

The History of Union Avenue Congregation

1860 through 2010 by Beth Harvey

The history of the Grand Rapids Branch has many facets of interest: tragedy-sorrow-hardship-progress-growth-expansion, etc.



It began with Elder John Norton of Kirtland and Nauvoo. Unable to sustain Brigham Young in the he assumed, and with faith that Joseph would be led to take the leadership, the Norton family fled Nauvoo by night in a covered wagon. Their escape took them into Michigan, taking up farmland in the Alpine area. In 1867, while on a business to Hopkins, Michigan, John Norton heard of the reorganization of 1860. Elder E.C. Briggs and David H. Smith were invited to hold cottage meetings in the Norton home. On August 2, 1868 the first services in the city were held in the Luce block; a four story building in the vicinity now known as Ionia-Monroe-Ottawa Avenue. In July 1896, Robert E. Grant, a missionary from the Bay City area, moved here and a branch was organized.

Unfortunately the years ahead were marked with considerable turmoil and misunderstandings with the result the Branch was disorganized, reorganized in 1902 and again disorganized in 1903. District rolls show a

membership of over 100 at that time. On November 10, 1910, a small group (14 in all) met, and with J.W. Wright, to organize into a Branch. Unfortunately most of the other 100 members were not notified, and as a ruling was made that only... "those in attendance be considered members... all others would be required to petition, and be voted upon to become Branch members"... further misunderstandings continued, for the ruling was not legal.

Construction Back By 1911 membership had grown to 42. Growth, however, through transfers, die to the gradual exodus of people from the north, bringing more and more Saints into the city, membership increased by 1922 to approximately 300. During the leadership of Walter Ryler (?-1933) and Homer Doty (1935-1936) the church membership grew. Halls and store buildings were no longer adequate, so two lots were purchased at Division and Zeno Streets and the first phase of a building project called "The Basement" was finished for services.



The great depression of the 30's coupled with financial difficulties of the General Church and the general decay of the area, stressed the need for building in a different area, so the basement building was offered for sale, which was consummated in 1946 under the leadership of Homer Harvey (1943-1947).

With a check for \$11,374.40 from the sale of the Basement Church, and under the leadership of Elder Homer Harvey and A.F. Shotwell (1947-1951), the Building Committee with E.B. Blett, chairman, became active. Late that year (1946) with the approval of Apostles Jensen and Gleazer and the Branch, the lots at Union Ave. were purchased for approximately \$9,000.00. In 1950, the design of the present building, with changes proposed by Apostle George Mesley, were agreed upon. Architect James K. Havemen prepared the blueprints, and a bid by J.P. Top Contractor for \$63,919.00 (which covered the vase bid plus the plumbing alternate of \$480.00) was accepted. On July 9th, ground was broken with Pastor A. F. Shotwell, Former Pastor Homer Harvey, Mrs. Hattie Cavanagh (charter member from 1896), J. Charles Hottashed (District President), E. B. Blett (Committee Chairman), Charles Babb and Fred Kuhn (Building Fund Committee Chairman) as well as other officers from the Branch turning the first sod.



In the meantime, meetings were held in the Women's Club on Cass Avenue. Upon resignation of Pastor Shotwell, in September 1951, Elder James Phillips became Appointee Pastor. Membership at that time was approximately 480 with 80 of those members attending the Galewood Mission. The mission had been started in the 1920's but phased out in 1961. The hope of having a real church home spurred everyone together with effort in service and consecration. Raising monies for the Building Fund was undertaken particularly by the Men's Club under Jim Grutter, The Women's Group under Frances Osborn and Hazel Dodds, the Young People's Group under Jack Hodge and Keith Harvey, and the Music Department under Frances Carlson which resulted in a successful outcome. On April 20, 1952, the official opening with a Service of Appreciation took place with General Church Officers –Apostle George Mesley, Bishop Delapp, Former Pastor A. F. Shotwell, Appointee Pastor

James Phillips, Architect James K. Haveman and Contractor J. B. Top in attendance. The debt had been reduced to \$25,000.00, plus the cost of organ and pews.

Under Pastor Phillips' ministry attendance was at an all time high. Efforts to reduce the debt were made through smorgasbords, continental dinners, bazaars, pancake suppers and other activities...consecrated offerings and services continued. In addition a nonmember "Friend of the Church" contributed many of the refinements and special equipment which added to the beauty, comfort and convenience of the building and grounds.

Then in June 1958, elder Melvin Russell replaced Pastor Phillips. Under Appointee Melvin Russell, spiritual, physical and financial growth continued so that in 1960 final payment was made on the loan, clearing the way for dedication of the building. January 22, 1961 with President F. Henry Edwards, Regional Administrator James Phillips and Pastor Melvin Russell and a 30-voice choir, dedication services were held.

With a membership of approximately 500, Brother Russell had plans for extending the facilities for worship, but he was transferred to Canada by the General Church and union. Construction of the front of the church was assigned to Elder Lee Oliver, effective July 1, 1962. Under Brother Oliver, expansion plans continued, and in 1973 the residence (annex) immediately adjoining the church was purchased. However with membership of over 500, both church and annex were “bulging at the seams”, so further expansion seemed desirable.



A “Grounds and Building Committee” was formed with Almer Dieterman, Chairman, and approximately 16 acres of land was purchased on Grand River Drive near Plainfield. In 1963, plans by Architect Edgar Firant were presented and okayed by the Branch. A non-profit organization known as Z.B.S., Inc. was formed to undertake platting of the area into building lots, with the understanding that the church would be built on the high ground. Roads were built including a road to the hill opened then construction began.

Records from 1964-1970 are not available for information on any of these projects, though some sort of division of assets were made. With cash available from the sale of platted lots, \$10,000.00 from a mortgage on the annex assumed by the Union Branch, plus funds on the deposit with the Bishop in Independence from the sale of Galewood Church, the Northview Branch came into being. There were 190 to 200 members who transferred to the new branch.

In 1970 Alma Dieterman became “Presiding Elder” and during that year Grand Valley Mission was organized with 63 members transferring on December 1st. during these years the project know as “The Group” came into being which required great fineness in handling. In 1972-1973, and in part of 1974, Almer L. Dieterman was



Presiding Elder during which time the Pictorial Directory and new carpeting were special projects. October 1974 through September 1976, Elder Robert Johnson presided as Pastor. During his years of service the mortgage debt on the annex was paid off. In September 1978, elder William Sherwood was elected as Pastor. The project, of the Electronic Sound Equipment was installed, giving needed improvement in the acoustics of the church building. In September 1979, Ronald Brentana was elected Pastor. Continual efforts of renovations were brought about with such projects as the re-pavement of the parking lot, purchase of a new piano and organ, repair of the annex which had then become the location of the district office. These efforts were made possible by various funding projects and personal efforts of the Saints. Pastor Brentana continued to serve the Branch through 1983. Thus the work went on with the renovation of the basement and the increased development of children services and various adult programs.

In 1983 Almer Dieterman again became Pastor and for the first time active nonmembers were allowed to join in the voting process at business meetings. During this time a decision to hire a full time pastor began. A needs assessment was conducted and on December 1983 a motion was made and passed to hire a full-time minister of the Melchisedec Priesthood. An interviewing committee was set up (William Sherwood, Lynn Reese, Ruth Marvin, Robert Middleton, Hap Frizzell and Gerald Dawson). Three final candidates were selected with Ted Griggs accepting the position in March 1984. Ted Griggs served as Pastor for 5 years. During his years of service increased spiritual leadership developed. Children and women became more involved in Sunday morning services. Special fasting and prayer services were focused on with prayer events taking place on Sunday mornings. Outreach to inactive members and a "Faith to Grow" program was established, along with the development of a Pastoral Care Group. The congregation became more actively involved in planning services and non-priesthood members were increasing their participation in the worship services. In 1988 and 1989 Ted Griggs became more involved in District and Regional Assignments. On March 5, 1989 he handed in his resignation and accepted a Regional assignment. On August 20, 1989 the branch approved the first calling of a women to priesthood, Barbara Griggs.



The congregation had less than 50% of its membership in support of retaining a full-time paid minister and with concerns over meeting the annual budget a motion was passed to look at a part-time pastor position. Almer Dieterman assumed pastorship in 1989 and Ron Brentana served again as pastor during 1990. The part-time position was never filled.

In 1991 Tom Reynold accepted the call to be Pastor. He has served as the Grand Rapids Pastor over the past five years. During his years of service further needed improvements in the building have been made, the kitchen has been updated with a new stove and refrigerator, new classroom dividers have been installed, the annex has been sold, and increased efforts of accessibility for the physically disabled have been achieved. The spiritual growth has also continued though family retreats, use of the "Arts" in worship,

increased support for youth development funds which has been used to increase youth opportunities to college through scholarships, camps and Sport Spectacular. A vision statement has been developed for the Union Avenue Branch which reflects their most recent steps towards building a Community of Christians.

In 1999 Elder Patti Findley was elected as our first female pastor. During the time she was pastor, a new mission was launched from the branch which focused on contemporary Christian music and worship. Living Rock Mission began meeting at Union Avenue on Sunday afternoons and, after a few years, elected to move to the Northview branch. The Union Avenue Branch continued to grow spiritually. We worked to increase home visiting and two evangelists worked with us to prepare the branch for a congregational blessing. Patti Findley also developed and trained a leadership team to take on more of the leadership of the branch. The pastor's office was updated with a new desk, ceiling fan and mail boxes. The nursery was also updated with new toys, new paint, ceiling tiles, and carpeting during that time.

In 2000, Elder Tim Colthorp was elected as the pastor. At this point, many of our senior high kids had graduated and most of our children were very young and so Vacation Bible school was started up again after a long hiatus. In 2002, the branch celebrated 50 years at the Union Avenue location. This was also around the time that the church name was changed to the Community of Christ. The branch worked to include more of our neighborhood in activities and ministry such as Vacation Bible School, Peacefest at Garfield Park, and some annual fund raisers were moved to Union Avenue in order to include our neighbors. The branch also took steps to form a strategic plan and began to develop the congregation's web site.

In 2003, Tom Reynolds was again elected as Pastor. Tom has been the force behind the branch's Strategic Planning. Tom entered into the five year commitment to the Co-Mission Pastor Initiative (CPI) directed through the world church, and brought great benefits back to the congregation. After completing of the CPI program in 2009, Tom entered the Western Michigan Theological seminary through Hope College. Tom was also called to the office of High Priest. We look forward to great spiritual growth in the coming years.

We look backward in gratitude to all those of an earlier era who gave of their talents, physically, mentally, and spiritually that we might be permitted to enjoy the fruits of their labors and sacrifices...and we look forward in hope that a “more perfect Union” Branch which might fulfill her obligation to this Area-this City-to the “Cause of Zion” and to Glorify His Name.



Pastors

1896 Robert E. Grant
? –1933 Walter Rylar
1935-1936 Homer Doty
????
1943-1947 Homer Harvey
1947-1951 A. F. Shotwell
1951 James Phillips
1958 Melvin Russell
1962- Lee Oliver
1970-1971 Alma Dieterman
1972-1973 Almer Dieterman
1974-1976 Robert Johnson
1977-1978 William Sherwood
1979-1983 Ron Brentana
1983-1984 Almer Dieterman
1984-1989 Ted Griggs
1989-1990 Almer Dieterman
1990-1991 Ron Brentana
1991-1997 Tom Reynolds
1997-1999 Patti Findley
1999-2003 Tim Colthorp
2003-2011 Tom Reynolds
2011-2018 Patti Zehr
2018-2020 Patti Findley
2020-20 Tom Reynolds

