



PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

## HISTORICAL PROFILE

Pilgrim Congregational Church was founded in 1874 with the first meeting of the Ridgeland Congregational Society, held in the Ridgeland Avenue railroad station of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Pilgrim celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1999 and is well into the second century of ministry and services in the Oak Park area.

Our lovely and unusual building dates back to 1889 and reached its final form in 1900. The building is the oldest structure continuously used for worship in Oak Park and is on the Register of Historic Places. The Hasbrouck-Sprague survey of Oak Park architecture rated the building as an outstanding example of the Queen Anne Revival Style, significant beyond Oak Park.

Denominationally, we trace our religious ancestry back to the early Puritan Congregationalists who came as Pilgrims to the new world. Having been active in the Council of Congregational Churches, Pilgrim continued its affiliation with its sister churches with the merger of Congregational Christian Churches and Evangelical and Reformed Churches in 1957. As a member of the United Church of Christ, Pilgrim maintains the "free church" tradition of local congregational autonomy in all matters.

### **Early History of the Church and Building**

In 1874, Oak Park had a population of less than a thousand people. The center of activity was the area along Lake Street between Oak Park Avenue and Harlem Avenue around the railroad station. In 1863, the first church had been formed with meetings in the little white schoolhouse on the northwest corner of Lake Street and Forest Avenue. This became the First Congregational Church of Oak Park. The area to the east was growing, but more slowly.

In 1872, the village of Ridgeland had been laid out. As families became residents of the new village, lots were set apart for church purposes. Meetings held to discuss the need for religious services led to the organization of the First Congregational Society of Ridgeland in February, 1874. Five trustees were elected, among them J. W. Scoville, who was also a charter member of the Oak Park church. Mr. Scoville and others were chief among the movers and developers of the expansion eastward. The Ridgeland church lots were not far from his large rambling home at 515 Lake Street.

Sunday Afternoon preaching services were held in various places -- very often the railroad station at Ridgeland Avenue. At this time, only 12 houses could be seen from the small frame station -- all else was prairie, with not a tree in sight. The nearest stores were in the village of Oak Park, a mile away. There were no paved streets, and in some seasons the boardwalks floated away so that some people used boats to get around. It is thus not surprising that attendance at the preaching services was often less than desired. In 1878, those services were merged with Sunday School services. Although without a regular church home, Sunday School attendance grew and teachers' meetings developed into Bible studies and prayer meetings. By 1888, attendance at the prayer meetings was averaging 30, and that October the Ridgeland Congregational Church was organized. On December 6, the cornerstone of the new church building was laid. The charter membership was 63, of whom 48 transferred membership from the First Congregational Church of Oak Park.



**The original church building, 1889**

The south wing of the current church, which presently houses the Chapel on the main floor, was the site of the original church. It was built of artisan stone with red brick trimmings and an entrance on the west. Seating capacity was 250 and the first session was held on April 26, 1889. The original plans appear to have included much of the building which is standing today, but for financial or other reasons, a simpler building was constructed. The architectural design was by the firm of Patton and Fisher, which was designing and building homes in the Queen Anne style along North Kenilworth Avenue. The cost of the original church building was \$8,000. Most of the cost was for the labor of carpenters and masons; the architect's fee was \$200. To

place the cost of the building in context, that same year, Frank Lloyd Wright borrowed \$5,000 to build his own home on Forest Avenue, while Patton and Fisher were building the D. J. Kennedy home and coach house for \$13,000.



**Pilgrim Church since 1900**

By the mid-1890's, membership had grown to more than 250, and the congregation decided that the time had come to complete the church building. The original plans were changed so as to permit a Sunday School room on the same level as the Sanctuary/Auditorium, which could be opened into the Auditorium when the occasion required. The main building was built of material

similar to and in harmony with the wing first erected, and on Sunday, March 25, 1900, the dedicatory services were held. By this time, the village of Ridgeland had been absorbed by Oak Park, and the name of the church was changed to Second Congregational Church of Oak Park. In 1918, the name was again changed, to Pilgrim Congregational Church.

The total cost of the building was \$55,000. The Sanctuary seated 700 people, and by opening the large wall/door which lifts into the ceiling between the Sanctuary and the Sunday School room, 400 more people could be accommodated. When the larger sanctuary was built in 1900, the first sanctuary became a parlor. This space was remodeled in 1941 and was renamed Pilgrim Memorial Chapel. The Sunday School room was renovated in 1971, and is now used as a parlor.

The exterior of the church looks today almost exactly as it did in 1900. The southernmost façade is essentially the same as it was 1889. The wood shingles which cover the gables have led some to classify the Church's architecture as Shingle Style, but the variety of materials on the lower surfaces, the stone, curving bricks and half-timbering, are more characteristic of the Queen Anne Revival style.

In 1966, Pilgrim Congregational Church launched the Pilgrim Community Nursery School as a service to families in the area. In 1979 the Oak Park Farmers Market began in Pilgrim's parking lot. That same year Pilgrim started the Donut Ministry. This unique program provides vital funding to 16 community

organizations as well as a delightful opportunity for community fellowship. Pilgrim also partners with the Oak Park River Forest High School for a number of youth events each year and with other organizations in the community.

Recent campaigns have added a handicap accessible lift, replaced the sound and the heating systems, purchased a new electronic organ, and painted the sanctuary and parlor. Physical plant improvements continue.

Pilgrim Congregational Church welcomes neighbors and friends to participate in the full life of the church. We are committed to radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional spiritual development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.