

# Through the Decades

A Linear History of  
First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, of Lowell

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2003

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## The Early Years-1830-1909



**1830's...**Daniel Marsac of Detroit built his log trading post at the junction of the Flat and Grand Rivers in **1831**. This was the beginning of Dansville, later known as Lowell.

**1850's...**In **July, 1851**, Rev. S. S. Brown and C. S. Hooker, meeting in Hooker's home, organized the Union Sunday School. On **March 6, 1856**, the Congregational Church Society was established. Its nine members hired Rev. S. Hemenway as pastor. In **1858**, with the proviso that, should the building ever be removed or used for other than religious purposes, the property should revert to the estate, Drs. Richards and Wickham donated a lot, and building of the sanctuary began. Many mishaps took place and it took nearly four years to complete.

**1860's...**The new sanctuary was dedicated on **June 1, 1861**, under the capable leadership of Dr. D. L. Eaton. Thirteen members now comprised the congregation. Dr. Eaton resigned the pastorate in **December 1861**, but remained to serve the church in every other capacity. We have no record of his replacement.

**1870's...**In **1874**, our church was in critical difficulty...with significant debt, the death or moving away of many members, and the building in need of much repair. Dr. D. L. Eaton came to the rescue...volunteering his time with no pay, and once again occupying the pulpit as well. In just three years, by **1877**, Dr. Eaton raised the money, had the church repaired and remodeled, and expanded the membership to ninety-five. Mrs. Leonora Perry once said, *"It is to Rev. Eaton this church owes its existence and continued life, and his labor was not for hire."*

**1880's...**The church celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Founding (1856 - 1881) in **1881**.

**1890's...**On **September 1, 1899**, the first Young People's Society for Christian Endeavor was organized under the leadership of Rev. Henry Marshall, then pastor of First Congregational Church.

**1900's...**In **1903**, the total enrollment, including officers, teachers and pupils, in the Sunday School, was 116, with an average attendance of 72. New pews were purchased and walls redecorated. On **February 4, 1906**, a congregational meeting was called to consider the possibility and propriety of moving the church edifice to Main Street. The idea was defeated by **one** vote. In **1907**, Rev. W.D. Ogg began his six year pastorate, under which the church grew to 156 members.

## The 1910's, 20's and 30's

**1910's...** On **August 10, 1910**, the Cheerful Doers were organized (from Mrs. M. M. Perry's Sunday School class) under the motto *Be Ye Doers of The Word*. They remained in existence until October 14, 1997. Throughout their 87 years of service they were faithful in visiting the sick, aged and shut-in, distributing bouquets, baskets of fruit, clothing and cards to all facing difficulty and personal struggle. Their last president and faithful leader, Mrs. Velma Johnson, led in all capacities, embodying the founding motto, until her death December 12, 1997. In **September of 1910**, the question of moving the church came up again and was once again defeated. On **May 19, 1912**, Rev. W.D. Ogg preached the first Mothers' Day service. In **1913**, Rev. Adam Murrman began his two years as pastor. Rev. A. H. Lash came in **1915** and was pastor of the church until 1920. On **March 11, 1915**, the trustees met and voted to build a parsonage. The parsonage was built one and a half blocks south of the church on what is now Hudson Street. During **November and December, 1918**, the church was closed due to an influenza epidemic in Lowell.

**1920's...** Rev. E. R. Cochrun became pastor in **January, 1920**, and remained until **April, 1924**. The two story Parish House was added on to the back of the church, with ground breaking ceremonies on **August 22, 1921**. It was completed in **December, 1921**, with dedication services on **January 8, 1922**. Some of the Sunday school classes were then moved from the crowded sanctuary to the Parish House. In **1924**, Rev. A. J. Blair became pastor and stayed until Rev. Andrew Lemke came in **February, 1928**. Rev. Lemke was young and more liberal in his thinking than most past pastors had been. He served until 1931.



**1930's...** **June 15, 1930**, was King Sunday - a bronze tablet was dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Francis King, Mr. and Mrs. Frank F. King and Miss Florence King. In a very fitting and moving service, the church recognized the 67 years their family had given to support and strengthen it (1863-1930). Rev. Samuel Wenger became pastor in **1332**, serving until **July of 1937**. He left here to become a prison chaplain - no reflection on his experience with this church. (In 1943, after being retired from full time Christian Ministry, Rev. Wenger returned during the pastorate of Rev. Woon to do the wedding for Howard and Ruth (Houseman) Thurtell. Rev. Woon assisted in the wedding. As Howard puts it, "It took two of them to hitch us.") On **July 1, 1934**, the church elected a four person panel to be custodians of the King Memorial Fund, with the annual interest to be used for maintenance and improvements. On **April 28, 1937**, the congregation voted to redecorate the interior of the church (soft blue and silver), re-carpet the chancel [carpet donated by C.H. Runciman], and paint the outside of the church. After 9 weeks of work, during which time no services were held, worship was resumed in the newly decorated church on **September 12, 1937**. A new piano was given to the Sunday School and dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Corrine Callier in **1938**. The church was without full time pastoral leadership from **July, 1937**, to **January 18, 1938**. Rev. Robert Barksdale then became pastor, moving to Lowell from Georgia. The Barksdales started both a junior and senior Pilgrim Fellowship. For years they were very active groups. Rev. Barksdale served as pastor until 1941. A Communion Table was dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Irene Childs Lee, on **September 4, 1938**. In **1939**, Mr. Roy Hill gave \$700 in memory of his mother. With the addition of \$500 raised locally, a Hammond Electric Organ was purchased. A service of Praise and Dedication was held on Sunday evening, **December 17, 1939**, to consecrate the organ, velvet draperies and the Cross and Candlesticks - the latter in memory of Mrs. M. M. Perry. The red, gray and white patterned wool carpeting was also added.



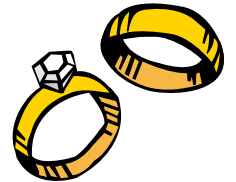
**Note:** Prior to receiving the new organ, the church had a pump organ with graduated false pipes. Mr. R.D. Stocking played this organ for over 50 years. He was to receive \$1.00 per week for playing all morning and evening services, midweek prayer meetings, funerals and weddings. Each annual meeting, he would cancel his \$1.00 per week salary. This did not save the church any money, as they never paid him anyway. Interestingly, after Mr. Stocking's demise, no one else was able to get the old organ to function properly.

## The 1940's, 50's and 60's

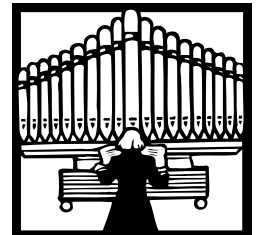


**1940's...**Sometime in the 1940's a steeple was added to the church. (It was damaged and had to be repaired sometime in the 1960's.) Rev. Norman Woon became pastor on **December 7, 1941** (the day Pearl Harbor was attacked). A reception for Rev. and Mrs. Woon was being held at the home of Mrs. Hattie Peckham when the announcement about Pearl Harbor came over the radio. In **1943**, one girl from the Pilgrim Fellowship of Lowell First Congregational went on to be state president of that youth organization.

**1950's...**In **1956**, the congregation celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Church Founding with a tea and banquet held at the Masonic Lodge. The sanctuary ceiling fell in **January or February of 1957**, and major repair was undertaken. Major work included replacing three trusses damaged or pulled loose in the sanctuary. A specialist was hired to repair the damaged stained glass windows. Two very unique pews were destroyed and could not be duplicated. The chairs in the back of the sanctuary were added to make up for the loss of pews. Bill Roth's sister, Mary, was to be married on **June 1, 1957**, and the work on the sanctuary was completed just days prior to that wedding. As late as one week before the wedding, the yet unfinished sanctuary was full of scaffolding. (I am sure the bride was much concerned as to whether or not all repairs would be complete for her wedding.) Rev. Woon resigned effective **July 1, 1957**. In **1958**, Rev. David Debbink became pastor and served until 1962. (Note: Members remember that when they were children in the 50's the church was always open. In fact, neighborhood kids used to come into the church and play freely, with no adult supervision.)



**1960's...**The women of the church started a *Rummage Bin* in the basement of Dr. Bob Reagan's Dentist Office on the corner of Main and Riverside. He charged a rent of \$1.00 per year. This mission project provided good used clothing, appliances, dishes, flatware and other household goods to community members very cheaply. The money earned was applied to the mission of the church. Monthly potlucks were also held during the **60's** as a way for the congregation to share in fellowship. In about **1962**, Rev. Charles Davis arrived and served until about **1967**. Children from the community would meet here for music and fellowship under Rev. Davis' tenure. The church kept a Cradle Roll with pictures of infants and dates of birth. It was noted that Dr. Hill was the primary physician in town and delivered most of the babies. Dr. Hill is the father of Mary Jo Hill, in whose name an endowment was later established. Present day members have mentioned a **1966** experience playing on the stage that used to be in what is now the upstairs lounge. A curtain then divided the sanctuary from the stage area - the back wall in the choir loft is where the curtain hung. The old organ with pipes hid most of the curtain and a door added at a later time, all prior to present wall. On the stage was a piano donated by Charlotte White, the daughter of a local dentist. A sign was placed on the piano - *Do Not Touch* - to remind the children who used the stage to keep hands off. In the summer of **1968** Miss Karolena Fox of California contacted the Trustees, and in memory of her mother, gave stock worth over \$10,000. This was just the impetus needed to start the renovation of the sanctuary and the choir loft. Funds came in so well for this renovation and for the Allen organ that everything was free and clear by **April, 1970**. In **1969**, Rev. F. Ervin Hyde became pastor. He served this church until **1973**, retiring and going on to serve other churches on an interim basis.



## The 1970's

**1970's...** Long time member Bill Roth remembers a time when he wrote in the dust that was on the organ. It remained there for two months before the organ was dusted. (And we think we have sometimes had difficulty getting and keeping a good custodian...) Dottie Roth shared her memory of a Sunday in **June, 1971**, when Nancy Wood sang a solo during the service. Dottie enjoyed music and, through the influence of hearing the choir and the soloists, decided to join the choir. She remained a member for many years. Mary DeRushia was also a big influence in her decision.



For many years our church and other community churches hosted a *Live Nativity in the Park*. One Christmas Eve two members of this church were struck and killed by a car as they crossed busy Hudson Street, after dark, to view the live nativity. Many adults and children involved in the nativity were witnesses. That tragic event ended any future plans for a live nativity in Richard's Park. In recent years the community's ecumenical Live Nativity was revived, but located near St. Mary's Catholic Church, on a quieter side street, with easy walk and drive by viewing.

In **1974**, Rev. Richard Greenwood became pastor, arriving at church the first day, and many days thereafter, on a motorcycle. He served until 1985. Long time choir member Nancy [Bill] Wood shared that the choir once held masks to their faces on the Sunday on which Halloween fell during Greenwood's tenure. He had no clue, as, when he would turn to face the choir, they would lower them. The congregation roared with laughter. Rev. Greenwood did not know what was going on until the conclusion of the service. On Sunday mornings, Rev. Greenwood often had a brown paper bag in which the children's sermon "props" were hidden. The mystery always added to the enthusiasm of the youngsters gathered for their special time before heading downstairs to church school classes.



The church first participated in the Fallasburg Fall Festival with a food booth in the **70's**, serving homemade pretzels. During Rev. Greenwood's tenure, the tradition of a spring/summer All Church Picnic was established using the Fallasburg Park pavilion and grounds. Rev. Greenwood is remembered as one who was usually in control of his emotions and particular about working with each church committee so as not to have anything happen unless he was apprized. People remember his last sermon as a time when he also tried to contain his emotions and remain in control of his feelings - with

dubious success. During this same decade, the congregation chose to bestow the honor of Emeritus status on Rev. F. Ervin Hyde.

In a **1979** effort to save money, the heat was turned down. One brutally cold day (-24\*) in **January**, the pipes in the basement froze and burst, creating a frozen waterfall over the piano, which was then rebuilt by Hans Ficsher. It is still used in basement today (2003). The New World Quartet, part of Grand Rapids Symphony, later to be known as the DeVos Quartet, performed in our church the weekend after the pipe incident. The Congregational Church sanctuary, chosen for our outstanding acoustics, was used for the community concert. During the violin solo the snow and ice on the roof let go and crashed to the ground outside, shaking the church and causing quite a stir in the congregation. One can only imagine the surprise and its effect on the soloist. Even though the lounge floor was warped by all the water from the week before, a reception there followed the concert.



In **1978** or **1979**, local teachers were allowed to gather in this church, where they took a vote to go on strike.

## The 1980's

It is interesting to note that, in **1980**, Rev. Greenwood was very instrumental in preventing prosecution of a number of prominent Lowell citizens who were involved in a "numbers racket." Rev. Greenwood spoke on their behalf and convinced the judge that they had learned their lesson and this type of thing would not happen again in Lowell.

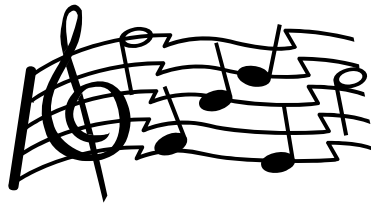
In **1981**, the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this church's founding (1856) was celebrated. The celebration was held at the then High School, now Middle School, in the cafeteria. Nancy (Bill) Wood made the cake with a picture of the church in colored icing. This was also the sesquicentennial of Lowell, and the church put a special float in the parade.



In **1982**, Rev. Greenwood served on the YMCA board and was Chairman of the board that hired Jim Hodges, Sr., as "Y" director for the Lowell branch. That same year the church purchased the Rittenger house, and Jim and Chris Hodges and family rented it from the church. Helen Look Daley, in **1982**, bequeathed to the church \$680,098 to be *"used as the Governing Board of the Church saw fit."* A permanent Look Fund was established in her name. She also left a considerable amount to the city of Lowell. Her generosity has benefited many through the ensuing years.



In **1984**, the church tore down the houses behind (west of) the present building and developed a parking lot. Street parking was all we had until that was completed in either '84 or '85. The Rittenger house had been the home of Howard Rittenger, remembered for his singing during worship - not so much for the quality of his voice, but for the volume and enthusiasm of his singing - perhaps a message to us all.



When Rev. Greenwood left in **1985**, Rev. David Hagens became Interim Minister. About a year after his arrival, the congregation decided to call him as Pastor. Since this was in violation of Conference rules for Interims, discussion ensued in the Association/Conference and an exception to the rule was granted. Rev. Hagens was concerned about the world and always included world issues in his prayers from the pulpit, raising congregational awareness. He was instrumental in getting and placing our first Peace Pole in the garden area on the south side of the sanctuary. He was pastor when the narthex was remodeled and the elevator added. David was also instrumental in upgrading Christian Education, hiring the first part time C.E. Director, Mrs. Eleanor Martin. Prior to this, the church school was run by a Superintendent, a willing and capable member of the congregation. This new paid position was possible through income from the Look Fund Endowment. David was very supportive and helpful to the Ingraham family during their adoption process and to other families at times of crisis. Some controversy arose during the latter part of his tenure, and he left in **1989**. (I have little insight into the issues involved, but the congregation was somewhat divided by the experience. However, the church recovered from this and became stronger through the ministry of the Interim Minister who followed.)



In **August of 1989**, Rev. Terry Tessari became the Interim Minister, seeking to heal and move this congregation into its new future. He served until Dec. of 1991. He lived in Portage, driving the distance to Lowell each Sunday morning, often barely able to make worship on time. Though actually only late a couple of times, he seemingly always drove in at the last minute. He often enjoyed Sunday dinners with congregational families following service. During his time with us, he did what an interim should do. He was very enthusiastic; and many members, unsettled by recent controversy, stayed or returned, as a result of his healing ministry.

## The 1990's

Dr. Roger LaWarre accepted a call as Pastor in **January, 1992**. He quickly established himself in the community as an enthusiastic and passionate leader in efforts of mission, ecumenism, justice and youth activities. A kitchen leak was repaired and the kitchen completely remodeled in his first year – probably just so he could flip pancakes on the new institution-sized cook-top for family, youth and Men's Fellowship gatherings. In his leisure time he enjoys fishing, hunting and being with his family – especially his grandchildren.



In **1993**, the congregation decided to paint and refurbish the sanctuary. The color, *silk ribbon*, was selected as a match to glass in our stained glass windows; but, as it appeared much "pinker" once painting was completed, it drew much comment and became an item of great discussion at the Congregational Meeting. Some changes were made, adding more white trim and white in the choir loft, as a compromise. As of this writing, it has remained the same - ten years and counting.



The New Dawn program – a high school education program for pregnant teens - moved from our building to new facilities created at the Runciman-Riverside School. This program, run by the local school district, had been housed in our church since its inception. Local FCC constitutional revisions, in **1994**, created a church council and a more comprehensive endowment board. We moved from a two Board system of Trustees and Deacons to a six Board system and Church Council, with each board having a representative on the Council, chaired by the Church Moderator and directed by the governing body, the congregation. "*Pennies for Lowell*" - a house repair program of the Board of Missions to help Lowell residents maintain and stay in their homes – began. In **October**, the YMCA and this church came to an agreement on a Day Care Program as a mission to the community. The YMCA of Lowell was contracted to run the program in our church school rooms.

A Mission Statement for this congregation, meant to be a guide for our next 10 years, was adopted in a **1995** Congregational Meeting. That same year C.E. Director, Eleanor Martin, retired from serving this church after 10 years of faithful and creative leadership. The outside of the church was painted. A newly formed Women's Fellowship began work on a new garden on the Spring St. side of the church. Youth Ministry first added a Boundary Waters Canoe Trip to their summer schedule to do group building in a wilderness setting of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota.



In **1996**, a new church sign was placed on the Hudson St. side of the church. The old sign faced Spring St. and offered limited visibility to people driving by. Doris Boyd, after many years as church treasurer, retires from that position.



In **1997**, church offices were remodeled and expanded at a cost of \$60,000, raised in part by the congregation, with the remainder paid from the Look Fund. The Endowment Board expanded the scholarship program of the church to include college-bound young people from the greater Lowell community, as well as from within our church. The church purchased the home at 416 Howard St., as a step toward possible future expansion of education facilities. The Cheerful Doers group "dissolved" and merged with the Esther Group. With declining membership in these two groups, a new Women's Fellowship began in **1998**, to replace them, and to work to include more of the women of the church. Discussions on the need to expand facilities began. The Council surveyed the boards and the congregation via a task force to determine needs that would be served by future expansion. Under the leadership of the Flat River Outreach Ministries planning committee, made up of members from this church, the Methodist, the Catholic and the Christian Reformed churches, the remodeling of the Old Baptist Church on Main and Jackson Street began. The Youth Ministry began a work service program that took young people to West Virginia to work with the Appalachia Service Project. They ended their stay in West Virginia with a river rafting trip.



"Y2K" became the buzz word in **1999** for concerns raised about computer crashes caused by the change into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Council convened a Fact Finding Task Force to determine the feasibility of staying and expanding at our present location or building a new facility at a new site. Congregational discussion continued. Church members helped financially and manually with local Habitat for Humanity projects.

## A New Millennium

**2000...**In the spring, our own Pastor LaWarre was honored as Lowell's *Person of the Year* in recognition of his energetic and enthusiastic contributions to our local community and its people. In **June**, the Flat River Outreach Ministry, Inc., first opened its doors for a ministry that included a Thrift Shop, a Food Pantry, and an Emergency Service program. Our Youth Ministry started a relationship with the Lakota Indians of the Ogala Nation on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, through the Association sponsored group "Re-Member," under the leadership of Rev. Keith Titus. In **July**, two van loads of youth and their leaders headed west for a week of discovery and mission. The congregation voted on **September 17** to move forward with expanding our church, giving a vote of confidence to explore both staying and expanding at this location and moving and building at a new location, provided one could be found. On **Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup>**, a Special Congregational meeting was called to discuss purchasing 19.2 acres one mile north of our present location. Purchase was not a statement that we would move, but a way to keep that option open as the Building Committee continued their research.



**2001...**With the leadership of our Director of Music, Megan MacNaughton, a Praise Band led us in special musical Praise Services the third Sunday of each month throughout the year. Our Deacons organized a Discernment Process of prayer and discussion to seek insight on God's leading in our church and our mission and ministry now and in the future. It was very successful with 52 families involved. A Congregational Meeting, on **June 10**, included a presentation by the Building Committee with the Council recommending, based on that presentation and the data gathered, that we move to a new location to expand our facilities. The motion was passed overwhelmingly and celebrated by the congregation. Under the revised constitution, the fiscal year was changed to be from **July 1** to **June 30** with two congregational meetings to be held each year - one in January for election of officers and Board reports, and one in June for budget adoption and financial reports. After three years of study, revised Endowment policies were presented to, and accepted by, the congregation. In **August**, interviews, by the Building Committee, began the process of hiring an architect and builder for our new church facilities.

**2002...**From **January 7-12<sup>th</sup>**, the Men's Fellowship sponsored a trip to South Dakota to Pine Ridge Reservation to do the plumbing in the facility to be used to house groups working on the reservation. All of the plumbing and hardware required for four showers, four toilets, four sinks, a complete kitchen and the addition of a new commercial water heater were added in four days of hard work. Amazingly, the weather was "balmy" - in the 40's - during the day. At our **January** Congregational Meeting the council recommended that Dan Vos Construction be hired as our construction company under a *Design/Build* format. The congregation approved the recommendation unanimously. A second adult work trip to South Dakota was completed in **June** and a Youth Ministry group, with CE Director Shannon Hanley and other adult leaders, traveled to the Pine Ridge Reservation for their second time late in the summer. In the fall, our building committee began to meet with our capital stewardship campaign consultant, Bob Farris, from Injoy Stewardship Services, to plan our "*Building together...building on Love*" campaign. In **December**, our journey led us on a Prayer Walk to the new property.



**2003...**As part of our ongoing preparation to strengthen our vision for moving from this building to a new church to be built one mile north of the present structure, on Lincoln Lake, Town Meetings were held to discuss and share our history - to catch a glimpse of the events from which our identity has come. Meetings were **held February 7, 8, 9 and 16**. A twelve minute video of pictures from our past was shown, followed by opportunities for discussion and sharing of memories. This has been a very important time for our congregation to touch our past and to know that we build a new future on the foundation of that past. There has been some grieving, much reminiscing and much gained insight and appreciation for who we are, as well as who we have been, as a church. Our spiritual journey toward the future has also included a Concert of Prayer (**January 26**), a 24 hour Day of Prayer (**February 28-March 1**), a Leadership Event (**March 8**), and a Celebration Event (**March 16**). **March 30, Victory Sunday**, marks the conclusion of one phase of our history and the beginning of another.