

LOOKING BACK and LOOKING FORWARD:
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC CELEBRATES 175TH ANNIVERSARY

One hundred, seventy-five years ago, many Christian denominations in Ottawa did not own their own buildings; and thus, they used City Hall in which to worship. First Congregational Church, organized on August 23, 1839, was one such congregation. Finally, on December 31, 1846, this church dedicated its first, new building on Madison Street, just two blocks from the Court House. The cost at that time was about \$5,000.

The melding of Puritan and Pilgrim ideals along with more “modern” philosophies and standards created struggles and disagreements. Over the next twenty-two years, there were many changes: five name changes, consolidations with other congregations, and some separations to form other churches. Yet during these changes, even under various names, the church adhered to its firm and earnest testimony against the “sins of slavery, intemperance, and the sins of the day.”

Names of prominent members included Dean Caton, an eminent jurist; Burton Cook, who nominated Abraham Lincoln for President; and Sol King, renown for Ryburn King Hospital. In fact, when Abe Lincoln was in Ottawa, he attended church with his friends Judge and Mrs. Caton. Also, Lincoln refreshed himself in this church during his now-famous debate with Douglas in 1858.

In 1870, the existing building was constructed at the corner of Columbus and Jackson Streets, at a cost of \$37,564.70. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. The sanctuary of this brick and stone building holds 1,000 people. The height of the taller bell tower is 168 feet, and the shorter one is 105 feet. The original organ was made in Lockport, Illinois, for

\$2,500. In 1871, Mrs. John D. Caton presented a silver communion service set, which the church has on display.

During those Victorian years, until about 1883, a strict code of “Christian conduct and character” was the benchmark of church membership. A church member whose behavior was in question had to meet with and was investigated by a committee, which used the following criteria: missing Sabbath services, actions unbecoming a Christian, using profane language, using intoxicating liquor, dancing, or not paying a hotel bill. The fate of a person’s continued membership in church was determined by the decision of this committee.

In 1886, the Woman’s Missionary Society was organized and opened the “Industrial School.” Female students were taught sewing and dressmaking skills, the fine art of housekeeping, and enough knowledge to be a Kindergarten teacher.

Beautiful, opalescent glass windows were commissioned to be made in 1899 by the Peltier Glass Company, for the fee of \$634. These windows are mainly on the ground level and stairwell. The impressive side windows in the sanctuary depict various Christian themes.

Previous to 1921, it was custom for a family to purchase pew space and have a brass name plate installed on the side of the pew. The location of the pew reflected each family’s prominence in the church. This custom was common in many denominations.

Many improvements were made over the years. The Chapel was constructed in 1948 to hold services for smaller weddings, funerals, and Sunday School classes. A one-reed, electric organ was installed there in 1949. Rev. Harrison was instrumental in the installation of the church’s elevator in 1952; however, he died a short time later, and his body became the first funeral passenger to use it. Five memorial windows, above the balcony at the back of the sanctuary, were installed in 1957 to honor Fredrick Sapp’s wife and parents. They were made by

the Michaudel Stained Glass Studio in Chicago, for approximately \$10,000, using 2,970 pieces of glass. In 1972, a house on the street behind the church was purchased by Edmund Thornton, Sr. and donated as additional Sunday school space, along with money for repairs and upkeep. Over the years, it has been used intermittently in that capacity and as a parsonage.

The organ in the Sanctuary, dedicated on September 24, 1972, is an amazing instrument with 1,793 pipes ranging in length from sixteen feet to three-quarters of an inch; this accounts for the extremely rich and varied tones. Designed in the American Classic style, it was made by the Schantz Organ Co. in Ohio. It is still considered one of the finest organs in the Illinois River Valley.

A pivotal event occurred in 1957, when a covenant was forged between the Evangelical and Reformed Christian Church and the Congregational Christian Churches to merge and establish The United Church of Christ. This new denomination “combined strong European ties, early colonial roots, and the vitality of the American frontier church,” (from History and Program, United Church Press, 1986) and continues to recognize the two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Each local church is free to retain or adopt its own organization and worship style; to retain its own name; to call or dismiss its pastor; to purchase or dispose of property; and to determine the level and boundaries of its relationship with the United Church of Christ. The church is proud of its history. First Congregational UCC’s roots have grown into a rich tradition of Christian faith and community ministry that has flourished in the United Church of Christ’s commitment to diversity, compassion, freedom and justice. In 2004, First Congregational UCC became an Open and Affirming congregation, making a public statement that all people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender are welcome into the full life and leadership of the church. Their Vision and Mission statement states:

“First Congregational United Church of Christ is an open table where all are welcome. We celebrate diversity, nourish and serve others, work for justice, and grow together in faith through the teachings of Jesus Christ and the voice of the still-speaking God.”

The Church continues to be an involved presence in the community. They have helped to assist and staff the local PADS for more than twenty-two years. The “Mission of the Month” donation program selects local agencies for which to collect monies. Children from Haiti and Southeast Asia have been sponsored. Every “Second Sunday,” a free luncheon is offered to the community at noon. Many free concerts are performed in the church, most of which make use of the wonderful organ. For the second year in a row, the church is collaborating with the “Y” to provide them with the use of their sizable facilities in which to prepare and serve the children’s summer-time program meals.

The 175th Anniversary year will be filled with a series of celebratory events and musical concerts. Worship is held each week on Sunday at 10 AM, and events will run through June 2015. These will be announced throughout the year. More information about the church and upcoming events is available on the website, www.uccottawa.org, or in the church office at 120 E. Jackson Street, and all of these events will be open to the public. First Congregational UCC invites everyone to join in this 175th Anniversary Celebration.