

A History of the First Congregational Church of Geneva United Church of Christ

Geneva, Illinois
1849 – 2018

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 it's 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.



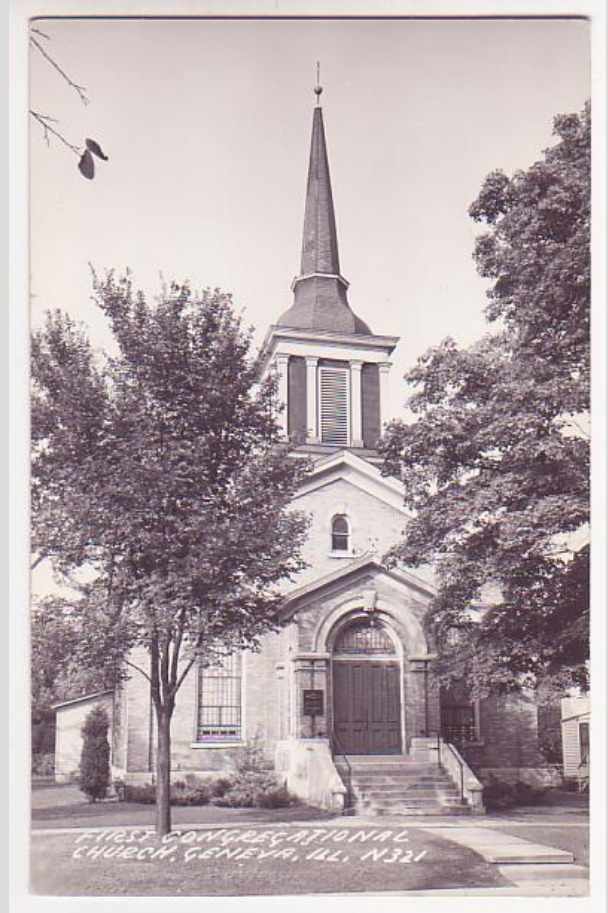
In 1856, the new church was dedicated. It was decided the congregation should sell the pews, or 'slips" as they were called. \$100 bought a parishioner his own pew. The money was needed to support the new church. By 1869, the custom stopped. The owners of the pews deeded them back to the church.

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, and many came to Geneva. The Society came to the aid of these people and the church gained many new supporters.

1873 was a year of extensive repairs. The improvements were costly, more than the original building cost. There was a gallery constructed 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, and a sloping floor was put in before the new pews were installed; the floor and pews are still there today. The pulpit and chancel chairs were new as well. New stained-glass windows were added. The new windows were not ornate but were geometric designed glass and had 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.

In the 1800s, getting to church was accomplished either by walking or riding a horse-drawn vehicle from the farms west of Geneva. Horse sheds were built at the back of the church to house the horses during services and other activities. By 1891, it was said that the horse sheds were “a disgrace to the church.” Not only did they look unsightly, but during the week and evenings bad boys gathered there and smoked. And there was beer drinking and card playing too!



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 was named the *Peterson House* in honor of Miss Jeanita Peterson, a life-time member, devoted worker and generous benefactor.

The celebration of the congregation’s 50th year took three days in 1895. 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. New stained-glass windows were put in, and are still there today. The cost: \$600.00. A bargain by today’s prices. Other repairs inside were made. The pipe organ was ordered and the steeple was repaired. The Ladies Aid raised money - \$1,300 – toward the costs.

The 1920s 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 Society 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 people’s 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, the Geneva Republican newspaper 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 society, politics and economics were changed greatly. Then came 1949 – our congregation 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; the work was begun. Suddenly though, the north wall of the building collapsed. No one was injured, but 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 11th 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."

Also in 1952, the Priscilla Society was formed 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.

A new parsonage, at 709 Willow Lane, was purchased in 1964. The old parsonage next to the church building was used as an office downstairs and Sunday School rooms upstairs. The other Sunday School section was in the Fellowship Hall of the church.

In 1969, the old parsonage was partly destroyed by fire. Through insurance and a building 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 ever 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, a church service was planned 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 MacNeille.

In 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 were the norm. Today the group still meets monthly, but instead of discussing jobs or professions, the men and boys of the group take care of some chore around the church property.

In 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 Christmas items, set up tables, and decorate the church and Fellowship Hall. At one point, a group of adventurous cooks made the many jars of cranberry and apricot chutney that were sold, but there aren't many adventurous cooks left around. Everyone works before, during and after the two-day sale and House Walk Tea. It is a great time of fellowship for both the congregation and the community.

Rev. George Burton retired in 1986 and Rev. Dan Stauffacher joined our church family in 1987. There were many projects that needed attention.

By January 1992, the Facilities Improvement Committee was formed. The organ was 39 years old and worn out. Parts were not available. Many updates, remodeling and repairs were needed. Generous pledges were

made; an architect was hired and a general contractor was chosen. Painters, plumbers and all sorts of help was needed. The project came in at \$81,587.00. Stained glass windows were removed, restored and returned to position. A Handicapped accessible stair lift was put in, and a new sound system was added. The front entrance, general painting, air conditioning and a refinished piano were included in the project. The congregation celebrated with a special program when all was completed. The new organ concert was magnificent.

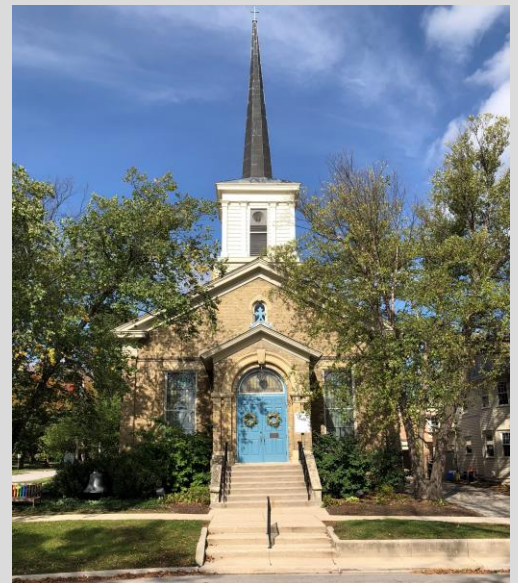
The parsonage at 709 Willow Lane was sold in 1995.

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

In 2001, Rev. Rebecca Clancy joined the church as our minister.

In 2004 the ceiling in the church sanctuary started to fall down. The years of plaster and layers of drywall became too heavy for the bolts that held everything in place, and services had to be temporarily relocated to Fellowship Hall. Since significant funds needed to be raised to repair the sanctuary ceiling, many other repairs were also made. The furnace and air conditioners were replaced, the flat roof over the Mayflower Room was fitted with a rubber membrane to prevent leaks, and the flooring throughout the church was replaced. The Memorial House building on Fourth street to the north of the church, long since planned for demolition, was razed and the entire north church yard re-landscaped. It was a welcome change to be able to hold church picnics and ice cream socials outdoors again. The Peterson House was also remodeled so that the church offices could be moved there, and the upper floor rooms could be rented out. Windows and siding were replaced, and several leaks in the roof and porch were repaired. The total cost for the renovations was \$350,000.00.

In 2011 another capital campaign was undertaken, this time to replace the aging handicap accessible stair lift with an elevator type platform lift. Because the church was constructed over many years and many levels, we had to install two separate lifts: one to get individuals from the street level of the church into the building, and a second to get them from the hallway outside the Mayflower Room down into the sanctuary space. In an old building, modern renovations can be a challenge. We were forced to cut the choir director's office in half to accommodate the new lifts, but everyone agreed they were a welcome addition. We also added two additional bathrooms in Fellowship Hall, and remodeled the nursery area to accommodate two bathrooms. Finally, we replaced the flooring in Fellowship Hall and replaced the roof over the sanctuary. These changes were done on a much more modest budget of \$152,000.00.



In 2012, in an effort to increase the rentable space in the Peterson House building, the small chapel in the church building was converted into church offices for the pastor and church secretary, with a small additional storage room. It allowed all of our church activity to be managed in one building and provided significant additional rental income for the church.

In keeping with our long tradition of working with local Boy Scout troops, we hosted two Boy Scout Eagle projects in 2014 and 2016. The first was an expertly constructed cedar pergola at the east end of the north

church yard. This structure was completed by Alex Novey, and took about six months of planning, designing and meeting with the city's Historic Preservation Commission. It was an impressive project, and very well done. The 2016 project included the extension of the cedar fence along the north side of the church, and was completed by Evan Knop. Again, the construction and planning work was seamless and expertly done. Eagle projects are meant to demonstrate a scout's resourcefulness, leadership skills, and ability to coordinate many different aspects of a project, and these two boys really earned their wings.

MINISTERS

It would be impossible to give full biographies of our 42 Pastors. Yes, 42 in 169 years. We have a list of all the ministers, their dates of arrival and leaving, but 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.

In 1910 the Rev. W. R. Dixon came along. 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.

Rev. 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. After Rev. Reid, 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, for the puppet shows: organized with puppets made by a puppet group within the church; acted out by the group; written devised and directed by Pamela Stauffacher, his wife.

Members welcomed the Reverend Rebecca Clancy as Pastor in September 2001 as an interim pastor while they conducted a search for a new pastor to replace Rev. Ebersold. She was installed as our permanent pastor on October 28, 2001. She came to the 169-year-old congregation from the First Congregational Church of Elmhurst, Illinois where she had been an Associate Pastor for 5 years. In addition to her church work, she

teaches, and will continue to teach, theology courses at Elmhurst College. Reverend Clancy earned a BA Degree in Theology from Smith College in Northampton, MA, graduating in 1981. At Smith her courses emphasized a study of the Old Testament, further enhanced by a “Junior Year Abroad” at Edinburgh Divinity School, Edinburgh, Scotland. Always interested in ministering to people whether teaching or serving a church, Rebecca graduated from the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1997, and has been a licensed minister in the United Church of Christ since 1995.

PASTORS OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN GENEVA, ILLINOIS

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|------|--------------------|
| December | 1849 to April | 1852 | Josiah Towne |
| May | 1852 to | 1856 | No record |
| | 1856 to | 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 |
| January | 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 |
| January | 1950 to December | 1958 | Wayne E. Reid |
| May | 1959 to November | 1968 | John C. Hollowell |
| August | 1969 to June | 1986 | George Burton |

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| 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 to | Present | Rebecca Clancy |

References:

Lynnly Buchanan, Historian

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