

Our Church
1847 – 2003

First Congregational Church of Geneva
United Church of Christ
Hamilton and 4th Streets
Geneva, Illinois

Organized December 19, 1849

Geneva's history is very much mingled with the history of church life. The early Settlers came mostly from New York State and New England, and many were church people.

In 1849, a small group had held church meetings wherever a place was available. The group invited Rev. Josiah Town to lead regular church services. The Unitarian Church offered its building as a place to worship. On December 19, 1849, the Congregational Church was organized by eleven members. "The First Congregational Society of the town Geneva" was established.

Times were hard in 1847, '48, '49. Money was scarce and crops were poor. However, the Gold rush of 1849 brought many travelers westward. Geneva grew rapidly. The Congregational group talked of building their own church. The site was selected. Brother Gordon Hollister purchased the lot for \$55.00 on January 14, 1854. The cornerstone was laid in June 1855. It took a year and a month to build, at a cost of \$4,500. Not only was this a considerable sum, but also the courage and the faith of these people must be noted. They proceeded in spite of hard times and in the face of an impending panic, which descended on the nation in 1857.

In 1856, the new church was dedicated. It was decided to sell the pews, or 'slips' as they were called. \$100 bought a parishioner his own pew. The money was needed to support the new church. By 1869, the custom stopped. The owners of the pews deeded them back to the church.

In April 1863, Rev. Larmon B. Lane wrote to his superior in New York: "The church has during the last three months enjoyed peace. --- I think the church will get to Canaan after awhile, but they are yet in the wilderness."

The ladies of the church organized the Benevolent Society in 1872. The Chicago Fire forced families to leave the city. Many came to Geneva. The Society came to the aid of people and gained many supporters.

1873 was a year of extensive repairs. The improvements were costly, more than the original building cost. There was a gallery at the rear of the church with stairs on either side. The melodeon and the choir held fort in the gallery. The loft was removed. The old pews with their little doors were removed. A sloping floor was put in and is still there. The pulpit and chancel chairs were new. Stained glass windows were added. The windows were not ornate but were geometric designed glass and limited colors. Ornamental beams and elaborate lighting fixtures were

added. These changes made a heavy debt. More space was needed so parlors were added at the rear of the church in 1885.

Of course, getting to church was pretty much walking or riding a horse-drawn vehicle from the farms west of Geneva. Horse sheds were built at the back of the church. By 1891, it was said that the horse sheds were “a disgrace to the church.” Not only did they look badly but during the week and evenings bad boys gathered there and smoked! And there was beer drinking and card playing!

By 1895 a parsonage was built for the ministers and their families. It was erected on the vacant space next to the church, east side, and is now the church office called Peterson House in honor of Miss Jeanita Peterson, a life-time member, devoted worker and generous benefactor.

The celebration of the church’s 50th year took three days in 18895. Rev. W. B. Millard was the minister at that time and he directed these three days with “reminiscences of the struggles, and pleasures of a growing church.”

The first Boy Scout Troop in Geneva was formed by Rev. W. R. Dixon in 1910. Since Boy Scouting was founded in 1908, it didn’t take long for the U.S. and Rev. Dixon to enter the organization. When Rev. Dixon resigned in 1914, not only the church members but also the townspeople were saddened at his departure.

Repairs to the church were in order again in 1919. The present stained glass windows replaced the old so-called “stained glass.” The cost: \$600.00. A bargain by today’s comparison of prices. Other repairs inside were made. The pipe organ was ordered. The steeple was repaired. The Ladies Aid raised money - \$1,300 – toward the costs.

The twenties arrived with increased prosperity in the country and the church grew in membership. Easter Sunday 1921, 40 new members joined the church. The Ladies Aid continued to be very successful in raising money for the church with their socials, suppers and other activities.

The 75th Anniversary of the church was held December 1924. Rev. C. H. Feast, minister, officiated with the help of four former ministers: Rev. W. R. Dixon, the Boy Scout and young peoples activist; Rev. R. L. Lloyd, one of the foremost Greek Scholars in the United States; Rev. G. S. McClary, minister 1917-1920; Rev. G. B. Laird, minister 1915-1917. It was a great celebration.

Members of the church did not realize that the next 15 years would be difficult. 1929 began the depression years.

The Pilgrim Guild was formed for the young women in 1932 and took over the creative and active work of the Ladies Aid Society. The Ladies Aid turned to Missionary Work.

In 1937, Geneva Republican printed an article by H. L. Jones, life-long member of the Geneva Congregational Church. At that time, he stated he was the oldest member of the church. Born in 1862, he started going to church as a baby in 1863. He said, “The early settlers were mostly from New York State and other eastern States, and were nearly all church people and formed a community with common tastes, common purposes and all the same language. I would be interested to know how many farmers drive into Geneva regularly to any and all

churches today.” Mr. Jones was talking of the farm community, which was the leading group. Mr. Jones said further, “This sounds like a lecture on the good old horse and buggy days, but I would not like to go back to them, though it was interesting to watch our old team turn the corner leading to the church themselves on Sunday morning. Not so with the automobile – it seems very hard to turn them toward a church.”

The church changed its name in 1938 from the “First Congregational Society of the Town of Geneva” to “The First Congregational Church of Geneva.”

The next ten years involved World War II and our social, political and economy were changed greatly. Then came 1949 – our church was 100 years old. This date was celebrated greatly with representatives of local churches, the Northern Association of the Congregational Christian Church and the Chicago Theological Seminary.

Two years later, November 1951, was a time to be excited. There were architectural drawings and plans for a major addition to the church: the Mayflower Room, Fellowship Hall and kitchen, Kenton Davidson Chapel, Nursery and Kindergarten rooms and the kitchen. \$75,000 was raised from the member pledges. Work was begun. Suddenly the north wall of the building collapsed. No one was injured. The chancel was ruined. The organ and organ pipes were completely destroyed. The Methodist Church at 3rd and Hamilton came to the rescue. Our congregation met there every Sunday for worship.

“At the time we had a meeting to decide if the church would continue or be disbanded. In the end, it was one of the best things that happened to the church because the disaster had a uniting effect to start the addition again.” (Quote by Don Graham, member.)

Doc Wessels, a member, had this thought. “I was on the Board of Trustees at the time when the wall collapsed. There was no insurance and we had no money to rebuild it. We met at City Hall to try to decide how to go ahead. Most of those present actually doubled their original building pledges in order for us to start again and rebuild the church.” The only time the Wessels have ever been audited by the IRS was the year when Doc Wessels deducted three pledges: regular stewardship giving, and two new building promises.

Early December 1952, all was in finished order and the rebuilt church was dedicated December 11 with Rev. Wayne Reid officiating. His words: “The faith of Our Fathers who founded this church, and all who have sustained it down through this first century of its life, is a spiritual heritage for which we are grateful and of which we can be justly proud.”

The Priscilla Society was formed, 1952, to further Christian principals and to increase fellowship among younger women. The group formed Receptions Unlimited – catering for parties, receptions, weddings, etc. Many dollars were raised for the care of the church and a wonderful spirit was carried throughout the community.

Tom Bartel, a beloved member, now deceased, once wrote: “My family moved to Geneva in 1955. While waiting to decide where to pursue our faith, we

were called upon by the pastor of The Congregational Church, who invited us to visit his church. We joined and have been pleased to be Congregationalists ever since.”

A new parsonage at 709 Willow Lane was purchased in 1964. The old parsonage next to the church building was an office downstairs and Sunday School rooms were upstairs. The other Sunday School section was in the Fellowship Hall of the church. Joan Rule, member since 1968, said, “When I was little, the children all met in Fellowship Hall in the church for Chapel where we sang songs and later collected the offering. It was really a big deal to be an offering collector. Later, when I got to be Mary in the Christmas pageant and Rick Landberg was Joseph, that was really special.”

In 1969, the old parsonage was partly destroyed by fire. Insurance, a fund drive, at a cost of \$30,000, it was restored. The Boy Scouts, under Ed Harz, a church member and former Boy Scout, provided the manpower. Remembering Rev. Dixon who started the Boy Scout movement brought to mind the wonderful spirit he started at our church. This also was the year the church steeple was rebuilt. The church bell that tolled from 1856 was removed and was placed near the church’s front steps. Carillon bells now peal the call to church and bring seasonal music to the community, thanks to the gift of the bells from the Frank Burgess family.

By a congregational vote, the church joined the United Church of Christ in 1970. The Coffee Hour after the Sunday services became an important fellowship time in 1993 and has continued since. This was also the time when the congregation was anticipating the 125th celebration of the founding of the church. A fund drive raised \$7,600 for redecorating and repair work inside and outside. 1974, the anniversary year, the celebrations were interesting: church historical films and a slide show; a luncheon; an ice cream social and a Sunday worship service depicting phases and years of the church. Rev. George Burton was the enthusiastic leader of the events.

1976 was another interesting year. It was the bicentennial year of our country. Ruth and Bill Feiker remember well. “July 4, 1976, our church service was planned and based on a Colonial Service of the ` 1776 era. About noon, bells from all the Geneva churches tolled a grand, glorious and continuous noise. People from all the in-town churches paraded to the Kane County Courthouse. Many were dressed in Colonial costumes, patriotic songs were sung, speeches were made and huge cakes were cut and shared by all. It was an unbelievably moving experience.”

1978 was a milestone year. Our church elected the first woman moderator, Diane MacNeillie.

1979, the Tri City Youth Projected rented the whole Peterson House and the program still serves the community today, although the headquarters have moved. The Congregational Alliance, which had done so many fine deeds and services, met for the last time. The church and other churches in Geneva sponsored a Laotian family. Along came our participation in Swedish Days, selling ice cream bars and Swedish foods. The Swedish meatballs continued to be a special favorite. The crew who organized and cooked worked hard. The food and meatballs were taken by a kid’s wagon cart to State and Fourth Streets where there was a covered stand. The

food sold quickly. In 1980, 4,200 meatballs were made and frozen. A heat wave was on and the refrigerator and freezer failed. No meat balls to sell! The Priscilla Society stopped meeting this year. 1981, the Society of the Sons of God (SoSoGo) was formed. Breakfast meetings once a month with the men cooking and usually a talk by a member about his profession. This was a greatly enjoyed activity. The Mayflower Room, stairs, hallway, choir room and Sunday School rooms were re-carpeted.

1985, the International Bazaar was started. Later it was called "One World Gift Sale" and was held with the Geneva House Walk Tea. This House Walk Tea is still held in early December every year. The church members make hundreds of cookies. They serve tea, do kitchen duties, sell items that are for sale, set up tables, decorate the church and the Fellowship Hall. A cooking group makes the many jars of chutney to be sold. Everyone works before, during and after the two-day sale and House Walk Tea.

This church meanwhile has remained a strength to all – friendly and helpful.

"Many of my children and grandchildren have been baptized, confirmed and married in the church. Yet, it was my mother's funeral that really stands out in my mind. You never realize, until it happens, how much you need the kindness and caring from friends at the time. I was truly touched by all my friends in the church. The funeral was at the church, and tea afterwards. It was so thoughtful and caring." Marilyn Cuscaden, member since 1968.

George Burton retired in 1986 and was followed by Dan Stauffacher in 1987. There were many projects that needed attention. By January 1992, the Facilities Improvement Committee was formed (FIC for short.) FIC II followed later. Rick Vycital, an energetic member, Vice Moderator for two years and Moderator for two years, was our hard-working head of the projects. The organ was 39 years old and worn out. Parts were not available. Many updates, remodeling and repairs were needed. Generous pledges were made. Committees worked to make things possible. An architect was hired. A general contractor was chosen. Painters, plumbers and all sorts of help were needed. The project came to \$81,587.00 and probably more. Stained glass windows were removed, restored and returned to position. Handicapped access was put in. A new sound system was added. The front entrance, general painting, air conditioning and a refinished piano were included in the project. The Sanctuary was changed completely. The congregation celebrated with a special program when all was completed. The new organ concert was magnificent.

The parsonage at 709 Willow Lane, by mutual agreement with Rev. Stauffacher, at his leaving in 1995, remained in full and clear ownership by the church. The congregation voted to sell the parsonage.

A Memorial Garden was being planned and the Memorial Garden Foundation was formed. A drive for funds was started September 1997. The dedication of the Garden was held May 16, 1999 with Rev. Sue Ebersold conducting the service.

In this year, 2003, Rev. Rebecca Clancy is our minister. She has impressed members of the church with her energy, enthusiasm, preaching ability and love of children.

MINISTERS

It would be impossible to give full biographies of our 42 Pastors. Yes, 42 in 154 years. There is a list of all the ministers, their dates of arrival and leaving. For most, no information can be found.

No doubt, Josiah Town, the first pastor, was a very important one. He remained for about 2-1/2 years. Rev. Elihu Barber was the 6th pastor and apparently a strong organizer. He came from New York State in 1860 and left in 1862 to establish Oakwood Hall, a school for boys in Lake Forest. His stay in Geneva was a happy one. His son, Charles A. Barber, married Anna, the daughter of Deacon Henry Warford. Since he had, before coming to Geneva from New York, established Oakwood Female Seminary in 1850, he apparently was as interested in education as he was in religion.

L. B. Lane was next in line. He is remembered for his struggle, 1862-1865, to get his congregation to be non-sinners and to live on \$500 a year from the Home Missionary Society in New York. The congregation had promised a sum of \$200 also but never raised what was needed.

W. H. Brewster, 1871-1876, was the first pastor to stay for a length of five years. Charles A. Abbott, 1884-1890, held the post for six years.

And so it went but mostly short terms were in order. Then along came W. R. Dixon in 1910. His stay was eight years. He was loved as a pastor, a Boy Scout Leader, a young peoples' leader and a friend and helper to the whole community.

Wayne Reid was a personable and loved minister. He attracted many a new member. He was also the pastor when the church wall collapsed. He stayed, and gave his all to hold the congregation together through the long hard work of rebuilding and running our church program at the 'borrowed' Methodist Church. Rev. Reid was the minister until 1958, eight years in all. And so the length of stay for ministers increased.

John Hollowell served 9-1/2 years – 1959-1969. He was a very friendly man, strong on Sunday School leadership and development. He was also a "caller" and was able to attract new members and know the community.

George Burton, 1969-1986, was with the church for 17 years, a record in the history of the church. He was an excellent preacher, had innovative ideas, and was an ardent organizer for the 125th anniversary activities of the church's founding.

Dan Stauffacher was known for his pep, his summer Sunday services, and lunches at Johnson's Mound. Also, or the puppet shows, organized with puppets made by an interested group. Acted by the group, and written devised and directed by Pamela Stauffacher, his wife.

Becca Clancy, 2001-2021 Becca earned her BA in Theology from Smith College, and attended Edinburgh Divinity School in Scotland for a year. She

graduated from Chicago Theological Seminary in 1997. From there, she taught Old Testament Studies at Elmhurst College until her retirement in 2021. Becca has a total of nine children! Becca was always interested in social Justice, and after retirement, moved to a farm in Wisconsin to raise cows, chickens and goats, as well as her five adopted children, and to study the law.

GENEVA CHURCH WELCOMES NEW PASTOR

In the Spring of 2021, the church welcomed its newest Pastor, the Dr. Rev. Michael Daly. Pastor Mike took about 13 seconds to fit right in here at First Congregational church. Mike was born and raised in the small, rural town of Bolton, Connecticut. It was a childhood full of outdoor activities including, playing soccer, camping, and fishing. It is an area rich with colonial history. A favorite Boy Scout memory is raking leaves at Nathan Hale's homestead. During high school and college, he played drums for a local rock band called, Reaction.

Mike studied psychology at Eastern Connecticut State University. During that time, he worked for The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, a camp founded by Paul Newman for children with life-threatening illnesses such as cancer. This experience was highly influential to Mike as he pursued a call to seminary and a focus on youth ministry. “The children and youth I met at this camp were fixated on the beauty and joy of life and not the possibility of dying young.” In 1990, Mike moved to Chicago, earning his Master of Divinity from Chicago Theological Seminary in 1996. While at CTS, Mike concentrated on Family Systems and youth ministry. In 2011, Mike earned his Doctor of Ministry from Northern Seminary in Lombard, IL focusing on youth mission trips.

Mike says, “One of the things I appreciate about our church’s congregational style is that we are all co-ministers, called to share God’s love and do “hands-on” mission work.” Mike has served UCC churches in the western suburbs of Chicago for more than 25 years. Mike and his wife Suzy live in Geneva and have four amazing children. Mike’s interests include playing golf, seeking out volunteer opportunities, learning about investing and the stock market, and cheering on the Chicago sports teams.

PASTORS OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN GENEVA, ILLINOIS

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|------|--------------------|
| December | 1849 to April | 1852 | Josiah Towne |
| | 1852 to | 1856 | No record |
| | 1856 | 1857 | N. A. Keyes |
| | 1857 to | 1858 | Joseph Kennedy |
| | 1858 to | 1859 | L. Benedict |
| August | 1860 to September | 1862 | Elihu Barber |
| December | 1862 to March | 1865 | L. B. Lane |
| August | 1865 to | 1867 | A. C. Beebe |
| September | 1867 to | 1868 | A. H. Post |
| | 1869 to | 1871 | H. M. Whitney |
| June | 1871 to | 1876 | W. H. Brewster |
| November | 1876 to December | 1879 | G. R. Milton |
| August | 1880 to April | 1881 | J. P. Barrett |
| August | 1881 to September | 1882 | W. H. George |
| June | 1883 to | 1884 | J. P. Bidwell |
| September | 1884 to | 1890 | Chas. A. Abbott |
| November | 1890 to August | 1892 | R. R. Lloyd |
| January | 1893 to September | 1893 | Wm. Rollins |
| January | 1894 to | 1896 | J. H. Windsor |
| February | 1896 to December | 1898 | C. H. Corwin |
| February | 1899 to February | 1903 | W. B. Millard |
| July | 1903 to June | 1906 | E. H. Sheppley |
| October | 1906 to January | 1914 | W. R. Dixon |
| March | 1914 to October | 1914 | Willis K. Williams |
| March | 1915 to January | 1917 | Geo. B. Laird |
| June | 1917 to June | 1920 | Geo. S. McClary |
| December | 1920 to August | 1923 | Glenn Stewart |
| January | 1924 to September | 1925 | Harold C. Feast |
| January | 1926 to October | 1928 | A. E. Beaumont |
| January | 1929 to May | 1936 | E. F. Bell |
| June | 1936 to November | 1937 | Edward D. Schmidt |
| December | 1937 to November | 1941 | A. Bishop |
| January | 1942 to August | 1945 | Geo. C. Marker |
| December | 1945 to November | 1949 | David R. Thomas |
| | 1950 to December | 1958 | Wayne E. Reid |
| May | 1959 to November | 1968 | John C. Hollowell |
| August | 1969 to June | 1986 | George Burton |

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|------|-----------------------------|
| June | 1986 to September | 1987 | Michelle Prentice (Interim) |
| September | 1987 to June | 1995 | Dan Stauffacher |
| August | 1995 to June | 1997 | Ed Spry (Interim) |
| June | 1997 to May | 2000 | Sue Ebersold |
| October | 2001 | | Rebecca Clancy |

CHURCH BOARDS

Christian Education Board is responsible for providing Sunday School classes, recruiting teachers and helping decide on curriculum. Our church has a strong program with a Director of Christian Education and a Sunday School Superintendent. Classes run from 10:00 – 11:15 am, and range in age from Nursery through Confirmation. There is a children's talk by Rev. Clancy during regular church service every Sunday with the whole congregation participating, followed by dismissal to classes. A Chapel Service is held at the end of lesson time.

Adult Education. Our pastor presents Bible Study classes, usually at 7:00 PM on Sundays, starting in the Fall and running through November. Classes again form in January. Church members and the public are welcome.

Worship Board/Deacons nurture the growth of membership, assist with fellowship, welcome new members, work with the minister to review order of service, prepare and serve communion, recruit for pulpit associates and ushers, maintain sanctuary needs, make and plan worship ideas with the minister. Also plan fellowship, potluck dinners and family happenings.

Mission and Benevolences Board supports charitable organizations and operations. The Board reports its recommendations to the Council for participations and financial contributions. The work of Missions is far-reaching. Support of Indian Schools; Heifer Project-farm animals for 3rd World Countries; One Great Hour of Sharing; CROP Walk; Christmas funding for retired clergy; Salvation Army; St. John Church, Chicago – food, clothing, needed supplies; Lazarus House Christmas tree giving; Lazarus House-cooking and serving one meal a month for 60 people. And other needs are met when budget allows.

Properties Board oversees and maintains the building and grounds of all the property owned by the church. The Board also is responsible for all repairs and general maintenance. Volunteers are welcome for grounds keeping and general clean up. The Board also sets rental policies for church properties, makes lists of necessary and desirable improvements/repairs with dollar estimates.

Stewardship Board's function is to educate and show need of the church's financial support. The Board coordinates and runs the yearly pledge drive. The Board follows

up the individual pledges throughout the year. The Budget Committee works closely with Stewardship.

Voluntary Organizations with purposes and principles in accordance with the church shall be approved by the Council. Such groups will elect their own officers. Funds resulting from projects will be turned over to the church treasurer by the end of each project.

Further Duties that enrich the church:

Sanctuary and altar arrangements
Bulletin boards
Hospitality committees – provide teas, luncheons, meetings,
special celebrations and funeral functions
Friendly visitors – visit shut-ins, sick, nursing homes

Activities and Fellowship

Many kinds of activities inspired by the Boards or members

Music and Choir

There is a volunteer choir and a director. The organist enriches the Sunday morning services and a piano, flute and two guitars also augment the program.

Ruth Feiker, editor

Pat Kitner, business manager

Mike Rosier, layout and printing

References:

Ruth Feiker, Historian

Congregational Church Files:

1. A Historical Bulletin 1849-1949, Margaret Alexander Allan, Historian
2. Our 125th Anniversary Year: First Congregational United Church of Christ, Geneva, IL. William Feiker, Editor
3. We Are Family 1994 and 1996 by the Stewardship Committee
4. Our Church 1849-2003, Ruth Feiker, Editor
5. Books available, Geneva Library and Congregational Church office:
Geneva, Illinois: A History of Its Time and Places, published by Geneva Library 1977, Chapter 15, Churches & Congregations, Ruth Feiker