

# Our History

The origins of Covenant Church go back to the early 1800s, shortly after Simon Kenton, accompanied by a band of sturdy Presbyterians, arrived in what is now Clark County.

An early history records that Springfield, in the first decade of the 19th century, “was in danger of becoming a center of vice wickedness for much of the surrounding country. Rough, lawless men and desperadoes loitered around the public houses, drinking, swearing, quarrelling...A pitcher of whiskey was a necessary adjunct to the water pitcher on the counters of stores, for the free use of all customers. The professors of religion, as well as men of the country, indulged in whiskey with the same freedom.”

But “the professors of religion” soon felt the need for greater sustenance for their souls. In 1811 a popular subscription in money, goods, livestock, and labor made possible the hamlet’s first house of worship, a 20x30-foot long structure erected west of Mill Run and south of Main Street. The first church was free for use by all denominations.

Presbyterian sentiment had grown strong by 1815, and on June 25, by authority of the Miami Presbytery, Andrew Steele was ordained to serve Springfield Presbyterians one Sunday every four weeks. Two years later the tiny congregation made verbal application, accompanied by a subscription of \$110.50, for half of Steele’s time. By 1819 twenty-seven persons who had been attending services regularly felt the need for an organized church, and on July 19 of that year, First Presbyterian Church was constituted, with Steele and stated supply and John Humphreys and Melvyn Baker ruling elders. Springfield was now a village of 510 souls – 285 men and 225 women.

For eleven years the congregation “boarded” about town, using a schoolhouse, the courtroom, and other churches for services. Meanwhile, the congregation had gotten its first full-time pastor in the Reverend Franklin Putnam in 1827, and in that same year organized a Sunday School. The church now had twenty-nine members. Springfield’s population was 935.

After the church was incorporated by the legislature as the First Presbyterian Church on February 11, 1829, the need was felt for a building all its own. But more than a year passed before the society purchased, for \$700, a lot six poles (rods) square, sold as part of the estate of a deceased citizen “to pay his just debts.” The lot, on the outskirts of the “old town of Springfield,” was located at South Street and Hoop-pole Alley (now Main and Fisher Streets, respectively) where a large parking lot is found today. Soon construction began. Because the church was built only as its members acquired the means to continue, two years passed before the “severely plain” one-story brick structure was completed. Two wood-burning stoves provided warmth.

With the beginning of life in its new building, First Church called the Reverend John S. Galloway as its second full-time pastor. He served eighteen years, the longest tenure among twenty-eight pastors who have served our church full-time. The period was one of great growth in religiosity, both in the church and in the village. The Sunday School became an important part of the church’s program. A Mothers’ Group was formed which met on Wednesdays to pray for the conversion of children. The congregation was growing, and on February 11, 1845, it purchased a 91x99-foot lot for \$300, just north of their building.

Inadequate by 1848, the church was razed and a two-story brick structure erected. The new building, costing \$12,000, not only provided a much larger sanctuary but also two rooms for the growing Sunday School, a library, and a study for the pastor. In the church’s wooden steeple hung the bell, which today hangs in the tower at Covenant. Pews in the new church were bought and sold, with deeds drawn up and fees assessed.

Mr. Galloway was a powerful preacher and “his vigorous assaults from the pulpit, the potency of the Word, and the efficacy of the Spirit prevailed.” By the time he retired on March 21, 1850, membership had reached 302. Springfield, its population now 5,109, had just been incorporated as a city.

Members of First had had a special interest in music since the church’s beginnings, and now they hired a chorister who also instructed both youth and adults in music. Another advance in the musical life of First came in 1855 when it acquired a cabinet organ, said to have cost \$30. For more than a decade it was carried from place to place by the sexton or chorister for use at all public services. Not until 1868 did the church have a pipe organ. This acquisition came two years after the congregation, at a cost of \$30,000, had made a number of alterations inside and out, among them an upstairs loft for an organ.

By 1860 congregational growth had made it impossible for all members to be accommodated at services, and on December 4, Second Presbyterian Church was organized with 106 members as a volunteer colony. Three hundred were left for First Church. The mother church helped with a gift of \$4,000 as the new group prepared to erect its

own building on the east side of Limestone Street between Main and High.

Women had played a leading but generally quiet role in the life of First Church since the organization of the Mothers' Group in the early 1830s. It was not until the Women's Temperance Crusade of the 1870s that Presbyterian women, in the words of one of their number, "began to get their tongues loosened." Promoting the cause of temperance was one of the major goals of the Women's Christian Working Society organized in 1874. Three years earlier, women of the church had organized a Foreign Missionary Society at least a year before any other such group was formed in Ohio. In 1874 missionary work was organized more completely under the name of the Home and Foreign Missionary Society. Calling themselves the Band of Willing Workers, girls in the church also formed a missionary society.

Men of the church caught the missionary spirit but their efforts, with assistance from their spouses, concentrated on affecting lives nearer home. The first of their efforts created Oakland Chapel, which had begun as a Sunday School in 1876. The school first met in the township building known as Oakland School District. It was located in a neighborhood known as East Springfield, which, according to a publication of the day, bore "a character that made it a reproach if not a disgrace, to be identified with in a social way." Despite the environment, or possibly because of it, the Sunday School flourished and with its growth came the desire for a permanent home. In January, 1882, the Oakland Chapel Association was incorporated, its purpose "the advancement of the Christian Religion, Morality, and Temperance." When the city limits were extended in 1883, the City Board of Education notified the Association that it could no longer use the Oakland School building. With the aid of First Church, and the generosity of individual members, a lot was given for a permanent home and a chapel erected. Oakland Chapel, dedicated on June 4, 1884, became Oakland Presbyterian Church in 1914.

First Church, in cooperation with Second, had meanwhile carried on mission work on Springfield's north side. There on February 11, 1877, a Sabbath School was organized with fifty-five members. At first the group met in homes, but it soon grew so large that arrangements were made to use a room in Northern School. In the fall of 1878 First and Second jointly erected a chapel at Mason Street and Stanton Avenue upon a lot donated for that purpose. The two churches then jointly financed the school until October, 1887, when the work was taken over by Second alone. Four years later, with First and Second, again acting jointly, a decision was made to organize a third church on the north side. The result was the organization of Third Presbyterian Church and the erection of a commodious building at North Limestone Street and Stanton Avenue, dedicated on January 24, 1894. This church, later renamed Northminster, has now merged with Valley View Presbyterian Church on Villa Road, selling its Limestone Street building to the Church of God Sanctified in 1973.

By the middle of the new century's second decade officers of First and Second Churches were discussing the wisdom of reuniting. Both churches were located in an expanding downtown area, scarcely three blocks apart. Moreover, both churches would soon need new buildings. Boards of the two churches, in June 1919, decided to submit the matter of union to their congregations. Both congregations took favorable action by a large vote and on November 2, 1919, Covenant Presbyterian Church was constituted with the approval of the Presbytery of Dayton. The name for the united church had been suggested by Paul C. Martin in recognition of the 1638 Covenant drawn up in Scotland to maintain the purity of the Presbyterian faith and also to symbolize the faith and loyalty between the merging congregations. The building of the former First church, in which the merged congregations held services after the sale of Second to business interests, was soon found to be inadequate. A building committee named on April 5, 1922, recommended sale of the property and purchase of a more suitable site. The congregation shortly authorized the purchase of property at North and Limestone Streets, formerly home for First Church of Christ, Scientist, and an architectural firm. With its frontage of 198 feet on North Street and 150 feet on Limestone Street, the site was expected to provide ample room for a large building and for the parking of cars, by now being used in increasing numbers.

On July 10, 1925, the congregation approved plans for a stone building expected to cost \$400,000. Four days later the first contracts were let – to Joseph O. Griffin for excavation and to A.G. Samuelson for concrete foundations. The following evening (July 15), ground was broken by the two oldest members of the congregation, George W. Winger and Colonel David King, assisted by the two youngest, Joseph Work and Richard McMahon.

George E. Savage of Philadelphia had drawn plans for the church, which would be a "towering pile" of Indiana limestone with the main unit of the Gothic structure taking the form of a cross symbolizing the Christian faith. Crowning the structure would be a 120-foot tower, a landmark in the city. The church's nave and its stained glass windows, to be designed by P.J. Reeves of Philadelphia, would be adorned with art depicting Biblical scenes. It was anticipated that sale of First and Second Church properties, coupled with voluntary offerings and a general

solicitation, would produce sufficient funds for the new structure, which was to provide ample room for all church organizations and activities.

The cornerstone of First Church became the cornerstone of Covenant during impressive ceremonies on June 3, 1926. H.G. Root, chairman of the building committee, served as master of ceremonies and H.S. Goodrich, scoutmaster of Covenant's troop, the oldest in Springfield, laid the cornerstone.

Gothic throughout, the main unit's architecture is laid out in the form of a cross, with the long arm containing the nave, chancel, and choir loft and the short arms holding the transepts on the east and west, each with a balcony. The cornice frieze along the two sides at the spring lines of the roof carries the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah on the west side, the New Testament proclamation of the fulfillment on the east.

The great stained glass windows of the sanctuary are especially beautiful. The Winger Memorial Window high above the main entrance provides a study of the Ascension, framed by events in the life of Jesus. The Rose Window faces the congregation, with its symbol of Christ at the center. The west transept window honors the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The west aisle window depicts the Miracles of Jesus, and the east aisle window the Parables. The window at the head of the main stairway shows young Timothy studying the Scriptures under the guidance of his mother, Eunice. All windows have been patterned after those in Old World cathedrals, using gresaille glass.

The furniture in the sanctuary is mostly of oak. This includes the elders' seats, richly carved and ornamented in the frieze of the canopy; the pews, the baptismal font, the communion table and its painting of the Last Supper (presented by P.J. Reeves), and the pulpit. The light fixtures are of hammered bronze, in designs reproducing old cathedral lamps.

The new building included a great deal more than a sanctuary, chapel, and Sunday School rooms. "It is arranged with thought to the requirements of modern religious education and multiple parish activities and a large part of the church is dedicated to interest of young people." Among other features is a 74x32-foot, fully equipped gymnasium on the third floor of the adjunct unit.

Covenant was erected at a cost of \$515,000 and indebtedness was to be retired by 1962, but receipt of several generous gifts enabled it to erase the debt in 1948, fourteen years ahead of schedule. In that same year, the church financed a rehabilitation program, and for \$16,000 purchased a 49x148-foot piece of property north of the building.

The new church soon had several choirs, directed by a Minister of Music from Dayton. Over 40 adult members filled the choir loft on Sunday mornings. In 1958 the church added a set of Whitechapel handbells to its splendid offerings, and in 1959 its musical outreach spread to the entire community when a Carillon of Bells was installed in the great tower as a memorial to Mr. and Mrs. James Jarett. Three times daily – at 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 5 p.m. – these bells ring with music, in keeping with the church's religious heritage. The old bell in the church tower is now silent except on special occasions. It was last heard when the nation celebrated its 200th anniversary. Covenant's musical program was greatly enhanced in 1962 when a Schantz organ, replacing the 35-year-old Skinner organ, was placed in the choir loft as a memorial to Charles L. Bauer, long known as "dean of music" in Springfield. In 1984 a Trompette en Chamade was given in memory of Judith Barnett Metz by her parents, Wilbur and Bessie Barnett.

Anticipating its 50th Anniversary-Rededication and facing the need to modernize and improve facilities, make extensive repairs on the exterior of the building, and retire a \$61,000 debt created to install modern heating equipment, Covenant in 1976 determined to hold a drive for \$272,000. Most of the interior work was to be completed by November 27, 1977. The congregation pledged \$330,860 for the work.

In 1988 the property facing on North Fountain Boulevard was acquired. The following year the construction of a new parking area and improvement of the existing lot were undertaken. This project included new landscaping along the north and west sides of the church building. Local businesses have been working to improve the appearance of downtown Springfield and Covenant can be proud of its part, as well, in enhancing the environment of our center city.

In 1991, the congregation's budget was in excess of \$325,000, enabling support of a variety of ministry and mission projects – in the congregation, in the community, and throughout the Presbyterian Church, USA. Covenant's educational program has been enriched by the addition of a half-time Christian Educator on the professional staff. The local Outreach of the Church includes support of the Clark County Jail Chaplaincy, the Clark County Habitat for Humanity, and the Interfaith Hospitality network. In addition to dollar support, hundreds of volunteer hours are contributed by Covenant members, helping to give real meaning to ministry and mission in the name of Christ.