

A History of Grace Church

The history of Grace Church spans more than 200 years. During that time we have had twenty-eight ministers including two that served our congregation for 17 years, our very first minister, Reverend John Peter Mahnenschmidt (1814-1831) and Reverend J. H. Bomberger (1880-1897). One minister served for fifteen years, Reverend Henry Sonnedecker (1831-1846) and another served for twelve years, Reverend Earl S. Crecelius (1990-2002). Three ministers have served for 10 years, Reverend E. F. Weist (1922-1932), Reverend Ernest Noll (1968-1978) and Reverend Charles B. Terrell (1979-1989). There were three ministers that stayed less than one year; Reverend Aaron Wanner (1853-1854), Reverend J. J. Roemer (1859-1860) and Reverend E. D. Wettach (1904-1905). The average pastorate was 7 years.

Our history begins with the founding of Columbiana by Joshua Dixon in 1805. In laying out the village he set aside the land at the Northeast corner of South Main and Pittsburgh Streets as a place for a School and Meeting House. In 1814, the School and Meeting House Society was established and a log cabin was erected. The conditions of fellowship required in the Society were "a practical conformity to the principles of impartial equity, and that every member shall be considered as possessing in himself an original and inalienable right to believe and worship God as his own conscience may dictate without being called into question by any other member."

Reverend John Peter Mahnenschmidt was probably the first minister of the Reformed faith to settle permanently in Ohio. He first held catechistic instruction in a tavern on the Square in 1813 then, moved his meetings to the Society's log meeting house in 1814. Reverend Mahnenschmidt is recognized for his extraordinary abilities as sermons and poems came readily from his pen. His chief literary work was an edition of the Heidelberg Catechism that was published in Canton, Ohio in 1834 and used extensively by Reformed congregations.

The Reformed and Lutheran congregations worshiped in the same structure and a union church replaced the log cabin and was built on the site of the present Grace Church. Reverend Henry Sonnedecker (1831-1846) became our minister during a time when many changes were taking place in the church and the area. The members of the Reformed congregation were slightly conservative but progressive. The New Measures Movement was to introduce revival meetings, the use of the mourner's bench and the custom of relating personal religious experiences to the Reformed Church. Reverend Sonnedecker's resignation is said to have been partly caused by his concern over the New Measures Movement. A stained glass window, in his memory, holds a prominent place in the Grace Church sanctuary.

Because of the discord the congregation was disbanded for a time. The Reverend Carl Lienakemper (1855-1858) re-established the Columbiana charge. In 1867, the Lutherans decided to build a church of their own and sold their interest in the church. Renewed interest of the Reformed members under the leadership of the energetic Reverend Reinhart (1860-1869) prompted them to rebuild and, the following year, they erected a handsome brick building with a basement. On September 17, 1869 the first annual session of the newly formed Eastern Ohio Classis was held in Grace Church.



Reverend James Reinhart 1860-1869

Reverend J. H. Bomberger (1880-1897) arrived in Columbiana to take over Grace Church and thus began a seventeen-year period of growth for Grace Church. An addition to the 1868 structure brought our sanctuary to its present size. The local electric light plant was constructed and on November 30, electric arc street lamps were lighted and electricity was supplied to the modern new church. Beautiful vines grew on the church, having been brought here by Dr. Bomberger from Philadelphia. Dr Bomberger started the Christian Endeavor Society at Grace Church, the first in the Reformed denomination. The Women's Missionary Society was established in 1884 and the Ladies Aid Society in 1887. A stained glass window was placed in the sanctuary next to the Main Street entrance to honor Reverend Bomberger.



**Grace Church 1901
Addition on left, 1868 Church on right**

A church quarterly was being published with Reverend Arthur Casselman (1898-1902) as pastor and editor. In the October issue of 1889 Reverend Casselman wrote, "It is our opportunity to send the first Reformed missionary to China, the darkest spot on the face of the earth." At the meeting of the General Synod in Tiffin, Ohio in 1899, there was both indifference and opposition to the China mission until Reverend Casselman announced that Grace Church, Columbiana, Ohio would pay the entire missionary's salary for seven years. The Synod decided to open the China Mission. The Board of Foreign Missions chose Reverend Fredrick Cromer to go to China. Difficulties plagued this venture and Reverend William A. Reimert, with his wife and child, replaced Reverend Cromer in China. Reverend Reimert became "The Martyr of Huping" after being shot by a Chinese bandit at Huping Christian College while trying to protect Chinese women and children.



Reverend Frederick Cromer 1902-1904

Reverend Cromer (1902-1904) arrived back in this country from China and assumed the pastorate of Grace Church. He kept up the support of the China mission work and denominational missionary work continued until 1934 when the political persuasion of that country forced all missionary expulsion.

Reverend George W. Welsh (1905-1907) took over the pastorate. The congregation desired a pipe organ and the pastor wrote to the Andrew Carnegie Foundation asking for assistance. Mr. Carnegie offered to pay half the cost of the \$1500 organ. A two-manual instrument with 604 pipes was ordered and installed and dedicated January 20, 1907. During a heavy electrical storm on March 12, 1907 after only a few weeks use, a short in an electric line was blamed for causing a fire that severely damaged the church and resulted in water damage to the organ. The organ had to be packed and sent to the factory to be reconditioned. The renovated organ and sanctuary were again dedicated in June 1908.



Grace Church after 1907 fire

Reverend William Yenser (1908-1917) convinced the congregation of the necessity of a parsonage. It was agreed to build if it could be accomplished for \$2500. Reverend Yenser is the only Grace Church minister to have served on the Village Board of Education.

Liberty truck convoys carrying troops east to points of embarkation passed through Columbiana from Detroit in 1917. Sometimes these troops stayed overnight in the Grace Church Sunday School rooms. On one such occasion a convoy with Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower, second in command, stopped at Firestone Farms. Harvey S. Firestone had been a member of Grace Church since his boyhood.

Automobiles were still rather new but the congregation felt Reverend A. Theodore Wright (1917-1921) could better serve the congregation if he had a car, so they bought him a 1919 beautiful black Model T two-door sedan. It was said that he went around corners the same speed as straight away and he was known to have rolled the car over several times. Since the church bought the car, he felt he should transport the women to Ladies Aid Society, etc., but no one wanted to ride with him. Following Reverend Wright's resignation, a one-and-one half story brick parsonage was built on the corner of the church property that faces Pittsburgh Street and the alley between the church and school.

Reverend E. F. Wiest (1922-1932) moved his family into the new parsonage. A garage was built behind the house facing the alley and a church kitchen was added to the main building.

Reverend Stanley Fritz (1932-1936) came during the depths of the depression but construction work continued at Grace Church. He felt a need for a local public library and was instrumental in forming and serving on the first library board. It was in June 1936 that the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America merged, forming a new denomination known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Reverend Wiest returned to Grace Church to preach the homecoming sermon for the 150th anniversary celebration on October 17, 1964.



Parsonage 1920

Reverend Walter R. Gobrecht (1936-1943) put forth great effort in planning for and carrying out the Grace Church 125th anniversary celebration and in tracing this church's origin. To him we are indebted for much of our early record keeping and history. Under his direction improvements called for a forced-air heating system, redecoration of the sanctuary, enclosure of the back porch of the parsonage, and installation of a new indirect lighting system in the sanctuary. The congregation's desire for a new organ was fulfilled when Reverend Gobrecht read of a free organ that had formerly been used in a theatre. The organ was installed in a new addition to the building in the northeast corner.

During Reverend Waldo J. Bartels (1943-1951) pastorate, it became apparent that the theatre-type organ was not satisfactory as a church organ and a Kilgen pipe organ was installed in the church at a cost of approximately \$8000. At this time the Harvey S. Firestone Foundation presented Grace Church with a generous gift to help offset the cost of the organ, or use as they pleased. Also, a cluster of stained glass windows were placed in the north wall of the chancel, a gift of the Firestone Families.

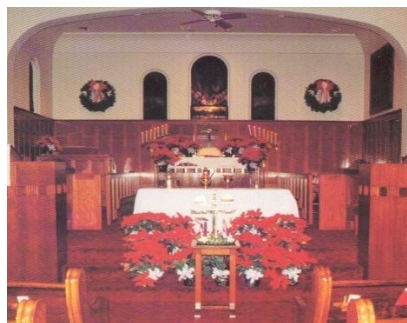
Reverend Donald J. Voelm's (1951-1959) greatest achievement in Grace Church was overseeing the construction of a six-room Sunday School wing built on the site where the parsonage had been placed years before. In 1957, the merger with the Congregational Christian Churches changed the church name to the Grace United Church of Christ. The church purchased a roomy house for a parsonage and the Reverend Harold W. Theidt (1960-1968) family moved in. The Friendly Class had managed the Street Fair food concession for some years but, due to insufficient help, a cafeteria-type service was instituted. The Sesquicentennial celebration of Grace Church was held with special services planned in October 1964.



Six-Room Addition 1966

New pew cushions were installed after Reverend Ernest E. Noll (1968-1978) came to Grace Church and plans were made to remodel the chancel area. For the first time in living memory, Grace Church will keep its doors locked. In 1976, the nation celebrated its Bicentennial and a number of church members participated. During the pastorate of Reverend Noll the debt for the education wing, chancel and kitchen improvements had all been paid off.

Reverend Charles B. Terrell (1979-1989) had the desire and ability to prepare and deliver top-rate sermons. The arrangement and execution of our worship service under his supervision was second to none. In 1990, under the watch of Reverend Earl S. Creelius (1990-2002), the church purchased four lots north of the church building. Following a fire in the adjacent building, it was torn down and the area was made into a much-needed parking lot.



Christmas 1990's

The Sunday School began a new form of study called the Working Rotation Model in 2005. There were four rooms involved including a computer room, a craft room, a movie room complete with a popcorn machine and, a room resembling Bible times.

In the year 2006 after much study, research and prayers, it was decided to merge with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and our name became simply "Grace Church." Reverend Robert Joy (2007 -) became our first NACCC pastor.

In 2014, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the building of that first log cabin. Our County, Columbiana and Grace Church have come a long way since then. The church has been, and is, home to so many who have worshiped here. That's why we say; "Come home to Grace."

Reference:

"A History of Grace United Church of Christ 1814 – 1993" Heritage Committee: Everett Warrick and James A Sitler
GCHbjr072008

MINISTERS SERVING GRACE CHURCH

1814 – 1831	Reverend John Peter Mahnenschmidt
1831 – 1846	Reverend Henry Sonnedecker
1847 – 1851	Reverend N. Paltzgrove
1853 – 1854	Reverend Aaron Wanner
1855 – 1858	Reverend Carl Lienakemper
1859 – 1860	Reverend J. J. Roemer
1860 – 1869	Reverend James Reinhart
1870 – 1872	Reverend Henry Hilbish
1872 – 1878	Reverend John M. Kendig
1878 – 1880	Reverend Henry T. Spangler
1880 – 1897	Reverend J. H. Bomberger
1898 – 1902	Reverend Arthur V. Cassleman
1902 – 1904	Reverend Frederick Cromer
1904 – 1905	Reverend E. D. Wettach
1905 – 1907	Reverend George W. Welsh
1908 – 1917	Reverend William Yenser
1917 – 1921	Reverend Theodore Wright
1922 – 1932	Reverend E. F. Wiest
1932 – 1936	Reverend Stanley L. Fritz

1936 – 1943 Reverend Walter R. Gobrecht
 1943 – 1951 Reverend Waldo J. Bartels
 1951 – 1959 Reverend Donald J. Voelm
 1960 – 1968 Reverend Harold W. Theidt
 1968 – 1978 Reverend Ernest Noll
 1979 – 1989 Reverend Charles B. Terrell
 1990 – 2002 Reverend Earl S. Crecelius
 2003 – 2006 Reverend Michael Boehm
 2007 – Reverend Robert Joy



Rev. J. H. Bomberger



Rev. A. V. Cassleman



Rev. Theodore Wright



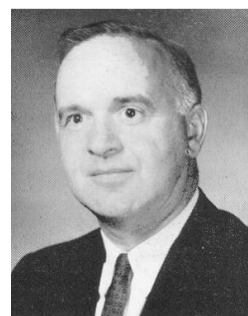
Rev. G. W. Welsh



Rev. E. E. Wiest



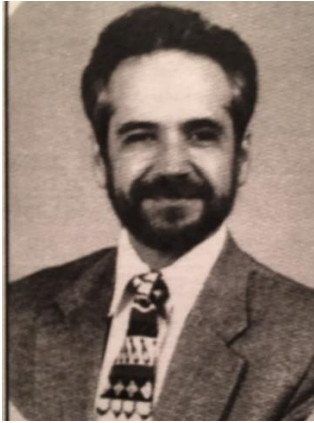
Rev. Walter R. Gobrecht



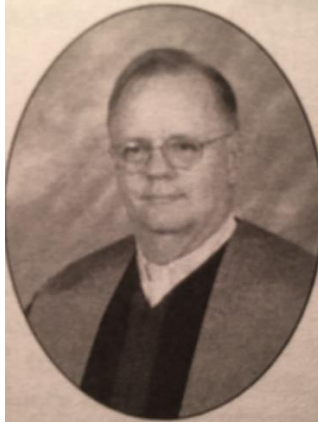
Rev. Donald J. Voelm



Rev. Charles B. Terrell



Rev. Earl S. Crecelius



Rev. Michael Boehm



Rev. Dr. Robert Joy