

## The Pilgrim Church of Christ in Southborough 1831-1960

### The Pilgrim Evangelical Society 1831-1901

#### The Pilgrim Church

#### United Church of Christ (Congregational)

#### Southborough, Massachusetts

1960-2002

The Reverend David T. Cross stated in his historical address delivered at the Rededication of the Sanctuary and Organ in 1958, "The origin of any church is in Jesus Christ." Yet with our characteristic congregational love of our own church, we want to know how our church got started, what happened to it along the way, and how it came to be as it is. We look back at Pilgrim Church.

The history of Pilgrim Church is more than the recitation of places and dates, for it is the history of its members on a journey of faith. In 1727 the Town of Southborough separated from the Town of Marlborough so that it could have a church and a school more readily accessible to the inhabitants of the area. One of the first tasks of the new town was to "erect and furnish a suitable house for the worship of God, and settle a...minister." The word "settled" applied, indeed, for the Reverend Nathan Stone was the town's first and only pastor until his death 50 years later.

In 1806, the original meetinghouse was razed in order to construct a "most spacious and truly elegant house" a few feet south of the site of the original meetinghouse. However, soon after the erection of this new building the Great and General Court passed legislation that discontinued mandatory support of the Town Church through public taxation. The church had to become self-supporting.

In 1831, thirteen members decided to withdraw in protest from the Town Church because the church was growing away from its Unitarian tendencies. This group was organized as The Pilgrim Church of Christ and is the antecedent of the present congregation. The supporting Pilgrim Evangelical Society was formed a few months later "to procure and maintain for us and our children...faithful, evangelical preaching and instruction." They had to raise the money to support the church.

Following unsuccessful attempts to use the meeting-house jointly with the Unitarian Society, Pilgrim Church erected the "lower meeting-house" in 1834 on the land that is now Peters Park. (Peters Park is in front of the fire station on Main Street.) When the declining Unitarian Society offered its buildings and grounds to Pilgrim Church in the

1850's, with the stipulation that certain repairs be made, the members of Pilgrim Church speedily accepted.

The records show that in addition to extensive repairs, a 14-foot extension was added at the north end, and a 134-foot steeple was erected. Further, we read that: "The meeting-house was furnished with an elegant organ."

The lower-meeting house was sold to Henry Peters in 1857 and later became Peters High School.

It is easier to recapture the history of a building than to know the human qualities of a congregation. Southborough in the 1850's was changing from an agricultural community to one having more than 30 industries. Other churches were coming into being. Pilgrim Church was no longer receiving help from the Massachusetts Missionary Society. On the contrary, the congregation was contributing to a number of mission programs. Church was first and foremost in the lives of these people. They were a close-knit covenant community.

We find strict by-laws prohibiting riding on the Sabbath for business or pleasure (it was all right to ride to *church*)! By-laws condemned theatrical and circus performances, balls, and dancing parties, as being evil and demoralizing. Violation of these by-laws was a violation of the covenant. All of the people exercised watchful care over one another. Sometimes they settled disputes between members at church meetings, at times amicably and at other times through excommunication. Watchful care extended to all areas of life with records showing physical and financial assistance to those in need.

It is interesting that women, in the early years of the church, did not have the right to vote. Shortly after the formation of the Ladies Home Missionary Society (and the financial assistance that they offered to the church) the rules were changed so that the ladies were notified of meetings *and* given the right to vote.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw changes in the community with the building of the Fayville Dam forcing the relocation of numbers of families. The church was also changing from the strict theology and strict interpretation of the Bible to a more liberal point of view, allowing more leeway in conduct. The earlier prohibitions were dropped. The changes in Pilgrim Church came at a time when Andover Seminary was accepting many of the criticisms that Unitarians had been making of their old Trinitarian doctrines. Legislation allowed for the incorporation of the church thus ending the dual relationship of The Pilgrim Church and The Pilgrim Evangelical Society. The Pilgrim Church became incorporated in 1901 and The Pilgrim Evangelical Society went out of existence. Pilgrim Church could now conduct business matters by itself. Economic conditions made it necessary to deed the horse sheds and grounds surrounding the church building to the Town in return for

permanent maintenance. Southborough was becoming a residential community with large estates. The depression of the 1930's put the church in a position of constant struggle to keep the doors open.

A reversal of the downward trend took place in the late 1940's when a handful of people met to vote on closing the church permanently. With courage equal to that of the founders of this church, their vote was to renew their efforts and look to the future. New members joined those who had guided the church through the lean years. The steeple, damaged in the 1938 hurricane, was the first major repair. Once again the bell could summon worshippers on Sunday mornings. Structural repairs were made to the foundation and underpinning.

The people of Pilgrim Church restored the sanctuary and rebuilt the organ in the late 1950's. Recognizing the need for united Christian witness, Pilgrim Church affiliated with the Worcester Area Council of Churches, and was among the first to endorse the merger of the Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed Churches by identifying with the United Church of Christ. Pilgrim Church voted to change its name to The Pilgrim Church (United Church of Christ) in 1960.

In the 1960's the Town deeded back to the Church the land necessary for the construction of a parish hall addition. They dedicated the new parish hall in June of 1963 as a "testimony joining those of the past to us of the present who envision the future." They remodeled the vestry in the old building at the same time to create three additional classrooms. In February of 1975, with great joy, the church made the final payment on the parish hall mortgage.

The 1970's saw the sale of the parsonage that created an Endowment Fund for the first time in the history of Pilgrim Church. Extensive remodeling was done on the sanctuary. With the new parish hall had come an increased emphasis on Christian Education. Personal and financial commitments to outreach programs had grown. During this period Pilgrim Church and its members played a role in the community, helping to establish the United Parishes of Southborough, The Southborough Youth Center, and the Triborough Pastoral Counseling Center. The music ministry of Pilgrim Church rose to new heights with the installation of an Allen electronic organ. The sanctuary resounded with concerts of Handel's "Messiah," Faure's "Requiem," Bach's "Cantata" and more.

The 1980's found Pilgrim Church to be a "place of sanctity, solace, divine comfort, hope and good cheer."\* The pastor's office underwent extensive renovation. The church staff welcomed the addition of an Associate Pastor to aid with the burgeoning church-school population. The church received Memorial Gifts of a grand piano in the sanctuary and a Memorial Garden. Our outreach programs continued to extend into the community with participation in Our Father's Table in Marlboro and the United Parishes Food Pantry being housed at Pilgrim Church.

The 1990's found Southborough at the intersection of 3 major highways, with housing developments filling its once open spaces. It is a town with an expanding population, growing schools, and technological business firms outlining the residential areas. Southborough has become an affluent suburb of Boston and Worcester.

2002 saw a major renovation and expansion of the entire church building. Classrooms, an elevator and handicapped access became a long dreamed of reality.

As we worship in our historic colonial building we appreciate the legacy left by those who have gone before us. Since Nathan Stone, each of our pastors has brought with him his individual "strengths and weaknesses, theological stance, and perception of Christian witness in Pilgrim Church...giving the church uniqueness at that point in time." Underlying this has been the covenant nature of the people of Pilgrim Church, which continues from one pastor to the next, from one generation to the next. This rich heritage serves as the foundation upon which we will build in the future. This is not a place meant for hiding, but for our journeying forward 'in faith'. The object of faith is neither our building nor ourselves, but the living God. It is under the promise of God's providence that we shall go forward.

### *Pastors of The Pilgrim Church, 1832-1998*

Rev. Rev. Walter Follett, 1832 - 1837

Rev. Jacob Cummings, 1838 - 1841

Rev. Dr. Stafford, 1842

Rev. J. Ballard, 1843

Rev. Alanson Rawson, 1844 - 1853

Rev. David W. Elwood, 1853 - 1856

Rev. E. D. Bates, 1856 - 1857

Rev. William J. Breed, 1858 - 1863

Rev. Nathan Campfield, 1863 - 1864

Rev. John Colby, 1865 - 1873

Rev. Dr. Andrew Bigelow, 1874 - 1875

Rev. H. M. Holmes, 1875 - 1878

Rev. Archibald L. Love, 1879 - 1883  
    Rev. J. E. Wheeler, 1884 - 1885  
Rev. Daniel E. Adams, 1885 - 1892  
    Rev. Martin F. Mevis, 1894 - 1906  
Rev. Dempster D. Gorton, 1906 - 1908  
Rev. Arden M. Rockwood, 1908 - 1912  
Rev. S. Carlyle Schaeffer, 1913 - 1914  
    Rev. William F. Slade, 1914 - 1917  
Rev. Homer S. Baumgardner, 1917 - 1918  
    Rev. James H. Peardon, 1918 - 1919  
    Rev. John J. Lockett, 1920 - 1925  
        Rev. F. H. Black, 1927  
    Rev. Henry E. Oxnard, 1927 - 1937  
        Rev. Marshall Eck, 1937 - 1939  
Rev. Christopher Westphalen, 1939 - 1941  
    Rev. Edward W. Lewis, 1941 - 1943  
Rev. Melbourne O. Baltser, 1943 - 1945  
    Rev. Quentin Leisher, 1945 - 1947  
    Rev. Ralph Reynolds, 1948 - 1952  
    Rev. David T. Cross, 1953 - 1958  
Rev. Joseph C. Williamson, 1959 - 1963  
    Rev. Richard R. Rodes, 1963 - 1964  
    Rev. Arthur T. Lutton, 1965 - 1968

Rev. Paul D. Fagg [Sanderson], 1969 - 1972

Rev. Richard A. Fisher, 1973 - 1975

Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Hunt, 1975 - 1979

Rev. Craig A. Reynolds, 1979 - 1992

Rev. Elven A. Riggles, Associate Minister, 1984-1990

Rev. Dr. David L. Fountain, 1993 -1998

Rev. Jonathan Wortmann, 2001 -

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### *The Statement of Faith of Pilgrim Church*

We believe in God the Father, our creator; in Jesus Christ, God's Son, our redeemer and Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, God's presence in our lives. Believing this, we covenant with God and with one another

to follow Jesus Christ as the only head of the church;

to grow in our understanding of the will of God;

to live according to Christ's teachings;

to share with others the news of God's redeeming love;

to be accepting, caring, forgiving members in our community of Christian Faith.