

OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Brief History

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, Minnesota, has a long and rich history. However, this history began, interestingly enough, in Washington, Connecticut. It was there during a series of religious revival meetings in 1831 that two young brothers, Samuel and Gideon Pond, were baptized and dedicated their lives to serving Jesus Christ.

They set out in the early 1830s in search of a place where they would be challenged and could be of service to people who needed their love and concern. Divine Providence eventually led them to Fort Snelling (then called Fort St. Peter's) at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. There they began missionary work among the indigenous Dakota people and the early white settlers in what would later become Bloomington, Minnesota.

Samuel and Gideon first lived and worked among the Dakota at Kaposia (now South St. Paul), then at Lake Calhoun and Lake Harriet in present day Minneapolis. Later they served at a mission in Lac Qui Parle in western Minnesota. They eagerly learned to speak the Dakota language, developed an alphabet for it and translated the Bible into Dakota. The Pond brothers served as missionaries, teachers of farming techniques, and carpenters, all the while advocating for rights and fair treatment of the Dakota people.

In 1843, they followed the Dakota people southward and settled on a bluff high above the Minnesota River at a place they named Oak Grove. There they built a mission house and a dwelling for their growing families. The original brick home is still there as part of the Pond-Dakota Mission Park, 401 E. 104th Street. Within a few years, at the invitation of Chief Shakpe, Samuel Pond moved his family further down the river to build a mission. This mission became the Presbyterian Church of Shakopee. Gideon Pond stayed on at Oak Grove. The Oak Grove Mission continued until the formation of the Oak Grove Church Society on September 19, 1855. This was the official beginning of the Oak Grove Presbyterian Church.

Martin McLeod, an early settler and friend of Gideon Pond, donated land for a new church and cemetery, and soon the Oak Grove Church moved to a new home. The church was located at the present site of the Bloomington Cemetery at 104th and Lyndale Avenue until 1864. By then Bloomington had begun to grow rapidly, and the young congregation needed more space. The building was moved (by two teams of horses and four yoke of oxen!) to its current location at Old Shakopee Road and Penn Avenue South.

As the community of Bloomington grew and changed, so did Oak Grove Church. Many times the congregation outgrew its facilities and built additions and brand new buildings on the current site. By about 1910, the old clapboard church was replaced with a new stucco structure. But it wasn't long before Bloomington hit another growth spurt as city folks began the exodus to the country and the country soon became a suburb. Oak Grove Church, and especially its Sunday School, was

soon bursting at the seams. It was noted in church records in 1955 that the Sunday School enrollment had increased from 235 to 385 children in just two years! The congregation's peak of membership—thus far—was in the early 1980s at just over 1500 confirmed members. Our current facility, completed in 2001, meets the congregation's needs very well and provides meeting spaces for groups and organizations from our wider community as well.

Throughout its 150+ year history, Oak Grove has maintained a strong tradition of service to our local community and to the broader world community. From the earliest days of ministering to the Native Americans and early Bloomington settlers, to the present day, Oak Grove has initiated and reached out to others through projects such as Meals on Wheels, VEAP (Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People—providing a foodshelf and other social services), Homework Connection, Cornerstone (preventing domestic abuse), resettling refugee families, Vacation Bible School (more community children than Oak Grove kids participate), the Summer Park Program, the San Lucas Mission in Guatemala, and more recently a major building project in Blompark, South Africa. On December 7, 2009, the Bloomington City Council honored Oak Grove Presbyterian Church with the Omar Bonderud Human Rights Award. Oak Grove was described by the Council as —an outstanding community organization with a long history of working with community partners to improve the lives of the diverse residents of Bloomington. In the summer of 2010 Oak Grove began hosting Oasis, a service for area youth in need of shelter. In 2011, Oak Grove began our Schools for Peace Project.

In 2009 the Session declared that Oak Grove is an —intentionally multicultural congregation. We have an increasingly diverse membership and seek to grow in that area, learning from one another and enriching our life together in worship, fellowship and service. Our new member class in January, 2011, had 21 people from five different countries!

In the year 2001 Oak Grove hired a full-time Director of Christian Education, Carol Osweiler, who has overseen a revival in this area. In 2010 the Session decided to hire a full-time Youth Director for the first time in twenty years. Many Oak Grove members have made significant contributions of time and talent as school board members, community volunteers, and elected officials in local and state government.

Thousands of ministers (every member is a minister) and thirty-seven pastors have kept Oak Grove Church vital and ever committed to Christian service. Together we have celebrated during times of plenty. We have also braved the tough times - the times of want and hardship, of uncertainty and despair—from plagues of grasshoppers to church squabbles to economic downturns. We are still here. And with God's help, we will continue to be a vital presence in our community and in the world in times to come!

Celebrating Diversity Growing in Love Open to All