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Congregationalism in Iowa City

The "forty-niners" on their western trek were augmented by restless Iowans. This probably accounts in some instances for the slow growth of churches, for the emigration took place in all communities. The Quaker colony at Salem, for example, lost to California many of its leading citizens, including its educational leader, Reuben Dorland. Bayard Taylor's *Eldorado* fascinated and inspired other Iowans to seek their fortunes in the Far West.

This emigration closed, however, about 1855 and a great wave of immigration began. On January 1, 1856, the Rock Island Railroad reached Iowa City. This gave an added impetus to the growth of the capital city. With the increasing population a growing denominationalism was sensed. The American Home Missionary Society had separated into Presbyterian and Congregational groups and this divergence had been felt in the pioneer settlements. The new ministers, unlike Aratus Kent who had founded union, or community, churches, came as delegates of various ecclesiastical bodies.

Iowa City Congregationalism had its beginning

with Presbyterianism. The two denominations often worked together even after 1837. It mattered not to the pioneers whether they were of one body or the other. Presbyterian as well as Congregational traces appeared in the early settlements. The Presbyterian Church, however, was itself divided into the Old School, with its first Presbytery founded at Bloomington, now Muscatine, on November 6, 1840, and the New School, founded first at Yellow Springs, now Kossuth, on April 12, 1842. Both groups were represented in Iowa City. The New School group did its work under the direction of the American Home Missionary Society, and to all intents and purposes sympathized with the New England Congregationalism of the Timothy Dwight school. The Congregationalists in Iowa City therefore associated themselves at first with the New School Presbyterians.

In 1870 the New School and Old School Presbyterian synods in Iowa united. The Congregational and Presbyterian churches have usually held fast to the older traditions and remained separate. When in 1932 an attempt was made to unite the two churches in Iowa City, the movement was voted down by the Presbyterians, although, in the early stages of discussion at least, the Congregationalists favored such a union. The

attempt, however, was finally so firmly rejected that it is not likely to be revived until some new spirit of coöperation becomes nationally popular.

Like the Congregational churches in the Welsh communities of Old Man's Creek and at Williamsburg, the Iowa City church grew out of a series of prayer meetings held in the homes of the people. These unattached worshippers consciously imitated the New England parish and in 1856 formed a Congregational church. During that same year twenty other Congregational churches were organized in Iowa, each with the same New England background.

The first settled Congregational pastor in Iowa City was the Reverend Thomas Morong of Andover Theological Seminary. He was installed on November 26, 1856, on the very day the church was organized. The Congregationalists, having no church building, were guests of the Universalist Church for the examination, and the installation service the following day was held in the Baptist Church. The Iowa pioneers took the matter of examination seriously, using one day for the procedure instead of a few hours as is now the case. The installation made November 27th a day long to be remembered. The Reverend Jonathan Blanchard, president of Knox College, journeyed from Galesburg, Illinois, to deliver the sermon.

Dr. William Salter of the Burlington church also assisted in the service.

While the Congregationalists had no church building, the Baptists invited them to use the Baptist Church, which was done, the Congregational service being held on Sunday afternoons. Prayer meetings were regularly held on Thursday evening, in the "ancient languages" class room of Professor Henry S. Welton in the University. Early in 1857 the Congregationalists rented the newly built Athenaeum Hall on Clinton Street. It seated 700 people, and served the congregation very well. The church began to grow numerically, having at the end of the year forty members. Then came the depression of 1857.

This financial panic broke upon the region with a paralyzing effect. The banks failed. "Money was of the wildcat variety, which might be good in the morning and worthless at night." The financial crisis seems to have heightened interest in religion. The Congregationalists defied hard times and planned a church building. In 1857 the capital was moved from Iowa City to Des Moines. The University closed for lack of funds and all seemed in a state of discouragement.

Then came the long-remembered revival. This great moral movement swept the whole country, and in 1859 crossed the Atlantic to Ireland and

the British Isles. Many new members joined the Congregational Church in Iowa City. But, in the meantime, Mr. Morong had been east trying to raise money. Unsuccessful in his efforts, he resigned in January, 1859. The congregation was without a pastor until the following December, when the Reverend John C. Hutchinson was installed as the second pastor of the homeless congregation.

The pastorate of Mr. Hutchinson lasted only six months, when he resigned, because the financial burden seemed too great for the meager resources of the pioneer group. The congregation, however, never faltered, believing the future had a place for the continuance of the Puritan tradition.

The next minister to accept a call was the Reverend W. W. Allen. His story reflects the strict dogmatism of the time. He had been pastor of a Baptist church in Keokuk but, having declared against close communion, he had communed with the Presbyterians and for this offence the Baptist church excommunicated him. Allen felt he was in line with John Bunyan and Roger Williams, but the Iowa Baptists could not appreciate such behavior. Only recently have the Baptist churches in Iowa begun to abandon close communion. Allen stayed with the Iowa City Congregational

Church until 1863, when the situation became so discouraging that all Congregational services were abandoned for a period of three years.

On July 31, 1866, the Iowa City Congregational Church was reorganized and the Reverend G. D. A. Hebard became pastor. The congregation realized by this time that it must either build a church or disband. So they built a church. On June 9, 1868, the cornerstone of the present building was laid amid general rejoicing. The reorganized church was composed of the New School Presbyterians and the Congregational remnant. The church was thus a new example of the old association of American Home Missionary Society in which both Presbyterians and Congregationalists coöperated. From this time on the Congregational Church in Iowa City prospered.

The Congregational Church of Iowa City began to attract attention in the sixties as a church atune to the conditions of the educational center in which it was located. It emphasized the cultural side of religion, invited eminent lecturers to its pulpit, and tried to harmonize its teachings with the rapidly changing beliefs of the period. The Reverend G. D. A. Hebard encouraged all this. Born and bred in Vermont, educated at Dartmouth and at Union Theological Seminary, he was pastor of the New School Presbyterian Church until he

brought about the Iowa City merger in 1866. He carried through the building of the present edifice, and on December 19, 1869, it was dedicated. Just previous to the dedication, however, Hebard accepted a call to the church at Oskaloosa. He was succeeded by the Reverend Rufus Sawyer, who stayed from October, 1869, to the spring of 1871, when he accepted a call to the church at Anamosa. Sawyer was succeeded by the Reverend W. E. Ijams who, like Hebard, proved to be exceedingly popular. It was during Ijams's pastorate that Iowa City was visited by Amos Bronson Alcott.

An entry in Louisa Alcott's *Journal* for November, 1872, speaks of her getting "Father off for the West". On this trip he first lectured in Dubuque. On Sunday, November 24th, he addressed the Sunday school at the First Universalist Church. He was everywhere popular with the children. On Monday evening he talked to the adult Sunday school class at the home of the teacher. On his birthday, November 29th, his admirers in Dubuque presented a gold-headed cane to him. He wrote about the gift to Louisa and she recorded the event in her *Journal*. On the first Sunday in December, Alcott preached at the Universalist Church on "The Religious Tendencies of the Times".

He next visited Fort Dodge, where he spoke on

Sunday, December 8th; then he went to Grinnell, from which place he proceeded to Iowa City, where he arrived on December 23rd and put up at the St. James Hotel.

According to Alcott's *Journal*, accessible through the kindness of Frederick W. Pratt and Odell Shepard, he went the next morning to call on the Reverend Samuel Judd, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church. Alcott had met Judd two years before in Dubuque. On Christmas day, Alcott attended "Episcopalian Services", and afterward called on various Iowa City people, including President George Thacher and Professor Amos N. Currier. He also held one of his famous "conversations" at the home of Professor James B. Edmonds.

Alcott was pleased with Iowa City and the struggling University. The people he met had read his writings, they were interested in his lecture, and they were all fond of Louisa, especially of her famous book, *Little Women*, which was a "best seller" in Iowa. On December 26th, Alcott called on Miss Augusta Chapin, the Universalist minister in Iowa City. He had a remarkable interest in the churches, and expressed a desire to know about the religious life of the West. He also made the acquaintance of John P. Irish, the editor of the *Iowa City Daily Press*. The Edmonds

family gave Alcott a reception on Saturday evening, December 28th, for faculty and students of the University.

The person, however, whom Alcott desired most to meet was the Reverend William Edwin Ijams. The Congregational minister's experience in practical philanthropy and in translating the gospel into institutional patterns interested Alcott. Ijams had established in Iowa City in 1854 an institution for the care and instruction of the deaf and dumb, and he had served as its first principal. This function was later assumed by the State and finally the school was removed to Council Bluffs.

When Alcott came to Iowa City in December, 1872, the University was much aroused by the conflict of religion and science as a result of the lecture tour of John Tyndall who, by his scientific theories, had challenged institutional religion and especially the orthodox conception of prayer. Although Tyndall had confined his lecturing to the cities on the Atlantic coast, his ideas had penetrated to the trans-Mississippi region, and had encountered in Iowa City one who was qualified to meet the issue so keenly felt in the churches and colleges. Ijams preached to a crowded church as the students and faculty came to hear religion's side of the question. He also wrote reviews and articles on Tyndall and Huxley, some of which

were partially reprinted in the student publication. Alcott was curious to know what orthodox Congregationalism in the prairie State had to say to Tyndall. He wanted to compare the reaction of Iowa with that which followed Tyndall's lectures in Boston. Ijams was the man to inform him.

On Saturday December 28th Alcott met Ijams at the home of Professor Edmonds, who was at that time teaching in the College of Law and interested in the current religious questions which Ijams fearlessly discussed in his sermons. Alcott approved of Ijams at once, and Ijams, like all of Iowa City, capitulated immediately to the charm of the aged philosopher. After a few minutes conversation Ijams asked Alcott to preach for him the next forenoon. Alcott consented "gladly".

The next forenoon the Congregational Church was crowded while Alcott read "a chapter and a hymn," and preached the sermon. He enjoyed preaching in the West and especially that December Sunday in the Congregational Church at Iowa City. There he found a kind of religion which, while Puritan and to the pioneers orthodox, was yet as liberal as New England Unitarianism. The subject of his sermon was reported to be "The Ideal Religion". Evidently the sermon dealt with religion and institutionalism, and embodied most likely the discussion he had had the day before

with Ijams about the influence of Huxley and Tyn-
dall on American thought.

On Sunday evening Alcott again attended the
Congregational Church, this time sitting in the
minister's pew, and heard Ijams deliver "an ex-
cellent discourse". On Monday, December 30th,
Alcott left Iowa City, full of praise for the New
England Congregationalism which had developed
in the "New West", as his neighbor, Emerson,
called the prairie country.

This visit to Iowa City did something to both
Alcott and Iowa City Congregationalism. The
latter was strengthened in its determination to hold
high the cultural side of religion, to show religion's
ability to cope with the perplexing questions fac-
ing America. But to Alcott himself it did even
more. He suddenly found himself at peace with
Puritanism in its western development. It helped
him clarify his own position. After all, Alcott re-
mained a Puritan — and he was confirmed in it on
the prairies of the New West.

CHARLES ARTHUR HAWLEY