

A HISTORY OF NILES CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

FOUNDING

In October 1875, the first public school in Niles opened, built with funds of \$320 from a ball and the balance raised by subscription. A Miss Watkins was the first teacher. This one-room building was sold to the Congregational community, and was moved and remodeled for our first church. An entrance and a bell tower were added. The first service was held June 16, 1889. Frederick Maar, then still a student in the Congregational Seminary in Oakland, was the first pastor. He was ordained in this church. The church was officially organized September 5, 1889, with twelve members.

The first wedding to occur in the newly established church was that of the pastor Frederick Maar, to May Tyler, the sister of Mrs. Charles (Julia) Shinn. They had courted in the home which is presently the center of Shinn Park on Peralta Boulevard.

This was a period of "tramps." The railroad station was near and Fred Maar had a big heart. Whether or not there was a sign on his gate, tramps seemed to head for the parsonage and were never turned away without a meal or a small bit of money.

There was a saloon within a block of the parsonage; the men who frequented it thought it a great joke on the minister to coax his little daughter in. It is doubtful they ever tried to give her anything to drink, but those were the days of free lunches, and she was fed tidbits from the counter.

The blacksmith shop was opposite the parsonage. One day, when the child was missing, her mother located her in the back of the shop happily wiping blackened axle-grease from the cars and making designs on her little white dress.

For all of the seven or eight years of Fred Maar's ministry in Niles, the people loved and followed him and were sorry when he left for Redwood City in 1896.

Several groups have come and gone since the church was first organized. Old-timers speak of the Chautauqua Circle, the Spare Minute Circle, a social group for young people, and the Christian Endeavor.

Only the Ladies' Guild survived. The first mention of the group is in their September 1891 minutes:

The Ladies' Guild held its first fall meeting last Wednesday at the home Mrs. H. G. Ellsworth. The ladies went at 11 o'clock, taking refreshments, and remained until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. A very comprehensive report of the year's work was made by the secretary, Mrs. H. A. Mayhew.

The officers for the year are: Mrs. James Smith, President; Mrs. Ed Clark, Vice President; Mrs. H. A. Mayhew, Secretary; Mrs. J. Tyson,

Treasurer. Directors: Mrs. Clough, Mrs. C. B. Overacker, Mrs. Tyson and Miss Amy Kerrell.

Our second minister, Edson D. Hale, served the church from 1897 to 1904. After his graduation from Pacific Theological Seminary, he married Lucy Movar, the daughter of Dr. George Movar, the pastor of the Pacific Theological Seminary. When he left, he did not take another pastorate but became a high school teacher.

EARLY 1900'S

Serving the church from 1904 to 1913 was Rev. Frederick Vernon Jones who had been educated in Oxford, England, and had served the Redwood City Church prior to coming to Niles. Because he was nearly blind, his wife did much of his reading for him, and he memorized what was needed. His wife, Georgie, also served as organist.

Mrs. J. E. Thane was the first Sunday School Superintendent. She also taught Sunday School as well as handled the music for the Sunday School and church.

The Men's League was a potent moral force for the community. At this time, it also became a cultural group, both musically and dramatically. The annual report of 1910 comments on the success of their production of *David Copperfield*.

During Mr. Jones' pastorate, a population shift occurred in Niles. The old town center was in the area of Mission Boulevard and the Niles Canyon Road. More and more people and businesses were moving around the Southern Pacific Station where the present town area still exists.

Mr. Jones encouraged the congregation to rebuild. They did so on their present site—the corner of H and Third Streets. On December 10, 1911, a brick shingle building was erected for \$10,000. It stood until April 12, 1938 when it burned down. It was said to be the largest Protestant Church between Oakland and San Jose and was referred to as the "Big Church".

These two quotes from the local paper, the *Washington Township Press*, indicate the vitality of the religious community in Niles:

NEW \$14,000 HOUSE OF WORSHIP—

"Takes front rank among the first rural church buildings in Northern California"—"probably most complete modern church equipment in Alameda County outside Bay cities"—"Sanctuary 54x42 feet, including gallery and organ loft, seating capacity 300—may be increased to 500 by opening door of S.S. assembly room"—also, "6 separate classrooms, ladies parlor, pastor's study, kitchen and gymnasium, equipped with stage, shower room, lockers, etc.—"meeting place for knights and queens"—fine piano bought by Men's League"

(Dec. 8, 1911)

“The church belongs to the civic future—first important institution in our community that has distinctly stepped over into this future—will stand as beginning of a larger Niles, planned for the larger type of institutional work to help life of the community.”

“Men’s League Banquet in honor of dedication—200 guests”

(Dec. 16, 1911)

The title of Pastor Emeritus was bestowed upon Mr. Jones. He retired from the ministry due to his poor eyesight.

Two very active presidents of the Guild in the early 1900’s were “Mother” A. A. Hatch, who presided for 18 years, and Mrs. E. A. Ellsworth, who held the position for 10 years.

From the building of the 1911 church until World War I, there was a very active athletic club which used the gymnasium attached to the church. After the war, several fine social dances were held there, but eventually the hall was converted into a parsonage.

Church records indicate a decline for the next third of a century. Robert G. Harbutt served from 1913 to 1914, followed by Charles L. Hyde (1914-1916), and Harley H. Gill (1916-1918). On July 2, 1917, Gill asked for a leave-of-absence to do war work, and a four-month leave was given.

Harry M. Pfeiffer served as pastor from 1918 to 1919, followed by E. C. Oakley, who resigned December 30, 1923. There were only 33 active members at the close of 1922. The difficulty in holding a pastor was not financial but discouraging community conditions, owing largely to a small Protestant element.

Records indicate Allen R. Goozee, a graduate of Pacific School of Religion, served from 1924-1926; Arthur W. Seebart served from 1926 to 1929. He left for a church in Columbus, Montana. Serving from 1929 to 1933 was Elmer G. Brinkmeyer, who came to us from the Pacific School of Religion and was ordained while here. Wesley Gordon followed from 1934-1936.

On July 1, 1928, Vernon Ellsworth and Anna Milicent Shinn were asked to burn the church mortgage, each being of a third generation family to be part of this church.

In 1936, Mrs. Kate Franklin, mother of Dorothy Gronley, was Superintendent of the Sunday School.

PRESENT BUILDING BUILT

The fire in April 1938, causing the “Big Church” to burn to the ground, was discovered when Florence Myrick came late to a Guild meeting and saw sparks. Old shingles were being burned in the fireplace and this ignited the roof.

Richard C. Day, for whom a stained glass window in the sanctuary is dedicated, led the congregation in the reconstruction work. While the new church was being constructed, the congregation sometimes met in the Veterans' Memorial Building.

The Martha Sanford Circle was organized May 6, 1938 with Virginia Munro as president, and Marie Vervais as secretary. There were 35 charter members. It was named to honor Martha Sanford who gave of herself with love and understanding to the children and youth of the community. Florence Myrick described Miss Sanford as a short, slight person with beautiful white hair who always carried a basket. She was received into our church membership on January 22, 1927, coming from Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1928 she served as Sunday School Superintendent. Later the basket was adopted as the symbol of the Circle. For years, a pansy march of the children was sponsored by the Circle each Easter. Martha Sanford died in 1933. She had recently purchased a stick shift automobile. Having previously driven an electric car, she had trouble shifting and was hit by a train when crossing a railroad track.

The founder of the Martha Sanford Circle was Levore Day, the pastor's wife who died only a few months later. The Hayward Congregational Church donated a children's altar in her memory

Laura Leask represented the Martha Sanford Circle on the committee planning the dedication of the new church on Easter, 1938, one year after the fire. The original church bell, purchased through the efforts of the first pastor, became a mass of bronze in the fire. It was made into a plaque which covered the time capsule in the vestibule of the present building.

In November of 1939, at a meeting of the Trustees, it was voted that a new group be formed which would function in the interest of all church groups – a Cabinet to tie all groups together.

1940's

Richard C. Day served as pastor from 1936 to 1942, passing away January 1943. He was followed by D. Q. Grabill from 1942 to 1946.

A treasurer's report submitted by A. B. Leask for October 1, 1943 to September 30, 1944, showed pledges of \$1,425.70; Christmas offering of \$193.37; and an Easter offering of \$374.76. Under disbursements, the pastor's salary and supplies were \$1,215.00; custodian, \$56.35; organist, \$104.00; and gas and lights, \$56.12. The proposed budget for the year 1944-1945 was \$2,350.00; with the pastor's salary being raised to \$1,500.00.

The church school was an on-again, off again affair for many years. During the years 1945 to 1951 there was no church school of any kind. These were the lowest years in the church's history.

Rev. D. Quincy Grabill organized an unusual dinner group that included men of every denomination. At the annual meeting October 12, 1944, Rev. Grabill announced the church mortgage had been completely paid off, far ahead of schedule. Edward Ellsworth, second oldest living member of the church, was given the honor of burning the mortgage.

In April of 1945, members were told of a \$5,000 gift from Mrs. Helen Clough Ford for the erection of a social hall. In 1948, at a \$5.00 a plate dinner, \$800.00 was raised by the Martha Sanford Circle to help finance the recreation hall. In December of 1948, Ford Hall was dedicated.

Rev. Grabill was a very highly respected man throughout the community. He was elected in 1945 as president of the Niles Chamber of Commerce as well as president of the Rotary Club. In July of 1945, he was on a month's vacation and died in Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin, after suffering a stroke at a picnic given in his honor.

Following Rev. Grabill's death, Donald L. Kirkbride began serving the church. He was ordained in this church on April 6, 1948 with Dr. Harley H. Gill, Superintendent of the Northern California Congregational Conferences, conducting the ordination. Kirkbride had graduated from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. Preceding the ordination, a dinner was cooked and served by the Ladies' Guild. Following the ceremony, a reception was given by the Sanford Circle.

In December 1948, Don Kirkbride married Greta (Miki) Mohn, a Niles native. The Rev. Arthur Freeman, rector of St. James Episcopal Church, Centerville, performed the ceremony in our church with a reception following at the Old Adobe.

During this time there was an active interdenominational youth fellowship group.

At the Thanksgiving Sunday service in 1947, there was a dedication of the memorial candlesticks given by Mrs. Florence Shinn in memory of her late husband, Joseph Clark Shinn, and an organ as a memorial to the late Rev. F. Vernon Jones, by Oscar Walpert, Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Ellsworth, and Mr. and Mrs. James W. Shinn.

Don Kirkbride left in 1949 to become a chaplain in the Navy.

1950's

Paul Focht, a graduate of the Pacific School of Religion, served our church from 1949 to 1953.

In 1950, Mrs. Florence Buehler became concerned that so little was being done for the children of the church. She started the Sunday School again with the help of Mrs. Nellie Shinn, Mrs. Florence Graber, and Mrs. Opie Dean. Mrs. Marjorie Redeker helped with the music. Don Patterson served as Sunday School Superintendent in 1953. When he became moderator, Ray Foote took over as superintendent. It was at his suggestion,

together with the woman's money, and Mrs. Ethel Avilla's organization, that a 300 book church school library was created.

Ken Parker was Assistant Sunday School Superintendent, there being two Sunday School sessions, with 156 children enrolled.

In 1954 the evening women's group known as the "Nite Owls" was organized at the home of Gladys Williamson. Their main purpose was to support the youth groups of the church. Many dozens of camperships were given by these ladies to youth in the church.

On April 16, 1956, the present iron church bell, which had previously tolled for a school and firehouse in Hayward, was dedicated.

Charles W. Kirkpatrick served the church during the years 1953 to 1959. He is well remembered for his outpouring of love and generosity to the entire congregation. He personally hand picked and distributed excess produce from gardens. Care and concern, ecumenical participation, and love for the common man exuded from him.

In 1955, Ruth Palacio was our director of music.

In 1956 the Niles District became a part of the incorporated City of Fremont, but we continue to be known as the Niles Congregational Church.

In 1958 the Women's Fellowship was formed, and Fran Meier served as president for the first three years.

1960's

The United Church of Christ was founded in 1957, but it took several years for Congregational churches and regions to vote to be come part of the new denomination (learn more about the history of the UCC at www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/). By 1962, Niles Congregational Church was officially part of the United Church of Christ.

The "Little House", a house next to the church became the nursery school when \$550.00 was borrowed from the church's roof fund for equipment and improvements to it under the auspices of the Board of Religious Education. The entire project was accomplished on a volunteer basis. The first three years of operation were hampered by a lack of enrollees. The Nite Owls provided scholarships for deserving youngsters in our church. In September 1963, there was full enrollment for the first time. The director was Mrs. Elizabeth Knauer, with Mary Foote as assistant. Donna Grass, Mary Foote, and Thelma Fracolli were instrumental in the Nursery School's beginning success. Mary worked for ten years as director and teacher.

Ronald K. Marmaduke became pastor in 1959 and served until March 15, 1966. A farewell party was held March 4 at the church. He left to become the pastor of the Bath United Church of Christ in Ohio. While he served our church he was given a leave-of-

absence to go to help rebuild the New Jerusalem Baptist Church that was burned in Natchez, Mississippi. It was during his pastorate that an annual Advent program started, and we had our first pictorial directory published.

On September 13, 1964, we observed our 75th anniversary.

Carlota Alexander was director of religious education for ten years, retiring in 1971.

During these years our church newsletter was called "The Herald".

Some Easter Sunrise services were held at the California Nursery.

On Sunday, February 14, 1965, a Valentine's Day Party was held. Wedding vows were renewed and a wedding cake was shared.

Our choir director from 1958 to 1965 was Mary Goebel. There is a stained glass window in the sanctuary dedicated to her memory. When she retired, Darlene Aylard became director. Denali Porter was the organist. In 1965 Mary Foote was the Junior Choir Director, and in 1966 Florence Hansen was the Junior Choir Director. For five years Mike Mohn was their accompanist. When he moved to San Jose to attend college in September 1966, Gregg Sisk took over as accompanist. The Nite Owls, with the help from the Martha Sanford Circle, purchased a piano for the Guild Room in 1965.

In 1965 Sondra Mulcahy Kuykendall was Sunday School Superintendent and Maxine Sickler was her assistant.

After eight years as church secretary Marjorie Reyburn resigned in July 1965.

In February 1966 an early day resident of the community, Mrs. James (Laura Thane) Whipple celebrated her 91st birthday. She died in August of that year. At that time Don Dillon was Mayor of Fremont.

Our interim pastor after Ron Marmaduke left was Gifford M. Webster. James Manley, a graduate of Pacific School of Religion, was ordained and installed as pastor of our church on September 18, 1966, and served until 1968. Dinner at the church followed the ordination. Administering the ordination vows was his father, Rev. Felix Manley, of Reno.

In April 1966 two of our young people, Nancy Blake and Kathy Wolfe, joined approximately 70 other students from the Fremont area for a work, camping, good-will and sight-seeing trip with the Caravana Mexicana Youth to the State of Sonora, Mexico.

Two families from our church became missionaries. Roger and Darlene Aylard and their five sons went to South Africa, and the Willett Family went to Ghana.

On December 23, 1968, David Newell became our pastor, and he served through 1973.

1970's

On April 24, 1970, we had an 80th anniversary party for our church. The program consisted of music, an old-time fashion show, and refreshments.

In 1970 real property was purchased in the Mission Valley area on which to build a new church, as it was felt the physical plant was breaking down and there was no land suitable for building in Niles.

Following Rev. Newell's resignation in 1973, Rev. Ray Welles became our interim pastor.

On September 22, 1974, the Rev. Sally S. Smith and Rev. E. Walter Smith were called in joined ministry. Sally received her Doctorate on June 12, 1982. They were wonderful leaders until they resigned and left for Stockton in 1984. It was a time of spiritual growth and increased membership. A "Prayer and Share" group was begun with Sally's leadership, and a Women's Evening Group was formed shortly before they left.

In 1976, four special congregational meetings were called. At the October 17, 1976 meeting it was voted to stay in the present church building. Early the following year a unanimous vote was taken to sell the Mission Valley property, thus terminating all plans to leave the present church location. Renovation of the sanctuary and other improvements to the church were completed.

An Allen digital organ was purchased in 1978 to accompany our wonderful choir. Under the excellent leadership of Winona Holt, who has been our Choir Director since 1968. Betty Taylor served as organist, starting in 1976.

On April 2, 1978, it was voted to purchase the property next door to the "Little House" at 37614 Third Street for \$45,000.00. It was used as a rental until the summer of 1989 when it was torn down.

A monthly "penny offering" was first started to help Nathaniel Teeba, an African seminary student. Following his graduation, this offering continued and assisted our own seminary students. Judy Dar-Callahan was with us in 1977-78 as minister in training.

Christine Skelton, former Director of Religious Education at Niles, became Associate Conference Minister for Education in the Ohio Conference. She was one of the leading educators in the UCC and retired about 1986.

This church likes to celebrate. On October 3, 1979, we had a potluck supper as the last event of our 90th birthday with Dr. Harland Hogue speaking to us of the story of the church's coming to California.

1980's

Mary Frances Smith was organist for the first half of the 80's.

Bill Foote was our first seminary student from this church whom we assisted with the monthly penny offering. He received his Doctor of Divinity degree in 1984 and was ordained in our church on July 3, 1984. He received his training as the Chicago Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Christine Pifer-Foote, were called to be co-pastors of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Sandusky, Ohio. They are the first clergy couple co-pastorate in the Northwest Ohio Association of the Ohio Conference. Prior to this, Bill served 2 ½ years as pastor of the First Congregational Church in Lebanon, Missouri.

With the leaving of Walter and Sally Smith in early 1984, we were fortunate to have Stephen Boyd, our seminary student at that time, serve as interim pastor until Richard Darksmith came to serve in July 1985. Steve was our second local student aided by the monthly penny offering. On February 10, 1985, Stephen Boyd led a Reaffirmation of Wedding Vows for a group of Niles Church couples. His Ecclesiastical Council was held at our church on March 24, 1985, and he was ordained April 19, 1985.

Our third student was Liz Nash. She worked as a minister in training with Sally Smith at the UCC church in Stockton. Liz received her Master of Divinity degree from Pacific School of Religion in 1988, and accepted a call to Houston, Texas, in 1989.

Our second pictorial directory was published in 1984 under the direction of Doug Swint and the Board of Evangelism and Outreach.

John and Judy Zlatnik went to Russia with the Soviet Peace Committee exchange as representatives of the Northern California Conference in 1986.

Organist David Hatt gave a concert during his year as church organist, in 1986.

At an October 1986 Congregational meeting it was voted to establish a Sunday School Coordinator, with Marilyn Singer becoming the first coordinator. Melissa Palleschi became the second.

January, 1987, found Marion Wolfe on a visit to Central America to a conference sponsored by the Center for Global Education as a delegate from the Northern California Conference.

In 1987, new seat cushions were installed on the sanctuary pews. They were made possible by donations to the Loren Hansen Memorial Fund.

Steve Pietkiewicz was organist for 1987 and 1988. He returned to us in September of 1989.

On Valentine's Day 1988 Richard Darksmith married an active church member, Melody Kee. Dr. David Jamieson, Conference Minister, performed the ceremony in the First Congregational Church in Alameda. Richard preached his last sermon as our minister on February 21, 1988. Ken Holt wrote, "It is Good to be Here," the anthem the choir sang for the service, which was inspired by Richard.

We were fortunate in obtaining Dr. Warren J. Kreml as interim pastor. He has been an inspiration and wonderful guide as we celebrate our 100th anniversary. Rev. Ann Lee Kreml, Warren's wife, served as Associate Conference Minister of the Northern California Conference.

The 4th of July, 1988, was celebrated by some of our members being involved in a fund raiser for the Maurice Marks Memorial Room of the grand new Library in Central Fremont.

At a Congregational meeting on September 11, 1988, it was voted to approve the employment of a part-time professionally trained Youth Advisor to work with the Junior and Senior High fellowship groups. Rosalind B. Ziccardi was hired to fill this position. She is the wife of the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Newark, and was herself ordained October 18, 1988 in the Chapel of the First Presbyterian Church of San Diego.

Our endowment fund was established in 1988.

In 1988, Judy Zlatnik cooked a Russian lunch as a fundraiser for Soviet visitors who attended Asilomar and visited in Northern California, culminating with a dinner for them in our church.

We designed Centennial memorabilia included: tee-shirts, mugs and plates. The tee-shirts and mugs featured a drawing of our church bell, which has become our centennial logo. They were designed by Mary Alice van Doorn and Mike Stahler. The Centennial plate, designed by Hal booth, pictures the three church buildings throughout our 100 years,

A cookbook with recipes collected from members and friends was published and sold under the direction of Barbara Swint and the Women's Fellowship. The centennial cookbook was dedicated to Florence Buehler, longtime president of Women's Fellowship. A Centennial banner was constructed under the leadership of Mary Alice van Doorn and dedicated April 30, 1989.

One Sunday we honored all our church members who have been a part of our church family for 20 years or more. Each was presented a pin with the number of years of membership. There was a progressive dinner, culminating with dessert in Ford Hall for an evening of sharing of memories and reminiscing of experiences and impressions through the years. In February of 1989, an antique show was held in Ford Hall. Models wore vintage fashions, most of which were from Mary Alice vanDoorn's mother. Carlota Alexander sent her lovely outfit worn at the 80th Anniversary Fashion Show that she

presented. It was modeled at the Centennial Show by Susie Anderson. Displayed on the tables were choice items from the homes of our members.

One Sunday, recognition was given for the church Nursery School and the past and present teachers. Another Sunday our theological students were recognized; another Sunday, the various women's groups; and another Sunday, the moderators were given recognition.

Our former minister, Rev. Jim Manley, presented a concert. For our Advent Festival, David Holt's play was presented by the Youth Group. Two publications were produced: a pictorial membership directory, organized by Marion Wolfe, and an centennial historical resume, compiled by Violet Mohn. The Rev. E. Walter Smith was installed as Pastor Emeritus of Niles Congregational Church on September 17, 1989. The culmination of the celebration was Homecoming Weekend with music written especially for the Centennial by Ken Holt and presented by the Choir and returning organist Steve Pietkiewicz on Saturday, October 14. This was followed by a dinner at the church. The celebration continued on Sunday, October 15, with the opening of the Time Capsule and "Looking Ahead with Our Hopes for the Future".

The last ministers who served in the decade of the 1980's were Jack and Janet Smith St. Cyr, and they were followed by a wonderful interim minister, Bill Youngdahl.

1990's

The decade of the 1990's was when we began looking at becoming an Open and Affirming church (within the United Church of Christ, "Open and Affirming" churches are congregations that declare themselves open to and affirming of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the full life and ministry of the church). This was accomplished under the leadership of moderator Melissa Palleschi. We opened up communion to include children and tried to include them in the worship services by having a weekly "Time With the Children". The Board of Christian Education continued to have a child-centered Advent Festival which is always festive with music, food and lively activities.

David Finster was our pastor from 1992-2003. The day he arrived at Niles he was greeted with roofers tearing off the old roof and replacing it. He decided to stay and after eleven years, he and Patsy moved to a new church in Fresno. While David Finster was here, Pastor Mary Conant was hired half-time, and she was an enthusiastic support to the church doing Youth Group, starting a Book Club and preaching monthly.

The Annual Flea Market became a job assigned to the vice-moderator at that time. The event not only augmented our budget but turned out to be an all-church fun event that lasts for a month and includes gathering and selling items. Of course, there are our famous sweet rolls on the day of the sale. We now have a volunteer coordinator, and Alta Jo Adamson has been our leader for several successful Flea Markets

It became apparent that the Little House needed to be replaced because of termite damage and toxic materials, so the Trustees made an arrangement with Tri- Cities Children's Center (now known as Kidango) to jointly with the City of Fremont demolish the old building and construct a day care facility connected to the church. Niles contracted with Kidango to have a 20 year lease with a rent of \$1 a year for the center, after which the facility would belong to the church. We have a good working relationship with all entities cooperating. At the time of the construction, we were able to demolish an old garage and then construct our parking lot. Exterior halls were enclosed and the offices were moved to the present locations. This was all done at no expense to the church.

Winter Relief became a yearly project during this decade. Ford Hall is turned into a sleeping and eating place for one month for guests from Tri- City Homeless Coalition (now known as Abode Services). It is an all-church effort to assist them with transportation, a clean place to stay and nutritious nightly snacks and breakfasts. We cook special breakfasts and dinners for them on the weekends and see that they have healthy bag lunches every day.

The Fremont Bank Foundation donated a new kitchen which makes it easy to cook for not only Winter Relief but for our frequent church meals. We are a church group that loves to eat together!

An Adult Sunday School was started by John Zlatnik.

2000's

Melinda McClain was our interim minister from 2003-2005. She was energetic and while she was here we improved the esthetics of the interior of the church.

Jeff Spencer became our pastor in 2005, and with him we have had a spiritual renewal in many areas of our church. Actual Spiritual Direction Groups have been formed, and we have found new ways to reach out to communities both close and far away. Jeff has encouraged an awareness of Global Warming, and we search together to find ways to decrease our carbon footprints. Our worship services are coordinated with sermon, music, children's stories, prayers and scripture all supporting a theme. Jeff assists all the Board to stay on track with his reminders before our meetings each month. This is a working pastor and teacher.

Our use of technology has increased our communications. We have a web page that attracts new members and keeps us all connected. Every Wednesday, we get an email message about all the events of the week which is helpful to remind us what is happening and how we can participate. We have a big screen in Ford Hall for movies and power point presentations.

In 2008, Winona Holt celebrated 40 years of being our choir director.

It is with sadness that we inform you of the death of our beloved Choir Director, Winona Holt. Winona was our Choir Director for over 42 years. She passed from this life to the next peacefully on Wednesday, July 14, 2010. A service celebrating her life and ministry was held on Saturday, July 24, 2010.

We have an active Men's Breakfast Group that meets for food and a great program early on a Saturday morning once a month. Bill Palleschi has been the driving force.

We have fulfilled 14 years of our contract with Kidango with Ken Rasler as our liaison. We have a monthly newsletter called The Bell. Annie O'Hare, Barbara Swint, and Riki Twist have produced it, and it is excellent. It comes online and by mail to those without a computer.

In 2008 and 2009, the Board of Social Concerns with special work by Susie Claxton focused our attention to the genocide in Darfur. We worked with other UCC churches to purchase a tent, painted it, and then Susie accompanied it to Washington D.C. where it was set up on the Mall. It was then shipped to Darfur to use as a school tent.

Just like in 1970, we again looked at our church facility and thought about needed changes and upgrades to keep it functional for now and in the future. An opportunity to merge with the First Christian Church was proposed, and a Discernment Team was appointed to look at the feasibility of such a merger. One aspect of this examination was a reaffirmation of being an Open and Affirming church. Currently (2009) we are still working on the details of a plan to possibly merge and join congregations at either the First Christian site or at the Niles site. Possibly, this will be decided in this decade. We trust that we will be led to make the right decision so that our church family will grow and thrive while we do God's work.

MINISTERS OF THE NILES CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Frederick H. Maar	1889-1896
Edson D. Hale	1896-1904
Frederick Vernon Jones	1904-1913
Robert G. Harbutt	1913-1914
Charles L. Hyde	1914-1916
Harley H. Gill	1916-1918
Harry M. Pfeiffer	1918-1919
E.C. Oakley	1921-1924
Allen R. Goozee	1924-1926
Arthur W. Seebart	1926-1929
Elmer G. Brinkmeyer	1929-1933
Wesley Gordon	1934-1936
Richard C. Day	1936-1942
D.Q. Grabill	1942-1946

Donald Kirkbride	1947-1949
Paul Focht	1949-1953
Charles W. Kirkpatrick	1953-1959
Ronald K. Marmaduke	1959-1966
James Manley	1966-1968
David Newell	1968-1973
Ray Welles – Interim	1973-1974
Sally & Walter Smith	1974-1984
Stephen Boyd – Interim	1984-1985
Richard Darksmith	1985-1988
Dr. Warren J. Kreml – Interim	1988-1989
Janet & Jack Smith-St.Cyr	1989-1991
Bill Youngdahl – Interim	1991-1992
David Finster	1992-2003
Mary Conant – Associate	1997-2002
Melinda McLain – Interim	2003-2005
Jeffrey Spencer	2005- A long time from now