

HOW A GREAT CHURCH GOT STARTED THE FOUNDING OF FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA IN 1866



First Church Building of
First Congregational Church
January 31, 1869 — January 9, 1887
N.W. corner 13th & L

The year was 1866, the natal year of the first permanent church in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The Civil War had ended. President Lincoln was dead but on Salt Creek in Nebraska Territory there was a struggling little settlement called Lancaster which was later to bear his name.

Congregationalists had churches in Territorial Nebraska before a church was to be established in Lancaster. The First Congregational Church of Omaha, for instance, was formally organized on May 4, 1856.

These early churches were dependent upon the American Home Missionary Society which was organized in 1826. But the Society so lacked money and leaders during the Civil War that it let the missionary movement in Nebraska drift.

In 1864, however, Rev. Reuben Gaylord, first pastor of the Omaha church, went east to confer with the American Home Missionary Society about securing an agent or superintendent for Nebraska. They responded by appointing him as the Nebraska superintendent and from there on he devoted his whole effort to the new field.

From the beginning of the settlement in Lancaster there were a few Congregationally-inclined residents who held services among themselves. On August 18, 1866, a Congregational Council composed of neighboring clergy met with those interested in establishing a church in Lancaster.

On Sunday morning, August 19, 1866, in the Methodist Seminary, the church was duly organized with six charter members. Reverend Gaylord, as an agent of the American Home Missionary Society, preached the sermon after which the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was partaken. The first permanent church had been founded in what was to become the city of Lincoln.

At the time the church was organized Lancaster could boast of six buildings — four dwellings, one store and a blacksmith shop.

The church began its active life as a mission church with the help of Rev. E. C. Taylor, who was serving other churches in Southeast Nebraska. According to the church clerk's records, Reverend Taylor held services "nearly every alternate Sabbath until October 27, 1866." The church then gave him a call to become pastor, an offer which he accepted for a term of one year.

He was to be paid \$100 by the local church and the balance of his salary was to come from the American Home Missionary Society. Collecting from the Society was somewhat tedious, as copies of letters from Reverend Taylor indicate. In one he said, "I would say that I have not received the remittance for the first quarter. I have written twice. If you have received neither of the letters and reports, please send the whole amount, \$200."

Of local conditions he said, "The season has been very dry, even for Nebraska, so that crops of corn, potatoes, etc. are very poor and the people find themselves straitened in giving for the gospel. Many of them are disposed to do what they can however."

The life of the missionary minister was no bed of roses. In one early report Reverend Taylor advised that he had preached regularly for the churches of South Bend, Salt Creek and Lancaster and occasionally at two other points extending for a distance of 35 miles on Salt Creek.

According to the church clerk's records, Reverend Taylor, "after preaching nearly a year to the edification and full acceptance of the church" resigned but "promised to continue with us until another missionary should be sent to occupy the pulpit." There were now eight members of the First Congregational Church of Lancaster County.

On October 27, 1867, the church issued a call to Reverend Charles Little, who is often referred to as the first pastor.

Reverend Taylor and Reverend Little made separate pleas to the American Home Missionary Society to put the Lancaster church on a sounder financial basis. They asked for \$1,000 annually, but the Society made it \$500.

In his plea Reverend Little said, "If we enter Lincoln at once and work efficiently we may be the first in the political and intellectual center of the state. If we delay for six months or a year at most, the opportunity will be lost. If we suffer the Congregationalists now in Lincoln to become discouraged, the Presbyterians will come in and take away a large part of the element which now we can secure."

Fortunately the little Congregational Church in Lincoln was able to take steps toward greater accomplishments. On April 1, 1868 it changed the name from the First Congregational Church of Lancaster County to the First Congregational Church of Lincoln.

The little city of Salt Creek was growing. In April of 1868 the Nebraska Commonwealth reported, "Lincoln now contains about 175 houses, between 15 and 20 having been erected within the past week."

In 1869 First Church completed its first home (the Tabernacle). The building, a picture of which accompanies this text, was 25 x 40 feet in size, sheathed with boards and paper.

The congregation occupied the church, though unfinished, on January 31, 1869, but it was not dedicated until November 7 of that year.

Reminiscences of Rev. Lewis Gregory who was to leave a deep impact on Congregationalism in Lincoln, say of those early years of First Church before its first home was built: "Many of our Nebraska churches, like Israel of old, have their stories of homeless days . . . From the year 1866 to the year 1868 was the homeless stage of this church. The church was organized in a borrowed room with only six members . . . No concern had the little company about a church edifice, if they could have regular Sabbath worship and the occasional service of a minister from the more forward town of Salt Creek, now Greenwood . . . They met from house to house in the country round and had all the room they wanted outdoors in the bright summer weather."

Reverend Little resigned as Pastor in 1870, but more than twenty years later, at a morning service of his former church he reviewed his years with First Church in Lincoln. He recalled that he began his preaching in a stone schoolhouse. He used a barn as a bachelor's hall until a house was furnished and his family joined him.

He told of the urgent need for a building for church services. He said, "The Commissioners who laid out the city designated three lots for each denomination which would build upon them within a specified time. Consequently the longer we delayed, the greater would be the pressure on businessmen for contributions to build churches. We determined to go forward."



First Plymouth Congregational Church,
Lincoln, Neb.

By the year 1885 this church began to grow with rapidity as the city of Lincoln developed into a modern metropolis. Indeed in 1887 Reverend Gregory saw an opportunity to increase the influence of Congregationalism by the establishment of another church in southeast Lincoln. This was named Plymouth Congregational Church. It too had a vigorous growth until by 1920 the First Church and Plymouth Church had about the same membership, in the neighborhood of 500 each. In 1923 problems arose, however, in both churches and the best solution seemed to be a union of these sister organizations. This was done by unanimous vote and the result was the present First-Plymouth Congregational Church.

On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1931 a beautiful new church edifice was dedicated. It was modern in spirit and one of the most striking of Congregational Churches anywhere in America. So from a very humble but significant start came the great First-Plymouth Congregational Church with its remarkable contribution to the life of Lincoln, Nebraska and the world at large. A startling contrast is evident as you compare the present sanctuary with the original one room building where it all started.

Excerpts from an address by Dr. Charles J. Kennedy on "THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES IN THE FRONTIER PROCESS DURING 1830-1860"

"As philanthropists and especially as Christians we should establish the institutions of religion contemporaneously with the erecting of our log cabins, the breaking up of the prairie and the falling of the forest." This declaration by the laymen and laywomen of an early Congregational church in the upper Mississippi Valley is typical of the interest of the thousands of Congregationalists and Presbyterians on the early Western frontier. To them, true religion meant both a particular kind of conduct in this world and a faith of life in the next.

Fortunately, the extensive collection of letters between the missionaries and the officials of the American Home Missionary Society, together with publications of that society and some secondary works, make it possible to appraise the many Congregational churches in the midwest.

The Congregational missionaries had several motives. There was Christian idealism and humanitarianism, which is inherent in the teachings of the New Testament. Also, the Protestant home missionary movement was both an expression of nationalism and a stimulation to the nationalistic aspirations which characterized the new West. A primary motive for Congregational missionary activities on the frontier, however, was furnished by their Puritan attitude toward the Western mind. With an apostolic zeal and at times with a spirit of sectarianism, these missionaries engaged in a crusade to save the West from "the bondage of sin and Satan." The stated object of the American Home Missionary Society was to diffuse the gospel. Also, the leaders believed that they must mold the new West or the West would mold the East.

The ministers recognized the unfavor-

able characteristics of the Western mind as being the prevalence of worldliness, the heterogeneous population, the superficial piety of the eastern emigrants, the freedom from the restraints of older community life, the tendencies toward "religious error, enthusiasm and Romanism," and the limitation of education and refinement.

In spite of these tendencies, the missionaries were confident that they could infuse the Puritan mind into the Western mind. There were certain favorable characteristics: the Westerners were enthusiastic and energetic; the Western mind was in a process of formation, the foreign emigrants were free from most of the restraint of Old World influences; and there was a Puritan "class of minds" in most communities in large sections of the Middle West.

The best opportunity for success depended largely upon the speed with which churches began to function. It seemed to these missionaries that each new community always passed through a critical period before it passed from its frontier to its post-frontier phase of history. During the first few years harmony prevailed among the pioneers. There was a high degree of economic equality, a very democratic spirit, and an unusual amount of confidence in one's neighbors. This produces a neighborhood spirit very conducive to the development of churches. There was always at least a minority desiring educational facilities, religious services, temperance observance and the general atmosphere of a restrained and respectable society. These few pioneers were deeply aware of the need of gospel institutions and gospel influences. When that was promptly supplied the results usually were satisfactory according to the Puritan point of view, and the critical period quickly passed. But when the agencies of evangelical religion delayed a few years, the obstacles increased, and the advantages of the initial enthusiasm were lost. It then became much more difficult to establish Christian influences.

There were other problems too. At times the American Home Missionary Society could not obtain enough ministers who were considered qualified to do successful work on the frontier. Also, the society was impeded by a lack of sufficient contributions from its supporters both in the East and the churches in the West.

The American Home Missionary Society favored a settled ministry rather than the use of circuit riders. Some men claimed that the settlement of one pastor was worth more than a hundred revivals by a hundred evangelists who would leave no one behind them "to gather in the fruits." The missionaries encouraged an "intelligent understanding of religious and moral questions, according to the Puritan viewpoint; and they promoted evangelism, personal piety, and "steadfastness of effort."

The primary methods used to achieve these aims are significant. Preaching was considered to be the most important function. Instruction in the Sunday schools and Bible classes was effective in imparting the New England theology. Prayer meetings encouraged the expression deemed necessary for the full development of personal piety. The visitation of each family was often of considerable importance. These methods were called the "ordinary means of grace." Revivals were always welcomed and usually experienced by each church once every few years. The results were wholesome; there was an increase in the spirit of prayer, in the Sunday schools and Bible classes, in the conviction that God has a great work for laymen to do, and in the call of young men to the ministry.

The covenant of these churches generally exacted a promise from the communicants to maintain a strict observance of the Sabbath. Some of the churches stated that the following activities on Sunday were a just cause for discipline: transacting secular business, or engaging in any secular labor even in the planting and harvest seasons; commencing or continuing a journey; visiting for social or

secular purposes; conversing about temporal or trifling subjects; calling at the post-office for letters or newspaper; reading anything not of a religious character; and walking or riding for amusement. As one might expect, Sabbath-breaking was the most common cause for discipline.

The covenants also generally required each church member "not to conform to the world or indulge in vain conversation or amusement, and totally to abstain from the use and traffic of all intoxicating drinks as a beverage." The list of vain amusements, as specified by special resolutions, included dancing, card-playing, and attending the theatre or "circus." Swearing and falsehood were prohibited but smoking was not a cause for discipline.

Theological views were also enforced by the threat of discipline. When a member manifested interest in Catholicism, Mormonism, Universalism or some such sect, he received immediate attention.

It is impossible to measure the effect of these churches on the moral life of the communities. Certainly, dancing, card-playing, attending theatres, and drinking intoxicating liquors continued and in some places increased. The immigration of some of the foreigners in the 1850's made the problems still more difficult for those persons with Puritan ideals. Nevertheless, even discounting the reports of the missionaries, it appears that in a number of communities the Congregationalists exerted an influence greater than the proportion of their number of adherents. Temporarily, at least, their ideals of a quiet Sabbath and temperance observance approached a reality in many places.

The ministers and churches were important also for their contribution to education. Every minister promoted Sunday schools and Bible classes which concentrated on imparting a knowledge of the Bible. Some of the earlier missionaries and their wives conducted week-day schools and academies at a time before the public schools system developed. The establishment and support of numerous

academies and colleges throughout the West constitutes a whole chapter in the history of these denominations.

Securing footholds on the early frontier was not easy for the missionaries. They were very particular in the requirements for church membership, and they attempted to reproduce as nearly as possible the attitudes and interest in religion, education, and Christian conduct which were accepted as the ideal in the East. Did the ministers and leading laymen and laywomen succeed in their purpose of infusing the Puritan mind into the Western mind? Certainly their success was not complete; the missionaries themselves lamented the fact. And yet it does appear that they were a determining factor in saving the frontier in the mid-west, to a significant degree, from "the sweeping tide of worldliness," "the fierce zealotry of errorists," and general "moral putrefaction."

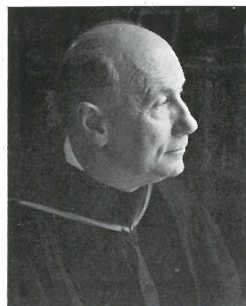
ANNUAL MEETINGS

The Annual Meetings of the Congregational Christian Historical Society and the Evangelical and Reformed Society will both be held on Tuesday, April 30th, at the Newman Congregational Church, Rumford, Rhode Island. There is good reason for holding these meetings in this place. The Newman Church is the oldest Congregational Church in Rhode Island, and one of the historic churches in America, being the 29th Congregational Church gathered in this country. It was organized in 1643, so that in 1968 it will be celebrating its 325th Anniversary. We will be happy to share in the celebration of this significant anniversary. The program will include meetings of the Executive Committees of both Historical Societies, together with their Annual Meetings for election of officers, adoption of Budgets, and other necessary business. All who are interested are urged to save this date so that they can be in attendance. Further notice with full details of

the program and opportunity for making luncheon reservations will follow.

The Historical Commission of the United Church of Christ will meet on the evening before, Monday, April 29th, in the Holiday Inn in Seekonk, R. I.

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Congregational Christian Historical Society on October 16th, Dr. Arthur S. Wheelock presented his resignation as Executive Secretary of the Society to take effect on December 31st. His resignation was accepted with regret.



On the recommendation of the Personnel Committee the name of Dr. Dwight L. Cart was presented to the Executive Committee and it was voted unanimously to appoint him as Dr. Wheelock's successor, his work to begin as of January 1st.

Dr. Cart has also been elected as Librarian of the Congregational Library and will carry both responsibilities, devoting one full day each week to the work of the Historical Society. We believe this arrangement is most fortunate and will work to the benefit of both organizations.

For 15 years Dr. Cart has been the minister of the First Congregational Church of Winchester, Mass. where he has served with great ability and devotion.

Dr. Cart received his A.B. degree from Simpson College in Iowa in 1926, his S.T.B. degree from Boston University in 1929. He has also received an honorary D.D. degree from Springfield International College and an honorary degree of D.S.T. from Northland College.

He comes well equipped for his new responsibilities.

SIGNIFICANT ACQUISITIONS AT THE LANCASTER CENTRAL ARCHIVES OF THE EVANGELICAL AND REFORMED HISTORICAL SOCIETY

June 1, 1966 — June 30, 1967

Members and friends of the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society closely associated with it are happy in the new quarters of the Philip Schaff Library of the Lancaster Theological Seminary. Many noteworthy items have been acquired for the growing collection of the Lancaster Central Archives.

Paul T. Slinghoff, Conference Minister, Pennsylvania Southeast Conference, William T. Longsdorf, Conference Minister, Penn Northeast Conference, and James W. Moyer, President, Penn Central Conference, head the list of Conference officials in sending items reflecting the activities of their Conferences. An urgent plea is made to Association Presidents, or those delegated to collect historical items within the Association, to send in reports and other records of their activities. The Society received three bound volumes of the Minutes of the first three meetings, 1963-1965, of the Lancaster Association of Penn Central Conference, a copy of the Minutes of the Central Association of the same Conference, and The Eastohioan, newsletter of the Eastern Ohio Association of the Ohio Conference.

James E. Wagner presented official, mimeographed Minutes of the Conference of Synod Presidents, 1939-1961, and Minutes of the Executive Council, 1957-1961. Twenty-two cartons of well organized archival material were received last fall from the Division of Christian Education, Board for Homeland Ministries, through the courtesy of Russell G. Clausen. This acquisition, housed in vertical file folders, includes records of meetings held and materials issued and preserved for a number of years by this Division.

The three persons contributing the largest number of dedication brochures

and other publications of local churches were: Theophil W. Menzel who presented forty published items pertaining to churches in Michigan and Indiana; Mrs. William J. Rupp who sent in forty-three publications collected by her husband, William J. Rupp, now deceased; and David Dunn who brought in thirteen publications relating to churches in Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York, and North Carolina. The original church records, contained in three volumes, of the following Pennsylvania churches were delivered by James W. Moyer, President of Penn Central Conference: Pine Grove Mills, Bethel; Laurelton, Ebenezer; Millmont, Ray's Union; Millmont, Route 1, St. Peter's; and Mifflinburg, St. John's. Herman C. Synder deposited the manuscript records of the Beaver Springs, Pennsylvania, Charge (Christ Church, Beaver Springs; St. Paul's, Beavertown; and Grace, Troxelville), consisting of the Treasurer's book, 1960-1966, the Minute book of the Joint Consistories, 1904-1966, and the Pastoral record book, 1913-1958. C. T. Moyer gave the Minutes of the Sunday School Conventions of Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, East Pennsylvania Classis, 1876-1903, Synodical Council Meeting Minutes of Lehigh Classis, 1948-1963, and the original manuscript list of licentiates, 1919-1963. A. Levan Zechman gave his compilation of the *History of the East Susquehanna Classis, Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1856-1941*. Richard G. Appel sent in two portfolios containing his miscellaneous correspondence and documents, and miscellaneous Reformed Church publications. Mrs. Charlotte Peifer gave the Pastoral records of Edward D. Miller for the period from 1874 to 1890, and the original Minute book, 1934-1965, of the Ringtown, Pennsylvania, Route 1, St. John's Church, Girar Manor. Included in her gift of various miscellaneous items were: Family Bibles of John Peifer and Elias Peifer, Elias Peifer's Civil War Bible, and seven church and baptismal

certificates of the Peifer family. John B. Frantz, Jr. presented a typewritten copy of his essay delivered at the annual meeting of the Society, May 31, 1966, entitled *An Example of Revivalism and Renewal in American Church History: The Reformed Church in the United States*. Alan B. Peabody presented a xerox copy of an eighty-six sheet scrapbook kept by Irvin C. Alt, a member of Riverside Salem Church, Buffalo, New York, pertaining to Herman John Hahn, and similar material on ninety-three xerox sheets. Howard S. Fox sent a Reformed Church General Synod badge, May 26, 1926.

I. C. G. Campbell, Chairman and Historian of the Nebraska Conference, kindly supplied, upon request, a copy of his essay, *The Work of the Conference Historian*, prepared for the first Central West regional meeting of United Church of Christ Historians, October 18, 1966.

Other papers sent, delivered at the same meeting, were Clarence Henkel's *Church History and the Local Historian*, and Charles J. Kennedy's *The Role of the Congregational Churches in the Frontier Process During 1830-1860*. The Nebraska Conference through its Conference Minister, Fred P. Register, supplied the Society with a lengthy list of local Church Historians of the Nebraska Conference, with mailing addresses.

The Society is grateful to the Boards, Divisions, Councils, Officers, Committees, and Conferences of the United Church of Christ that supply their publications regularly.

The officers of the Society wish, through this medium, to thank all its friends who take an active interest by their assistance in making material available for use in one location.

Prepared by Herbert B. Anstaett

Have you sent in your gift toward the work of the Historical Societies?

HISTORICAL COMMISSION OF THE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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