

Pilgrim Harvests

In more than a century Iowa Congregationalism has seen some good years and some lean ones; it did not crash in the depression, although its stamina was given a grueling test.

During the 1930's, the church membership remained practically stationary, but Iowa's home expenses fell off dangerously by more than 50 per cent. The figures for benevolences light up the combined postwar and depression period from 1920 to 1935, in so far as the basic economic difficulties are concerned. Iowa's benevolences, which had reached their all-time high of \$216,074 in 1920, plummeted to \$137,430 in 1925. By 1930 they had shrunk to \$80,439, although the fearful extent of this shaking did not become evident until 1935. In that year the benevolence giving scraped the bottom at \$30,965 — one-seventh of the 1920 amount. It has been with great determination that Iowa Congregational Christian people have been making the long and difficult climb to the \$125,835 reported in 1950, and present indications are in favor of still higher totals.

The past two decades, though filled with accomplishments of many kinds, have brought some serious reverses. Painstaking researches recently

made have dictated a number of timely projects which, already under way and in good hands, make the outlook much more promising. Nevertheless, the faith of each church is being tried.

Iowa Congregationalism, in so far as the membership figures are concerned, has been in a static condition since 1920, yet today's total of 43,218 is the largest ever. Withal, since 1900, the number of churches on the roll has decreased. Fifty years ago that figure was 317; it is now but 221. There has also been a decrease in the number of Sunday school pupils enrolled. The all-time high in this department was attained in 1925 with 34,683, but today's enrollment is one-half of that number. Youth groups have likewise been affected. The 1950 enrollment of 3,914 is equal to that of 1943, but represents a loss of 60 per cent since the turn of the century. On the other hand, the work of the Sunday schools and young people's organizations of today is vastly superior to that done fifty years ago, more of it being self-planned and self-sustained than formerly. The quality of direction and teaching is also much better today.

In 1950, the twelve largest churches, in order of size, have a combined membership of 10,322, about one-fourth of the total strength of Iowa Congregational Christians: Des Moines (Plymouth), Spencer, Mason City, Grinnell, Waterloo (First), Burlington, Sioux City (First), Dubuque (First), Ames, Dubuque (Immanuel), Fort

Dodge, Cedar Rapids (First). The denomination is growing in the cities and in the smaller towns, best in the latter; but it seems to be losing in the larger villages and in the open country. The property valuation of all Iowa Congregational Christian churches in 1950 exceeds \$8,000,000, while the total Conference assets are better than \$200,000.

In recent years the church association has been increasingly stressed as "the pivotal unit of fellowship next to the local church"; in Iowa, each of the nine associations has its officers and committees elected by the church delegates and sharing the load of Conference administration. Known as the "Iowa Plan," this is undoubtedly one of the finest illustrations of church democracy. The organization of association parishes is now being tried out "as a helpful transition toward better techniques." To spearhead the rural expansion needed in Iowa, the Board of Home Missions has assisted with generous grants, and competent direction of association parish units has been given by the Rev. and Mrs. Vern R. Willey while at Truro, and by the Rev. and Mrs. Homer E. Dalrymple, now at Keosauqua. At Denmark over \$5,000 in proceeds from the God's Portion Harvest Sale in 1948 helped to finance the work of six vicinity churches, including one of the Roman Catholic faith.

In 1920, in addition to providing for the regular

home and benevolence budgets, Iowa Congregational Christians raised \$243,000 toward the Pilgrim Memorial Fund — the system of ministerial annuities. Practically every church in the state shared in this enterprise, several giving over \$10,000 apiece. Again, in 1949, the Iowa churches put the Unit Plan Fund over the top in less than eight years instead of the ten suggested for the completion of this further drive for pensions and annuities.

The Iowa Fellowship of Congregational Christian Women, and the Iowa Laymen's Fellowship are both performing constant and timely services within Conference bounds and throughout the world. The president of the former is Mrs. E. R. Norton of Grinnell; the latter organization is headed by Sherman Q. French of Hawarden. A notable feature of the annual Conference meeting is the dedication of the Woman's Gift — more than \$5,500 in 1950. The Laymen's Fellowship is now in the process of raising the Fred D. Cram Christian Education Fund of \$54,000, named for Professor Cram of the Iowa State Teachers College at Cedar Falls and offering scholarships to deserving young people who are preparing for full-time Christian service.

The Conference in 1945 published the volume prepared by Superintendent Emeritus Johnson, *The First Century of Congregationalism in Iowa, 1840-1940*, which included a chapter on the work

of Iowa women written by Mrs. Elbert A. Read of Shenandoah. The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches held its biennial session at Grinnell College in 1946 and brought to Iowa more than 3,000 delegates representing more than forty state conferences.

Superintendent P. Adelstein Johnson was succeeded in 1938 by the Rev. Royal J. Montgomery, who had previously given sixteen years as the Conference Director of Religious Education. As Superintendent Emeritus, he now serves as Conference Historian and directs the Mayflower Home project from Grinnell, the Conference seeking to raise \$130,000 for the erection of a retirement home for the ministry and others. Together, Dr. and Mrs. Montgomery and F. J. Kiesel of Grinnell have donated the large nucleus of this fund from their personal treasure.

In 1947, the Rev. Judson E. Fiebiger, D. D., came to the superintendency of the Iowa Conference from the pastorate of the Ocean Avenue Congregational Church of Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Fiebiger also serves as President of the Iowa Inter-Church Council. Mrs. Judson E. Fiebiger is Chairman of the Missions Council, the official promotional body functioning primarily in the areas of missionary education, stewardship, and giving. Serving with Dr. Fiebiger are the Rev. Andrew K. Craig as Field Secretary, and D. H. Thomas as Business Manager. Until recently, the

Rev. Virgil E. Foster was Director of Religious Education.

Iowa Congregational Christians have promoted the work of the Federal Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, and now support the program of the newly constituted National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. As the denomination has grown, much of its national leadership has been recruited in the Middle West, and Iowa has responded generously.

What of the decade that lies ahead, and what of the future? During the 1950's, fifty Iowa Congregational Christian churches will commemorate a hundred years of service. Among these are some of the strongest in America — churches rich in resources of men, women, and youth. Superintendent Fiebiger recently stated in an address, "A Triumphant Church is a militant and crusading church. It is a church with a purpose, a mission. . . . It is a church that is aglow, that has a Cause to promote, a Lord to serve, a God to glorify." The Iowa churches are now faced with the greatest challenge in their history.