

## A Longer History of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley

Before the incorporation of Berkeley on April 1, 1878, there had grown up on the east shore of San Francisco Bay a community known first as Ocean View and then as West Berkeley. This village antedates the community growing up around the College of California, which would become the University of California. A small Sunday School was held in a home in Ocean View as early as 1855.

The organization of the First Presbyterian Church is traced back to the fall of 1877 when Mr. and Mrs. George McDonald called on their friends Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Hoag. The McDonalds and the Hoags were Presbyterians. In the intimacy of their fellowship they expressed their desire for a church of their faith in the college community, a commitment that subsequent congregations have upheld. Further, the little Presbyterian Sunday School in West Berkeley was about two miles away, and muddy roads often made it difficult to get to church.

The idea of a new church was discussed among an ever-enlarging group of sympathetic people. Among those interested were Professor and Mrs. Joseph Le Conte of the University. Finally on March 4, 1878, a petition was drawn up and signed by twenty-seven men and women. In response to this petition, the Presbytery of San Francisco called a meeting for Sunday, March 31, 1878. At this meeting, First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley came into being—one day before the city of Berkeley was incorporated.

Fifteen signed the Articles of Incorporation, all of whom had signed the original petition. These 15 can be considered to be the charter members of this church: seven women and eight men. They were Maria L. Clarke, Theresa Bartlett, Mary E. Hoag, Catherine H. McDonald, Hattie Kelsey, Laura Kelsey, Francis Williams, M.J. Denny, A. Bartlett, Joseph LeConte, John Kelsey, F. M. Denny, George McDonald, Charles T. Hoag, and W. E. Sell. On April 2, 1878 the organization of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley was reported to the Presbytery of San Francisco and the infant church was duly enrolled with its sister churches in the Presbyterian denomination. For six or more months this group was ministered to on Sundays by various pastors who preached without compensation. Services were held at 3 p.m. in the Berkeley Gymnasium School at 2222 Dana Street.

In 1879 the first sanctuary was built, but by 1895 the church could not hold its 296 members. A second sanctuary was constructed, but within 10 years it could not hold its 424 members.

As Berkeley and the University grew, so did the church, expanding every 10 to 20 years. In 1905 the congregation sold the second sanctuary, retaining the right to use it for one year, and purchased the current lot at this corner of Dana Street and Channing Way. Amazingly, during this period the church survived factional fighting over both building issues and whether to call a "liberal modern man" or a scriptural conservative as pastor. Building continued, weathering delays caused by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and economic pressures of the day. During the second year of construction, First Pres met in Stiles Hall, part of the University of California. The new sanctuary, with seating for 1200, accommodated its first service in January, 1908 and was dedicated on April 26, 1908 "by a congregation with strong vision and confidence in God," as Earl Palmer, senior pastor, wrote in 1973.

The new pastor, Dr. Lapsley McAfee, came to the pulpit in 1905, having been a missionary in the Philippines. He came first as Stated Supply. His call (specifically just to preach the morning sermon and to minister to the University, i.e. teach a college class) was for one year and when extended, caused friction and opposition. The liberal faction had most of the money and important positions in the church, but a majority of the church's membership supported Dr. McAfee, and the church extended the call. This led 125 members to withdraw, forming St. John's Presbyterian Church in 1907 and leaving debt and concern over how to pay for the new building. God was faithful, and on December 31, 1913 the mortgage was burned at a special and surely joyous celebration.

We have always expected our pastors to be strong preachers of the Word. McAfee fit that aptly and was recognized across the nation, even to being nominated in 1926 to be Moderator of General Assembly.

Though he did not win the election, his voice was clearly heard as the Fundamentalist candidate. At First Pres he has been considered by many "to be the minister who, by his Christian faithfulness and genius for leadership, laid the foundation for a church of outstanding spirituality".

He led the church to expand its support of overseas missions and acted upon its interest in youth and college ministries. In the 25 years of McAfee's ministry, 135 people from First Pres went into full-time Christian service and membership increased from 615 to 1876, continuing to parallel the growth of Berkeley. In fact, the church felt so strongly about overseas missions that when Dr. McAfee left Berkeley in 1930 to return to the Philippines, the church lent support at his full salary; this in the heart of the Depression.

In 1922, the lot south of the sanctuary was purchased for parking and youth activities. At least half of the lot was used in 1940 when the Scout Lodge was built to add capacity for the activities of Troop 50. This troop claimed First Pres as its sponsor from the time of its charter in 1934 until suburban troops became more convenient for many families in the sixties and seventies. In 1994, a Cub Pack 50 began again and lasted 4 or 5 years, unable to recruit younger boys.

Francis Shunk Downs was secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York in late 1931, when he was asked by our church to be its new pastor. He began service here in March of 1932 and stayed 12 years. He is quoted in 1938 as saying, "We have always stood on the Bible as the Word of God, holding steadfastly and intelligently to the great essentials of the evangelical Christian faith." Yet, the years of Dr. Downs' ministry were very hard years for First Pres, and the whole world in general. His ministry began at the height of the Depression and ended at the height of World War II, with our church in turmoil.

First Pres was divided again, this time more over personalities than religious reasons. A power struggle between Downs and the clerk of Session, in which Presbytery became involved, led (or forced) Downs to resign in 1944, taking one faction of the church with him to form St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, later re-named Durant Avenue Presbyterian Church. Overnight the membership went from 1800 to 1200, and on a typical Sunday there were less than 300 people coming to services. People said that the church was dead.

In 1945, a young man who had grown up in Berkeley and who, in 1932, had been taken under the care of Session, and whose father served on the above-mentioned Session was called to be our pastor. That man was Dr. Robert Boyd Munger. He arrived in September into what seemed hopeless, he himself calling it a "deplorable situation" in his autobiography, *Leading from the Heart*. Yet, his own sense of call and mandate for Berkeley and the world were clear and in prayer and humility he claimed it often.

With his arrival and by God's grace the church became alive again and began to grow as never before, continuing the strong commitment to missions and pulpit ministry. A church-sponsored Wednesday night prayer meeting became a meaningful community time and was well-attended. Membership blossomed to over 3000. The radio ministry began in 1947. Sunday school and the college fellowship, Calvin Club, (led primarily by women during World War II) were burgeoning with a constant stream of young people entering into full-time Christian service. In response, by 1949, the Christian Education Building along Dana Street was completed. That same year, Dr. Munger preached his famous sermon "My Heart, Christ's Home," a meditation on turning our whole lives over to Christ. In 1954 it was published in booklet form and continues to be widely used by many organizations. A church-sponsored Wednesday night prayer meeting became a meaningful community time and was well-attended.

That same year, some 50 members of our congregation, led by Associate Pastor Rev. Carl Thomas, became charter members of the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, which was organized to begin an outreach to the fast-growing suburban area east of the Caldecott Tunnel.

Presbyterian Women, known as early as the 1920s as the Women's Missionary Society, grew through these years and were dedicated to service, mission projects and prayer for missionaries, worship and fellowship. They also provided food service support for many church events. This group continued to

thrive into the 1980s and 90s, eventually disbanding due to the lack of younger women joining as the group grew older and more and more women worked outside the home.

In 1959, the second wing of the Christian Education (CE) building was dedicated. The church was sending out dozens of members into full-time Christian service, accounting for 10% of Presbyterian missionaries being sent from the United States. In the 1950s, half of the whole church budget was devoted to mission work—the first church in the U.S. to make that claim. Prayer groups sprung up around individual missionaries and missionary organizations, further support for those called by God to serve far from home. These were led and maintained mostly on a monthly basis for many years by friends, some of whom also visited the field. Prayer groups sprung up around individual missionaries and missionary organizations, furthering support for those called by God to serve far from home. These were led and maintained mostly on a monthly basis for many years by friends, some of whom also visited the field.

Dr. Munger resigned in 1962, and some 60 elders, deacons, and trustees spent a weekend at Mt. Hermon giving primary attention to the news that Dr. Munger had accepted a call to University Presbyterian Church of Seattle. The officers made this statement: "Now we are sure. Now we know with real enthusiasm. Now we have a deep, heart-settled peace that it is the purpose of Jesus Christ for His Church that Dr. Munger go to Seattle, because God is going to do a greater work than we ever dreamed of here at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley. Exciting days are ahead, and we know we are on the move with steps that will not alter because they will be directed by Him."

Attendance dwindled following Dr. Munger's departure, part of the reason being the changing political climate in Berkeley. In the 1960s, the church found itself in the midst of a cultural and literal battleground. Dr. Harold Englund was pastor during this troubling time, and he was especially committed to enlarging the church's local ministries. We began to pay more attention to our neighboring community, especially Telegraph Avenue. There were incidents in the street in which God was moving at that time, and Dr. Englund wrote of one in a 1997 issue of the *First Pres Times*.

"One day hundreds of street people were gathering on our church parking lot. Charlie Brown, Associate Pastor for University Ministry, a Catholic priest and another pastor went out to them. They were filling a huge weather balloon with helium, and since it was the Virgin Mary's Day on the Catholic calendar, they had painted on the balloon "three cheers for the Virgin Mary". Finally they let it go with cheers.

The three ministers took the microphone and said that while they didn't always understand the street people, God understood them and loved them. Then they took a basin of water and towels and went right down the row of them, washing their feet. There was total silence and unexpected reverence. Was the Spirit at work?"

He also noted that "People would listen to our radio broadcast on KGO to see what was happening at the eye of the storm. We had a Catholic radio audience, a prison radio audience, and a Bay boating radio audience."

Dr. Earl Frank Palmer was called to be our next pastor, coming to us from Union Church of Manila. While a Cal student, he had become a Christian through the ministry of Calvin Club and he went to seminary from First Pres. During his long tenure at First Pres, he deepened our tradition of preaching from the Bible as the Word of God. Many still here remember and appreciate the word-by-word exegesis of Dr. Palmer's sermons. He focused on how God's grand design encompasses all of history, giving man dominion and stewardship responsibilities over the earth, always leading back to the cross as an historical event and a personal event. While pastor here, Dr. Palmer preached many sermon series that later became books such as *Salvation by Surprise*, a commentary on Romans. Dr. Palmer summed up and gave weight to our continuing support for foreign ministries in a quote from 1973: "If any single quotation from the Holy Bible could lay claim to be the life verse for our congregation throughout the years, the Great Commission is that quotation."

When the 65 year-old sanctuary was declared unsafe by the fire department in 1971, First Pres made a very conscious decision not to leave these contentious streets where rioters were breaking windows and much of Telegraph Avenue was boarded up, "but to live out its mission on this very corner of Dana and Channing, building a sanctuary lined with glass windows to be open and visible", welcoming "to the community". The new sanctuary was dedicated June 8, 1975.

After this season of turbulence, the congregation under Dr. Palmer from 1970 to July of 1991, reaffirmed its spiritual footing and greatly recovered in its size and dynamism. This recovery included seeing an expansion in many of our ministries---music, children, youth, college, food service, plus lay counseling and homeless ministries---with an emphasis on equipping ourselves via education.

The high school Network Choir, a burgeoning nursery under the leadership and endearing love of Maria Staal, a reinstatement of and great growth in summer ministries in the college department, continued guidance of seminarians through the stages leading to ordination, the addition of a staff position to steward the wonderful kitchen provided us in 1958 as part of the Christian Education building and to begin the growth of this ministry, volunteers beginning a monthly and then twice-monthly meal for the homeless which continues today, the start of the Lay Counseling Service---all are legacies of Dr. Palmer's time with us. Any of these could be expanded on greatly, but it seems especially important to note that since 1980 nearly 80 seminarians have entered and have been or are being guided through the Presbyterian process toward ordination. Of that group, 43 have been ordained, many in the sanctuary at First Pres. Some have planted new churches. They serve all over the world and today 16 comprise 20% of seminarians under the care of the Presbytery of San Francisco.

From November, 1992 to May, 2009, Senior Pastor Dr. Mark Labberton exhorted us to soak ourselves in the Word. He often called us back to Jesus Christ as our center as well as keeping our history in mind. On the occasion of our 125th anniversary he wrote these important words: "our history enables us to live *from* the past not *in* the past. Many institutions, not least churches, are stuck in the mode of time long past...That is not my experience of our history. Instead, our history gives us the richness of openness to the present moment and the resources to face the challenges of today in new ways...The primary reason for this, in my view, is the simple, living centrality of Jesus Christ. Since our Lord is always our contemporary, we can look to the past and celebrate God's faithfulness, knowing that we are called to discover that afresh today...This allows us to honor and learn from the past without being captive to it. We serve the risen Christ who is Lord today." Our current vision and mission statements were developed during Dr. Labberton's tenure.

With the founding of our licensed daycare facility in 1991, we began weekday use of the playground adjacent to the brown-shingled building, now known and used as McKinley Hall. This brought great concern about what was happening in and around the building. Vision 2000 Committee and later the Facilities Task Force began a long process of addressing various building issues, engaging with the City of Berkeley, and looking at space needs. This process brought us the new building named Geneva Hall and the 180-degree rotated McKinley Hall as well as an underground parking structure. These were dedicated on September 25, 2005 and have dramatically changed the way staff works together as well as providing more programming opportunities. First Pres carries significant debt on this project and, though plans are yet to be put in place to eliminate that debt, we look forward to another joyous mortgage burning ceremony one day!

Many classes and groups, most recently Sunday adult education groups called Learning Communities, study one specific book of the Bible over a given semester. Many more small groups are able to meet "on campus", as we now call it. Other ministries have expanded. In 2008, a fourth service was added, bringing a contemporary service into the morning block of time. Called the eleven:27, a stated aim was for outreach to the community. A further aim was to bring a more racially diverse population into the morning worship times, which it has done.

In the later years of Dr. Labberton's ministry, we looked at justice issues in a variety of ways, from the point of view of Scripture while also looking more honestly at ourselves as part of the minority world. A Global Scholar-in-Residence program functioned for a few years in the nineties. Out of this program and

this view of the world, an annual weekend Global Church Conference was initiated in 2006, bringing prominent and strong voices from other parts of the now majority world to increase our understanding of changes in how mission work and evangelism is done more effectively by people in their own countries. Dr. Labberton preached several sermon series, which became part of his first book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice*. Justice issues are much more a part of our thinking today, locally and globally.

Looking back over our history, we can see that the qualities that have informed the character of First Pres Berkeley since its inception are the same traits that will carry us forth into our future and will keep our fellowship and ministry vital and life-changing. We have always been an evangelistic church, centered on Christ, as revealed by Scripture, with a culture of diversity and a faith that shows itself in works. May God grant that we continue to grow in our maturity in Christ as we seek to be this kind of church now and in the future.

*This history draws heavily on a piece written by Clifford Drury on the occasion of our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a piece written in 1973 celebrating (yes!) the required demolition of our third sanctuary, the 2003 booklet "Living From the Center" by Amy Osterholm and on the 2005 booklet "On This Corner" by Camille Peterson.*