

***First
United
Church***

A History

Our Heritage

First United Church of Oak Park is affiliated with two denominations: The United Church of Christ and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. These two denominations have themselves been the products of church mergers. The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 when the Evangelical and Reformed Church united with the Congregational-Christian Churches. The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was formed in 1958 when the United Presbyterian Church of North America united with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Over the years these two denominations and their predecessors have maintained close ties. Both come out of the Reformed wing of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation in Europe. They were influenced by the teachings of John Calvin, the Protestant Reformer of Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin's ideas were then carried to Scotland by John Knox, where he founded the Presbyterian Church. At the same time these ideas were influencing the English Puritans, ancestors of the American Congregationalists. Powerful factors in the ecclesiastical history of seventeenth century Britain, both Presbyterians and Puritans participated in the Westminster Assembly.

Prominent among their Reformed beliefs was the conviction that the church had a responsibility for the total welfare of society. On occasion they challenged the secular authorities with a prophetic stance.

When they came to America the Puritans and Pilgrims who formed the basis of the Congregational Church settled heavily in New England while the Presbyterians concentrated in Pennsylvania and the middle colonies. As the two denominations began expanding westward on the frontier they developed what has been called a "Plan of Union". Church historian Lefferts A. Loetscher has observed:

"Co-operation between Presbyterians and Congregationalists came with particular readiness. Relations between these two bodies had been cordial during the colonial period and since. Both accepted the Reformed or Calvinistic doctrines and both used a simple Puritan type of worship. The chief differences were in church government, the Congregationalists having no presbyteries over the local congregations."

The Plan of Union was adopted in 1801 and enabled the two denominations to found new congregations affiliated with both denominations. These were nicknamed "Presbygational". In the early 1800's Presbyterians and Congregationalists worked together to support the American Board for Foreign Missions which was responsible for much of the early American missionary work abroad.

This same spirit of co-operation was present in Oak Park (then called Oak Ridge) in 1863 when the "Oak Ridge Church of Harlem" was organized. Among the original members were "two Methodists, two Presbyterians, one Baptist and two Congregationalists." The original call for the formation of that church would equally well fit its twentieth century successor!

"The Christians of Harlem, of different denominations, thinking that the

cause of Christ will be better furthered among us by united effort, have mutually agreed upon articles of Faith and respectfully request that you will meet with us in council on the 17th day of February (1863) at 7 o'clock P.M. to organize a church if deemed expedient."

The Oak Ridge Church of Harlem was the forerunner of both First Congregational Church and First Presbyterian Church of Oak Park. The Oak Ridge Church changed its name in 1871 to First Congregational Church. In 1883 a group of members from this church formed the First Presbyterian Church.

In 1874 the growing First Congregational Church moved into a new stone building on an apple orchard donated by James Scoville, now the corner of Lake and Kenilworth. The congregation raised \$20,000, the Ladies Society donated \$8,000 and the Trustees borrowed another \$10,000 to complete the building program. The total cost of the new church was \$47,000. It was two stories high and had an impressive spire 190 feet high complete with a bell donated by Henry W. Austin, Sr. who, as the story has it, sent the first bell back because the tone didn't suit him!

The building grew with several additions, along with church membership, but in 1916 the tall spire was struck by lightning and the sanctuary burned to the ground. Rebuilding the church began at once, and in 1918 the present building was finished and dedicated by a determined pastor and hardworking congregation. The original bell, donated by Austin, was hung in the new belfry.

Some Reminiscences About First Congregational Church

"I remember the morning of the fire. We were getting dressed to go to school and we heard this huge clap of thunder. My father said that it must have hit somewhere. My grandfather called us a few minutes later and said, 'It's the church, the church is on fire!'. We went down in the rain and watched the firemen stand around helpless while the church burned. Lightning had struck the steeple and they didn't have the water power to get to it. The people stood out on the street and watched it burn. Right then and there the church members vowed they would build it bigger, and they did."

"There were four deacons on duty every Sunday. The deacons stood at the door of each aisle in the narthex and greeted everyone. They truly were the official greeters. Then the ushers were on the other side and they seated you. No one was a deacon or usher who hadn't really proved himself to be a good member and very interested in the church. They earned that right. They wore a cutaway - a tail coat, striped pants, a tie that was grey or black stripe and a grey vest."

"Most people had regular seatings. This was not a contract but it was the equivalent of a contract. An usher needed to know those things. They had a list

posted out in the entrance. There are still people who always sit in the same pew that their father and grandfather sat in! The senior usher, Mr. Bullock, knew all about ushering. He was genuinely interested in the job and in its being done very well. He felt that this was really important for the church. It was a reception committee, the dignity and the neat dress was the way to do it. I can remember his coming over to me once when I was serving and my tie had slipped up the back of my collar. He said, 'Do you mind if I do something for you?', and I said, 'Not at all.' Then he fixed the back of my collar. I remember being so embarrassed! He was very nice about it but thereafter I was always checking it to see that it was O.K."

"I have a memory when I was a young boy going to church on a winter Sunday morning. There was a lot of snow on the ground and after church I threw a snowball at a very elegantly dressed gentleman in a tall silk hat and hit his hat right smack off. He was a deacon."

"When I was a boy of eight or nine there was an elderly, very distinguished gentleman, whose name was D.D. Garcelon. He had perfectly white hair and when he was dressed up in a cutaway did he look like something else! The story is that a little kid came to church and someone asked him how he liked it. He said, 'Just fine. When I got there God met me at the door and gave me a peppermint'."

"When the usher escorted Mrs. Hemingway with her long skirt down that aisle, everybody looked. She had snow white hair and she put it on top of her head. She was a commanding looking woman. The paintings that are in Centennial Hall were painted by her. One is a picture of the original church."

"Deacons rehearsed communion and the men were arranged according to height so that we would make a nice appearance. I remember marching down two or three times. We sat down at the same time and we stood up at the same time. If a person sat down at the wrong time you'd know he had died, they were so perfect!"

"When we served communion, there was the bread committee and the wine committee. We used Thursday's bread. We had to cut it into these little cubes and they had to be just the right size. Someone made a board with nails in it that you put the bread over and cut it just right."

"Longer ago than that, the ladies made the grape juice. Some of our grapes went to make it. In fact, a good many of the families in Oak Park had grape arbors - Concord grapes. The women of the church would bring the grapes to the church and make the juice in the kitchen. I think they made the bread too."

"Dr. Barton visited the Holy Land (he was the minister from 1899 - 1924) and brought back a barrel of water from the River Jordan. I was baptised with Jordan water as were many other kids. That bottle of dirty water with the cork in it lasted until 1965!"

"Every Wednesday night there were dinners that were considered very impor-

tant. There were lots of people who would never miss them. It was an integral part of the church program."

"For Easter Sunday Service, 'regulars' were told to come to the nine o'clock service and leave the eleven o'clock for the 'hardy annuals'! The church was full both times, so they would stand the people in lines against the side walls. The ushers would bring thermos jugs of something to drink in the meanwhile ... they told me it was tomato juice. There was a big choir with trumpets and 1200 in the congregation. They would sing 'Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Alleluia!' It was exciting."

"The pastors who served the church brought with them their different talents and personalities. One of the pastors used to spend most of his free time in the gym riding a unicycle. Another was embarrassed to smoke in public; there was a fireplace in his office and once I walked in and he was lying on the hearth with his head in the fireplace so that the smoke would go up the chimney! Dr. Palmer built the gym, Dr. Hoskins left the chapel, Oliver Powell left the church house and Fred Momeny joined us with the Presbyterians. Every minister has some big idea. Maybe the next one will burn the place down!"

"Our First Congregational Church was truly one of the great Congregational churches in the United States. Dr. Coe used to say it was 'the Cathedral of Congregationalism'."

After meeting for two years in Hoard's Hall, the first brick building in Oak Park, the First Presbyterian congregation bought a house in 1885 on the south side of Lake Street. The next year they built a brown frame church for \$10,000.

This church was outgrown at about the same time it was paid for and in 1902 a new Romanesque church was built after moving the old church to the rear of the lot. Only seven years later in 1909 they replaced the old frame church with a new Sunday School building, adding a balcony in the sanctuary and bought twenty-four more feet of land on Lake Street. By 1925 the membership had doubled and plans were made to build a Church House to accommodate larger meeting halls, staff offices, a new kitchen and heating plant. With a bequeath of \$50,000 from Jacob Mortensen for the Church House plus \$10,000 more for endowment and additional funds raised by church members, the building was begun in spite of the depression and completed in 1931 at a total cost of \$305,000.

Some Reminiscences About First Presbyterian Church

"One of the big things we did each year was to have the summer Christmas tree. We had it each summer and we brought all of the things that were going to the missionaries so that they would be sent in time to get there for Christmas.

It was a big event, especially for the children. The Christmas tree was always brought by Mr. Hemingway from his summer property up in Michigan."

"We used to have opening services in Sunday School where all the children gathered together and had devotions and singing before going to their classes. There was a keyboard in there that played the organ that was in the sanctuary."

"The thing I remember the most is that my kids climbed out the same Sunday School windows up on the balcony that I did."

"One thing that added a great deal to bring membership into a close relationship was the great big pageants that they used to give. Not just Christmas, great big, semi-professional performances like 'The Rock' and 'Joseph and His Brothers'. We had the makeup man from the Lyric Opera to make them up. We rented the most elegant costumes and had a regular costumer, somebody who was a member of the church who was the custodian of all the costumes that we kept. They were authentic, many of them given by missionaries. We also had a woman who was a professional dramatist. She coached the plays for a great many years.

"Dr. Ward wrote some of the Christmas pageants himself. They took the first pews out of the front of the chancel. We worked for about two months on that and worked hard too. They were very elaborate. These three brothers, great big men, were always the Kings. All of us were dressed in all this regalia, about half the church was in that. It was enormous! And the honor of the church was to be Mary."

"Everything was done with a certain amount of festivity and graciousness. Annual meetings were a big event with a lovely dinner. Then we would go upstairs for the meeting afterwards. We had linen tablecloths and people brought their own silver service. The hostesses at the tables were wives of the members of the Session. Each one brought her own table decorations that were very elaborate. They wore long gowns and each one had an aide who sat beside her and would run to the kitchen for her. We really looked forward to them. It was a serious day, social but very lovely. There was a dignity to it. That's part of our heritage."

"The whole huge area of the church would be opened up for Wednesday evening services. You'd come and spend a dollar for dinner. It was catered. Then there would be a regular service. Perhaps the idea of the seminars grew out of these Wednesday night dinners. We would sometimes break into small groups and discuss a certain topic for several sessions."

"The Board of Deacons used to have a very strong volleyball team. They used to play the church in Evanston. There was a report that went around in Oak Park, if you wanted to be a deacon in the Presbyterian Church you had to play good volleyball."

"There were some strong personalities. One minister thought that communion shouldn't be quite so private, it should be done in a body and everyone would hold their bread and take it all at once. One man said, 'For me, never. Communion is something that is very private. I will take that bread when I want it.' These were people that had convictions and they lived by them. They weren't easily swayed. Not even by the minister."

"Bertha McAllister made a huge map of the world that was in the front of the church. I would estimate that it was about six feet by four feet. It had the various places marked where we had missions. The inscription was 'The Light That Shines Farthest, Shines Brightest Nearest Home'. It was a silent reminder of one of the focuses of our church."

"There was a volunteer program in our church where people went down to Kentucky to small churches. The young people would do what they are doing now - go in work groups and help rehabilitate a church in the areas where they were having a great deal of difficulty."

"I think the thing that distinguished our church was its high degree of benevolence giving. And that meant a great deal of understanding of the outreach of the church. In 1957, fifty-eight of our members were serving on the boards of neighborhood houses in the Chicago area. Of course, since the sixties the whole nature of inner city work has taken a different turn. Most people feel a high sense of their own identity so that the place for the suburban church as far as involvement of that kind of work has changed."

Through the years that these two churches were located one-half block apart on Lake Street they maintained close ties. When the fire destroyed the sanctuary of First Congregational, the two churches held joint Sunday evening services and a joint Christmas pageant in the First Presbyterian building. Again, when First Congregational built a new Church House in 1964-65, they shared facilities with First Presbyterian during construction. In the late 1960's and early 1970's a joint Mission Committee of the two churches addressed community mission needs.

Both churches have been prominent in their respective denominations. Dr. Roy Ewing Vale, who served as pastor of First Presbyterian from 1921 to 1930 later became Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Rev. Fred Hoskins, who served as pastor of First Congregation from 1950 to 1956 became one of the first co-presidents of the United Church of Christ.

When the two churches united in 1975 they wrote a new constitution which adopted elements of both Presbyterian and Congregational church policy to develop a system for local church governance which combined the best of both. The uniting was approved by both denominations and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. eventually amended its national constitution (The Book of Order) to make possible this form of church merger.

First United Church of Oak Park carries on the intention stated by its predecessor in 1863 that "the cause of Christ will be better furthered among us by united effort".

The United Church

The process of uniting was done carefully with much discussion and forethought all along the way. As each step came about it happened with the widespread consensus and support of the entire congregation.

In 1973 the two churches formed a Joint Exploration Committee consisting of equal representation from both churches. The members of this committee and its sub-committees were:

<i>Paul C. Gignilliat, Chairperson</i>	<i>Ward P. Fisher</i>
<i>William B. Browne</i>	<i>Glenn C. Fowler</i>
<i>John C. Donaker</i>	<i>John G. Hoppe</i>
<i>Suzanne N. Duffy</i>	<i>Ann Samuelson</i>
<i>Jerome F. Fallon</i>	<i>Ellsworth R. Shephard</i>

Co-operative Ministry Committee

<i>Jane Beam, Chairperson</i>	<i>Lynne Mason</i>
<i>Sara Bode</i>	<i>Gerald W. Mungerson</i>
<i>Roger Carlson</i>	<i>Robert P. Schauss</i>

Joint Parish Committee

<i>Harold W. Herman, Chairperson</i>	<i>Miriam Hotchkiss</i>
<i>John Davison</i>	<i>Lynn McClure</i>
<i>Robert H. Gardner</i>	<i>Thomas L. Rusk</i>

Consolidation Committee

<i>Frank Hutchinson, Chairperson</i>	<i>Walter D. Herrtck</i>
<i>Mary Anderson</i>	<i>Patricia Lane</i>
<i>Estelle Campbell</i>	<i>Clarence Monroe</i>

At that time the decision had not been made to unite but rather to explore what it might mean to work closely together. They explored three possible models by dividing into three subgroups.

The first explored Cooperative Ministry - both churches would keep their own buildings, their own staff and internal organization, but they would work together on some things such as Christian Education or some joint worship services. They might share resources, but would basically stay as separate churches and just cooperate on certain programs.

The Joint Parish Model went a little further. The two separate churches would be kept, but would form a Joint Parish council that would be a governing body over both churches. More things would be shared in common and more things planned together, but each would keep its own organization and structure.

The Complete Merger Model planned to combine total organization and structure in one united church.

After exploring these three models they chose the third model in a vote in June.

1974 - complete union. They formed a Uniting Council which had the responsibility for putting together what might be the basis for forming a united church. This council formed six subcommittees: Constitution and Bylaws, Finance and Legal, Buildings and Equipment, Staff and Personnel, Organizations and Programs, and Communications. Members of this council were:

Cyrus V. Giddings, Chairperson
Baron L. Browning, Clerk
Truman Anderson
Carole Beyer
John Davison
Angeline Gebhard

Harold W. Herman
Walter D. Herrick
Lynne Mason
Connie Ronnow
Blake H. Schubert
James A. Starkey

"The first Sunday that we came to visit this church happened to be the first time the two churches were going to have a joint seminar to talk about this merging thing. To walk into a church and see this sort of thing beginning ... I remember going home and saying, 'This is so neat, what is going on at that church, let's go back and try it again!'"

"I am constantly reminded of the great force that our two ministers had. Bill Killam on the Presbyterian side and Fred Momeny for the United Church of Christ (First Congregational) side were the real spark plugs that provided the initiative and the motivating force to begin. Without them I don't think it would have happened. These men were dedicated to moving themselves out of a job. It was evident that they couldn't stay, we couldn't afford to have two ministers."

"The very beginning of it all was when a group of pastors in Oak Park, the liberal type - whatever that meant - came together one fall to become an informal support group. We were all in the middle of things - the stresses and strains of the world were boring in on Oak Park in those days, or so we thought. In various ways we were "involved" and in various ways we were feeling the pressures that came from such involvement. Anyway, seven of us became a group that met almost every Monday afternoon, late, in someone's living room to share our woes and dreams and to support one another in our ministries. There, we discovered that we had so much in common, that our congregations were engaged in the same kinds of things. It was infinitely more helpful to share one's ministry than to feel alone. We became known as 'The Oak Park Seven' - and probably were given more credit and blame than we deserved for a number of things!

In this group, most of us moved across denominational lines for the first time in a relevant way, and some deep personal relations were established. Originally, we thought of possible ministries amongst all of us, even tried one or two that hardly got off the ground. Out of this, however, we first had the dream of our two congregations, First Congregational and First Presbyterian, forming some kind of deeper relationship than simply being across the street neighbors.

That's how it really started - we were surprised and delighted with the

readiness of our congregations to proceed with the dream. We were determined from the very beginning that we would not inflict something on the congregations - not to try to move them along out of pressure or loyalty to us. Also, we were determined that we would go only as far and as fast as the people wanted. Consequently the pastors would have been ready to move much more slowly and not even have gone as far as we finally did - but the readiness of the people was surprising. It was almost a matter of our having to yell, 'Wait for us, we are your leaders!'

We were proudest of the fact that we wanted to do this not for the sake of survival or prestige or numbers or power, but for the sake of mission. Naive or not - we really believed that this ought to be done so that our congregations could better serve the community in the name of Jesus Christ."

"I was impressed with how many knowledgeable members of both churches worked long months to make the union possible. Personally, I believe that our lives were enriched because of our association. I am happy to know them and to have made new friends, whom I consider very dear. It is my hope that a feeling of unity will continue during the years to come."

"We discovered a lot of things for ourselves on the Uniting Council right away. Within three weeks we had discovered that it was inconvenient to have every other meeting in another building. I suppose that was an early view of what was to take place a year later with the whole congregation. There was considerable concern over individual's symbolic attachment to buildings. On the other hand, I was struck almost immediately by two people with whom I talked, both trustees, one from each of the churches. Their concern was that we get out of the building that each one was familiar with and please move across the street where the situation was bound to be better."

"I am particularly reminded of what seems now to be almost the act of God in our midst when this whole thing began to take place. We forgot that we were different in any respect, we were Christians."

"Putting the congregation together went so smoothly it was hard to believe. The structures were essentially similar, so it was not as difficult as it might have been. The resource people in the congregation were absolutely fantastic. At one time we had seven attorneys working on different aspects of legal problems. By the second or third meeting most of us had forgotten our source, where we came from, and found ourselves very much dedicated to the task. The amazement was that it all went so smoothly. It took a lot of work from a lot of people, and a lot of commitment."

In January, 1975, after a Constitution had been written and presented, the two congregations, meeting separately, voted to unite based on that constitution. The votes at that point were overwhelming in the range of 80 to 90 percent in favor of forming the United Church. Between January and May of 1975 preparations were made for a united celebration. In May of 1975 with a procession down Lake Street the two churches united into one.

"As I remember, the service was held at South Center, then it moved to North Center. It was basically a service of celebration. There were presentations by people who talked about the background of the two churches. Thirty or forty people were accepted as new members that day. We were in that first group to join the United Church. It really felt like we had ties to the new church rather than to the predecessors because we were never part of either of the other groups. Balloons were passed out at the end of the service. Then the five ministers John Porter, Barry McCullough, Fred Momeny, Bill Killam and Frank Baldwin led a procession from the South Center down Lake Street over to North Center and we had a picnic on the lawn.

"It was special because the police blocked off the streets and there were people all over the place watching our procession. We had big red banners that are at the front of the church now, one for the Presbyterian Church, one for United Church of Christ and a First United banner in the middle. People carried them in the procession behind the ministers. It was really impressive ... the five ministers walking along with their black robes flowing; a beautiful warm, sunny, spring day.

"After a picnic lunch on the lawn of North Center there was a service with representatives of both the Presbytery and the United Church of Christ. That service was a statement of our existence. That was the first time we sang the celebration hymn that Mildred Sizer wrote."

After that, the process of uniting still went on, and there was a need for the United Church to set its directions, its goals and to plot what it would have in the way of program, personnel, finance and building. For that the Task Force of the future was formed. The members of this committee were:

Henry J. Bode, Chairperson
Truman Anderson
Elvin L. Balch
Carole Beyer
Shirley Dudley

Richard M. King
Elmer R. Orloff
Donald E. Peaslee
James H. Petru
Sherlynn D. Reid

Meeting for a period of a year, it conducted a detailed goal setting process throughout the congregation trying to set the future goals of the church. At that time the task force recommended consolidating the church program into one building - that was North Center and the community mission center into the South Center. The intention then was to hold on to both buildings, but eventually that became a financial burden. The mission focus has now been continued in another form with the sale of South Center and the setting up of the Special Mission Endowment Fund. Proceeds from this fund are to be used in ways that continue the church's mission in the community.

"What occurred over this period of time was so enjoyable. The previous committees had set up the systems and procedures. We tried then to solicit from the people what their needs and their values were and really start to define

what the First United Congregation was going to be like."

"The first goals were strong statements about caring for ourselves and others. People were more than willing to put aside their own personal needs and likes, sometimes not a very easy task, and put the congregation first as a whole."

"The Task Force of the Future created a "We Care Fair" to try to figure out what sorts of groups we were supporting in mission. What were all the different kinds of involvements in our community, and in the wider metropolitan area and in some cases the wider missionary field? We wanted to learn what sorts of things we were doing and how we were using the resources we had. We tried to make an opportunity for the congregation to get a feeling for this by bringing in the representatives and the materials."

"We also tried to develop some goals and then get congregational feedback in the form of home meetings to expand these goal statements. That way input would come not only from the smaller committee but also from the congregation as a whole."

"There has been much self study that really identified goals and what we hoped to become that I think the church has a much greater sense of itself and where it's going than most churches. We've got some very clear goals and our chances of reaching them are better from having gone through the uniting."

"Now 16 percent of our members have joined the United Church. Many of them are already active on boards and committees."

First United Church continues to explore the challenges resulting from its heritage of two congregations, the goals and planning set forth in the formation of a union and the varying needs and experiences of its people. New possibilities in the area of mission, worship, care of members and program call each of us to respond and to shape the future.

"How much the world in which our church ministers and the life styles of its members have changed. Few young families can any longer afford the lovely silver that graced the tables of church dinners. And our younger members whose basic wardrobe is several pairs of Levi jeans would surely feel excluded from worship in which the ushers wore morning coats.

"Although the outward forms of our life together have changed greatly (and some may feel this is a deep loss), our challenge is the same that has confronted Christians for 2000 years as they faced a changing world - the challenge of seeking to understand the 'new things' (Isaiah 43: 18-19) that God continues to do in our midst. As we seek to be faithful disciples we find ourselves continually needing to interweave our current stories with the Biblical story so that we can see a bit more clearly who we are as individuals and as a church and more fully understand the way God would have us work out His purposes in the world."

Sources

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Book I

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May, 1980 in celebration of the fifth anniversary of the formation of First
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