Two Hundred Years of First Sunnyvale's Ministry*

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(I am currently the chairperson of the Administrative Council of First United Methodist Church of Sunnyvale. For this year's church conference, I was asked to speak for ten minutes about our church's ministry during the past year and for the next year.)

First United Methodist Church of Sunnyvale was asked to review its ministry during the past year and discuss its goals for next year. Since we celebrated the church's centennial this year, we will instead consider the church's ministry during the past hundred years and, as much as humanly possible, its ministry during its next one hundred years.

You just heard one of the church's newest ministries: the jazz group. This talented group of musicians continues in the Christian tradition of using music to assist in worshiping God. These members have performed at special Sunday night worship services, moving our members in ways different from the traditional organ and piano.

At another evening worship service, this one on Remembrance Sunday, we celebrated the lives of those who have left their earthly bodies. The step-daughter of church member Ray Phelps wrote a musical work, which debuted here at the church.[1] Perhaps, this was the first time a musical composition was written to be performed at First United Methodist Church of Sunnyvale.

This church has not always had the name "First United Methodist Church

[1] The music was written by Annette LeSiege and the words and liturgy were written by Chris Williams, a friend of Ms. LeSiege and a Presbyterian minister.

of Sunnyvale, California." In fact, it did not have a name when it started in 1898. Pastor Charles L. Withrow from Mayfield Methodist Church in what is now part of Palo Alto, started "Cottage Prayer Meetings" at Murphy's Station. An illness in Withrow's family soon ended the Sunday school lessons, but the citizens of Sunnyvale continued seeking God's word.

That desire continues today. Education Director Peggy Dile and several teachers lead Sunday school each Sunday morning, teaching people of all ages about God's word. Sunday school and this church's other ministries impact four-and-a-half year old Carol. She attends the 8am worship service with her mother Karen McCoy and sister Sarah. She enjoys talking with Pastor Carl Thomas during the children's sermon (or the helper's sermon as we call it). With her mother's help, she has explored the organ and piano, watched the organist play, and participates in communion. She even helps collect the offering (it can't hurt to have a cute little girl pass the offering plate, can it?), and she makes the others (including me) smile and remember the joy of childhood that Jesus calls all of us to reclaim. What she really enjoys is Sunday school with "Ms. Peggy" and her friends. If the worship service runs a little late, she runs after Ms. Peggy who slips out the side door to ensure Sunday school starts on time.

Her mother and two other parents organized the "Jelly Kids" group of our youngest members[2] to explore the local area. One week ago, they visited a local fire station. The next morning, Carol came running to me to tell me all about the trip. "They have beds there!" she exclaimed, showing me pictures of the beds and of second-grader Harrison's donning a fireperson's gear.

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the year 1902, when the Sunnyvale Land Company was starting the town of Sunnyvale, California.[3] David Ralston, minister at Mayfield Methodist Church and a student at Stanford University, would cycle to Sunnyvale to lead Sunday afternoon classes and worship. One Sunday, he heard that Mr. Crossman, a realty man with the Sunnyvale Land Company would offer four lots of land for the first church that would organize in Sunnyvale. As an energetic young minister, he traveled to San Jose the next day to meet with Crossman and then talk with the District Superintendent. He found the desired land in Sunnyvale,

[2] Technically, they are associate members until confirmed as full members of the church.

[3] The town had various names, e.g., Encinal, until its current name was adopted sometime in the first decade of the 1900's.

contacted church member William K. Hooper to haul a load of bricks from nearby Mountain View, and then erected a sign that said "This is the site of the New Methodist Church." That's a lot of work in one day.

The story continues with a jab at the Baptists, who also did not yet have a church building in Sunnyvale. The day before, that is Sunday, David Ralston had heard that the Baptist minister had called a meeting for Monday night to discuss accepting Crossman's offer of land for a church in Sunnyvale. This is why Ralston acted so quickly, acquiring the land and dumping the bricks on the church's original site. Ralston remembers, "Here came the Baptist minister and quite a few of the people to see what was going on. Our people were there to a man. They [the Baptists] never called the meeting to order at all. The sight of the new site was too much for them and they all went home and we proceeded with our Methodist church ...."

That sort of interdenominational rivalry would no longer be tolerated today just as intolerance toward different ethnicities, nationalities, and (soon) sexual orientations is not tolerated. Peoples from various countries and cultures have been joining our church, which historically has had predominantly white Americans of European descent. We have made much progress. For example, Wembi Dimandja, formerly of the Congo, has written and performed songs for our worship services. Our church's mission group assists a struggling Hispanic church in Salinas. An Indian congregation worships in these buildings on Sunday afternoons.

The church's greatest ethnic diversity occurs in the Senior Nutrition Program. Serving hot lunches to over two hundred people every weekday, the program serves the nutritional and social needs of senior citizens from Sunnyvale and surrounding towns. Everyday, before lunch is served, musicians perform while people dance and socialize, while volunteers and a few employees prepare the hot meals. Mandarin is the native language for over half of the participants, and a Chinese social club meets regularly. This is an excellent example of a private-public partnership to serve our communities' needs. Participants' donations supplement federal, state, county, and city money to ensure our senior citizens have a safe, warm, nutritional place to go.

During the past hundred years, our church's ministry has changed from serving the needs of a small, new town on an important railroad line to serving the needs of a moderate-sized city in Silicon Valley. What will the church's ministry include in its second hundred years? No human knows, and I can only speculate. If Carol aged 104-and-a-half years is still here, she would probably see a church where no particular ethnic group dominated. More Hispanics would participate. Carol would still be participating in Sunday school, which she would have taught for quite a few years and to which she would have brought her children and her children's children. The senior nutrition program may have disappeared, but the church would still be reaching out to senior citizens, of which she would be one. The church would share God's love throughout the world via its local mission and through the United Methodist apportionment system. Perhaps, at some point, the church would even have relied on the apportionment system to rebuild after a devastating earthquake hit the region. The church's ministers would have changed several times, and the buildings may have changed or the church could have moved to a new location to make way for, perhaps, a fifty-story office building, but the most important part of the church, its people and Christ, would still remain. They would still be loving each other using Christ's love and trying to decide how to apply that love in a society in need of love. (*Pause.*) Perhaps even a young Stanford person would again be associated with the church as a young David Ralston was in 1902 and as I am today.

One hundred years of ministry is a long time to consider. What steps will we take next year? Most importantly, we will continue to listen carefully for people's needs, use their talents, and ensure that we provide support. If there is need for a youth group, we will start one. We will continue working to educate our young people and encouraging new families to join the church. We will continue celebrating our diversity, perhaps holding joint worship services with the Marthoma Indian church or the Catholic church next door. We will continue to care for each other, being present and praying for each other when in need, as our pastor, members, and lay ministers currently do. We will again discuss sexual orientation and its place in Christianity. We will again stretch to fully pay our apportionments. Our children will perform a Christmas musical and participate in Vacation Bible school. We hope to add four new members to our choir. Personally, I hope to have the privilege of knowing a five-and-a-half year old Carol who has grown in Christ. Thank you.