

A Brief History of The Federated Church

On July 2, 1914, The Federated Church of Columbus was inaugurated at an evening meeting of two congregations coming together. The two congregations joined by Articles of Federation were the Congregational Church and the Presbyterian Church. Both had active memberships formed in the last half of the 1800s and both continued to prosper at the time of the federation. Successfully merging the cooperative spirit that the two churches had established in the preceding years, they joined in a united effort to serve as one congregation while still maintaining the identity with their state and national denomination affiliations. The Federated Church continues its relationship with the two denominations, now Presbyterian Church (USA) and United Church of Christ. After 90 years at the time of this writing, and with the completion in 2001 of a newly constructed sanctuary and extensive renovation of existing facilities, The Federated Church of Columbus continues into the new century in the Spirit of Christ, proclaiming God's grace in word and deed.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Romans 15:5-6*

Much of the information presented comes from documents and historical writings from the church and the book, *In Such Harmony*, written by William E. Christensen. This writer has relied heavily on Mr. Christensen's writings, *In Such Harmony*, for the historical account in the early years. A more indepth study of these and other historical supporting information, such as The Constitution, Mission Statements, Vision Statements, and annual reports, will provide a complete historical account for persons interested in research. *In Such Harmony* covers the first fifty years and provides the reader with many anecdotal details of early church successes and struggles as well as events taking place in the community of which they are a part. Similarly, another publication compiled by Betty Grant contains the same and takes up years between the 50th and 75th anniversary of Federated Church. They may be viewed at the Church Office located at 2704 15th Street, Columbus, Nebraska.

Two Church Origins

The year was 1866. Nebraska was still a territory, the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln had occurred the preceding year, and the Union Pacific Railroad constructed westward from Omaha reached Columbus. Amid the accompanying struggles for survival and growth early settlers had seen the need to establish religious communities. The opportunity for children to have religious training was provided, and one year earlier a nondenominational Sunday school was formed and proved popular. From this outgrowth the first Congregational Church was organized on October 14, 1866.

The Congregational Church began with a membership of six. It grew out of the meetings formed during the previous year by the Congregational Society of Columbus. Although similar in names, the Congregational Church and the Congregational Society of

Columbus were two distinct entities. The latter was strictly nondenominational and formed for the purpose “to promote the cause of morality and religion...and to provide suitable church buildings.” Among its members were those who were not interested in affiliating with a denominational church. Mr. Christensen states in his book, “The relationship of the two groups might best be described as one organization within another—the denominational Congregational Church within the nondenominational Congregational Society.” The two existed side by side after the organization of the Congregational Church until the Society declined and finally merged some twenty years later.

It would be four months after the Congregational Church was established that their first church building was dedicated, February 3, 1867. As in the formulation of early religious meetings, the Society provided the impetus for the construction of the first church building. It was done so with the help of a donation to the Society by the city fathers in 1865 of two lots for erecting a building with the stipulation of January 1, 1867, for the completion date. Construction proceeded on what is now 22nd Avenue, between 9th and 10th Streets. The building came to be known as the Congregational Church, with the Congregational Society of Columbus existing alongside. For over a decade this modest building served as the first home to the Congregational Church. Then early in the year 1879 as the membership continued to grow and prosper, discussions began to consider a new building on a lot east of the current structure.

Early records of the Congregational Society and the Congregational Church have been lost. However, the Rev. E. M. Lewis served as the first pastor for the Society in 1865. It is not known how long he remained. The Rev. Reuben Gaylord, a Congregational pastor from the east who served an Omaha church, helped to establish other churches in Nebraska and occasionally came to Columbus to preach for the Congregational Society. He also made significant contributions in effecting the construction of the first building by making trips from Omaha to Columbus while work was under way. It was with his assistance that the Congregational Church organized on October 14, 1866.

Four years after the Congregational Church was formed, the Presbyterian Church came into being in Columbus in 1870. The pioneering efforts of Rev. Sheldon Jackson in the early beginnings of the Presbyterian Church paralleled those of Rev. Reuben Gaylord in the Congregational Church origins. Both men were pastors, missionaries, and builders of churches. Rev. Sheldon Jackson’s work to establish a Presbyterian Church began a year earlier in the spring of 1869 when he was appointed Superintendent of the Presbytery of Missouri River. His assignment was to develop the mission field opening in the west. The territory he was assigned extended from Western Iowa, Nebraska, Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado to Utah. In the days of primitive transportation, carrying on work over an area of such size might understandably pose some problems. Nonetheless, Rev. Jackson set out to undertake the task that lay before him.

Within three months Mr. J. N. Hutchinson, Licentiate, was engaged by Rev. Jackson to provide monthly services during the summer of 1869. Joseph M. Wilson was obtained to continue semi-monthly services beginning in November of 1869, with Rev. Sheldon

Jackson preaching occasionally. Private residences served as meeting locations since there was no church building. The number in this group of listeners is unknown, but Mr. Christensen's writings cite the homes "proved adequate," and preliminary discussions for organization of the church took place at one such residence on August 13, 1869.

Pastors Wilson and Jackson completed final organization of the Presbyterian Church and the first service took place on January 20, 1870. It is fitting to note that the formal inauguration of the Presbyterian Church took place at the Congregational Church, whose congregations would conjoin in a federation in the next century. With the election, ordination, and installation of Ruling Elder G. W. Brown proceeding, services closed with the administration of the Lord's Supper.

The Presbyterians were without a church building for several years after their organization, unlike the Congregationalists who had a building within four months. Records of the church mention holding meetings in different denominational churches who shared their own facilities. Among those listed were the Nebraska Avenue Church, the German Church, the Methodist Church, and the Congregational Church.

The spirit of sharing also extended to pastors. When one or more churches were without clergy on a temporary basis, congregations would attend a church where services were available. Thus, unity and cooperation were practiced among churches in the community in their earliest foundations.

Five years after its organization in 1875, steps were taken to acquire a site at the corner of 14th Street and 28th Avenue for the first Presbyterian Church building. However, it would be three more years before an old school building used by District 13 was purchased and moved to the lot as a temporary place of worship for some months. When necessary funds were secured to begin construction of a new building, the school building was moved again and ground was broken on the same location for a new church in late 1878. Although it was anticipated the building would be completed in ninety days, it was the summer of 1879 before it became occupied. Finances and problems over a smoking stove caused much tribulation for the building program.

Early church records show membership growth was slow, but steady through the early 1900s for both congregations. Membership in the Presbyterian Church in 1876 when building plans were taking effect was listed at 21. By 1896 it numbered 90, and in 1909 the figure had reached 122. From the meager, but determined, six who founded the Congregational Church in 1866, membership totals in 1898 were 114, and by 1907 they had reached 202.

Church services, social gatherings, and carry-in meals provided members of both congregations with happy occasions for fellowship with one another. Such stories attest to the good times members enjoyed being together. Those events must have been a source of satisfaction in their social lives, as well as fulfilling their spiritual needs.

Church life, none the less, was not without its struggles and conflicts as early records indicate. According to accounts written by Mr. Christensen, both church denominations “assumed responsibility for the moral lives of their members and did not hesitate to call them to account for conduct which failed to meet the approval” of governing bodies of the congregations and their pastors. Reports of charges, the rules of procedure used to determine guilt and punishment, and the results of such trials are laid out in the minutes for anyone wishing to view them. As early successes and camaraderie of fellow congregants brought much enjoyment and fulfillment, the times of conflict both churches underwent during their growing pains brought divisiveness and embarrassment. Such accounts only indicate that growth “was not always easy or marked by harmonious relations between pastor, session, and laymen.” At times, troubled events marked the end of service for a pastoral relationship and the invitational call for a new pastor.

The Federation

Mr. Christensen describes the climate that existed when the federation between the Congregational Church and Presbyterian Church was on the horizon. In his book, *In Such Harmony*, this description is found.

As the year 1913 opened, there was no indication that it was to be an extraordinary one for either the Presbyterian or the Congregational Church of Columbus. Each had called a new pastor early the previous year, the Presbyterians the Rev. Dr. George F. Williams of North Platte, Nebraska, and the Congregationalists the Rev. George A. Munro of Grand Junction, Colorado, who had served the Columbus church, from 1900 to 1908. Both churches were apparently happy with their choices, and the work was going forward satisfactorily.

The Congregational Church was in its forty-seventh year, the Presbyterian Church just beginning its forty-fourth. Each had grown slowly from its beginning and numbered its membership well above the hundred mark. In both cases the increasing membership created growing pains, and the church buildings which had been large enough when first erected were proving inadequate for the enlarged congregations.

Relations between the two churches and with other denominations were cordial, although there had been no concerted attempt to organize interdenominational work. And yet, if one browses through the records over the years, there is a long tradition of close cooperation between churches for specific purposes. It has already been noted that prior to the erection of their own church building in 1878, the Presbyterians met in the Congregational Church, the Methodist Church, the German Reformed Church, and elsewhere. The Congregationalists, in turn, having sold their old building in 1891, asked permission to worship in the Presbyterian building until their new church was completed.

This sharing of buildings often extended to the sharing of pastors, and a congregation that found itself without a minister for a time would usually solve the problem by worshipping at another church. Some of the early members recall that it was the accepted practice of a Sunday morning to “go where there is preaching,” without too great a concern for denominational affiliations.

Other interdenominational ventures included special prayer week plans and revival meetings where several churches in Columbus joined together. When the Congregational pastor suffered an illness that necessitated his absence, pastors from the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal Churches each held a Sunday morning service in the church. Stated in the Congregational minutes this “makes us feel that we are drawing nearer to Christ and forgetting the slight differences that separate us here on earth.”

A recurring illness suffered by Rev. George A. Munro left the Congregational Church temporarily without his services in October of 1913. Subsequently, Rev. Dr. George F. Williams, Presbyterian pastor, suggested that the two churches meet jointly until Rev. Munro’s return. Both congregations immediately approved the suggestion and it was agreed Dr. Williams would undertake the task. The plan included seven provisions:

- 1) that the congregations worship together as long as it is mutually agreeable,
- 2) that the services be held in the two churches alternately,
- 3) that the offerings in envelopes go to the church indicated,
- 4) that the loose offering be divided each day equally between the two churches,
- 5) that the Christian Endeavor Societies hold union prayer service each Sunday evening in that church in which an evening preaching service is to be held,
- 6) that music be led by a union choir, and
- 7) that the first services be held both morning and evening in the Congregational Church on November 9th, 1913, and in the Presbyterian Church on November 16th and subsequently alternate as long as agreeable.

With a plan in place, the two churches went forward. After three months of joint services and Rev. Munro’s health seeing no improvement, discussions began to arise concerning a permanent union between the churches. The “mutually agreeable” conditions set forth led to interest for making an “enduring basis” in the effort.

Several factors favored a merger of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. First, greater efficiency in solving normal church-related problems would result with a larger organization. Second, youth would benefit in larger Sunday school classes and, jointly, they would build a better “school spirit.” Third, continuing problems of teacher shortages would best be relieved by uniting. Fourth, the ability to attract new ministers of greater training and experience would be possible. Finally, both congregations were addressing a need for more space, and the appeal to provide fully adequate building facilities favored joining together.

Work to accomplish these efforts was set into motion, and less than a year after serious discussions began, The Federated Church of Columbus was born on July 2, 1914. Steps

had been taken during many meetings held jointly and separately in the preceding months to draw up Articles of Federation, work out details of governance, and elect committee structures. By a large majority both congregations had voted in favor of the federation.

Initially, it was reported there was some concern at the state levels of both denominations, “neither of which particularly favored the move to unite.” Their opposition was soon put to rest when the federation was functioning smoothly and “was here to stay.” By fall of that year, both state offices supported and adopted the plan.

Credit is given to Rev. George A. Munro and Rev. Dr. George F. Williams, the two pastors serving the Congregational Church and the Presbyterian Church, respectively, at the time of federation. Rev. Munro’s unfortunate illness led to an opportunity to explore unification. Although his condition rendered that he was not actively involved in the process, his service provided the congregation he served with the preparation of interdenominational cooperation. His sermons had “stressed spiritual values of universal significance rather than a strictly sectarian outlook.” Dr. Williams provided unselfish leadership. His role in leading the congregations step by step toward federation was significant, yet “there is no indication that he sought to better his own position” by his actions.

The newly formed Federated Church was ready to call its first pastor, since the two pastors serving had agreed to step aside once the federation was completed and sufficient time was allowed to select another pastor. Dr. Williams remained in his position until the congregation voted unanimously to call Rev. Thomas Griffiths of Geneva, Nebraska. He accepted, and his work with Federated Church began in early 1915.

The Constitution sought to maintain balance between the two denominations joined in the federation and “to prevent situations which might lead to friction between them.” To this end the Constitution required that the pastorate alternate between the denominations, first Presbyterian, then Congregational. Other various ways to maintain balance were set forth in the Constitution, including committee structures, criteria for membership selection to boards and committees, and activities that related to each denomination such as election procedures and receipt and disbursement of monies. The Constitution also provided policy for calling and dismissing pastors.

As the church grew in size and responsibility, social interests and concerns called for change, and other situations bound to arise needed adjustments, the original constitution was revised. However, “the concept of unity... without loss of denominational identity has remained as it was at the beginning.”

One of the primary reasons for joining together two congregations was that each had outgrown its facility and needed a new building. They had hoped that by working together they might achieve a more suitable building than by working alone. The need for a new facility became more acute upon uniting, and the search for a location began. A site at the corner of Platte and 15th Streets was found, and it was unanimously agreed to purchase a quarter of the block for \$8000. The existing lots were sold which provided for

a building fund. Money from the sale of the Presbyterian building provided additional money. The Congregational building was razed and its lumber used in the new Federated Church building. Services were held at the Y.M.C.A. until the building project was completed. Two years after the cornerstone was laid, the Federated Church building was dedicated on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1922.

Over the years additional property was purchased, eventually encompassing the entire block on which the first Federated Church building sits. In 1924 a parsonage was built on the property west of the church. It was later sold and moved when plans to build a new sanctuary were realized. In May 1977 the congregation voted approval of an Education Unit and it was built on the existing property.

By 1990 the Federated Church membership totaled 818. In an organization of similar size disagreement and discord are natural consequences on occasion. The early 1990s saw the congregation experiencing controversy. By the end of 1994 membership had decreased to 716, the aging physical plant needed improvements in the form of renovation or building anew, and finance issues resulted in budgetary obligations not met. Some wondered whether the federation was still effective. At a congregational meeting in May 1994 the issue of affirming or disavowing the federation was called to vote. The vote was resounding. Over 94 percent voted to affirm the federation.

Discussions continued on whether to renovate the current building to make it handicapped accessible or embark on a new building plan. Other major building maintenance issues needed to be addressed as well. An architectural company presented plans for a new building and a vote to consider those or renovate/refurbish the existing building was presented to the congregation in June 1995. The vote failed since neither option carried a majority and plans were set aside. However, the desire to make Federated Church a place where all could enter did not rest, nor were the maintenance issues resolved.

Determined to end the stalemate on how to bring the facilities up to date, the Governing Council passed a resolution in the fall of 1995 to build new on the present site. Acting on that resolution the idea was called to a vote by the congregation. In October 1995 the vote carried by 74 percent to act on a new building. A building design committee was formed and a new approach for building was presented. Their work culminated in the following proposal: 1) build a new sanctuary north of the existing building; 2) gut the existing building, making way for a new fellowship hall and kitchen on the lower level and a gymnasium and additional classroom space on the upper level; 3) add space west of the existing building to expand and consolidate church offices; and 4) join together with a larger narthex all of the existing and proposed facilities—a new sanctuary, the renovated current building, and the existing Educational Unit. In a vote by the congregation on October 1999, a 92 percent majority approved the committee's proposal and voted to enter into contract with Radec Construction Company to complete the project.

A little more than a year after groundbreaking, the first services in the new sanctuary were held on May 6, 2001. The dedicated work and diligence by the Building Design

Committee and the Capital Funds Committee to complete the proposal was realized. The individuals serving on these committees are worthy of much credit in bringing the idea to fruition and deserve mention. The Building Design Committee was composed of Sam Scheidegger, Chair, Roland Augspurger, Mary Hull, Ron Lambert, Laura Porter, Jim Rosekrans, Tim Warren, and Rev. Don Wilson, ex-officio. The Capital Funds Committee consisted of William Grant, Chair, Lloyd Castner, Gordon “Mac” Hull, Phyllis Scow, and Rev. Don Wilson, ex-officio.

Heretofore, more attention to the physical aspects and the foundational origins is given to this historical account than to individuals. Little mention is given to the faithful congregants, dedicated clergy and staff who bonded together spiritually through word and deed to carry out the ministry that Christ modeled. They were many, and their contributions make up an important part of the history. Their stories are found in documents kept at the church where they may be reviewed.

Likewise, any history would not be complete without including important events and programs undertaken during the course of an active church body’s existence. As the title suggests, this is meant to be a “brief” history of Federated Church. Therefore, events and programs are not lacking, rather they are not included.

Federated Church might be worthy as William Christensen’s example “that the things that **unite** us as Christians are so much greater than the things that **divide** us, and that by focusing on essentials we may move forward in harmony and fellowship.” The idea supports a test for endurance. Indeed, this unifying concept is a principle on which our nation’s foundations exist. For 90 years the federation of two churches uniting has stood a test for endurance by carrying out God’s ministry into the 21st century. Federated Church continues its relationship with two denominations, Presbyterian Church (USA) and United Church of Christ, and its purpose to carry on the work of the two churches under one united effort and management.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Romans 15:5-6*