PILGRIM Congregational Church was founded at a gathering of about 40 people on the evening of December 5, 1866. Within a couple of weeks, the founding members dealt with the details and minutiae of formalizing their endeavor and the new church celebrated with a Dedication Ceremony on December 23rd. Three infants – all children of charter members were baptized. A Sunday school had been established at Morgan (now Delmar) near Garrison in 1853; however, the founding of PILGRIM Church formally dates to 1866. Despite many obstacles, ranging from a cholera epidemic to a major schism, PILGRIM managed to persevere and grow along with the city around it. With energetic and inspirational leadership, the congregation completed construction of a sanctuary building in 1872 @ 2843 Washington Ave. On numerous occasions PILGRIM members nurtured those who wished to enter the ministry and seeded groups for other new church starts in Eastern Missouri.

PILGRIM began to take its place as a leader in the search for social and racial justice in the late 1800s and into the 1900s. PILGRIM was a strong voice opposing “demon rum” and supported the WCTU temperance movement in St. Louis. When Drury College (Congregational), now Drury University, faced a serious financial crisis, PILGRIM took a major part in coming to their aid. In 1872 the women of PILGRIM founded The Woman’s Association and that organization was the longest running one @ Pilgrim until 2015 when they disbanded. The women of the WA had a healthy endowment that they prudently managed and over the years provided many monetary gifts to the church when repairs or new items were needed. We are truly indebted to our women for their gifts over the years.

In 1906 PILGRIM moved west and built a beautiful sanctuary with a 10-bell tower (that has been restored and tolls on the hour to this day) @ 826 Union Blvd. The Danforth Chapel was added in 1940. Rev. Truman B. Douglass was called to be pastor in 1936. He was a leader in opposing America’s entry into World War II. After Pearl Harbor, he took up the cause of Japanese-Americans who were evicted from their homes and forced to live in internment camps. PILGRIM sponsored a Japanese-American family so that they could be released from their camp and find employment in St. Louis and the Nakano family were members of PILGRIM for many years. During Dr. Douglass’ pastorate at PILGRIM, conversations were held between he, Dr. Samuel Press of Eden Theological Seminary (Evangelical & Reformed) and unnamed others. These conversations led to meetings between leaders of the Congregational-Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed denomination which led to their merger in 1957 and the creation of the United Church of Christ.

With the end of World War II, the city population began moving west and “white flight” was the order of the day. As the neighborhoods around PILGRIM experienced “white flight” and a changed racial population with some areas falling into decline, some members proposed that PILGRIM should also move and either build or buy a new church facility in the suburbs. Others felt PILGRIM should stay put and deal with the challenges presented by the changing neighborhood. Studies were done and reports written about the future PILGRIM faced. Everybody understood that staying on Union meant that PILGRIM would be existing in and ministering to an area populated predominantly by black folks. The congregation was polled and the majority voted to remain on Union and to open PILGRIM’s doors to people of all races. This decision did lead to some members leaving PILGRIM; however, the many that stayed believed that they had done “the right thing”. Our first African-American member was Mrs. Velma Hunt and her family and Velma is still a revered and beloved member of PILGRIM. So, for many years now PILGRIM has enjoyed being an integrated (at times about 50/50) and thriving church learning about each other racially, culturally, and historically, especially the United States history about race that we all share but has long been hidden from many of us. It hasn’t always been easy but we have persevered, sometimes losing members but we continue to have a racially mixed congregation always ready to explore the next evolution of PILGRIM Church. We may be fewer in numbers but we are mighty in doing God’s work @ 826 Union Blvd!

Our church building @ PILGRIM is made of gorgeous pink Missouri granite and houses a beautiful sanctuary. As many of our older churches know, keeping up a big building can be a huge job. Over the years PILGRIM’S church house has had makeovers, repairs, and updates and shows her age as we try to keep up with it on an irregular basis. Regardless, we love our church home and we are very proud to own the 2nd largest organ in St. Louis. Our Rolls Royce of pipe organs is an Aeolian-Skinner organ consisting of 80 ranks with 4609 pipes and was installed in 1945. It is one of five Aeolian-Skinner organs still existing in an unaltered condition within the country and the replacement value is estimated to be four million dollars. And it gives us great music!
PILGRIM has long been known for its caroling due to our annual participation for over 100 years in the St. Louis Christmas Carols Association which began 1911, when William H. Danforth and a group of friends decided to bring joy and goodwill to their neighbors by caroling outside their homes. PILGRIM members were among those caroling folks and have been caroling on Kingsbury Place and surrounding areas ever since (usually now the Sat before Christmas Eve). Founder Danforth died in his home on Kingsbury Place in St. Louis on Christmas Eve 1955, as he waited for carolers from PILGRIM Congregational Church to serenade him.

The PILGRIM Community Soup Kitchen founded in 1982 primarily through the efforts of dedicated Pilgrims, Ruth Cornelius, Carol Kester, and other Pilgrims as well as many dedicated PILGRIM volunteers. Over the years, we have served about experiencing food insecurity. In the early donations with food bought with monetary churches and monetary donations from guests. Over the years the SK became more person” so our wonderful volunteers toiltries as well as loving care and kindness. This is PILGRIM’S longest and strongest ministry to our surrounding community. PILGRIM opened a Food Pantry in 2011 after the sudden closure of the Dignity House Food Pantry. Opened originally @ PILGRIM as a temporary site and when none of the other area churches were willing or able to house a permanent Food Pantry, PILGRIM quickly became the permanent site supplying an average of 50 families each Wednesday. PILGRIM provides staple food supplies to people from the neighborhood on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of each month from 10-11:30 am. These two ministries are now under the ministry title of Wednesday Ministries to serve our community.

Over the years we have had an intercessory prayer group, a youth group and a men’s group, a boy scout troop, a bell choir, adult classes and children’s Sunday school, a parish nurse, Kwanzaa celebrations, church picnics and retreats and some of these have withered away and some continue to grow strong. Our Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry Ministries are going strong. In addition, our ecumenical choir provides us with beautiful music each Sunday and our guest musicians often bring new and exciting music and instruments to us, especially during the summer months. For many years now on the Sunday before Veteran’s Day, we have honored our living PILGRIM Veterans and their families, those Pilgrims who served and are no longer with us and Veterans who serve currently all over the world.

PILGRIM belongs to UCM--Union Communion Ministries, a collaborative effort of PILGRIM UCC, UNION AVENUE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST and WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN churches who together minister to our community by partnering with neighbors and congregational members and seeks to:

- improve the quality of life in the community surrounding the corner of Union and Delmar;
- confront poverty, hunger, and educational disparity, which are often rooted in racism and classism, through holistic approaches including direct service, systemic change, and community building.

Throughout the year we have community events for back to school, Thanksgiving baskets, a Christmas Toy event, and our fabulous Summer Concerts in the Park. Ivory Perry Park is located on the old 2nd site of the Visitation Academy and Convent @ Belt & Clemons Ave. The Academy abandoned the city for the county back in 1962 and the park was then named Visitation Park. A new and beautiful city park was then created & renamed after Ivory Perry, a black activist in the city of St. Louis. He was always working against oppression and the results thereof, such as lead paint poisoning in many of the older St. Louis houses in which the black community often were forced to reside due to housing segregation, leading the picket line @ the Jefferson Bank to open bank jobs for black folks in 1963 and protesting police brutality which we know still exists today. Children in many of our urban cities still die of lead poisoning today so the work he began is still needed.

The park got a bad reputation when a 10-year boy was tragically killed by a pack of wild dogs in 2001. That is one of the reasons UCM and its partner ecumenical churches decided to help reclaim the park for the community and hold free Ivory Perry Park Concerts on the 4th Sunday of June, July & August @ 6 pm. It’s a great time, bring your chair, buy some food, and enjoy some great music of various genres.
We also collaborate with our sister churches as the Union Council and each year for over 20 years we have shared a Rev. D. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday worship & celebration, an Ash Wednesday service, educational classes during Lent and a Maundy Thursday worship, and a Thanksgiving worship and meal. We have a great time together during these events and look forward to each one as well as seeing our “church” friends @ the concerts.

Throughout the years PILGRIM has continued its dedication to social, gender and racial justice issues. We joined CACI which became MCU—Metropolitan Congregations United to support urban initiatives. In 2007 after 2 years of classes, discussions, panels, study and prayer about gender identity, orientation and sexuality issues led by our able Next Steps: Reconciliation Initiative and our Community Partnership Ministry, the congregation voted to become an Open and Affirming church. That was just one more instance of “opening our doors, our hearts and our minds” that has been a hallmark of PILGRIM Church. At one time our strong financial base meant we could give several college scholarships to Soldan graduates. During the early 2000’s, our experienced 5-person team of facilitators for Dismantling Racism were chosen by the national UCC to travel throughout the nation leading Dismantling Racism Workshops for our churches as well as for the national staff in Cleveland and New York. Over the years, we have participated in: the boycott of Taco Bell for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ Fair Food Program in 2001 which works for human rights for Florida farm workers; boycotting Wendy’s for the same issues; supporting Ethiopian small coffee farmers while boycotting Starbucks; buying items from Equal Exchange for our Justice Sales throughout the year so Pilgrims & friends can do Justice while shopping for goods; Mission 1 collecting over 3000 cans/boxes of food for those experiencing food insecurity in 2011; the Gateway ONA and PrideFest since 2008; the annual CROP WALK each year; our 140th anniversary year-2006, when we received donations to buy 140 blankets for our Blanket the World with Love Project for Church World Service; mentoring and reading programs @ Clark School, our neighborhood school while it was still open; celebrating the historical election of Barack Obama as our President in 2008; we participated in the God is Still Speaking Campaign; sponsoring 2 missionaries to Haiti; supported 2 Pilgrims who did Hurricane Katrina Relief work in New Orleans; raising over $10,000 for the Hope Shall Bloom UCC Katrina Relief Project and more for other Disaster Relief efforts; housing the Gateway Men’s Chorus for several years; the Shoeman Project; our own very popular, U R Loved Project (borrowed with permission from the Disciples) which allows us to give Subway gift cards to those on the streets who ask for help so they can at least get a sandwich to eat; traveling to Jefferson City as part of MCU efforts to inform our legislators of justice issues; writing many letters and signing petitions to our legislators (state and national) to do justice; divesting ourselves of investments that were counterproductive to our justice stance for South Africa and oil production; and the Black Lives Matter movement.

We continue to: host the Eden Seminary Commencement; prepare special meals to celebrate Mother’s Day and Father’s Day for ALL women and men of PILGRIM; be a 5 for 5 Church for OCWM and the 4 special UCC offerings; serve our annual Easter breakfast; provide many, many delicious meals for various church and neighborhood events; go on Wine Tours and a Beer Tasting Tour in the cool fall weather; and we are lucky enough to have our very own church song P.U.C.C. to the tune of YMCA and have a new version every couple of years courtesy of our own Fred Eppenberger. In the past, we have attended Muny productions and Cardinal games and have sent some of our youth to several General Synod meetings as well as Regional & National Youth Events.

Suffice it to say that we have survived through schisms and seedings, marriages and divorces, two World Wars and newer conflicts and like many churches we have had our hills and valleys, we have weathered ice storms and flooding basements, IRS challenges and best of all we have had times spent together in meaningful worship, meetings galore, energizing retreats, wonderful fellowship & play times enjoying one another, clean-up days and, of course Pilgrims love to eat, (just like all you church-goers) especially the wonderful meals that come from our church kitchen and our own kitchens that have inspired recipe exchanges and the like. There is just something extra special about sharing church food!

PILGRIM Church has had a long and storied past and is very grateful for the many pastors who have served @ PILGRIM over the years, as well as, our faithful staff members who have kept us going for 150 years. We are currently in the search process for a pastor who will work with us as we continue through the New Beginnings Process. You can contact us on our 300th Anniversary and we’ll let you know how it is going.