

HISTORY OF PLYMOUTH

Plymouth Church, Des Moines' first Congregational Church was gathered in December, 1857, with ten charter members, including the Reverend J. T. Cook, an ordained minister as well as a school principal. Mr. Cook served as pastor for eleven months and then returned to his teaching profession. Church services were held in "Mr. Allen's bank" and in Sherman's Hall until the church on Court Avenue was completed.

From reading the original records of Plymouth and on through its entire history, one is impressed by the outstanding pastoral and lay leadership. The ministers have been not only well educated and fine spiritual leaders, but were involved in local as well as national concerns; while many of the laymen were prominent business men and leaders in the community.

The second minister of Plymouth, J. M. Chamberlain, served part of his ministry as a chaplain in Georgia (with the Union army), and our church was a station in the underground railway.

The Reverend Henry S. De Forest, the next minister, wished to be remembered as having helped found the Des Moines City Library and as a member of the original Board of Directors. He left Plymouth to become the first president of Talladega College in Alabama.

Dr. A. L. Frisbie who served as our fourth pastor, was influential in the building of our second church structure to accomodate the expanding membership. The location was the corner of Seventh and Locust, the present site of the Ruan building. Doctor Frisbie founded seven satellite Congregational Churches in the Des Moines Area. As transportation improved, these churches gradually merged with the mother church, the last and best remembered being North Park, Greenwood and Waveland--the latter two merging when our present church at 42nd and Ingersoll was built.

In 1893, the Sunbeam Rescue Mission was organized by Byron C. Ward, a member of Plymouth, this mission being largely financed by the church. This sanctuary gave help to "fallen girls", stranded working women and "unfortunate young men".

A member of Plymouth founded the Roadside Settlement and received financial support from the church.

Francis J. Van Horn, who was called to Plymouth in 1899, had a motto, "A new church for a new century" and was instrumental in the building of the church at 8th and Pleasant. The organ was given by the Turner family, owners of the Des Moines Street Car system. One of these street cars is pictured here.

During Frank W. Hodgdon's ministry from 1903 to 1911, the membership of the church expanded greatly. The choir, always an important part of our church program, ^{GREW} ~~expanded~~ in the first decade of the new century to 100 members, many of whom were the finest musicians in Des Moines. It became THE CHOIR of the city. Plymouth has always maintained this tradition of outstanding music.

~~THE~~ The years from 1911 until 1921 while Dr. J. Edward Kirby was minister, were colorful in the history of the church. Doctor Kirby was a good business man and succeeded in putting Plymouth on a sound financial basis. Newspaper clippings from that era show that he also waged a personal war against "loan sharks" and he started the Morris Plan Bank in Des Moines. During this time, the Plymouth Playground Association was formed and an indoor/outdoor playground ~~at~~ for the use of all children in the community, with a professional director, became a part of our program. Also during these years, the Iowa Congregational Hospital was built, the brain child of Dr. George Royal of North Park Church, and received financial support from Plymouth. This building is today a part of the Bishop Drumm Convalescent Home.

These were also the hectic years of World War I when Plymouth Church took an active role in politics and war work. The soldiers stationed at Camp Dodge were welcomed each Sunday. In reading the old church programs, we noted that Sundays at Plymouth were geared especially for the soldiers--music, vespers, social events.

In 1926, during Dr. Burtis R. MacHatton's ministry, the 8th and Pleasant church was condemned by the city for the purpose of building Keosauqua Way. Doctor MacHatton conducted a fund-raising campaign for the new church to be built at 42nd and Ingersoll. It was his suggestion that "Love Never Faileth" be put over the altar of the church.

Dr. Stoddard Lane who came to Plymouth in 1929 had been a driver of a French ambulance during World War I and had received a Croix de Guerre decoration. His war experiences made him an ardent pacifist, and starting in November 1929, he always conducted an Armistice Day service in the interests of peace. He initiated many new ideas at Plymouth, such as changing the constitution to include one or more women on the Board of Trustees, establishing the Board of Religious Education, the Christmas Workshop, the Plymouth Youth Choir; he also attracted many new members to the church.

Stoddard Lane became well known in the community for his ecumenical work and exchanged pulpits with two Jewish Rabbis; as a result, our relations with the synagogues became extremely cordial. He was prominent in his work with the Iowa Round Table of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

Stoddard Lane died at his home after a four month illness, May 17, 1943. The two stained glass windows in the east wall of the sanctuary are in his memory.

Dr. Frederick M. Meek was pastor of Plymouth from 1943 to 1946, and in those three years accomplished the following things: he successfully waged a campaign to retire the debt of the church; added a full-time religious education director to the staff; started the custom of memorial gifts to the church; promoted the Iowa Inter-church council, a fore-runner of the Des Moines Council of Churches.

Dr. Fred Hoskins, one of the editors of the Congregational Book of Worship, was pastor of Plymouth from 1946 to 1950. He put a strong emphasis on social action, inter-church relations and Christian unity, and also established a strong youth program. He was a firm advocate of the church merger and worked tirelessly to this end. However, the congregation rejected the merger when the vote was taken.

Dr. Charles M. Houser, who came to Plymouth in 1950, will long be remembered for initiating the Thanksgiving Pilgrim Service--now one of the great traditions of our church and community. The following important happenings occurred during his pastorate: the mortgage was burned; the first Rhythmic Choir was born; the community house was named for Dr. and Mrs. Burling (Doctor Burling was the former beloved pastor of Greenwood Church); Plymouth joined the Des Moines Council of Churches; Lane Chapel was dedicated; the Plymouth Nursery School was founded in 1954.

In 1960, when Dr. James W. Lenhart was installed as pastor, he was President of the Homeland Ministries and one of the editors of the Pilgrim Hymnal. During his ministry at Plymouth, the congregation voted to become a part of the United Church of Christ (). Other important happenings were: a Casavante organ was purchased with memorial funds from several donors; the Turner Estate was settled, resulting in a large sum of money to the Women's Fellowship, enabling them to establish a trust fund to award annual college scholarships; a nursery school at Roadside Settlement was begun, and the Plymouth Blood Bank was established by the Board of Social Action.

Doctor Lenhart was a leader in Plymouth's purchase of the Pearson property across the street and the building of Plymouth Place, a retirement home for the well-elderly of modest income. He was also president of the Des Moines Council of Churches at the time Homes of Oakridge was planned and built. He initiated the Tenebrae Service on Maundy Thursday. He also played a major role in the plans for our new church addition.

Doctor Lenhart retired in 1977 and he and Mrs. Lenhart live in Sanibel Island, Florida where he is currently starting a new United Church of Christ.

Dr. Ford Forsyth, former director of the 17/76 Campaign was interim minister from September 1977 to June 1978. We are grateful for his wisdom and guidance during the critical period of searching for a new pastor, music director, demolition of Burling House, and the beginnings of our new church wing.

We give thanks to the Lord for the wisdom and leadership of all these fine men, members of their staffs and the thousands of lay workers. We members of Plymouth take pride in the positive impact our church has had in community concerns and are confident that future leadership will continue this tradition.