

A History of First United

This is an account of the more than 150 years of life as a congregation, beginning with the two congregations that joined together to form First United in 1925.

First Congregational Church

The roots of First United go back to 1846, when a small Congregationalist congregation gathered, and shortly thereafter purchased property on Elgin Street across from the present-day National Arts Centre. Construction on a building began in 1847; however, this congregation was not able to complete this building and it eventually became the site of Temperance Hall.

During these early years of existence, the congregation struggled, even ceasing to exist for a few short years. In 1860, the congregation was formally reorganized, and in 1862 purchased property on the corner of Elgin and Albert. A church was built, known as the "blue stone church" which was then replaced by a second larger building in 1888—this building was red brick. In 1901, a beautiful Casavant organ was purchased, and this organ was later moved to 397 Kent Street. Beautiful music has since graced our faith life.

In 1911, the congregation, outgrowing its building yet again, sold this prime real estate property and relocated to 397 Kent Street at the corner of Florence Street. This time a cream coloured brick was chosen (to add to the rainbow of colours) and the building was constructed for the cost of \$33,000.

This congregation was also a pioneer, celebrating the first inter-racial marriage in the city.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

During a time of congregational conflict at Erskine Presbyterian (1911), differences became irreconcilable and Westminster Presbyterian formed as a separate congregation. For three years this congregation was not recognized within the Presbyterian fellowship, and it was during those years that a close relationship was forged with the First Congregational church.

With the prospect of Church Union on the horizon, the Westminster congregation discerned and chose not to construct a permanent church building, worshipping instead in space secured within the Conservatory of Music before transforming three row houses into a worship centre on the corner of Lyon and MacLaren Street.

First United

In 1925, The United Church of Canada was created by the union of Methodists, Congregationalists, and approximately 60% of Presbyterian churches on June 25th, 1925. However, four and a half months prior, First Congregational Church and

Westminster Presbyterian joined together on February 15th, and became the "first" United Church in the city.

This union was marked in dramatic fashion as described by congregational historian Edna Shearman who wrote that the Presbyterian congregation,

...marched down the few blocks to their new home while the Congregational members stood in the two side sections so that the new members might be received into the centre portion of the church. It was a deeply moving, unforgettable service, and so the two become one body to be known as the First United Church of Ottawa.

The First Generation at First (1925-1955)

First became a worshipping community for many who came from all across the country to work in Ottawa. There was also active support for families that had loved ones serving overseas. The congregation was very supportive of mission and church work both overseas and locally. They also became large contributors to the Church Extension Fund of Ottawa Presbytery. During these years, the Congregation experienced considerable growth.

In 1945, the Rose Window was unveiled. This window, which was a gift from the Women's Association, was a tribute to those who served in the war and is constructed with 58,000 separate pieces. The brilliant colours, changing with the light outside, represent the enlightenment of the human spirit.

The Second Generation at First (1955-1985)

Like many centre town congregations, members of First United moved to the suburbs and helped establish congregations in these growing neighbourhoods. Numbers at First dwindled, but a faithful community continued to provide nourishment to one another and service to their community.

During these years, a relationship was established with the Chinese United Church which was officially formed in 1962. This congregation grew from a mere 40 to 240 worshippers. The congregation shared space with First United until 1986, when their growth outstripped the space available and they purchased a church at 600 Bank Street.

The Third Generation at First (1985 - 2007)

Beginning in 1985, the congregation, facing imminent closure, opened themselves to what God's Spirit might be willing to do. This openness created an environment for a resurgence in congregational life. Building upon earlier roots of mission characterized by caring for the marginalized, a focus on a progressive, inclusive, and social justice theology attracted many new congregants. Along with many others, members of the GLBT community and those in recovery or learning to live beyond experiences of abuse became active in congregational life. In 1992, the congregation celebrated its first same-sex union.

Our Present Life (2007 – now)

In the late 1990's, the congregation began a visioning process in order to discern its future ministry. As part of this process, it was discerned that the Kent Street building, while beloved, was not fully servicing the congregation. Aware of many other under-utilized church buildings, the congregation made a stewardship choice which imagined congregational life beyond this building. The journey since that time was long and at times winding, but led to the development of a partnership with All Saints' Anglican (Westboro).

This partnership was inaugurated in dramatic fashion when some members of First United marched from their Kent Street home to their new Richmond Road home, and were greeted by members of All Saints' Anglican at the corner of Island Park and Richmond Road. Scarves of welcome (with the words "One in Spirit") were given to those from First, and then the two congregations gathered to dedicate a communion table/altar which the two congregations had gifted one another with.

A wonderful synergy continues between the two congregations as they share faith and space together.

The Next Chapter

First continues to embody the values bequeathed to the congregation by the faithful members of previous generations. We continue to imagine how we creatively continue to embody our Christian faith in the twenty first century.