



OUR FIRST 155 YEARS

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF CHELSEA, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Years 1832-1843 New England Congregationalists from Vermont settled in Dexter Township which embraced the present townships of Manchester, Sharon, Sylvan, Lyndon, Freedom, and Bridgewater. Then founded what was called the Vermont Settlement. A school system was organized in 1834 and a school house was built. It was known as the Ira Spaulding School. After meeting a few years in the school house, agitation to build a church began. It was voted to adopt the Presbyterian form of government and the Presbyterian Church of Sylvan was formed. Eighteen persons joined as charter members. About 1842 trouble developed among members of the school district, which also affected the church, and the Pastor left. The school building was destroyed by a mob in the winter of 1843. The Church disbanded. History now brings us to the beginning of the FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF SYLVAN.

YEAR 1849, FEBRUARY 21ST. BIRTH OF OUR CHURCH.

First Congregational Church of Sylvan was the corner stone of our church today. The first Pastor was Josephus Morton. We don't know how long he served, but believe somewhere around 5-1/2 years. In June 1849 the Articles of Faith and Practice in use in Jacksonburg (Jackson, Michigan) Congregational Church; also they formed an affiliation with the General Association of Michigan and we were duly received in membership. The congregation consisted of 16 charter members of which three names were still in fond memory of some of our congregation at our 100year celebration. (Sears, Spaulding and Winans). For the next few years services were held in neighborhood school houses. Records do show that 32 new members were added and no one was dismissed. Before being admitted to church membership a pledge of abstinence from making, distributing or using intoxicating drinks, was required. Members could be excommunicated on second offense, and also for laxity in church attendance.

In 1851, because of the increased membership, the church moved its place of worship to a schoolhouse ½ mile south of Chelsea in Pierceville. The first Sunday School was organized in 1851.

In 1850, Elisha and James Congdon laid out the village of Chelsea on the Michigan Central Railroad. Because of this central location it was decided to build a church in Chelsea. Elisha Congdon donated the land where our present church stands. The warranty deed shows a value of \$100.00.

For eight years this church was the only church in Chelsea. It was truly a pioneer, with bare walls and floors, unshaded windows and low-backed pews. A large stove was

placed in the vestibule with smoke pipes running 2/3rds length of the auditorium, providing LITTLE heat and much dust and discomfort. The arrangement of the church was unusual, the pulpit being at the front and the choir on a raised platform at the rear. During the singing the congregation arose, turned their backs to the pastor and faced the music. Later this order was changed. The church grew over the next few years and in 1854 the church changed its name to; First Congregational Church of Chelsea. Records show the membership stood at 112. From 1868-1870, 43 new members were added. One of the members, Anna E. Sears, a donor of \$5000.00 endowment fund which our church still benefits today. You will note that one of our stained glass windows has her name on it.

In 1871, due to increased membership, it was decided to remodel and enlarge the church. The grading of Middle Street had left the church in a real elevated position. By removing the ground to street level and a few more feet a basement was added. We must note that the church was the second building in Chelsea to have a basement and furnace. The basement was used by many organizations in Chelsea. The dirt removed from the church property was used to fill a marsh where the old High School stands today. The church grew, but had a hard time meeting its pledges and considered that they had over-expanded the church. In February 1875 they sold the Lima property and combined the membership. Many of the members of the late 1890's continued their support of the church into the 1940's.

Between 1875 & 1890 five pastors served the church. During that same period, many ladies groups were formed, including a group known as the "Workers", later to join with the "Home Missionary Society" and was renamed "Women's Missionary Society". Even today we see the women of our church holding all of us together. (I sometimes wonder if we would have a church if it were not for the women of our congregation. That has nothing to do with history, but those are my thoughts).

Twenty three years after the completion of the second church building, a committee was approved to consider building of a new church. No decision was made at that time, but they did decide to build an addition on the back of the church for the singers. The Church and the Parsonage was destroyed by FIRE, Sunday February 18, 1894. The Estey Organ was saved and stored in the Wurster home to be installed later and gave service until 1907. Services were held in the Sylvan Township Hall during the next year.

A new church was built on the same property, dedicated January 1895. (We must note: Fire destroyed the church February 1894 and the new church was dedicated January 1895, just 11 months later at the total cost of \$7,500-7,700). After the fire it was deemed wiser to build the parsonage on a separate lot donated by Wm. Hatch in the next block east. The bell installed in the belfry had a unique inscription which reads:

I praise the True God,
I announce the Sabbath;
I call the people,
I arouse the indolent.

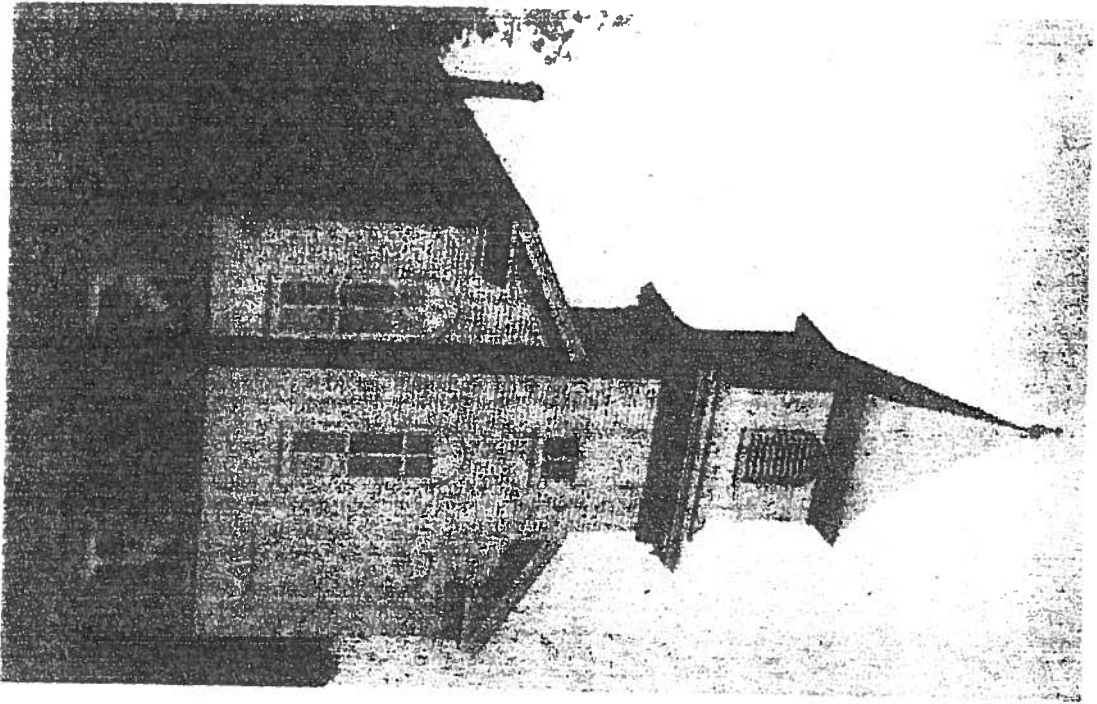
A new custom was inaugurated in our new church and the first wedding was to be held in the evening, but shortly before the appointed day it was decided it would be wiser to have weddings performed in the daylight because the newly installed village electric plant was very undependable and the lights had a habit of going out at the wrong time.

A tabloid size paper of May 1900 lists the services, and one can hardly believe that Sunday is a day of rest; 10:30-Regular Preaching Services, 11:45-Sabbath school, 3:00-Junior Christian Endeavor; 6:30-Christian Endeavor; 7:30-Evening Service; 7:30-Thursday evening prayer service. Mrs. Helene Steinbach was engaged as the first organist, followed by Earl V. Moore, future Dean of the University of Michigan, School of Music.

From 1911-1942, seven Pastors served the church. Confirmation classes were started in 1931 and continue until this today as needed. Depression Years, 1931-1938, were dark years as membership fell and collections diminished. The Pastors salary was cut from \$2,500 to 1,000. For a short time the church was without a resident Pastor.

In 1938 the church needed improvements and work was done during the summer and on Sunday afternoon. September 29, 1938 the church was rededicated. The 1940's brought many remodeling projects to the church and the parsonage. During the "War Years" of 1940's, when incomes were at a high level, the "Board of Trustees" took the opportunity to solicit funds for remodeling and improvements. The campaign was started in April 1945, and by 1946 nearly \$13,500 had been pledged. The 95th Anniversary of the church was celebrated February 1944 and a new church manual was adopted October 1945. Improvements continued during the 1940's; such as, the kitchen, kitchenette, newly furnished dining room. The alter, gradine and wainscot, were given in memory of Captain Kenneth Beach, by his Mother and his brothers. One brother was General Beach.

January 1949, Our 100th year. Records show a congregation of 262 members represented by 180 families in the parish; including an unusually strong and efficient group of officers and teachers. On December 5, 1960 the congregation voted to become a member of the "United Church of Christ", and our official name was changed to "First Congregational Church of Chelsea, United Church of Christ". During the period 1949-2004 (55 years), many loving projects have taken place in our church. Most of the church has been refurbished with carpet, pew cushions, paneling, remolded kitchen, main floor restroom, Pastors study remodeling and the rebuilding of the Belfry. In 1995, the Village installed a new lamppost in front of our church to light our way into the next 100years. With only 45 years remaining until our next celebration of our second 100 years we all look forward to our younger members to help carry the traditions of our church. At the 100 year celebration the following words best express the spirit and our aim of our church. "To bring a spirit of love to little children and high ideals to youth; inspiration to men and women in the midst of life; comfort, peace and fellowship to the aged; labor together under the love and leadership of Jesus for better world of brotherly love." With the loving leadership of Pastor Barb we are looking forward to the future.



The first church was dedicated in 1852. It was remodelled and appears above in 1871, and served the people until it was destroyed by the Indians in 1901.

