The "Prehistory" of First UMC, Sunnyvale*

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(First United Methodist Church of Sunnyvale, California, celebrates its centennial this year of 1998. To celebrate this, I, as chairperson of the Administrative Council, will read this devotional at the beginning of a meeting.)

1 Introduction

As you no doubt know, First United Methodist Church of Sunnyvale, California, will celebrate its centennial year this year of 1998. Before we discuss installing windows from our church's first sanctuary into the narthex of our current sanctuary, I'd like to discuss the "prehistory" of FUMC. That is, I'll discuss the role of the Church, i.e., mainly the Roman Catholic Church, in Santa Clara County before 1898. We'll see three things:

1. The Church started Santa Clara County.
2. The Church educated Santa Clara County.
3. The Church reflected the diversity of Santa Clara County.

2 The Beginning

The Church founded Santa Clara County in 1777. Two hundred twenty-one years ago tomorrow, Franciscan priest Tomas de la Peña celebrated mass at the Santa Clara Mission for the first time. The purpose of the Santa Clara

Mission was to Christianize and civilize the Indians, i.e., to teach the Indians "agriculture and such other arts and industries as would make them useful citizens, while their souls were to be rescued by inculcating a disposition to pious observations." [Wes76, page 9] By the end of 1777, a little town called San José de Guadalupe would be founded.

The other reason the Franciscans came to Santa Clara County was to farm the fertile land. "Fruit culture was one of the earliest industries engaged in [Santa Clara] County. The Fathers at the mission planted the grapevine as one of their first agricultural efforts. Orchards of peach-trees [sic] followed, and other fruit in succession." [Wes76, page 11] They wrote, "We find, within six years after the planting of the orchards, that the production of fruit was so large that it defied consumption in its natural state." [Wes76, page 9] In 1876, an atlas of Santa Clara County boasted, "There is scarcely anything that soil will produce that cannot be grown with more or less profit in this valley." So people came to Santa Clara County to find their fortune in fruit.

3 Education

The Franciscans came to teach the Indians, but the number of Anglos who wanted to learn also increased so the Church founded colleges. In 1851, the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, led by Reverend John Nobili, founded Santa Clara College. However, the Methodists incorporated their university first. Called California Wesleyan College, this Methodist Episcopalian university was located on the "University Tract," midway between San Jose and Santa Clara. The university claimed to be the first in California to offer a classical education. By 1871 when women were first admitted, the university (currently known as the University of the Pacific) had moved to San Jose.

4 The Church's Diversity

That's how the Church founded Santa Clara County, started the fruit industry, and cared for the county's education by founding universities. The county was a success. Numerous peoples from the East came to settle, and the Church reflected the people's diversity. By 1876, over nineteen different denominations, including five different Methodist denominations, served the approximately thirty thousand people of the county. The Methodist Episcopal Church was by far the wealthiest Methodist denomination and served Los Gatos, Santa Clara, San Jose, Mayfield, and Gilroy. The Methodist Episcopal Church South had five small churches in the county. Other denominations included the German Methodists, Zion Methodists, and Trinity Methodists (all in San Jose), the Methodist Episcopal Church South (colored), and Centenary Methodists.

5 Foreshadowing

By 1876, a man named Martin Murphy had purchased a large piece of the Rancho Pastoria del las Borrega, and the San Jose & San Francisco Road ran past the edge of the church's current property, but the development of Murphy's Station (as the railroad stop was called) would await the founding of the Sunnyvale Land Company near the end of the century.

6 Opening Prayer

Dear God, we thank you for the work of the Christians who built the church in Santa Clara County and in Sunnyvale. Will you please guide the conversation as we discuss replacing the narthex windows of this current sanctuary? Amen.

7 Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for guiding us during this meeting. Will you please help us share your love as we leave this sanctuary to go out into the world? Amen.

8 Acknowledgments

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References

[Wes76] Thompson & West. *New Historical Atlas of Santa Clara Co., California.* San Francisco, 1876.