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Frederick I

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Western Congregationalism

With every company of New Englanders hurrying westward, Congregationalism was advancing beyond its original habitat. Yet by comparison it was losing out nearly everywhere. But why?

Congregationalists generally were consolidating their western missions with those of the Presbyterian Church. The "mutual forbearance and accommodation" enjoined by the Plan of Union of 1801 found a welcome among the settlers, who could thus be fellowshipped in the same church and choose their minister from either denomination. Soon, hundreds of new churches had been formed, and untold thousands of the unchurched reached. Scores of missionaries were kept busy, the principal agency being the American Home Missionary Society, organized in 1826.

Where circumstances required "accommodation," the Congregationalists watched their identity disappearing in a church type which some, liking it, called "Presbygationalism" and others, possibly lacking in "forbearance," did not like. The Presbyterians were more aggressive, too, yet the majority of the Congregationalists joined their churches. Recent studies have shown that upwards of 500 Congregational churches (the nation over)

were received into Presbyterian church bodies previous to 1846. Yet few leaders were willing to see home missions conducted in any other way.

But talk was getting around of a "revolt." Certain Presbyterians — the more liberal wing, the "New School" group — were for fellowshipping the Congregationalists; others were not. These latter formed the "Old School" bloc, believing that the "very fearful crisis" could only be broken by "a thorough-going work of reformation." In 1837 the Old School outvoted the New School in the General Assembly, thus purging the Presbyterian Church of "Congregational influences." The New School Presbyterians continued to work with the Congregationalists until 1861.

In 1838, on the eve of organizing the first Congregational church in Iowaland, there were more than 100 Congregational churches in Ohio, 20 in Michigan, 36 in Illinois, 6 in Indiana, and 4 in Wisconsin Territory. West of the Mississippi River two had been formed, but only one was now in existence. Everybody anticipated that Congregationalism eventually would become resurgent, and that is what happened. Even now, New Englanders were settling in the "Black Hawk Purchase," where Illinois Congregational ministers had done some prospecting. What if they should be invited to come over and form a church in Iowa?