

God is Still Speaking,

The Beginning Years of the First Congregational United Church of Christ



Jessica Albert
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Introduction

“This is the joyous feast of the Lord and it is Jesus Christ who invites all of us to this table. We are invited to come from the north and the south and the east and the west exactly as we are and who we are to sit at the table with your Lord.” These words are spoken on the first Sunday of every month by either Reverend Thomas Payden or Reverend Deborah Payden at the First Congregational Church’s communion celebration. Bread is donated each communion by an individual member or family of the church. The bread is passed and each person (including nonmembers) is offered a piece. Each person holds his piece until the entire congregation has portion. They all eat their bread together to symbolize the unity of the congregation. Then small glasses of juice are passed around and each person drinks as the juice comes to him to symbolize the individuality of each person (juice is offered in lieu of wine as every person is invited to share in the communion, including small children). The congregation is made up of approximately 300 confirmed adult members. This number does not include unconfirmed adults or children who have not yet reached confirmation age (adolescents are invited to participate in the confirmation process when they enter the 8th grade). There are more than ten families who have attended this church for three generations and a handful that have attended for four generations or more. These families and countless others have attended church each Sunday in the same building erected in 1854 by the Church’s very first members.

Before the church was built, numerous families migrated from New England to the southeast corner of Wisconsin in the 1830s. This area was wide open and land was for the taking. The only Americans that had traveled here before were simply passing

through. One of the most prominent families that entered Wisconsin was the three-generation Rawson family from Massachusetts. Oliver Rawson, the patriarch of the family, began informal religious gatherings in his home shortly after settling his family in what was then known as Oak Creek. The families in attendance each brought their own religion with them. Even the passing missionaries that led many of the services were of different religions. The three main denominations represented were Baptist, Methodist, and Congregationalist. ¹ As the meetings grew, members began hosting their religious meetings in the newly built schoolhouse and eventually decided that a church building of their own was in order. Work began in the early 1850s and was completed in 1854. Services began and a permanent minister position was established. While it was eventually decided that the church would be a Congregational church, the Baptists and Methodists were also a part of the church body. Inevitably, tensions arose between practitioners of the varying religions and on more than one occasion, these tensions and differences were grave enough to bring the church to its knees and it considered disbanding. This is the story of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and how those who were truly devoted to their religion and their worship constructed a church and created a congregation, both of which are still a part of South Milwaukee today. ²

The History of Congregationalism

In the 16th century, England found itself in a serious religious predicament. The established religion of the country had changed numerous times according to the whims

¹ First Congregational Church, *125th Anniversary* (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: n.p., 1979), 8.

² The northeast corner of Oak Creek was incorporated as the Village of South Milwaukee in 1892. The Village of South Milwaukee, "After Thirty Years," (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: n.p., 1922), 2.

and beliefs of monarchs like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. While the Reformation had penetrated England at this time, there were some who felt it did not entirely represent their oppositions to the religion of the monarch. These individuals formed groups that met to discuss and compare their ideas of religion and Christianity with the practices of the established church. Some groups left England and formed churches in exile, while others who remained were under a constant threat of being discovered. Those who stayed and were discovered were forced to either disband or leave the country. Among those exiled from England was a group of a Congregational turn of mind, the Separatists.³

Separatism was becoming a more involved and powerful movement in Europe. The conservative pattern of the Elizabethan religious establishment disappointed many Christians, especially those who believed it to be unlike the pattern discerned in the New Testament. Many met secretly in “privy churches.” Despite the risk of being caught and the receiving punishments in various forms, these clandestine meetings continued with more and more disenchanted Christians joining and forming their own private meetings. Robert Brown and Robert Harrison, both graduates of the Corpus Christi College in England, began a Separatist church around 1580. Its members made a formal covenant, elected officers, established regulations and discipline practices, and arranged regular meetings.⁴ The authorities tried to repress the church and their efforts forced the church and its congregation into exile. Most of these Separatists fled to Middleburg, Holland and continued on their own religious path. Another Separatist Church that found itself exiled from England for their practices but were welcomed with open arms in Germany.⁵ The

³ Mervin M Deems and Frederick L Fagley, “Historical Sketches of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church,” (n.p., n.d.), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Reformed Evangelical City Fathers of Frankfurt gave the members a church building which allowed them to worship freely and discuss openly without any outside threat from the country's government.⁶

Congregationalism emerged as a distinct sect of Christianity in England in the mid-17th century. Historically, Congregationalism was founded by determined Christian men who wished to form churches where all of the members would be Christians. These men, after reading the New Testament, "discovered the Church to be separate from any worldly association in the sense that it was founded by Christ."⁷ These men also believed that wherever Christ was, there was the Church, and whenever a few gathered in His name, there is His Church.⁸ This is the main component of Congregationalism. Christ is the head of the Church and His Church is in many places at many times. A large part of why the Congregationalists broke away from the Church of England was because a mortal man was attempting to take the place of Christ in the Church. Whether it was a monarch or a pope was of no consequence. W. B. Selbie quotes Dr. Fairbairn in his book, *Congregationalism*, and Dr. Fairborn wrote that in the independent idea of the Church, four determinative elements existed. A Church is: 1) a society of the godly, 2) instituted to express the religious ideals of Christ, individually and collectively, 3) capable of extensions only when said extension is by a means which produces faith, and 4) autonomous and authoritative.⁹

Many of those who made the pilgrimage to the New World left Europe because they were persecuted for their religion. Those from the Separatist movements settled

⁶ Deems and Fagley, 3.

⁷ W. B. Selbie, "Congregationalism," (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1927), 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dr. Fairchild, Congregational Union Jubilee lectures, 51-52, as quoted in Selbie, 13.

mainly the regions around the Massachusetts Bay and the Connecticut River Valley. Many congregations were established in the region with the approval of the secular government. These early New England churches did not consider themselves a separate sect of Christianity and did not give their new denomination a name. They simply considered themselves local manifestations of the Church of Christ. They did not have a hierarchal religious government. Each church was self-governing and regarded as the institute responsible for the religious well-being of the communities in which they were established. The earliest document revealing American Congregational faith is the Cambridge Platform of 1648. This “Great Charter” of Congregationalism professed the intention to practice the ideas behind the aforementioned elements of the Church, but also the necessity of all churches in “preserving Church-communion one with another, because they are all united unto Christ.”¹⁰

The Congregationalist movement remained principally in New England for a century and one half after the establishment of Plymouth in 1620. It was the first Separatist denomination to pioneer in the Northwest Territory. Those travelers who ventured out into the new territory brought their religion with them and established churches and schools. There is one party in particular most responsible for the spreading of the Congregationalist way. Samuel J Mills, a graduate of Williams College, joined with several “Brethren” with the shared purpose of evangelizing the world. Other like-minded Christians joined them later and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was founded and volunteers were sent abroad.¹¹ It wasn’t until 1826

¹⁰ Deems and Fagley, 6.

¹¹ Gaius Glenn Atkins, “An Adventure in Liberty,” (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1947), 24

that separate state missionary societies joined together to create the American Home Missionary society, which concentrated on spreading the word of God into the West.¹²

Settling in Wisconsin

OAK CREEK

GREEN BAY ROAD

Pioneer Road

Chicago to Green Bay

Established by the Federal Government

1832

These words are inscribed on a bronze plaque affixed to a large stone marker on what is now Packard Avenue in Cudahy, Wisconsin. Previously a part of Oak Creek, this road was used by the military to transport supplies to and from Fort Dearborn (now Chicago) and Fort Howard (now Green Bay).¹³ This marker is the first indicator of regular visits by white individuals to this area. It was not until a few years later, in the summer of 1835, that members of parties traveling this road decided to stop along this section and establish the first white settlement in this locale.¹⁴ Word spread among the east coast that the soil was fertile, lumber abundant, and water plentiful. Of those attracted to these promising lands was Elihu Higgins of Franklin, Massachusetts. After traveling by horse wagon to the region and finding, to his satisfaction, that the land was all that it promised, he sent word back to his father-in-law, Oliver Rawson, telling him of his findings. Elihu Higgins sent for his family to join him in Wisconsin and encouraged Oliver Rawson to come as well and bring his own family of eleven.¹⁵ In the next few years, the area saw a slow but

¹² Deems and Fagley, 8.

¹³ "After Thirty Years," 1.

¹⁴ South Milwaukee Centennial, Inc., "Through the Years," (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: n.p., 1935), 3.

¹⁵ T. J. Reed, "An Historical Sketch of South Milwaukee," in the Jubilee Book, (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: First Congregational Church, 1908), 36.

steady growth in population and in 1838, under the Pre-emption Act, the government officially opened land in the Northwest Territory for sale at \$1.25 per acre.¹⁶ Despite the attractive prices, the Panic of 1837, coupled with the lack of a convenient source of supplies, hindered the settlement's growth.¹⁷ Only forty families had relocated within the town's borders in the late 1830s because the economic difficulties prevented made it difficult to settle for many travelers.¹⁸

Religious Gatherings

Feeling the need for religious worship, Oliver Rawson began hosting religious meetings in his home in 1837. Located roughly in the center of the recent settlement, Oliver Rawson's home was easily accessible to residents and clergymen alike. These meetings were attended by Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists. The services were conducted primarily by clergymen and elders from Milwaukee, Wauwatosa, and Racine and the primary families in attendance were the Dibleys, the Fowles, the Baldwins, and the Stockwells.¹⁹ For these families, music was a necessity for early services as much as the sermon and

Reports have it that in the 1830s, a melodeon used to be folded up and carried from Uncle George Howe's house to Mr. Oliver Rawson's in a clothes basket ... before the days of the melodeon, and some time after, Mr. Joe Dibley used to accompany the voices on a flute. If for any reason flute and melodeon were both missing, a tuning fork was relied on.²⁰

¹⁶ The City of South Milwaukee, "The History of South Milwaukee," <http://www.ci.south-milwaukee.wi.us/history.htm> (accessed 19 March, 2007).

¹⁷ "The Panic of 1837 was an economic depression, one of the most severe financial crises in the history of the United States. The Panic was built on a speculative fever. The bubble burst on May 10, 1837 in New York City, when every bank stopped payment in specie (gold and silver coinage). The Panic was followed by a five-year depression, with the failure of banks and record unemployment levels." Wikipedia, "The panic of 1837," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panic_of_1837 (accessed 19 March 2007).

¹⁸ "Through the Years," 3.

¹⁹ "First Congregational Church: Centennial 1854-1954," (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: n.p., 1954), 5.

²⁰ "First Congregational Church: Centennial 1854-1954," page 21.

Once the depression of the late 1830s had passed, the steady growth of the area recurred and the religious meetings at Oliver Rawson's house became much more popular. Since a place and time had been established already, more and more settlers came to the house rather than attempting to host gatherings of their own. In 1840, a schoolhouse for District No. 1 was built on what is now North Chicago Avenue, less than a block south from where the current church building stands.²¹ This schoolhouse was the first non-residential building in the area to be used steadily for religious purposes. The frame building was built with lumber shaped by John Fowle's sawmill, located on the mouth of the creek.²² The plans for the inside of the classroom followed a very common pattern of the day. Desks were placed all around the perimeter of the classroom and fastened to the walls. The only source of heat, a box stove, was placed in the center of the building.²³ This building was ideal for the type of religious meetings that were most likely held in Oliver Rawson's home. Instead of the attendees sitting at desks, all facing one direction, with the clergyman or elder standing at the front of the classroom, the families were allowed to face each other and engage in discussion and conversation with one another. During the first winter the schoolhouse was occupied, students studied at the log home of William Shew as the schoolhouse funds fell short and the building was not yet completed. While there is no record of where the religious meetings were held during this time, it would be safe to assume that meetings were once again held at Oliver Rawson's residence. If the schoolhouse provided substandard conditions for class sessions, it is likely the schoolhouse was also unfit to house religious services.

²¹ "Through the Years," 9.

²² C. H. Lewis, "Early History of the Church During Years 1835 to 1873," in *The Jubilee Book* (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: First Congregational Church, 1908), 8.

²³ *Ibid.*

Organizing Religion

The first records of any church organization being formed actually occurred before the first official town meetings were held and leaders were established. However, the purpose of the April 1, 1842 meeting was not to discuss the future of a Congregational church, but to discuss the organization of a Baptist church. H. Charles Clark, the first church to begin recording meeting minutes, reported that this first meeting was opened with song and prayer and lead by Elder Johnathan Blake, a founding father of the town of South Milwaukee. Elder Blake set forth the Articles of Faith and Practice to be followed by the congregation. These articles were unanimously accepted by those in attendance; they felt the articles wholly expressed their beliefs. Among these articles, there are statements and declarations that, while used regarding the Baptist church being created, define Congregationalism quite well. One of those very Congregationalist statements reads, “We believe that the government of the church belongs exclusively to itself, and when there is a division upon any question a majority of the male members must decide.”²⁴ The Constitution of the First Congregational Church similarly states, “The government of this church is vested in its members who reserve to themselves final control in all matter pertaining to this Church.”²⁵ Although the residents, who were of mixed religions, were creating a constitution for a Baptist church, the influence of Congregationalism did not go unnoticed. Members of the new Baptist church included the Dibley, Stockwell, and Fowle families. Blending the differing religious views of these families created some doubt as to whether or not the new church would be accepted by the already existing Baptist churches in the area. Church records read, “A resolution

²⁴ The word “male” was expunged from this article by vote of the church May 1, 1846. “Through the Years,” 7.

²⁵ First Congregational Church Constitution (1968), art. 5.

was then passed to invite the following Baptist churches to meet us in council the second Wednesday of the present month to see whether they can fellowship us as a church, viz: The Milwaukee, Greenfield, Vernon, Prairieville, Racine, and Mount Pleasant churches.”²⁶ By April 13th, Brother Blake and Brother Dibley served as delegates of the church and met with representatives of other churches in the area seeking acceptance of the new Baptist church. After a warm reception by local churches, Brother Stockwell joined his bretheren and the delegates formed a committee which was appointed for the purpose of seeking official recognition from the Association of Churches. It was granted by June 22nd, 1842. Now that the church was officially recognized, it needed an official home, but this process proved much more difficult and lengthy than anticipated. Under the later date of September 28, 1844, the records indicate that (male) church members voted to confer with a Mr. Hawks in regards to obtaining land on which to build the church. One year and five months later, a follow-up note appears declaring the above committee “unsuccessful in this business for which they were appointed.”²⁷

Discipline was another difficulty church members had to confront. Discipline and scolding began at Oliver Rawson’s house. One of the men once made a comment that the minister leading the worship that day would not tolerate. The comment itself is unknown, but it was offensive enough to cause the minister to shout, “If – if – I had you at my home I’d whip you.”²⁸ Not only does this suggest that certain behaviors were not tolerated by the meeting’s leader, but the minister almost suggests that other members should take an active role in quashing conduct unbecoming a religious person, especially during a time of worship. This set the pace for discipline to be institutionalized within the new Baptist

²⁶ “Through the Years,” 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Lewis, 7

church. Records from the church indicate how watchful members were of each other.

There are several recorded incidents where the new church had to take action against its members. The notes read as follows:

Feb. 16, 1845. Vote that Bro. Joseph Dibley and Bro. C. H. Clark be a committee to visit Bro. _____ and see why he absents himself from communion and the meetings of the church.
June 22, 1845. Took up the case of Bro. _____, who had absented himself from the meetings of the church and was accused of using profane language and of violating the Sabbath ... and showing before the world an angry unchristian spirit.²⁹

Members of the congregation came and went and some were even expelled from the church for their unchristian actions. Despite the formality finally established by the religious gatherers, the church's legislative body was unable to keep a steady membership. This growing dissention caused Pastor William Clack on March 17th, 1851 to write:

Instead of the church coming together to renew their covenant engagement and transact the business of the church of which they had been duly notified the day before, only two Bretheren preasant [sic] and no sister. A worse state of things could not exist. The rules of our faith and practice are of no use. It appears to me that God has in his Providence sent me here as a victim [sic] to be sacrificed at the shrine of contention. God's will be done.³⁰

The congregation disbanded. With the breaking up of the congregation and the failure of the Baptist church, the opportunity to create a Congregational Church emerged. Shortly after the Baptist church and its members disbanded, a new Constitution and its Bye Laws were adopted by religious residents:

We the undersigned inhabitants of Oak Creek & vicinity feeling it to be our privilege to co-operate with the 1st Congregational Church here to be established in sustaining the perpetuating gospel ordinances and institutions do form ourselves into a religious society & for our better regulation adopt the following Constitution.³¹

Among the early signers of this constitution were male members from the Rawson, Baldwin, Fowle, and Dibley families.

²⁹ "Through the Years," 7.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

A Religious Home of their Own

By this time, all family members were attending services, including small children. Foot stoves, quilts, and heavy blankets made appearances every week at the schoolhouse to ensure comfort to those in attendance. Families arrived in the morning and after morning services, they consumed the noon lunch they had brought from home, and prepared themselves for the afternoon service. This filled their spiritual needs as well as their social needs in a time where neighbors were less abundant than they were on the east coast.³² By the time the schoolhouse construction was finally completed in 1843, members of the church had been discussing the need for a religious home of their own. It was clear they needed a church. While the idea of a church building was discussed before the schoolhouse was utilized, the economic depression of the late 1830s affected the income of the new settlers.³³ Many pioneers of the region struggled just to pay the \$1.25 an acre for the claim they had acquired. Gathering the financial resources during these years to construct a church was impossible.³⁴ The first attempt at starting the building process was in 1844, but the planned progress came to an immediate halt when The Baptist church's attempt to obtain land from Mr. Hawkes failed. It was not until years later, in 1850, when the new church building became a real possibility. Huron Beckwith presented the deed to a piece of his land to the Congregational Society of Oak Creek.³⁵ The Congregational Society of Boston became involved and made a sum of money available for a building with the stipulation that the same amount of money was raised by

³² Lewis, 9.

³³ "Glimpses of Yesterday," 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lewis, 11.

the congregation. The exact sum was never recorded.³⁶ The patriarchs of the families faced the challenge of securing the extra money needed to construct the church. E. D. Holton, a pioneer of Milwaukee and an active member of the Grand Avenue Congregational Church, was anxious to assist in any work which would benefit his regional neighbors and religious brethren. On November 30, 1853, a gift of \$225.00 was promised to the church under the condition that the church be completed no later than November 30, 1854.³⁷ Now the work began in earnest. A contract was found and its details documented in the Jubilee Book, a collection of articles and papers written by church members:

Luke Beckwith does covenant and promise that by the 15th of November, 1854, he will, in a good a workmanlike manner, well and substantially, finish the building known as the Congregational Church, according to draft and explanations hereby agreed upon, Mr. Beckwith to be paid \$150.00.³⁸

There were also receipts kept which are declarations of payments received and bills for supplies. Jesse Baldwin completed all of the mason work with the help of just one man during the plastering stage and a copy of the bill from him was kept by the church. The sawmills of the town not only provided the contractors with lumber, but planed the lumber as well. Resident John Whitmore was contracted out to put the finishing touches on the building.³⁹ Members of the congregation lent their helping hands to the construction of the church. Those who could not be paid in full accepted pews in lieu of the monetary payment. The quality of the work has been described by many and those feelings have been encapsulated in the following quotes: "Their fine workmanship is evidenced by the fact that the walls of the present sanctuary were the original four walls

³⁶ Lewis, 11.

³⁷ "First Congregational Church: Centennial 1854-1954," 6.

³⁸ Lewis, 11.

³⁹ Ibid.

of the first sanctuary,”⁴⁰ and “that his work was well done is attested by the fact that the building withstood the ravages of time and weather for over half a century, practically as it was first designed.”⁴¹ The second quote refers to the fifty-four years the building stood before any renovations were needed or remodeling done. To raise the money to pay for this workmanship, pews were sold to congregation members for \$15.00, \$25.00, or \$50.00, depending on their location within the sanctuary. All the pews were sold except for the first two rows. These were preserved for mourners on funeral occasions.⁴² The building was nearly finished by November, 1854 and was dedicated on July 26, 1855. Despite the later dedication date, the church celebrates its official anniversary in November.

Along with the new church building came something else new to the members of the congregation: church debt. In January 1855, a festival was held inside the church to raise money to pay off the church’s initial bills. Fundraising activities, such as mite parties, involved all members of the church, including the children. Mr. Rawson became popular among the children for “sugaring off.” He fashioned a cornucopia made of left over wallpaper and filled it with raisins, popcorn, and various candies. These were sold for five cents each and the selling of the cornucopias became a tradition in the church for many years. If a child was not fortunate enough to afford the five cent cost, Jerry McCreedy, an adult church member, became their best friend; he provided each unfortunate child with the five cents they needed to partake in the cornucopia activity with the rest of the children. The arrival of ice cream to Oak Creek occurred during this time and Jerry McCreedy’s relative, George McCreedy, opened up his house on many

⁴⁰ “Glimpses of Yesterday,” 2.

⁴¹ The Village of South Milwaukee, “After Thirty Years,” (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: n.p., 1922), 1.

⁴² Lewis, 12.

evenings to host ice cream parties. Ice cream was made and sold here and the money gathered went to pay off the debt. Luther Rawson, Oliver's son, donated enough money from his personal income to pay off the rest of the church's arrears.

Although the congregation's effort finally manifested into a church building of their own and the debt repaid, the congregation members still had difficulties keeping their faith alive. Dissention still remained between members of the different faiths, despite the previous agreement of establishing the church as Congregational. The Methodist and Baptist faiths were still represented during the time of the church building and some members were reluctant to give up their own religious beliefs and creed. However, the community, with all their differences, had faith in one underlying thought: the uplift of the community by the church and the Bible. In the years preceding the building's completion, the congregation underwent major reorganization. Despite the failure of the Baptist church, Baptist records were still kept until January 1, 1854. Then, their records ceased and the Congregationalist church and its records sustained.⁴³

The congregation continued its attempts to improve and retain some stability and it started with the minister position. The first Congregational minister to provide services every Sunday on a regular basis was Mr. Shirrell. Hailing from Ripon, Wisconsin, Mr. Shirrell first came to the Milwaukee area in the 1850s to preach on alternate Sundays to the Rawson clan while preaching in Caledonia (just south of Milwaukee County) on the other Sundays. The Centennial pamphlet created for the church states "Now the records jump to 1865. We know the church was active because it became headquarters for volunteer work during the Civil War. It was the receiving point of things sent for the

⁴³ "First Congregational Church: Centennial 1854-1954," 7.

comfort and need of the soldiers.”⁴⁴ After this, the only records available for this time reveal that in 1867, the Milwaukee Church donated the Congregational church’s first bell. It was a cast iron bell that sported cracks, possibly acquired during its transportation to the church.⁴⁵

Keeping the Faith

The stability of the church was not to last. Only six years later, in 1873, the church entered a period of inactivity, again because of conflicts that arose between the members of the different sects of Christianity. While the congregation had declared themselves Congregationalist, the Methodist and Baptist tendencies of many members interfered with the religious harmony of the new church. The men and women were very fixed in their conflicting beliefs and creeds and all were devoted Christians, yet they were disinclined to surrender any of their cherished ways and “naturally the progress of spiritual growth was much impaired.”⁴⁶ In a few short years, once again, only three members of the congregation remained. They were three women – Mrs. Martin Hobart, Mrs. Adin Hobart, and Miss Carrie Hobart -- each representing a generation of the Hobart family.⁴⁷ J. W. Leonard described the situation by saying, “the church seems to be at a low tide, the light all but out. We find, however, the fire smoldering; all that it needed was stirring up and rearranging.”⁴⁸ During the spring of 1874, Reverend D. R. Anderson, a student of the Chicago Theological Seminary graduate, was recruited to

⁴⁴ “First Congregational Church: Centennial 1854-1954,” 8

⁴⁵ Lewis, 18.

⁴⁶ J. W. Leonard, "The period from 1873 to 1908," in *The Jubilee Book* (South Milwaukee, Wisconsin: First Congregational Church, 1908), 20.

⁴⁷ Leonard, 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

occupy the pulpit for four months during summer vacation. However, the Reverend stayed and preached here until 1878. He was the first Reverend to consistently preach at the church for more than three years. The majority of ministers that came to preach before Reverend Anderson stayed for only one year or less. Reverend Anderson had an enormous task ahead of him. He came into the church when it was at one of its lowest points. His sole mission when he first took over as the new preacher was to rebuild the congregation. He won over the people by emphasizing a broader, more liberal view of the church and its people's needs and brought forward the concept of brotherly love and fellowship. Reverend Anderson downplayed the minute differences that existed between the represented religions. The people reorganized, once again, and the United Church of Christ of Oak Creek was established. A new declaration, confession of faith, a constitution, and a covenant were drawn up and submitted for approval to a committee consisting of three previous occupiers of the pulpit. The new plan was approved. From here, the church's congregation increased to sixty-one. The new congregation flourished and each member devoted themselves to the spiritual growth of the congregation. Once again, Leonard describes quite well the condition of the congregation by saying:

One cannot help but be impressed with the wonderful Christian love and influence that was brought to bear upon the people in the removal of the stumbling blocks which had been keeping them apart, and in bringing them into the unity of spirit and brotherly fellowship where much good was accomplished.⁴⁹

It was under the leadership of Reverend Anderson that the church regained its stability. Since the time of Reverend Anderson, the church congregation has remained secure in its beliefs and goals and has never again been in danger of disbanding due to dissention

⁴⁹ Leonard, 22

among its members. The congregation and the church building stand today as they had in 1854, stable and devoted.

Conclusion

Throughout the years, the congregation has not remained unchanged; it is a fluid entity. Members have come and gone but for every one that left, there are many who stayed. No one is entirely sure why the Congregationalist Church succeeded where the Baptist one had failed or why the Congregationalists fought continually to keep the church alive when there were only a few members left. Reverend Thomas Payden, the current minister of the Church, and Dawn Albert, a former Catholic and now 15-year member of First Congregational, give us some insight into what the Congregationalist religion provides for its members that other Christian faiths cannot offer or choose not to offer.

In an interview with Reverend Payden, he explained several reasons why he thought people were interested in the Congregational religion. He stated that many people are “disenchanted with whatever faith or tradition they had been familiar with” when they were younger. While the activities of the children of the church were not frequently recorded, they played a considerable role in the church in the past and they continue to today. They provide music (either vocally or instrumentally), they participate in a special children’s message during the church service, and they serve as acolytes and lay readers. The Sunday school classes often participate in art projects that habitually decorate the inside walls of the church. The “presence and honoring of children in the life of the congregation” is something that encourages those seeking a new church to come back to

the First Congregational after their first experience there. While the children were unable to help with the building of the church directly in the 1850s, they assisted in the fundraising process. Also, the Congregational religion is open to more interpretation than other sects of Christianity, which makes newcomers feel more at ease when first entering the church and longtime members more comfortable in questioning their beliefs. Questioning your beliefs is actually encouraged at First Congregational. As Reverend Deborah Payden once asked, “How can you believe in something if you haven’t questioned it?” Reverend Payden mentioned that First Congregational’s members “appreciate being able to question and struggle with their faith rather than having it spoon-fed to them.”⁵⁰ The open interpretation to this belief system is described quite well in Max Ehrmann’s poem, *Desiderata*, when he says, “Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be.”

Dawn Albert grew up in the Catholic Church. Her mother, a Catholic, was forced to elope in order to marry a Lutheran man. Growing up, Dawn was exposed to both faiths. The former did not allow her to actively participate in the life of the church because she was a child and “children were not meant to be seen or heard; they were never a part of any service,” and the latter because she was a woman and women were not only prohibited from participating in the service, but were refused a voice in regard to matters of the church. However, Dawn was not allowed to choose which church to attend. She was told by her mother that if she was not raised Catholic, her mother would be excommunicated from her church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Dawn married Merlyn, another Catholic-raised individual, and both decided to leave the Catholic Church and search for a new religious home. Dawn declined to continue with Catholicism because

⁵⁰ Reverend Thomas Payden, interview by author, 21 April 2007, phone interview.

some of her beliefs were condoned by that religion. First Congregational allowed Dawn to worship freely without sacrificing her voice regarding her personal beliefs about clerical marriage, birth control, the lack of ordained women, and the role of children in the church. The Reverends Payden are known to the congregation as “Tom and Debbie” whether they are in the pulpit, at a church picnic, or at the grocery store, and this makes Dawn feel more like an equal in the church and she feels it gives the church a greater sense of community.⁵¹

The factors expressed in the preceding paragraphs are just a few reasons why people have been attracted to Congregationalism and why many have chosen to continue practicing their faith in a Congregationalist church. When Oliver Rawson initiated religious meetings at his house and when those meetings were transferred to the schoolhouse, every person was involved in the conversations and in helping create the church community. Every person, including children, lent a hand in raising money for the new church building and every person had the honor of celebrating its completion. While there were many struggles to get the church started and keep the congregation maintained, the Congregationalists put forth a fervent effort to strengthen the church when it was weak. The Congregationalists in South Milwaukee today put forth the same effort and dedication into the church, and arguably, almost all would say that they get much more out of the church than what they put into it. Whatever their initial interests in the church are, enough individuals and families have devoted themselves to the First Congregational United Church of Christ over the past 153 years to construct a church and a congregation that has, so far, withstood countless tests of time.

⁵¹ Dawn Albert, interview by the author, 23 April 2007.

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