

# The History of the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves

The First Congregational Church of Webster Groves was founded on January 31, 1866, when ten residents – most of them New England transplants – signed a Covenant binding them together as a Christian community.

Until then, those same ten had been members of the nearby Rock Hill Presbyterian Church. With the growth of that community, it had become clear that another church would be needed to serve the vicinity.

However, the New England transplants didn't desire another Presbyterian church and instead longed for the Congregational churches of their youth – self-determining Christian associations they felt were more aligned with the First Century Church the disciples of Jesus had created.

And although the Congregationalist gospel message was overall very similar to the Presbyterians' message, the two groups differed on an important issue: slavery.

Congregationalists recognized the inherent equality and dignity of all human beings and their commensurate civil rights, whereas the Rock Hill Presbyterian community had continued to welcome slaveholders into membership. Despite the fact that the Rock Hill church permitted slave laborers to worship with them, and accepted their volunteer labor to install the church roof, the Black folk were segregated at the back of the sanctuary. By contrast, this being a few months after the end of the Civil War, the Congregationalists were of the opinion that they had kept silent for too long about the sinful status quo of slavery.

Our original ten church members invited all “the Christians at Webster Groves” to join them in the formation of this new church, but loyalists to the Presbytery dashed any hopes that the “First Church” of Webster Groves would be the only church in the community.

In February, First Congregational Church worship services began in the Chapel Grove Seminary building – an elementary school that had been recently established by three of First Church's original members for their daughters. A tower was attached to the school building in order to house the bell purchased by William M. Plant and the employees of his Plant Seed Co.

By April 1866, a movement had begun among First Congregational members to lay the groundwork for the formation of the First Baptist Church. This would be a gathering of local African American Christians. First Congregational members, the former missionaries Rev. William & Clementine Porter, divided their property so that newly freed Black people could own homes with theirs alongside the Union Pacific tracks.

At First Congregational's directive, the Porters established a Board of Directors for the First Baptist Church, comprised both of First Church members and Webster Groves Presbyterian members (founded in March 1866). The original board members sold their seats at \$25 apiece to the subdivision residents, so that the African American church would be led by its own members and a building fund established. First Baptist began meeting in November 1866 in a building at the northwest corner of Porter's subdivision.



1871 Church Building

In 1871 First Congregational got an upgrade from the school building when a small stone structure was erected to house the congregation. This sufficed until 1893 when a grand sanctuary was constructed to accommodate the congregation's growth under its first really successful pastor, Rev. John M. Sutherland.



Church in 1920s

Shortly after the incorporation of Webster Groves as a city in 1896, Rev. Sutherland stepped aside due to health concerns. He was succeeded by the dynamic and oftentimes controversial Rev. Charles L. Kloss. In 1900, Kloss drafted a new “creed” for the congregation to affirm weekly. Remarkably basic in its statement, the generality of Kloss’ creed matched well the breadth of religious perspectives his church welcomed:

*I believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. I believe that Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life. I believe in the clean heart, the unworldly life, and the service of love He taught and exemplified. I accept His Spirit and His teaching.*

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves would speak these words nearly every Sunday for 84 years. Church members stopped repeating it only when the congregation became divided over the creed’s lack of inclusive language representing God.

- In the meantime, a number of developments demonstrated the church’s dedication to the equality and dignity of all:
- In 1921, following the death of church member Edward Studley Hart, a nephew of an original members of the church and a great advocate for women’s rights, a stained glass window was installed in his memory. It depicts Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount and surrounded by eleven disciples — eleven female disciples.
- In 1943, in opposition to the U.S. government’s internment of Japanese Americans, First Congregational Church became the spiritual home for two families released from camps in Utah and Arkansas. One of these was the family of Chiura Obata, an artist whose sumi and watercolor painting had made him an instructor at the University of California – Berkeley. Our church’s Jubilee symbol is based on the strokes of Obata’s brush, reminding us of both God’s beauty and justice.
- A new Covenant was drafted in 1976 and, in 1984, it replaced the Creed of 1900 as the statement repeated each week in worship which summarizes the commitment of our church community.
- With First Baptist Church in 1991, First Congregational began observing a Celebration of the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. It became a community-wide Celebration in 1996 and continues to this day as Webster Groves and Rock Hill’s annual march, dinner, and celebration.
- In 2008 First Congregational Church approved a resolution to become “Open and Affirming” of all people, “welcoming everyone regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation or socio-economic background.”

## **Covenant of 1976**

*We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together:*

*To seek to know the will of God,*

*To experience the joy and struggle of discipleship,*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and*

*To work for peace and justice among all people.*

*We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.*

## **Denominational History**

Our faith forebearers — the Congregationalists — were invested in their church and in their world. The earliest Congregationalists were the Pilgrims and Puritans of New England who embodied faith and justice in numerous ways:

- Established the first university in the New World when they founded Harvard in 1636
- Hosted the Boston Tea Party at Old South Church in 1773
- Hid the Liberty Bell beneath the floor in Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, PA when the British took Philadelphia in 1777
- Were active in missions, founding the first foreign mission society in America (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission)
- After the Civil War, established more than 500 schools across the South and colleges for African Americans.

In every movement for justice and equality in our country, Christians in our tradition (now, the United Church of Christ) have stood with others struggling in Christ's name to bring hope and change. The UCC formed in 1957 out of a merger of four strains of justice-minded Christianity (Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed).