denomination's nearly 6,000 churches counted a total of 1,093,325 members. Two significant examples of the congregation's commitment to its work and responsibilities were the Endowment Fund and the Agency Fund, both started in 1943 as long term projects. The Endowment Fund's principal purpose was to provide income to benefit retiring church employees with records of long service. The Agency Fund was conceived of as an emergency cushion. Its original amount has grown through investment and contributions from church income. Its goal was to equal the cost of one year's church operation. Other special funds contributed to the church's work include scholarship resources that aid deserving young people. In late May, 1955, a Church Council was formed, encompassing the trustees, deacons and deaconesses, church school administration and other committees. The Council's purpose was to coordinate church work and promote communication among the areas of activity. To better bring church members into contact with one another and integrate them into church activity, a "colony" plan was drawn up. The congregation was divided into 14 geographical areas. These colonies were further divided into neighborhood groups, consisting of four to 12 families. Each colony leader had direct contact with each other. Leaders of colonies with council members and ministers acted as indirect contacts to the other colony leaders. The arrangement aided in making members more aware of the church's work, and through cooperative contact they felt a continuing and vital part of the church's function.

Churches can come to depend on a minister, but their continuity and strength is in their members. Through a general vote in January, 1961, the church accepted the constitution of the United Church of Christ, but with the beliefs of its members and their local control of church affairs still intact. Responsibilities for function of the growing church were organized among standing committees listed as building and maintenance, finance and endowment trust, pulpit and church staff, music, organ, parsonage, insurance and taxes, long-range planning, by-laws and office administration and audit. Dr. James M. Lichliter, former pastor from 1961-81, said, "The problem of building in any church is not one of size but of motivation. The church is created by God, working through Jesus in our hearts and minds." Church membership reached a high point in 1960-61 with 3,029 members, and a Sunday School enrollment of 1,200. Although membership in other Protestant denominations with long histories in America also was high, church leaders here and abroad warned of trends that would reduce membership in individual churches. Interest was diverted from Bible-oriented Christianity toward scientific, political and social solutions to issues. The First Congregational Church, which always had offered strong fellowship and social programs, found itself competing with a proliferation of secular activities for people of all ages. To offer more to members of the congregation in a time of competing interests, the church moved towards emphasis on adult education. In 1962, the Women's Fellowship founded its long-running Town Hall series of celebrity lectures.

The October annual meeting in 1969 was the last to be held in the fall. New bylaws were adopted, consolidating all boards and committees into one council with overall responsibility for operating the church. The annual meeting was changed to June, allowing the council and officers the summer months to settle into their responsibilities. As an addition to the enrichment programs a fellowship period with coffee in the dining room following the morning service began in 1972 and continues to this day. Also that year, the Hanging of the Greens became an annual congregation celebration of the start of the Christmas season. Families worked for a few hours in early December to garland the sanctuary, erect evergreens, hang wreaths and place candles throughout the church. Resulting from the newly renovated space in 1999 under the guidance of senior minister Dr. David D. Young, there was now room in the Courtyard for a tree of impressive proportions. High school young people participated more actively in church services. Beginning in 1975, they carried flags, banners, and the cross to lead the processional at the beginning of regular Sunday services. The youth continue that tradition today, including processing with the Bible, and a small child presenting the Christ candle and reciting the Call to Worship. The young people in the church now also hold positions on

standing committees, and participate in youth fellowship and youth mission trips. Youth programs have been, and continue to be, a vital ministry of the church.

Dr. David H. Graham, former senior minister, began a program of volunteer ministry in 1981. He sent three from the congregation to a seminar on volunteering. They outlined a program upon their return that was publicly announced in September, 1981, and has been evolving and growing since. Two advantages could accrue from greater volunteering. The first would be enhancement of the work of the church and its role in the community, as well as improvement of the material upkeep of the church's facilities. The second would be greater awareness of the contribution of time, talent and effort by individual members of the congregation. In doing so, volunteers would understand their importance to the church. Examples of volunteer work for the church and its programs include the young people who participate in the church rituals, lay liturgists, greeters and ushers, audio technicians, Church School teaching/shepherding and activities, child care, kitchen resource and welcome center people, distribution of flowers after service, visitation to homebound members and those in hospitals, prayer circles, church music including the choirs, office help with mailings and similar chores, painting and yard work, landscape details and flower boxes, youth advisors, outreach missions, Women's Fellowship work, and many more. An important part of the work is to stimulate volunteering by new members of the church, and bring them into church participation so they become part of the whole effort. By 1985, the church's bylaws had undergone a complete update. These spelled out responsibilities of staff members and committees.

Over the years, many renovations, expansions and re-decorations have taken place, with the approval and support of the congregation and its various clubs. But the most significant and recent renovation occurred from the summer of 1997 to March, 1999. All interior spaces of the building, except the Miller Chapel, underwent complete demolition beginning in September, 1997. The Sanctuary Organ was entirely rebuilt. A Columbarium, for ashes only, was included in the new interior space located between the Sanctuary and Courtyard. The Columbarium is a sequestered garden within the walls of the church, and can be viewed through glass walls on three sides. The names of those persons whose ashes are interred within it are engraved upon a leaf of the Tree of Remembrance. During the church reconstruction, worship services were held at the Burnham Brook Center, 200 W. Michigan. The radio ministry continued during that time. One major feature of the renovation was updating the building to meet state codes for safety and accessibility to persons of varying abilities. There are two wheelchair ramps, and an elevator. All rooms, including restrooms, are accessible to persons with special needs. As a result of the collaborative effort of the members and staff of the church, architects, contractors, volunteers and workers, the church received prestigious recognition. The Faith & Form: Millennium Religious Art and Architecture Design Awards; co-sponsored by the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture (IFRAA); a professional interest area of the American Institute of Architects; in accordance with the judgement of the Religious Art and Architecture Awards Jury; presented the Faith & Form Religious Architecture Design Award RENOVATION to the First Congregational Church, Battle Creek, Michigan; For Excellence in Religious Architecture.

The staff has also recently received training in using an Automated External Defibrillator (AED), and other resuscitation methods. Several times during church activity persons have needed and obtained assistance due to illness/health issues. The staff and members are dedicated to responding to all the needs of all people. Recently, development was begun to offer education geared specifically for persons with special needs. In 2000 a new Rotation Model Church Education program was launched for first through seventh grades. Rather than each grade having its own classroom, these grades rotate to different rooms that use varying teaching styles around a cohesive unit theme. KICS (Kids in Christ's Service), a service based youth group for children in grades third - fifth, was started in 2005. The Confirmation class for eighth grade youngsters has a year-long process, with special community service opportunities, and visits to other local worship services, including Temple Bethel. Each confirmand has a sponsor to help guide them through the confirmation process.

The church has retained over the years a cooperative relationship with other local churches, including the Presbyterian. Joint worship services are held at special times yearly; each congregation taking a turn hosting the service in their church. The pastors and choirs blend for these occasions. In 2005 a community

effort to pull together resources to address local concerns of injustice was begun under the acronym JONAH.

The Church's gathering for congregational worship is its most obvious activity. Its programs of music worship are a source of pride. But the murmur of study groups, the social activity of church circles, concern with the Bible, and outreach activity, all attest to the faith and work in the church as part of the larger body of Christ active in the world. This congregation of worshipers has an ongoing connection to the world around it. It began that spring in 1836 when four pioneering families formed the church in the log schoolhouse. We embrace the present and future challenges, as we discern the will of Christ in our lives.

Ministers Who Have Served The First Congregational Church - Battle Creek

Includes all senior ministers after 1919

Year Called

1836	Rev. Silas Woodbury, pulpit supply
1836	Rev. William Jones, pulpit supply
1837	Rev. Calvin Clark, first to be called
1839	Rev. Stephen Mason
1840	Rev. H. Hyde
1841	Rev. M. Kaspen
1843	Rev. R. B. Bement
1845	Rev. Alexander Trotter
1846	Rev. Joel Byington
1850	Rev. S. D. Pitkin
1858	Rev. Charles Jones
1859	Rev. E. L. Davies
1867	Rev. S. L. Wishard
1870	Rev. William H. Dickinson
1873	Rev. William W. Halloway
1877	Rev. Reed Stuart
1888	Rev. W. D. Simonds
1895	Rev. Thomas J. Horner
1905	Rev. Frederick H. Bodman
1913	Rev. Anthony Mills
1919	Dr. Carleton Brooks Miller
1960	Dr. Duane N. Vore
1961	Dr. James M. Lichliter
1981	Dr. David H. Graham
1989	Dr. David D. Young

Year Hired Interim Senior Minister

2005 Dr. Jake Kaufman

Year Called Associate or Assistant Ministers

1925	Rev. Max F. Daskam
1938	Rev. Donald S. Bourne
1942	Rev. Alpheus M. Lusk
1944	Rev. Oviatt E. Desmond
1947	Rev. Don L. DeCoursey

1951 Rev. Donald E. Tarr
1954 Dr. Duane N. Vore
1955 Rev. Bruce C. Bashore
1959 Rev. Philip E. Reikow
1963 Rev. David L. Evans
1967 Rev. A. Craig South
1971 Rev. Ralph Datema
1974 Rev. David H. Graham
1980 Rev. Randall Hachfeld
1984 Rev. Jennifer Browne
1994 Rev. Susan M. Valiquette
2004 Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser

For a more complete history, please refer to *A Trust for Tomorrow*, Compiled and Edited by Edward Z. Boies and Doris E. Ware. Published by FCCBC in honor of its 1986 Sesquicentennial. Printed by B & R Letter Shop, Battle Creek, Michigan. Available at First Congregational Church, 145 Capital Ave., NE, Battle Creek, Michigan, 49015. Telephone: (269) 965-1225