

Remember When

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Plymouth Congregational UCC Celebrates 160 Years

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ (UCC) has deep roots in Burlington's religious history. Its seeds were planted in Burlington's first Protestant church group which formed on February 18, 1843. At the time, the village had a population of less than 200. The Burlington schoolhouse, now called Whitman School, was the original meeting place where 18 members united under the guidance of Rev. Stephen Peet, pioneer agent of the Home Missionary Society. Rev. Peet was assisted by Rev. C. C. Caldwell.

By 1852 two churches had sprouted from this original group. A Presbyterian church, which later became Plymouth Congregational Church, was built that same year and a Union church (also referred to as the Free church) was completed in 1853. The Union church building later became the Baptist Church, then Luther Hall and Cross Lutheran Church, and today is home to the Church of the Nazarene at Kane and Jefferson Streets.

In 1858 a move was made to reorganize the Presbyterians, Methodists, and others of denominational faith into one fold and the Congregational church was formed, with 23 charter members and former Presbyterian pastor Rev. Philo C. Pettibone as pastor. The congregation bought the Presbyterian church building on what is now Milwaukee Ave. The building served as the church home until 1902, when it was torn down and the present church erected. During the rebuilding period, services were held in the school building later known as Lincoln School.

THE NEW CHURCH 1902-1903

The cornerstone of the new Plymouth Congregational Church was laid on July 1, 1902. An address of welcome was given by Franklin H. Nims, son of early Foxville pioneer, Ruel Nims. In the cornerstone were deposited copies of the minutes of the organization of the church; roll of charter and present members, Sunday School officers and members; book of reminiscences; coins; and copies of newspapers.

The brick church with Bedford stone trimmings was designed by Turnbull & Jones of Elgin, Ill., and built by contractor William Rothering of Burlington. It included an auditorium with seats arranged in a semi-circle on an inclined floor. Beautiful stained glass windows from the first church were carefully removed and installed on the new building as was the original bell, "that for nearly a half century, performed the pleasant duty of calling the people of dear old Burlington to worship within its sacred walls," as stated by Lucius W. Conkey.

Dedication of the new, debt-free building was observed on February 8, 1903. William C. Wilson, trustee chairman at the dedication service, expressed that seating assignments would be made to families according to the contributions they generously bestowed to defray expenses. Membership reached 160.

EXTENSIVE EXPANSION 1951

On May 20, 1951, Rev. Henry Schadeberg laid the cornerstone for a church expansion that included an education wing consisting of eight classrooms, a chapel, minister's study, and office. The construction required the sale of the Tobin house, which was moved to Edward Street. The two-story red brick addition connected to the church on the corner of Johnson and Washington streets. Today the space is primarily occupied by the Plymouth Children's Center, Plymouth Church's primary community mission since 1979.

Over 400 people attended the open house and dedication on Sunday, February 10, 1952, followed by a Thanksgiving and Consecration service in the evening. In 1961, the Mehring property next to the church building was purchased for additional Sunday School space, and additional improvements were made.

ANOTHER REMODEL 1992

The main entrance to Plymouth Church was moved from Milwaukee Avenue to Washington Street in April 1992. The remodel included changing the altar position to accommodate the new entrance, raising the floor, adding an elevator, pews, and a cry room, and remodeling the church's kitchen. The congregation met at the Masonic Temple during the interim. The renovated church was dedicated on Sunday, November 8.

EXPANSION AND RENOVATION 2016

Championed by Rev. Robert Wang, Plymouth Church received a recent expansion and facelift that was completed in 2016. The new space includes a church office, pastor's office and meeting space, and an expanded and remodeled kitchen and dining hall. Additional and remodeled space was created for the Plymouth Children's Center, which is housed in the education wing. An open house and dedication was held at the church on May 22, 2016. *(This article was contributed by Christine Schultz.)*



Rev. Luman A. Pettibone, Plymouth Congregational pastor from 1880 to 1895, stands beside the 1840s schoolhouse (now known as Whitman School) where Burlington's first Protestant services were held in 1843. Photo taken about 1890 by C. E. Clench.



This wooden church (above) was built in 1852 on Geneva Street (now Milwaukee Avenue) by Burlington's Presbyterian church group. In 1858 most members re-organized into a Congregational church, which bought the building from the Presbyterians. The building was torn down in 1902 to make way for a brick church building.



The brick Plymouth Congregational Church at left, which replaced the wooden church, was dedicated in February 1903. The building's north side is shown in this postcard view taken by Howard A. Wood in 1908.



Church facilities have been extensively expanded and remodeled over the years as shown in this 2018 photo of the Washington Street side of the Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ and its education wing.

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