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WOW! Ottawa First United Methodist Church! We, the former Methodist Episcopal Church, are Ottawa's first church! Our claim to local fame; the first church in Ottawa and maybe in La Salle county! Question: is it our building that's recognized for it's outstanding historical significance or are we receiving this special designation because of the love, service and sacrifices of congregation's past? To have even attained such honorable status we had to be associated with events that made significant contributions to our history. Receiving such an historical designation means we've been determined to have retained integrity. The National Register criteria recognizes seven aspects of integrity one of which is association. We're "associated" with events of national historical significance. Christian significance! Not because a prominent person lived or worked here. We're not an archeological site that's providing valuable insight into the past. (at least I hope we're not an archeological site). The building's amazing but we're not receiving this designation because it's an outstanding example of design or construction. This building's an icon of a nation shaping ideal. We receive this special historical designation because this building's associated with the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. For the last 187 years this place characterized a way of life for the people, the Christian way of life. Stop and consider how for 153 of our last 187 years, people sat in these less than comfortable pews and worshipped God made known to us in the man Jesus Christ. People came here to be strengthened in the faith to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We're a congregation that officially began in 1832. That's 187 years of Methodism in Ottawa. It all began in 1825 when the man Jesse Walker appointed himself to be a "Missionary to the Indians." Imagine what it was like for Walker to travel on horseback through hundreds of miles of unbroken Midwest wilderness. There weren't roads for this Methodist Circuit rider to travel. Traveling through virgin Illinois prairie would not have been easy. Swimming across rivers and streams to get to suitable sites to camp each night. Campfire cooking every night before laying down to sleep under the starry night's sky on a blanket and his overcoat. It's the true story of our beginnings from the historical records of La Salle county. Jesse Walker and his District Superintendent, Peter Cartwright traveled from Peoria to the Potawatomi mission site at the mouth of the Fox River. They called the families together and preached to them. The next day the chiefs came and smoked the pipe of friendship with them. Through an interpreter, they made a speech to the chiefs about their mission. With only 5 white families they started a school with 14 Indian children. The school and the conversion of the Native Americans to Christianity was less than successful but what did succeed was a Methodist class, Ottawa First's first congregation. Can you imagine the personal danger Jesse Walker endured! What faith! What conviction! What risk! No wages, no social security and no protection from the elements or Native Americans. Remember this was during the time of the Blackhawk war! What a faith! What a sense of God given purpose.

Jesse Walker's efforts resulted in not just this church but 24 active churches in the La Salle county area. From those very hard, humble beginnings this congregation grew to 1043 people. The 1969 Church Directory lists Rev. Dr. Don Thomas as pastor of this congregation that numbered 1043. They worshipped at one of 3 services. First Church had a radio ministry on W.O.L.L (FM), a nursery and Sunday School. There was Jr. & Sr. High MYF, the Duo and Pioneer Clubs, 4 Women's Circles (Bethany, Miriam, Rachel and Susannah), the Wesleyan

Service Guild and 3 choirs (Adult, Jr. and Cherub)! Good thing church leaders saw God's vision of an expanded church. In 1957 this church purchased the Old Farrell garage using 3 years of pledges to annex the church with the garage. The new education building cost \$103,000 (that's almost a million in today's economy). The education building was dedicated in November 1959. Ottawa First Methodist Church was a strong church; a known leader in Ottawa's Christian community. This church "united" the community in communion and ecumenical Good Friday services. It was known then that this church was the most active church in the now defunct Ottawa Ministerial Association. Think about the hundreds of thousands of people's lives who've been impacted by this congregation's mission and ministry! The weddings, the baptisms, the funerals. 187 years of faith inspired relationships.

187 years of peopling serving in Jesus name to transform the world for the cause of Christianity. Over the years very generous and passionate Methodists used this building from which to operate its missions and ministries! Impacting lives and making a difference for Jesus Christ in the Ottawa community. Consider their sacrifices. Consider their faithfulness! Life was so different then but not at all easy just very different from today's difficult! Think about what past congregants endured. Warp speed with me if you will back in time to April, 1861 to the start of the Civil War. For 4 long years the war raged on until the North succeeded and slavery ended. The Civil War claimed 620,000 lives, both Northerners and Southerners, black and white. Imagine what it felt like coming to worship on Sundays in the 1860's. What's on your mind and in your heart. It wouldn't have been all that long since your family packed up everything and headed west to settle here. Naturally, with the War happening you'd be scared, worried and concerned about your future! You'd sit in your pew praying God, what is your will for our slaves? God, what is true freedom? Are we to love all people even Black people? O, God will my brother or my father come home? Alive? Please keep them safe! It's almost unbelievable considering the tumult of those times but First Church was built the year the Civil War ended in 1865 at a cost of \$9,000. War's fear and uncertainty did not keep this congregation from stepping out in faith. They sacrificed \$9000 to build this building. \$9000 then is like \$150, 000 today. Building First Church today would cost over 3 million dollars. Warp speed from the 1860's to 1914. You're the congregation sitting in your pew.

You've come to worship with WW 1 on your mind. Naturally, you'd be scared, worried and concerned about the future! What would you pray? God, please just protect our men, my brother, my husband, my uncle, my friends. God please end this war to end all wars; bring my loved one home alive. 4 long years you prayed that prayer til the war ended in 1918. The world suffered 16 million soldier and civilian casualties. Warp speed ahead in time with me 11 years later and it's the Great Depression. Imagine yourself sitting with your family in your pew Sunday after Sunday for the 10 long years of the Great Depression from 1929- 1939. The stock market's crashed. Nobody has money to buy a thing including food. Industrial output's come to a screeching halt. Your dad's company laid him off. Your family has no income. Banks failed so your family's lost all their investments. For 10 long years you endure, seeing more and more unemployment. As many as 25% of Americans were unemployed. What's on your mind and in your heart? Naturally, you'd be scared, worried and concerned about the future! What would you pray? God, help us. God, we don't have enough money to eat let alone bring your church

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an offering. God, how will my family survive? God, I'm embarrassed. I can't provide for my family. Do I swallow my pride and go to the soup line? God will I ever work again? Yet, faithful Ottawa First Methodists remodeled this Sanctuary in 1938 just as the Great Depression was coming to an end and right before the outbreak of WW II in 1939. Imagine coming to worship every Sunday for the next 6 very long years of WWII. It'd be a congregation of women, mostly. But, that's exactly what you're your family did! You rarely missed church. What's on your mind and in your heart? Naturally, you'd be scared, worried and concerned about the future! What would your prayer be? God, please end this war. God, please protect my brother, my boyfriend or my husband, my uncle and my friends. God please, just please, bring my loved one home alive. God, what's going to happen to our countrymen and women? Will it ever end? There's no gas and I can't even get tires for my car, God, every resource we have's going to fight this war. God, will you bless us? We're just doing what true Patriots do, we'll sacrifice for our country. Imagine going home after worship Sunday, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941. You wouldn't know it yet, until you sat close to your radio listening to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt talk about the day that will go down in infamy. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor! On American soil! Imagine the fear you'd have for your future and the future of this country. You'd be anxious but you'd come to church the next Sunday to find hope for what appeared to be a very uncertain future. Christmas was coming but now more than ever you'd seek the peace that can only be found in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The fear and concern for the future was no different during the dropping of the atomic bomb or the Cuban Missile Crisis or after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Some of us are alive today to remember sitting in the pews those next Sundays; scared, worried and concerned about our future. Just like we were scared, worried and concerned about our future after 911. But, by then there was a significant difference. Since the 1970's and by 2001; Jesus had become counter culture. People did church less and less for more and more reasons! Until the Sunday after September 11, 2001! Church attendance spiked when our sense of national security was shaken. Radical Islamic terrorists attacked the New York Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the United States Capitol. What was on your mind and in your heart those Sundays? Naturally we were scared, worried and very concerned about our future. What did we pray? We prayed, God, keep us safe. God, comfort all the families and friends who've lost loved ones. God, bless our first responders especially those who sacrificed their lives. God, I don't feel safe and secure any more. God, please give me your peace. Will our future ever be secure again? My friends, my point in all this remembering is this: throughout history, since time's beginning! God was . As a people and a nation this weekend we set aside this time to remember how faithful people sacrificed to serve and protect our freedom. We've endured horrible tragedies, difficult wars, outrageous unemployment, horrible economic upheaval, missile crisis and terrorists' attacks. There has always been reason to fear for our future! We've wondered how we'd ever survive and yet, here we are celebrating and remembering! And, the good news is: God was with us. God is with us and God will always be with us...in it and through it all. This church and its congregations have endured so much over the last 187 years to survive to be thriving this day! Are you finding hope in our remembering? I ask because aren't we scared, worried and concerned about the future? The church's future! The future of

the United Methodist denomination? Our children and grandchildren's futures? What's on your mind and in your heart? What are you praying for these days? God, what is your will for all people, even LGTBQIA people? God, how do we truly love all people, unconditionally and sacrificially! God, we see all those who don't go to church. How can we reach them with your Good News? Today's 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians scripture has us hearing Paul tell the church at Thessalonica the same message Paul tells us today. Stand firm! Hold fast to the teachings! The church at Thessalonica's no different than Ottawa First except Paul's teaching them about the end times when Christ returns. But, lately, I've heard people question if what's going on in our world and in our denomination is a sign of the end of times.

Since Paul left them, rumors about Paul's teaching spread through the Thessalonica church. People got upset and confused. Like now, everyone's uneasy. Because once rumors start and a special few start interpreting how they believe events will transpire, the disturbance sweeps through the church! Paul knows the difficulty will fracture the church. He knows rumors have to be put to rest. Paul's not allowing them to get distracted by any end of times details. Paul just encourages them like he encourages us “not to become easily unsettled or alarmed,” but instead “stand firm and hold fast to the teachings.” Translated, the word “unsettled” means “shaken,” like a violent earthquake shakes. Like us, they knew what it was to be “shaken “to their foundation's core. Like us, the church was NOT just mildly questioning how things might work out. It's more like an earthquake of doubt that's devastating their faith. They're “alarmed!” and so are we. That's the fear surprises cause. They began in one direction while Paul was with them, but, they're surprised by his new teaching! That fear's shaken their foundation. Fear paralyzes. Fear is scary. Fear makes us feel uncertain about what to believe and what to do. Fear makes us worry: what's next? Isn't that where we are? What's next for United Methodist? Paul's new end of time teaching may not seem all that concerning to us. We've been waiting 2019 years for Christ's return, but this new teaching has shaken them just like what's going on in our denomination has shaken us. But, Paul's words are our words. Notice Paul didn't spend any time correcting the teaching or righting where they'd gone wrong in all their rumoring. He spends more time encouraging them like I want to encourage us! Find hope in our remembering and do not fear! Stand firm, hold fast to the teachings. Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us how to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Love! Do not be shaken! God is love! God was, God is and God will always be love. Look back, remember and find hope! Faithful Methodists endured, sacrificed and stood firm and so will we! Step out in faith. Do not stay stuck in rumoring or remembering! We just can't! Our culture's changed. These are different times, the time between what was that will never be again and what will be. Christianity in our country is in decline. We're living in the Post Christian era. We don't really like to acknowledge or even talk about it. When this church began; ours was a Christian nation founded as one nation under God! Going to church, being Christian was a social norm that's no longer true! So, the way I see all this is: desperate times call for desperate measures! The church no longer has the luxury of opening our doors and expecting people will come through them. God was, God is and God will always be but the ways our faith inspires our relationships and the ways we serve to transform the world for Jesus Christ have to change! Paul's prayer is our

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prayer. Stand firm! Hold onto Jesus’ teachings! Focus on the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be encouraged! Hope! Be strengthened in every good deed and EVERY GOOD word. Do not be shaken! Do not be discouraged. Instead, let’s come together and grow in our faithfulness. In fact, I’m challenging us as a congregation to stand so firm in the faith that we start asking God this ONE question: what one new thing can we do for the Ottawa Community that will make a difference for Jesus Christ? What do we want to be known for? What’s our next bold step of faith? What will we risk for the cause of Jesus Christ in the Ottawa community? Yes, in our remembering we find hope for the future, but like faithful Methodists it’s time to cross the hard, difficult prairie of our uncertainties and ford our streams of doubt to begin a new thing. Our new thing doesn’t have to be as outlandish as a new idea in Florida. They started a Craft Beer Church! The next 187 years in mission and ministry at Ottawa First United Methodist Church on the corner of Jefferson and Columbus Street are up to us. How will we step out in faith?

