

PASTORS

Over the past 15 years

Obviously, the pastor has not changed, although I do think I have changed personally in some ways. My sermons have become more edgy and focused on social justice and missions. Because I practice what I preach, the last few years have found me in New Orleans cleaning up after Hurricane Katrina, in Ukraine at an orphanage and most recently in Arizona to learn more about our current border issues and to help take water into the desert for those crossing into our country to try and make a better life for their families. In the past three years I have participated in numerous protest rallies and marches. The most memorable was the Women's March in Washington, D.C. the day after the inauguration of our 45th president.

When it comes to significant events within the church itself, three will always hold a special place in my heart: the day we voted to become Open & Affirming (April 3, 2011), the day I baptized my granddaughter Kensington in 2015 and the recent celebration of our 200th anniversary.

I know the elephant in the room these days (the topic people are thinking about, but don't want to bring up) is my plan for retirement. The truth is, I don't have a plan! I love the church and my ministry here, so as long as I am healthy, and the congregation feels I am being effective, I want to stay. If I live as long as my mother, who will be 97 in October, I have a long way to go!



Since 1819

Our first resident pastor, **Rev. Alan Nash**, was hired in 1838. Like so many that would follow, his pastorate was relatively short, slightly less than two years. Some were only here a few months, some a few years and only a couple served more than a decade, but they all helped to shape our history, one way or the other. Many went on to hold important positions within the wider church while others left the ministry and succeeded in other fields. I wrote about each of them in my book, so I will just highlight a few of their stories here.

My favorite is **Rev. Ralph Claggett** who served from 1926-1929. He had already written a best seller book by the time he came to First Congregational and would go on to write more books and several plays. He created a Committee on Religious Drama and several of his plays were presented at the church. He always credited the church with inspiring him to develop his play writing ability. Rev. Claggett loved our church and probably would have stayed for a long time if he hadn't been advised to resign after talking about sex in a sermon!

Rev. Claggett was not the first pastor to be pressured into resigning. Such had been the fate of **Rev. Edward Steiner** (1898-1902) more than two decades earlier. Born in what is now Czechoslovakia, he came highly recommended by one of our previous pastors, Rev. Ingersoll. Steiner had more passion for the Gospel than our conservative congregation was willing to tolerate. He joined forces with the editor of the local paper and other men in the community to successfully fight against the multitude of saloons and brothels throughout the city; he tried to maintain a spirit of fellowship with the laborers of the city by working with them one winter during the day and attending to his pastoral duties in the evening; he became an advocate for the immigrants who were doing the dirty and dangerous work of blasting limestone and making cement; he spent his vacations studying immigrants and following them from Ellis Island to Pittsburgh, Connelsville and Chicago.

The congregation's response to his "social gospel" was to turn against him. One of the church leaders told him he was "called to the church to preach the Gospel, not talk about those dirty foreigners."

When the tension in the church continued to escalate, he and his wife decided it was best if he resigned, even though he "faced an unknown tomorrow." Having no idea how he was going to support his family, he simply counted his blessings and moved on in December of 1902. "Our assets were," he wrote, "each other, three children, aged respectively nine, five and one year, some debts - and faith in the Guiding Hand which hitherto had led us." Some time later he joined the teaching staff at Grinnell College and rose to international fame as an author, lecturer, sociologist, and educator.

Not all the pastors were treated poorly, some, like **Joseph Stein** (1930-1944) were dearly loved, He, by the way, has the second longest pastorate in our history. (I beat him by nine years!) He was called to First Congregational shortly after the stock market crash of 1929.

Rev. Stein sounds like a saint to me. In spite of the personal trauma of trying to raise a family during the Depression, when year after year his salary was cut, he is remembered for his happy and practical outlook on life and for the individual interest he took in all the members of the church.

We can assume that **Rev. Robert Boardman** (1959-1968) was also dearly loved, or at least greatly respected, for his leadership during the turbulent sixties. I say this because the large room adjacent to the sanctuary, formerly known as "the Sunday school room" was officially named in his honor in 1986.

The congregation took a bold step in January of 1986 when they hired a clergy couple, **Revs. Bill and Christine Pifer-Foote**. It was a non-traditional choice, but at the time the benefits seemed to outweigh the concerns. The two pastors shared the work load (and salary) of one pastor. It took awhile for the congregation to adjust to this new concept and the idea of having a woman pastor. A few years later they had yet another adjustment to deal with, something that had never happened before in the history of the church, the pastor was pregnant! Much to everyone's surprise Chris's pregnancy and maternity leave were managed well and everything in the church continued to run smoothly.



Unfortunately during their pastorate an ongoing challenge was the negative attitude of many members who focused on the way things used to be, rather than what they could be. Membership was down, worship attendance was low and money was tight, but the Pifer-Footes believed there was potential for the church to turn around if everyone worked together. Few were willing to do that. When the pastors decided to call it quits in May of 1991, there wasn't even a president of the congregation.

Then began what turned out to be a five-year search for another pastor. There were two interim pastors during that time and another who was called to be a designated pastor. As such he had a contract outlining duties similar to an interim, but for a designated period of time, 2-4 years. Unfortunately, he was let go after just three months of service due to mental health issues. Thanks to a core of members determined to keep the church alive, we survived those challenging years. I'll talk more about those folks next month when I highlight outstanding people throughout our history.

