

A Beacon of Light



A History of the

United
Church of
Wayland

Written for the
50th Anniversary

1970—2020

Historical Documents
and primary source material
compiled by Joyce McAllister



Original History
of United Church of Wayland
written by David Young

2020

50 Anniversary History
of United Church of Wayland
Written by Gail Hollinger

August, 2021
Wayland, Michigan

Dedicated to

Joyce
McAllister

Charter Member
and Historian of
United Church of Wayland

Third Generation member
of the Disciples Church of Christ



Without whom
we would have
no history.

With our grateful thanks.

August, 2021

INTRODUCTION



Can two churches, each with their own traditions and buildings, abandon their historic homes and build a completely new church - together? The answer is a resounding yes! We know this because it's what happened in Wayland, Michigan fifty years ago when the Wayland Christian Church - Disciples of Christ (DOC) and Congregational Church - United Church of Christ (UCC) decided to blend their congregations, leaving the church buildings they had occupied for over a century, establishing a completely new church, in a completely new building.

The two churches were located only blocks from each other on Superior Street, both drawing their members from the same neighborhoods so that many of the future members of United Church of Wayland were already friends. Several things led to the merger. Each congregation was dealing with an aging and

outdated building. Roofs leaked and floors were so flimsy that bringing in a casket for a funeral service was ill advised. Space was limited and overall, the two buildings were simply inadequate for their congregations' needs. Add to this that the two congregations often engaged in



The United Church of Wayland logo combines the symbols of our parent churches, the Christian Church on the right and United Church of Christ on the left. They are set on a rainbow background to recall our commitment to be Open and Affirming.

joint projects using one building or the other when one was more suited for a particular activity. Finally, and most importantly, the two congregations had similar views on what it meant to be a Christian.

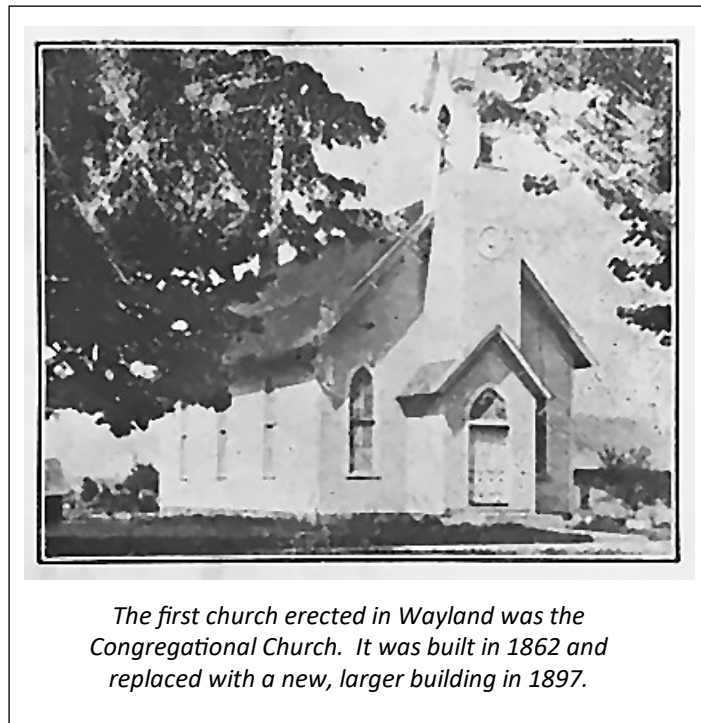
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH — UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST



Historically, the Congregational Church practiced congregational polity, which holds that the members of a local church have the right to decide their church's forms of worship and confessional statements, choose their own officers, and administer their own affairs without any outside interference. One of their core beliefs is that - *every believer is a priest and ... every seeking child of God is given directly wisdom, guidance, power.*

In 1858, six years before Wayland was incorporated as a village, the First Congregational Church of Wayland held its first services in the little red

schoolhouse at the corner of Sycamore and South Main Street with the Rev. James McKay leading worship for seventeen souls. Within a few years planning was underway for building a church and in 1860 a parcel of land on Superior (the current site of DeWeerd's Heating and Air Conditioning) was purchased for \$100. The building was completed under the supervision of Rev. McKay and a dedication ceremony was held on April 16, 1862, becoming the first church to be built in Wayland. The building was used for 35 years and saw the service of 19 ministers.



By the end of the century, the congregation, which had grown along with the village's population (the population in 1860 was about 500, by 1890 it was 1,750) required a new and larger building. In 1895, the Rev. F.P. Sprague began working on the plans for a new building on the same site.

The cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1896 to a sunrise salute of 18 guns and a day of celebrations and speeches. The Rev. Sprague labored with his own hands to build the new church which was dedicated on February 15th, 1897, having cost \$2,200 to build. The

church pews were purchased from the Grand Rapids School Furniture Company and seated 200. The church bell, donated by Mrs. Mary Nearpass Forbes, a charter member of the church, was the largest in Allegan County at the time, weighing 1,800 pounds. That bell now stands in front of the United Church of Wayland. Membership at that time was reported at 40 persons. In a brief history of the church written in 1908 (author unknown) it was noted that *The work of the Sunday School and Ladies Aid Society are important factors as they are both largely responsible for the growth of the church.*

Over the years, several changes were made to this second church building. A kitchen and classrooms were added to the back in 1930 and in 1941 the sanctuary underwent remodeling. In 1950 the entire church was redecorated. A need for additional classroom space was the impetus for a full basement being excavated under the building in 1954.

In 1958 the church celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the First Congregational Church of Wayland. The cornerstone was opened and found to contain news articles from

the local paper and a list of members, both somewhat damaged by water.

By the 1960s, the church, at that time recognized as the oldest building in Wayland, was beginning to feel its age. Mary Lou Hooker, who was baptized in 1965 by the Rev. Fred Dunbar in the sanctuary baptismal pool, said; *When it rained, you could feel the*

water drip down on the congregation. Mrs. Hooker added; *We couldn't even bring caskets into the church because it was so small and the fabric of the building was so fragile.* Wayne Goodwin, a member of the Church of Christ,

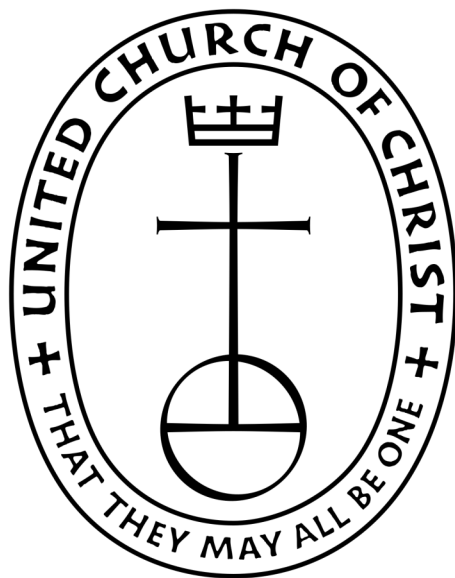


An early image of the church from a postcard produced by Fannie Hoyt, a member of the church.



A drawing made of the Congregational Church on the occasion of their 100th anniversary.

who would eventually be selected as building chairman for the new church, said the old Congregational Church was too small to handle services and Sunday School on the same day, so parishioners often went to the Church of Christ down the street to attend Sunday School. *And it [the building] was not good for handicapped people*, he added. This was also a period in our national history when older structures were accorded little value and people generally preferred new construction over restoring older buildings.



WAYLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST – DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

“We believe yet, though our numbers



are not so great, the Wayland Church of Christ - Disciples is a beacon light in the community,” wrote Mrs. Charles Wilcox, an early member of the congregation.

The Church of Christ, with its historical roots in the 19th century Restoration Movement, endeavored to recreate the church first established on Pentecost, A.D. 30. Participants in this movement sought to base their doctrine and practice on the Bible alone, rather than recognizing the traditional councils and denominational hierarchies that had come to define Christianity over the centuries. A core belief is that: *the Bible is sufficiently plain and simple to render its message obvious to any sincere believer.*

Wayland Church of Christ was organized in 1877, at a meeting in White's Hall on April 22 under the direction of D. M. Severence who served communion to the 17 people in attendance. Hiram Strinham was elected elder, an important position in the Church of Christ. The new church was established: *with its only creed the Bible, and the only gateway of admission was to repent, believe and be*

buried in baptism to arise and walk in the newness of life.

The pulpit was supplied for a time by different ministers, D. N. Severance, being the first, delivering only a few sermons. Occasionally, when no pastor was available, one of the elders would read a sermon written by one of the pioneer ministers, a common way of dealing with the shortage of clergy at that time. In addition to meeting at White's Hall, services also were held at the Methodist

Church, in a building which has since been torn down and the current Methodist Church built in its place. In spite of the changeover in ministers during this period, the church grew from a couple of dozen members to over 125 in a very short time.

The church's first permanent pastor, Rev. M.B. Rawson, preached his first sermon at the Church of Christ on September 16, 1877 and on October 17 he was officially called by the congregation. His annual salary was set at \$500, a fair wage for its time, the equivalent of what a skilled trade worker earned.

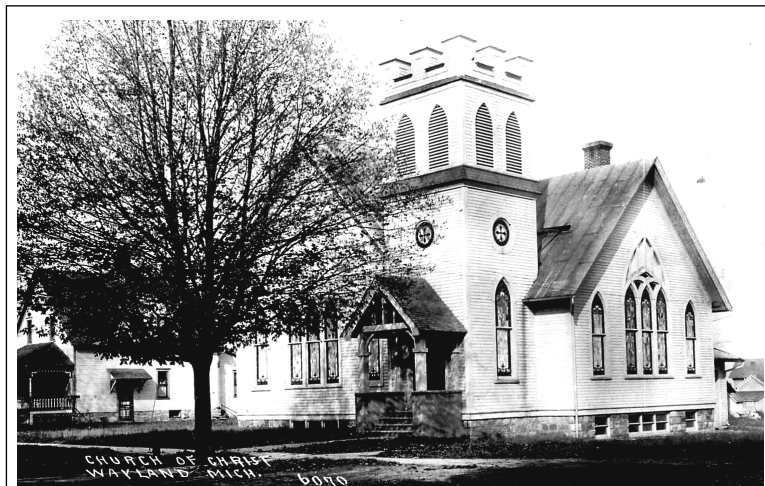
At a meeting in September, 1877, a

decision was made to provide a permanent home for the congregation; they would build a church. The first step was to form a committee to solicit funds for its erection. Then, a building committee was appointed and on March 19, 1878, it reported the site selected was the land donated by Israel Kellogg, which included three lots on a tract of land 12 rods square on the southwest corner of the wheat field lying west of the village and east of the Interurban Railroad tracks (the bed for

this defunct railroad is now a utility corridor). That building still stands on the corner of what is today Superior and Vine streets.

Plans for the new building were made and construction was undertaken immediately.

The church building, which cost \$2000, was dedicated March 7, 1879 at a service that overflowed the sanctuary which seated 325. At that service a subscription was taken up and the amount collected, \$478, was enough to pay off the mortgage with \$100 left over. A Union of Thanksgiving service was conducted November. 29, 1879 with a social and supper held later that evening under the direction of the Ladies Aid Society at White's Hall. The congregation of the Methodist Church, which had been hosts for early meetings of the



An early image of the Church of Christ, from a postcard produced about 1900. The building is almost unchanged today.

congregation, was invited to this celebration. A Sunday school and a Ladies Aid Society were quickly organized: *to assist in all charity work and to strengthen all efforts for Christian growth and the success of the church at large.*

Mrs. Charles Wilcox reported in a history of the church she wrote for the Wayland Globe in 1939 that; *the early members of the church did not have the easy ways of transportation as we have today, . . . instead, driving several miles with an ox tram or horses and wagon, over muddy roads. . . . or plowing through drifts of snow when the thermometer registered below zero, often attending both morning and evening services [and returning] in nights so dark the only way they knew they were keeping the road would be by the splashing of their horses hooves in muddy water.*

Rev. Fay C. Wing spent the longest time with the church, serving as the minister for 12 years, overseeing 112 baptisms. In addition to being the pastor of the Church of Christ, Rev. Wing was what we would now call a bi-vocational pastor, as he supplemented his income by operating both a furniture store and a funeral home, each located in the building that still stands on the northwest corner of South Main and Pine Street, across from Henika Library.

A parsonage was constructed in 1902, under the supervision of Rev. G.F. Camp, on the parcel of land to the west of the church on West Superior but it was sold not too many years later. In 1940, the church purchased a house on Vine Street to serve as the

new parsonage.

The Church of Christ eventually became known as the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. After the union of the two churches to form United Church of Wayland, the old church building was sold to the Free Methodists who still meet there under the name of Wayland Community Church.



BECOMING UNITED



If you look at the histories of these two denominations, you will see several commonalities; one is the desire to maintain independent congregations, free from denominational control. The other is a desire to return to the original roots of church worship as experienced by the early church following the day of Pentecost by using the Bible as a source for inspiration.

Over the years, the two congregations, operating from buildings just blocks from each other and drawing their membership from the same neighborhoods, often did things together and knew each other well. There were whispers about a merger in both churches. In fact, the earliest attempt to unite the two churches was in January 1911, but negotiations broke down quickly. Merger talk was revived in the 1940s, but again the movement fizzled.

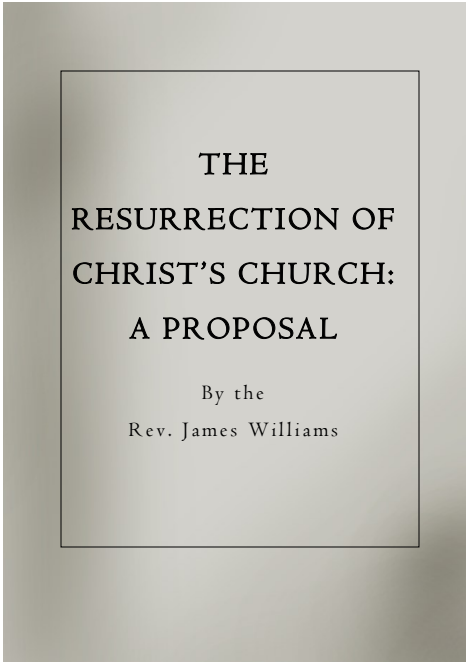
Things finally took a serious turn in the early 1960s. Joyce McAllister said the pastors of the two churches were engaged in serious talks of a merger as

members of the Ministerial Association. *It wasn't so much that they agreed on theology* [which they did, on the essential matters], *it was because they both needed a new place of worship.* Virginia White, who joined the Congregational Church in 1959 with her husband, Win Adams, said, *They* [the Church of Christ] *didn't like it* [their individual situations] *any more than we did*". So, while the ministers were making plans

for a future blended congregation, there were many conversations on the same subject being held privately.

Perhaps one of the biggest days of the history of both churches was the Easter Sunday service at the Congregational Church on April 14, 1963. The Rev. James Williams, in a sermon that still resonates with his passion when read today, made it clear that he and the Rev. Dunbar were very much in favor of merging the two congregations and

building a church facility that could accommodate both. In his sermon, which was reprinted in a booklet titled *The Resurrection of Christ's Church: A Proposal*, Rev. Williams began by saying: *Led by the Holy Spirit, which I conceive by both Faith and Reason to be God's will . . . I would propose . . . that here in Wayland, Michigan . . .*



THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST'S CHURCH: A PROPOSAL

By the
Rev. James Williams

A booklet printed shortly after Rev. Williams presented his proposal for the unification of the two churches contains his complete sermon.

we conceive a union not merely of spiritual bodies and attitudes, . . . not only a union of oneness with our membership, . . . but a physical union. Hence, I would have us this day seriously consider . . . a merger of two churches in this community. In words that foreshadow our current *Open and Affirming* movement, he continues by saying: *We must reassemble and bring back to life the Church around the Lord's Table and His Altar of faith and conviction. That this Table and Altar would be for all people, . . . that a revitalized witness be in the heart of each believer in Christ, and that we exclude no one who professes Christ in his [or her] heart. . .*

Rev. Williams concluded his sermon by enumerating six important characteristics of this new united church; it would be:

1) a ministry recognized by God and His promise,

2) where a statement of faith is spoken in the historic tradition,

3) where two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion, are provided,

4) a church that is democratic in its form of government,

5) and relates to the historic traditions of both churches, and

6) that such a church would accept all

brothers [and sisters] in love and fellowship and try to recapture the lost right hand of fellowship.

This news electrified both congregations and even the Grand Rapids papers reported on the proposal. Initial response from both churches was positive and a merger committee was formed immediately. Their first meeting was held on Oct. 28, 1963 with Win Adams, Henry Blauuw, Harold Dietiker, Mrs. Ford Henry, Mrs. Kay Kaumeyer, Mrs. Doris McAllister, Harold Reinhart, Mrs. Virginia Smith, Herman VandenBerg,

Arnold Wilde, Rev. Fred Dunbar and Rev. James Williams attending. The committee was asked to consider three points:

1) What is it that keeps us from uniting the two churches?

2) Would the merger be a good thing?

3) Can the churches be more effective as a united group?

While there was initially hope that the merger could be

accomplished speedily, it ended up taking many years to achieve.

Committees met, conversations were held, publicly and privately, and votes were taken. Everyone agreed on points number two and three, that the two churches could be more effective by combining their numbers and their

Such a church
would accept
all brothers
(and sisters)
in love and
fellowship.



finances. The biggest stumbling blocks were the Church of Christ's belief in the importance of baptism by immersion and their desire to have communion every Sunday. Some members of the Congregational Church believed that building a baptismal pool in the new church would be too expensive and that having communion every Sunday would cheapen the sacrament, making it seem routine and thus lose its special significance.

In August of 1965 the Church of Christ voted to approve the merger. About this time the differences between the two churches became more and more contentious and after four years of discussion, at a meeting October 8th, 1967, the members of the Congregational Church rejected a proposal to merge by a margin of two to one. The merger talks broke down completely. In the meantime, the national conferences of both churches were urging local churches to explore the possibility of merging their congregations.

Things were left at that point for several years, but there were still people who felt strongly that the merger was a good idea for both churches. The Church of Christ was, having long ago approved of the merger, waiting for the Congregational Church to catch up. The two churches were still doing many things together. Both their youth groups and the Sunday School classes had combined. There were some conversations about

the merger in 1967, but they didn't sound very positive. But by early 1970 things began heating up again and the people of the Congregational Church was ready to meet with the Church of Christ to seriously discuss the merger. From that point, things moved swiftly. Once again, joint meetings were held, but this time there seemed to be more purpose behind them. By May a constitution and bylaws for the new church were drawn up. In the bylaws, the *Purpose* of the new church was to: *worship God, proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, celebrate the Christian sacraments, realize Christian*

fellowship, and unity, . . . render loving service to humanity, and strive for righteousness, justice, and peace.

A name for the new church was chosen – United Church of Wayland. On Sunday, June 14th, 1970, the Congregationalists voted by an overwhelming majority, 74 to 2, for the merger. At last, the new church was to be a reality. By this

time, Rev. Williams and Rev. Dunbar who had begun this movement years before, had left to accept calls to other churches and were absent by the time their dream of union was finally achieved.

A *Plan of Union* was drawn up, outlining the expectations of the two congregations. First, they acknowledged that there existed; *an essential oneness . . . and a desire . . . for integration of our work and*



The church bell from the Congregational Church in its new home in front of the United Church of Wayland.

interests into a common whole in order to mutually strengthen the church of Jesus Christ. They agreed that: incidents of history, traditional practices, and the like, [were] quite irrelevant to the essence of the Christian faith. In an optimistic conclusion, the document states: We believe that each congregation ought to consider each other as precious saints of God, members of the same family and joint heirs of the same inheritance.

The first combined service was June 28, 1970 and on July 19th The Rev. Scott Pricer was called as the first pastor of the newly merged congregations. For a time, the two congregations had Sunday services at the Church of Christ and Sunday School at the Congregational Church.

By the end of 1970, both the Church of Christ and the Congregational Church had been officially dissolved and The United Church of Wayland established. Early church Sunday bulletins appeared with the new church name by November, 1970. On July 19th, a dual ordination ceremony for the Rev. Scott Pricer was held and on August 2nd, a Celebration Service, marking the union of the two congregations, was held. The first Annual Meeting was held on October

7th, 1970.

At first while the new building was being planned, the congregations altered their worship between the two old churches, meeting one week at the East Church (Congregational Church) and the West Church (Church of Christ) the next. By 1971, this had changed so that the West Church became the location for Sunday worship and the East Church became the center for Christian education. The newly enlarged and vibrant youth group used the old building as a coffee house and meeting place and held

several notable events there including a multimedia presentation of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and a concert by *The Potter's Clay* singing group.

While the Sacrament of Baptism was left to individual preference, it was decided to have a joint Communion service once a month and have

weekly Communion services before the worship service on the other Sundays.

During this period of four years, Wayne Goodwin, who headed up the building committee and would shepherd the construction of the new church through all its stages, and Mike Burian, an architect, made plans for the new church on land to the



For many years, this traditional Pottawatomi black ash basket was used to carry the communion elements into the sanctuary.

immediate west of Steeby Elementary School on East Superior. *We spent about a year scraping together enough money to buy that property, Goodwin said, even though it was a swampy piece of real estate.*

Raising the money to build the new church was challenging! The two parsonages were sold and a new, larger home on Namen Court was purchased to serve as the new parsonage; funds left over from the sale were placed in a *Golden Savings Account*. An early application for a loan of \$140,000 was turned down by a local bank. Funding from the conference of Church of Christ was explored, but at last United Bank of Wayland (now United Bank of Michigan) offered a loan of \$140,000 at 8.5% interest for 20 years. Eventually, the Church of Christ- Disciple's building was sold for \$7,500 to the Free Methodists and the Congregational Church was sold for \$12,000 to Deweerd Heating and Air Conditioning. That firm used the building for storage for a number of years but eventually tore down the old church and built their present commercial building on the site.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:



On a cold and windy day in the spring of 1972, a group of people gathered on the site of land purchased for the new church and were photographed standing behind a large sign stating that this was the *Building Site of the United Church of Wayland*.



Following church one Sunday, a group of people walked to the future site of United Church of Wayland to celebrate the Installation of this sign.

By February, 1974, meetings were being held to finalize the building plans with Mr. Orrie Martin, a local contractor. On April 21st, 1974, a congregational meeting gave its unanimous approval to begin construction on the new church building that would become United

Church of Wayland. On June 16th, a groundbreaking ceremony was held and the next day the footings were poured. Like any building project, the process had its ups and downs, but when it was completed, *Great was the Joy thereof*. There is a story that a member of the building committee was discovered dancing a jig in the minister's study on receiving the news that the sanctuary pews were on their way.

The Sanctuary Committee was responsible for many of the details of the final design, such as selecting the brick used for the exterior and interior of the building, selecting the Radiant Red carpet (which is still there after



The framework for the sanctuary going up.

50 years – original cost \$5460) for the sanctuary, purchasing the pews and lighting fixtures, and obtaining the glass for the stained-glass windows. The fireplace in the fellowship hall was requested by the youth group who raised the money to pay for it.

The first annual meeting in the new

building was held in the Fellowship Hall on January 26th, 1975 and one week later the first worship service was held in the sanctuary. The new church was completed and dedicated on April 27th, 1975. Wayne Goodwin reported that Sunday was a: *"Kissing" Sunday, with love and gratitude overflowing to God, who had truly brought us through a wilderness of detail and pressures, to the Promised Land of our new place of worship, in all its beauty. Here we could verily "Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness", which, after all, was our dedicated purpose from the moment it all began.*

The early concern over baptism by immersion was overcome by installing a baptismal basin below the floor of the sanctuary. Members could elect to be baptized by immersion, or by the laying on of hands. Resolving the issue of weekly communion was a bit more contentious and took more time. In the beginning, there was a monthly communion service during worship. Those who wanted communion on the remaining Sundays could receive it after the service. Finally people came to realize that this situation was only emphasizing the differences between the two congregations. Wayne Goodwin said that now, looking back, he couldn't understand how the two different philosophies were maintained for so long. Eventually the practice of weekly communion was accepted by all. Wayne Goodwin said it wasn't long until most people felt: *it wasn't church unless you had communion. I learned to enjoy it. We didn't really have church traditions [in the Congregational Church] and we seemed to become richer for the added*

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

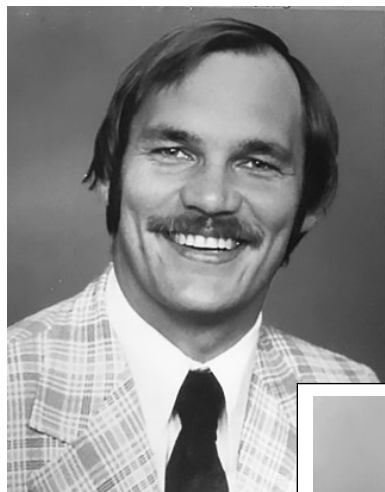


Without a doubt, there were growing pains that first decade, but many joys as well. The ecumenical flavor of the United Church of Wayland continued to be nourished and sustained through dual affiliations with both parent denominations. This holds true today.

The Rev. Rich Koster, was the first pastor in the new building. In his remarks for the Church's dedication, he commented on how the building was already being used to

serve the social and physical needs of the community. He emphasized his hope for the building to *support our unique mission responsibilities as people of God; preaching the Gospel, studying the Word of God, maturing in Christian faith, and planning and executing our ministry of healing and reconciliation.*

One of the early programs the congregation supported was *Love Loaves*. Ceramic loaf shaped banks were distributed and used to



The Rev. Richard Koster

collect a hunger offering. On Thanksgiving Day 1985, the clay loaves were broken (smashed with hammers) and the money in them collected – over \$1000. The money was distributed between three organizations, World Vision, CROP, and the Heifer Project. Another hunger project involved the youth of the church who participated in a *Bike-a-thon For Hunger*. Their goal was to raise \$300 towards the church goal of \$2000 for the inter-church relief fund, *One Great Hour of Sharing*.

Pastor Koster was succeeded by The Rev. Walter Baumgartner who arrived in 1978, but he stayed with us only a short time.

Next to be called to serve the United Church of Wayland was a pastoral couple, the Reverends Chuck and

Rebecca Kutz-Marks. They arrived in 1979 and are remembered with great fondness. Each was hired to handle pastoral duties half time.

Under their leadership, the congregation took on the support of a Vietnamese refugee family, the Nguen family of six,



The Revs. Chuck and Rebecca Kutz-Marks.

providing housing, furniture, clothing, education and financial support for a year while they were learning how to manage their new lives in the United States. Volunteers provided tutoring and some just spent time befriending the family. This was just the first of several refugee families the church sponsored over the years.

The Rev. Brewster Wilcox arrived at United Church of Wayland in 1990. Christian Neighbor's Food Pantry opened its doors in 1991 and

United Church of Wayland was there to provide leadership on their board and support by providing regular donations of food and funds as we still do to this day.

About this time, the Women's Fellowship began making handmade cuddly toys for the Wayland Ambulance staff to give frightened children and made quilts to give to HIV-AIDS infected children. They also put together healthcare kits for the Allegan County Foster Child Program and a church mission in Belize.

Pastor Wilcox was greatly admired by



The Rev. Brewster Wilcox

some in the congregation, others felt he wasn't the right person for United Church of Wayland. In a high-handed move, the Mission Council asked him to resign (this should only have been done by a vote of the congregation). Pastor Wilcox left the church and there were hard feelings on both sides of the issue that resonate to the present day.

The Rev. Nancy Zerban has been our longest serving pastor, arriving in 1993 and retiring in 2010. During her tenure a 3,800 foot addition to the education wing was built in 1999, again under the supervision of Wayne Goodwin. This addition was needed to accommodate the needs of the growing congregation which included many families with young children. The new addition added a choir

room, two classrooms, an office for the secretary and another for the pastor, a new utility room, restrooms and storage.

Programs like CROP Walk continued during her time with us and new projects,

like the monthly clean-up of a stretch of highway were begun. One of the



An early picture of the sanctuary on an Easter morning, showing how it looked before the large speaker cases were placed on the wall.

most memorable events were missions trips to the South Dakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation through the Remember program. On that first trip, the group built bunk beds and trundle beds for families on the reservation. Those who participated in this and subsequent trips to Pine Ridge remember the experience as being life-changing and many participated in this mission more than once.

For many years, United Church of Wayland has led the community in the annual *Christmas Project* which provides the makings for a Christmas dinner plus toys for the children of needy families in Wayland. Originally, names and gift suggestions were put on a tree and members of the congregation would take a name and purchase the gifts. In the last few years, that has changed and now a selection of gifts is put out and parents select the appropriate gifts for their children.

United Church of Wayland was strongly against the war in Iraq and in 2003 Nancy Zerban and a group of church members stood at the intersection of Main Street and Superior on Monday evenings, holding signs saying *Wage*

Peace. Zerban was quoted in the local paper saying: *We want to show our support for the troops, but we also want peace to come sooner than later. Some people don't understand that those two concerns can be shared.*

The Zerban family became involved in the music program with the Zerban's

son Jason leading the choir which was anchored by the classically trained voice of their daughter Angela. The choir of 20 to 30 members sang challenging music under Jason's direction, including an annual Christmas Cantata which was so well done it eventually attracted the attention of the community. The sanctuary would be overflowing on the Sunday before Christmas when the Cantata was presented. A CD of the choir's favorite pieces was produced and widely distributed.



Pastor Nancy Zerban served our church for seventeen years.

The Steven Ministry program began under Nancy Zerban's tenure. This was a program that paired trained lay people with those who were experiencing life difficulties and in need of high-quality, one-to-one, Christ-centered care.

Without a doubt though, the most significant event to occur at United

Church of Wayland was the decision to become *Open and Affirming*. Before making this important decision, classes were held to raise awareness and to explain what this would mean for our church. The congregation was encouraged to read and discuss the book, *Am I Blue*. At a Congregational Meeting in 2007 a nearly unanimous vote approved the official *Open and Affirming* position of accepting everyone to the full life and leadership of the church without regard to their race, origin, age, abilities, economic situation or sexual orientation. At this time we are still the only *Open and Affirming* church in Wayland and the surrounding communities. Since that time, we have attracted people from the LGBTQ community and hired our first openly gay pastor.

In 2010 the congregation began a large fund-raising project of selling pavlovas, a dessert of meringue topped with strawberries and kiwi, at a booth for the *Grand Rapids Festival of the Arts*. The project required the assistance of many hands including a gang at the festival to man the booth and another gang at the church to cut fresh fruit and deliver it to the booth several times a day during the three-day festival. The last few years the church did the *Arts Festival*, the booth also sold sausage rolls and grilled fresh pineapple. The project continued until 2019 and there were years when the proceeds approached \$10,000. The festival was canceled in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic and the congregation has since determined it will not participate in future festivals.

Pastor Nancy retired in 2010 and moved with her husband Andy to the

Traverse City area where their children were now located.

Pastor Nancy was succeeded by the Rev. R.J. Hronek in 2011. By this time the economic recession of 2007-2009, which impacted churches of every denomination, had greatly reduced church membership. He was hired as a $\frac{3}{4}$ time pastor which worked well for him as he was pursuing his Doctorate in Theology which he completed while he was with us.

Hronek was very active in the community and became a member of the financial committee of the Wayland Main Street program and was



The Rev. Dr. RJ Hronek.

instrumental in placing an initiative before the City Council to prevent discrimination by reason of race or sexual orientation, which was eventually passed by the City Council.

The church's Clothes Closet began during Pastor Hronek's tenure. There are other churches providing clothing,

but they charge for the clothing, adding the funds to their budget. Our Clothes Closet is unique in that all the clothing is absolutely free. There is no income requirement to gain access to this service. At this time the closet is open once twice a month and is staffed by church volunteers who also accept and organize the clothing that is donated to the Clothes Closet.

Another project that was begun during Rev. Hronek's time with us was the Feeding America Food Truck which is still coming to our parking lot once a month to drop off food for the food insecure. This ministry is a cooperative effort of several Wayland Churches but was initiated, organized and is still managed by United Church of Wayland.

Rev. Hronek and his wife Jan left us in 2015 to take a pastorate in South Carolina to be closer to family.

The Rev. Bonnie Simerly came to us from New Orleans and took over the pastorate in the fall of 2016. At first she lived in the parsonage next to the church which had been purchased during the Zerban's tenure, but when she purchased a home of her own, the church voted to sell the parsonage. This provided a much-needed financial cushion for the church.

Summer vacation Bible school had been a traditional part of church life but had discontinued for a number of years when

membership of families with young children declined. However, it was revived in a new form in 2017 with the Amazing Arts Academy which explored God's word through the arts; singing, dancing, painting, drawing, sculpture and even poetry writing. The Academy was held in the evening and the children were served dinner upon arrival. Each session ended with a singalong around a campfire. The last year it was held, over fifty children

from the community attended.

The Wayland Community Quilters, an ecumenical group of women, sponsored by United Church of Wayland, create quilts for the patients of Wings Home, the residence for Wings of Hope Hospice. The original goal of this group, established in 2017, was to make and donate 80 quilts a year to Wings Home as that was the average number of people served by the hospice each year. They easily surpassed this goal and are now also donating quilts to

the Linus Project, which provides quilts to hospitalized children.

Pastor Bonnie's spirituality shone through this difficult period of our church history, and it was only after some personal trials that she decided to leave us and return to home in Louisiana in 2020.

At time of this publication, the church is being led by an interim pastor, the Reverend Kyle Carnes, who is doing an outstanding job of preparing us for the transition to the next stage of our church's history.



Pastor Bonnie Simerly with some of the children from the Amazing Arts Academy.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



On April 23rd, 1978, the United Church of Wayland's cornerstone was dedicated. In it were placed records of the two churches and the people who made those churches live in our memories. One of the scriptures read at the ceremony was from Ephesians 2:19-22

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The words of the dedication included this passage: *We place these papers in the cornerstone so that some future generation can know how these things came about, so they can know the path that has been walked. "And you shall remember all the ways in which the Lord your God has led you." (Deut. 8:2). . . . Praise God for the people with a will, and the labor of love, and faith that have gone into it. Give us, Lord, the faith, the love, the dedication, the courage to be molded in the image of Christ. To be the hands, the feet, the body of Christ serving in His world. . . Give us Lord, vision to see our world with the eyes of Christ. Give us compassion and love to motivate us, the*

strength and courage to do the work that is ahead for us.

The population of Wayland was about 2000 when the two churches decided to become one under the mantle of The United Church of Wayland; today the population of our little town has doubled to a little over 4,200. Who knows what our town will look like in another fifty years? Whatever the future holds for us, we hope we will always be; *a welcoming Christian community, committed to overcoming barriers to God's love, truth and justice in the world for all people* [our vision statement]. And that we will *witness to God's love, forgiveness, mercy, truth and justice and be radically loving by faithfully following the teachings of Jesus Christ, intentionally and actively working for justice in our congregation, community, and world.* We will also endeavor to; *be good stewards of the physical and spiritual gifts we have been given and joyfully share these gifts in our worship and world, always mindful that we are all one in the body of Christ* [our mission statement]. Like Mrs. Wilcox of the historic Church of Christ - Disciples, "We believe yet, though our numbers are not so great, [. . . our church] *is a beacon light in the community*".



Compiled and written by
Gail Hollinger
for the 50th Anniversary Celebration of
United Church of Wayland
2021

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