

Pioneer Congregational Church

Church History – 1849 through 1999

One hundred and fifty years ago on September 16, 1849, in the schoolhouse on the northwest corner of I and Third Streets, a small group of men (and one woman) voted to form the First Church of Christ in Sacramento City (Congregational). On the following Sunday, a confession of faith and covenant was presented and the following enrolled their names as members:

Rev. Joseph A. Benton, J.M. Mackenzie, H. Allen, William S. Baker, H. S. Benedict, Rev. T. A. Ish, W. P. Ewing, Selah Lewis, Denis Buckley, J. S. Auger, Emmerson Moody, Forest Shepherd, George G. Webster, Albion C. Sweetser, O. S. Parker, B. F. Reed, (and later) F. L. Chapman, Jesse Moore, W. C. Frisbie, H. Race, S. B. Birdsall, R. A. Wilson, H. S. Senter, J. S. Foster, James Zabriskie, W. C. Walters and Mrs. James (Mary A.) Alexander. Mary was the first, and for nearly twenty years, the only female member of the church.

The group included Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Mr. Ish was a minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, having arrived in Sacramento only a few days before the organizational meeting. The preponderance was Congregational, however, accounting for the policy of the church.

Thus was begun the church which today is a staunch institution in the capital of California, with its place of worship across the street from Sutter's Fort, the birthplace of the city. It is to one strong, devout man that the credit must go for the conception and the building of the church. Without him, Pioneer Congregational Church would not be celebrating its sesquicentennial.

Joseph Augustine Benton, a young graduate of Yale College and Yale Seminary, sailed on the ship Edward Everett on January 12, 1849 from Boston for the Golden Gate. He was the chaplain of the Boston and California Joint Stock Mining Company, a group of 150 men seeking fortune in the newly found gold fields. Benton was 31 years old when the company reached San Francisco on July 6, 1849. Although still a Congregational licentiate, Benton preached for a Presbyterian pastor in San Francisco on the morning of July 8th and for Rev. T. D. Hunt, a Congregationalist, in the evening of the same day.

The group arrived in Sacramento on the 14th of July and on the 22nd, Benton preached in the grove at K and Third Streets, just before leaving with the company for the Mokelumne River area. The mining company however, formally dissolved on August 4th and Benton returned to Sacramento.

Sacramento was a rough place in those days. Steep banks rose 20 feet and more from the river. To the east there were three to four blocks of a makeshift city among the logs and stumps and under the trees. There were only a few wooden buildings. Cotton cloth tacked

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around willow trees served as stores and houses. One street had been opened through the timber to Sutter's Fort two miles away. The city was the jumping off place for gold seekers who came by steamer from San Francisco on their way to what they hoped would be fertile fields. Prices were high, \$5 for a loaf of bread, \$1.50 for a pie, etc. There were few women and men seemed more intent on gaining wealth than in obtaining spiritual comfort.

This was the place in which Joseph Benton decided to stay and continue his work in the ministry. He wrote in his journal: "The citizens with a few exceptions are here without their families and not expecting to remain long; yet the place has grown rapidly in three weeks and is still growing. There are good men here; there is enterprise and I shall go on and act according to the wisdom I may possess, both natural and acquired. For this, God be praised!"

Benton was not the first of the men of God to arrive in Sacramento and begin his work. He himself reported that religious exercises were begun in June 1849, by a practicing physician who was also a Methodist Episcopal preacher. His name was William Grove Deal. The exercises were continued by Deal and others, Benton among them, until the end of the summer months without any respect to a denominational organization.

Rev. Flavel S. Mines, a Protestant Episcopal clergyman, arrived in San Francisco on July 4th and on September 23rd preached in Sacramento. Grace Church (Protestant Episcopal) was organized about September 25th. Rev. Richard F. Burnham, who arrived in Sacramento around late November or early December of the same year, became rector of the parish.

On October 23rd, Rev. Isaac Owen arrived in Sacramento and took charge as pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church where services had begun in July. This church afterward was known as the Sixth Street Church.

As far as being the first church in the city of Sacramento, Benton said later, 'It is probably fair to say that the Methodists instituted the first regular services and the Congregationalists had the first regular minister and the first regular church organization.'

After Benton made his decision to remain in Sacramento early in August of 1849, he preached on the 12th in a mechanic's shed. It may have been the same small blacksmith's shop referred to by Dr. R. A. H. McDonald who had come across the country by pack mule and arrived here on July 18th. Dr. McDonald later described how Benton preached at the shop at Fourth and J Streets before which stood a broken down wagon, the tongue and hounds of which were used for a pulpit. The story no doubt gave rise to the legend of Benton preaching his first sermon in California from a wagon.

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On August 19th the first Sunday school in Sacramento was organized in the schoolhouse with five scholars (all the white children in the city) and taught by Professor Forest Shepherd, founding member and schoolteacher for the city. Benton was confined by illness that day. On September 9th, the first prayer meeting was held at the corner of I and Third Streets, attended by Christians of all denominations.

With the organization of the First Church of Christ began the struggle to keep alive the flame, which had been kindled. Despite the enthusiasm in forming the group, it was late in October of 1849 before the members could rally themselves to such a pitch of courage as to consider building a church structure. One of the reasons for hesitation was the fact that lumber cost \$600 per thousand feet.

Even so, in November, a lot was purchased on Third near M Street for \$3,000. After \$1,500 was paid on it and a committee appointed to raise money and erect a chapel, the rains came and halted further proceedings. The lot was exchanged for the money paid on it for one at the southwest corner of the alley on Sixth Street between J and I Streets. It was 40 by 80 feet.

No further progress was made during 1849. The year ended with twenty-seven members received by the church. Four withdrew and one died, leaving twenty-two to begin the year of 1850.

Mr. Benton became seriously ill early in the year and left almost immediately for Monterey to stay with Rev. and Mrs. S. H. Willey and recover his health. He had preached on the sixth of January in a large canvas tent on M near Second Street to a large audience.

On January 8, 1850, the river overflowed its banks and the city became a vast sea all the way to Sutter's Fort. All religious observances and most other activities had to be suspended until the water receded.

Benton returned to Sacramento on March 19th and on the 24th he preached for Mr. Owen in the Methodist Chapel which had been sent from the east. Later in the day, Mr. Benton held council with four members of his church to lay plans for the continuance of Congregational worship. Benton told the group he would be glad to do the work he came to do if they would provide him with a place to preach and give him just enough money to live on.

Arrangements were made for services to be held for several weeks in the store at 529 J Street. Later they were held on the south side of J Street between Sixth and Seventh and

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also in the Sons of Temperance Hall at 302 J street. Seventeen more men joined the church in April 1850.

In April, a building committee was appointed. One of the members was David Hewes who had entered the mercantile business in Sacramento that month. Hewes helped solicit subscriptions for the church and with the money raised he went to San Francisco to purchase the hard wood frame of a church building which had been shipped from Australia. The fire of May 3, 1850, in San Francisco destroyed some of the frame and caused a delay in the erecting of the building in this city.

Meanwhile, on May 5th, The First Ecclesiastical Society was organized to manage the temporal affairs of the church. Mr. Benton was the moderator and John Danforth, the clerk. On May 12th, W. C. Walters, J. L. Chapman, James Gallup, G. C. Cargill, Harding Bigelow and W. A. Carpenter were elected trustees. On the 24th, the society was incorporated according to the laws of the state.

In June, a one and a half story parsonage, 12 by 19 feet, was erected on the rear of the church lot. On June 21st Benton wrote in his journal, 'Moved into the parsonage with much joy.'

On August 26, 1850, work was commenced on the first church building. On September 4th the cornerstone was laid with appropriate exercises. The stone contained a box holding a description of the church history to date and the newspapers of the day.

The church was dedicated on October 6th with the Methodist pastor, Dr. Deal, assisting. The edifice was 30 by 60 feet with a gallery for the choir and a tower. Its total cost, including the lot and the parsonage was about \$8,000. Thus was born the infant Congregational church and thus was erected its first home.

Cholera struck Sacramento that fall and struck hard! As many as 50 died each day. Mr. Benton was kept busy with burials as well as helping attend to the sick.

Near the end of 1850, rules and laws governing the church were passed and on January 5, 1851, at the annual meeting, permanent officers were elected. They were: W. C. Walters, Treasurer; James C. Zabriskie, Clerk; and James Gallup, J. W. Hinks, John McKee and Z. W. Davidson, Deacons. Hinks soon resigned and Albion C. Sweetser was elected.

Later in January, the church extended a unanimous call to Joseph Benton to become its first permanent pastor at a salary of \$3,000 per year and the use of the parsonage. Up to

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that time the young preacher had been receiving Sunday collections as his salary. Needless to say, the call was accepted and a council was called for on March 5th.

The ordination of Mr. Benton was the first such Protestant ceremony in California. The council included pastors from San Francisco, Marysville, and Monterey. After an extended examination of the young pastor, which was satisfactory, the service included the reading of the Scripture and prayer by Rev. J. W. Hinds, a sermon by Rev. J. H. Warren, the ordaining prayer and charge to the pastor by Rev. Albert Williams, the charge to the church and ecclesiastical society by Rev. W. W. Brier, the right hand of fellowship by Rev. S. H. Willey and benediction by Mr. Benton.

The Church of Christ was on its way! The attendance at the services apparently was satisfactory in those days. William E. Chamberlain, grandfather to Waldo Julian who is a member of the Pioneer Church in this Centennial year noted in his diary for February 2, 1851: 'Went to Mr. Benton's church. Day very pleasant and the church well filled.' On April 6th the first communion service was held, at which time five more men and two more women joined the organization. There were 50 communicants at the service.

The year of 1852 was a hard one both for the city and the church. On March 17th the flood gate at the mouth of the slough gate gave way and the city was flooded again. Later, in the great fire of 1852, nearly all of the business part of the city was burned, east to Ninth Street and south to N Street. The church and parsonage were saved. On December 19th the levee broke and the city again was flooded for the entire winter. Benton's journal for the last day of the year noted, 'The year goes out buried in the sea and under a cloud for our poor city.'

In the following year, on February 6th, five more persons joined the church at a communion service attended by almost 60.

Two big milestones of the church were marked in 1853, the organization of the Ladies Aid Society on July 13th and the first home missionary meeting on September 11th.

One of the first members of the Ladies Aid was Mrs. Lyman Stearns (Ellen Black) Gilman, the grandmother of Mrs. Malcolm Glenn. Despite her seven children, Mrs. Gilman found time to help take care of the sick and to work for the church. Her prized pair of candlesticks standing today on a mantle place in Judge and Mrs. Glenn's home were taken to the church on every social occasion in those early days.

A heavy blow fell during the following year. On July 13, 1854, shortly after the church had been enlarged by 12 feet and newly papered and repaired, fire broke out in the city on

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K below Fourth Street and raged to Seventh and I Streets. The courthouse, church and parsonage were destroyed. The communion plate and Sunday school library were lost.

The speed with which the church responded to this catastrophe indicated the place it held in the hearts and souls of its members. On July 26th, they resolved to build a new edifice on the joint stock plan and raise as much money as possible by the sale of pews.

The lot on the northeast corner of the alley opening between I and J on Sixth Street, almost directly across from the first building, was purchased. The cornerstone, costing \$150 and donated by Judge A. P. Catlin, was laid September 21st. Including the lot and a mortgage of \$8,000, the total cost of the church was \$30,000. It was dedicated by Mr. Benton on the last day of 1854.

The organ fund for the church was begun on January 28, 1855, when the choir gave its first concert under the direction of John McNeill. Later in the year, the Ladies Aid held a festival for the benefit of the church fund and cleared \$1,600.

Early in 1856 most of the Presbyterians withdrew from the church to organize the First Presbyterian Church. On October 7, 1857, the General Association of Congregational Churches was organized in Sacramento. On April 14, 1858, the Ladies Aid raised \$1,200 for the church fund by giving a fair. (Library ref's too.)

Mr. Benton preached his tenth anniversary sermon on June 5, 1859, slightly in advance of the actual date because the following week he left for China and a trip around the world. He was granted a leave of absence by the church. He visited the Holy Land and returned by way of New York on December 7, 1860. During his 18 month absence, E. G. Beckwith supplied the pulpit.

During 1861, the pastor gave a series of lectures on the Holy Land and other places he visited on his tour. On December 9, 1861, the American River levee broke and city was inundated, the water being the highest in the city's history. On January 10, 1862, the river rose again and the water was higher than in December. It stood 14 inches deep on the church floor. Church services had to be suspended for most of those two months.

An interesting incident is noted just before Benton left Sacramento for other fields. In the month of June, 1862, some of the members of the society raised the questions of the spiritual condition of the church, saying that many young men were not attending the meetings. Upon investigation by a committee consisting of the Deacons, three of the trustees and Charles Crocker, the situation was found to be more the fault of the complaining member than the pastor.

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On December 14, 1862, Mr. Benton tendered his resignation after receiving a call from the Second Congregational Church (later Plymouth) in San Francisco. He was requested earnestly to rescind his action but, at his request, a council was convened on January 7, 1863, and it advised acceptance of the resignation. On January 15th the church also accepted the resignation but adopted strong resolutions stating that the decision of the council had been made contrary to the desire of the church.

Mr. Benton supplied the church without pay until February 22nd preaching his farewell sermon that evening. Thus ended the first thirteen and a half-year pastorate of our church.

When Benton left, he gave the church a lot at the rear of the church and sold another lot adjacent on the north to the church society for \$500 less than what it cost him. In 1858 he had given \$500 toward paying the debt on the church property and early in 1862 he had relinquished \$500 of his salary because services had been suspended during the flood of December, 1861 and January 1862.

He had the pastorate of the Plymouth church from 1863 to 1869 and then became a professor as well as one of the founders of the Pacific Theological Seminary. He was also the founding editor of *The Pacific* in 1851 and a founder of the College of California at Berkeley, which later was merged into the State University.

November 30, 1850, was the first Thanksgiving Day observed in California and on that day, in Sacramento, Dr. Benton preached a sermon on 'California As She Was, As She Is and As She Is To Be.' His ability as prophet may be observed best in the following excerpt of that sermon:

'A million people cannot fail to thrive by cultivating this virgin soil and in fifty years they will be here to make the demonstration; farm houses will dot thickly every valley, marshes will be redeemed from overflow and wastes will bloom in beauty and yield harvests of joy.'

'The state will not fall behind the chieftest of arts and manufacturing and in commerce; with hundreds of miles of navigable bays and rivers, with 700 miles of sea coast, with earth's broadest ocean at her feet gemmed with a thousand sea isles and having the shore of a continent, California is to be the queen of the seas, and with the Golden Gate are to be the docks and depots of the steam and electro-magnetic marine, of which all the steam marine that now exists is but the minutest embryo.'

'The iron horse that has drunk the waters of the Mississippi will fly over mountain and plain and river, breathe defiance to yonder beetling cliffs and towering peaks of snow, as

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he dashes forward through the tunneled depths beneath and comes through our streets to slake his thirst at the Sacramento.'

In March of 1863, the church extended a call to Rev. Isaac Edson Dwinell for one year at a salary of \$3,000 and it was accepted. The offer was made by telegraph to Salem, Mass.

Dwinell began his work in Sacramento on the first Sunday in July. A year later, the church asked him to become the permanent pastor. He accepted and was installed on July 10, 1864. The same year, an organ was set up in the church, largely through the efforts of John McNeill, at a cost of \$4,500.

After Dwinell had been in Sacramento a short while, he wrote in a letter to the east, 'There are many elements in this city of about 20,000. There is indifference to public sentiment because public sentiment does not exist. Yet, in any case of sickness or suffering, no persons have warmer hearts than the apparently cool and indifferent Californians.' (Pull Quote)

In the fall of 1868, the church building was elevated 12 feet at a cost of \$8,000. It is hoped that this will prevent further flooding of the building. The lecture room was finished, new pews installed and other improvements made, all at a cost of more than \$5,000.

At the time of the raising of the church a second cornerstone was laid and it was that stone which first came to light when the edifice was torn down in 1923.

The esteem which the church and, indeed, the entire city of Sacramento, held for Mr. Dwinell was shown near the end of 1868. Having been offered the position as first professor or acting president of the California Theological Seminary Association; he tendered his resignation to the church on November 17th. The feeling of the Sacramento parishioners was so intense and the urging of other residents was so strong that the ecclesiastical council, which convened on December 15th, would not give consent to Dwinell to leave. He remained for another fifteen years.

One of the continuing problems of the church, ever since its founding, is the constant shift in the population of the city. In June of 1871, a committee was appointed to revise the manual of the church. It reported that up to that time 347 members had been received into the church and that 109, nearly one-third, had been dismissed by letters. In addition, 28 died, leaving a total of 210.

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In July of 1874, Mr. Dwinell was granted a three month leave of absence and that was extended for three more months because of his health. During the period the pulpit was filled by Rev. Aaron Williams, the same pastor who had supplied the church for a period in 1867 when Dwinell had gone east on business for the theological seminary.

On May 17, 1883, Mr. Dwinell again submitted his resignation to the church, having received another call from the seminary, and this time it was reluctantly accepted.

At the seminary, Dr. Dwinell assumed the chair of homiletics, the art of preparing and preaching sermons. The position later was endowed permanently by three of Dr. Dwinell's personal friends, Moses Hopkins, C. P. Huntington, and Mrs. Charles Crocker, the latter two having been attendants during his ministry in Sacramento.

How much value to the church, to the city and to the state to have a man like Dr. Dwinell in the leading pulpit of the city may be seen in reviewing his civic efforts during his tenure. When, in 1868, an effort was made in the legislature to repeal the Sabbath laws of the state, Dr. Dwinell spoke vigorously against the move and wrote strongly in *The Pacific* and in the daily press in the support of his opinion. The bill was defeated. The success of the movement fourteen years later was no fault of his.

Another topic which brought forth protest from the pastor was the attempt to arouse a spirit of discontent among some classes of citizens in 1878. In his discourses at the time, Dr. Dwinell pointed out the symptoms of the communistic spirit in California and other states. He showed why attempts were being made to array classes against each other, to override divine personal rights, to crush individuality, to belittle Christianity and to establish the unsound doctrine that the state is the only safe capitalist.

Other sermons written and delivered by Dr. Dwinell touched upon the conflict of capital and labor, upon the troubled period after the adoption of the new constitution by the state, and upon the Chinese immigration questions. He also drew up a reform school bill for the legislature, spoke against speculation in bonanza mines in 1875, helped organize the Sacramento Protestant Orphan Asylum and aided in the formation of the Sacramento Literary Institute. On January 25, 1876, the environmentalist, John Muir, was invited to speak before the Institute for the first time. His lecture was so well received, he was later invited back.

Dr. Dwinell died in Oakland on June 7, 1890, at the age of 70, a few days after handing diplomas to the graduates of the seminary.

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After Dr. Dwinell left, the church was supplied for a time by Rev. P. S. Knight and others. During that time a few changes were made in the interior of the church, notably the moving of the organ at a cost of about \$600.

On January 15, 1884, the church went to the Pacific Theological Seminary for a new pastor. The man selected was W. C. Merrill, a student under Dr. Benton. Mr. Merrill was ordained and installed on May 9th. His salary was \$2,000.

One of the things accomplished by Merrill during his six year pastorate was the organization of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor.

Mr. Merrill resigned on June 1, 1890, and on June 19th the church invited Rev. J. B. Silcox to become its pastor for one year. On May 3, 1891, Silcox accepted the offer to become the permanent pastor, but a year later, after receiving a call from the Congregational Church of East Oakland, he resigned, effective August 31st. He declined to withdraw his resignation although urged strongly to do so. He was to return later, however.

In August of 1892, Rev. J. B. Koehne was engaged to preach on trial during September and October for \$400, but early in October the agreement was changed to a year's contract. On May 4, 1893, the church asked him to be its permanent pastor and he accepted. The following April, he resigned. At first his resignation was refused by the church, but finally accepted.

The church called Rev. Henry N. Hoyt on September 7, 1894. He began his pastorate during November of that year and on January 29, 1895, he was installed formally by a council consisting of representatives of churches in Berkeley, Lincoln, Rocklin, Oakland, San Francisco, Stockton, Woodland and Vacaville.

During Mr. Hoyt's tenure, a Civic Club and a Young Men's league were both organized to promote interest in the church work.

On September 9, 1896, Mrs. Frances S. Benton, widow of the beloved first pastor of the church, presented a life sized portrait of Dr. Benton to the church. The presentation was made by Albion C. Sweetser, the last surviving charter member of the church.

Mr. Hoyt resigned on December 29, 1897, to take effect on February 1, 1898, in order to accept a call from a church in the east. The departure of Mr. Hoyt and his wife was greatly regretted, both were very popular with the members.

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The church extended a second call to Rev. J. B. Silcox and it was accepted, service to commence in May of 1898.

With Mr. Silcox again in the pulpit, the annual meeting of the church in January of 1899 was reminded that it was the Golden Jubilee year and plans were laid for an observance which was held on September 22nd and 23rd, beginning on Sunday morning.

In his sermon, Mr. Silcox gave a remarkably complete history of the church, especially of the earlier days. In closing he said, 'I have dwelt on the past of this church in order that we might get inspiration to make a better future for it. The most fitting way to honor the pioneers of this church is to resolve that, on the foundations they so well have laid, we will build up a nobler structure to the glory of God and the service of man. This church is their legacy to us. "What shall our bequest be to the coming generation?'

One of the important steps taken by the church before the close of the century was the change of its name. It had been known as the First Church of Christ of Sacramento City and also as the First Congregational Church of Christ. In accordance with a resolution offered at the annual meeting on January 22, 1899, and adopted on May 21st, the church was incorporated on June 20th under the name of the First Congregational Church in the City of Sacramento.

The second pastorate of Mr. Silcox ended in the spring of 1900.

Rev. Henry K. Booth became the pastor in November of 1904 and with his arrival the church again began to talk of a new building. By 1905, the church was found to be sadly in need of renovation, but the decision was made to make repairs rather than seek another place of worship. The interior was redecorated, new stained glass windows replaced the old ones, a new carpet was laid and other repairs made. The old organ was entirely remodeled and enlarged and then rededicated as the Crocker Memorial Organ in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Crocker, whose heirs contributed the money for the work.

A memorable event occurred in 1904 as far as the distaff side of the church was concerned. Heretofore, the Ladies Aid had been the sole auxiliary for the church, now the Priscillas were organized and began their work. At that time, there were 318 members on the rolls, about two thirds of whom were women.

By 1906 the attendance at church services was so good that the time honored system of pew rentals was stopped and a method of annual contributions was adopted to supplement the Sunday collections.

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On April 18th and 19th of 1906 the city of San Francisco was leveled by the famous and disastrous earthquake. The catastrophe caused a great rush of people into other communities and many refugees headed for Sacramento. The church swung wide its doors. Cots were set up in the basement, food was provided and clothing was furnished.

On October 10, 1907, Mr. Booth resigned to accept a call from the North Berkeley Congregational Church.

Rev. H. G. Temple was called from Seattle on December 11, 1907. In January of 1910, however, after a year of troubled times for the church, Mr. Temple was released from the pastorate and was replaced in June by Rev. Arthur Bardwell Patten of Santa Rosa.

On the church records for November 3, 1909, appears a special resolution which was adopted in honor of the ninetieth birthday anniversary of Deacon Albion C. Sweetser, the last remaining charter member of the church.

Mr. Patten was installed on December 8, 1910. In June the thought of the church had turned again toward the possibility of a new building when Mrs. F. W. (Cornelia E.) Fratt gave the church the lot at the northeast corner of Fifteenth and P Streets. It was valued at \$15,000. Earlier in the year the Sixth Street property had been placed with two real estate firms to sell for \$42,500.

The church had been without a regular pastor during most of 1910 and the road for Mr. Patten was rough. A report of the annual meeting of the church on January 10, 1912, shows only 221 members. Moreover, it was a troubled period for the world in general. In 1913 and 1914 the church adopted resolution for world peace to be sent to the United States Senate and to President Woodrow Wilson. On May 18, 1914, the church also adopted a resolution to support the movement for the prohibition of the liquor traffic.

By January of 1916, there were only 194 resident members of the church. In the Sunday school there were 137 members. One class of boys successfully defended its city Sunday school basketball league championship.

The report of the Young People's Christian Endeavor Society in 1916 shows that a printing press, purchased for \$400 just before Mr. Temple became the pastor, had saved the church more than \$1,000 in the cost of weekly bulletins and special programs. The press was still being used to print the bulletins until the early 1970's. In those days, the boys and girls of the Christian Endeavor Society helped with the printing.

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Mr. Patten's letter of resignation was read to the church on December 10, 1916. It contained a reproach to the church for 'not rallying more generally and not winning the public more largely'. The resignation was rejected at that time but it was resubmitted and accepted as of April 8, 1917. The scholarly Mr. Patten was well liked by the church, but the need of an administrator to lift the church from a wartime slump was felt.

The church, by 1917, seemed to have reached its lowest ebb to date. On April 29th, the First Methodist Episcopal Church sent a communication to the Congregational body inviting it to worship with it because the latter had no pastor. The invitation suggested also that a delegation from each group meet to consider a basis of uniting, pending further developments. The two churches at that time were within two blocks of each other. Both properties were up for sale because both were anxious to leave what had become an undesirable part of the city. In response to the invitation, the Congregational Church voted to join the Methodists for the May 6th services, but to continue to hold its own services later.

On June 13, 1917, Rev. Harvey Miller of Paradise, California, was invited to become the pastor of the church. The low financial status permitted an offer of only \$100 per month but he accepted. His wife, Dr. Clara Miller, was an osteopath. She set up a practice in the city.

The war took its toll. The church dropped to 163 active members in 1917. The Ladies Aid sent 14 Christmas boxes to the boys from the church who were in camp. In 1918, the church suspended services from October 20th to November 24th because of the influenza epidemic.

After the war, the church struggled along with between 200 and 300 members. The organization apparently was held together by the hopes and dreams of a new church building in a new location and by the indomitable work of Mr. Miller. In November of 1921, the church thought of buying the lot at the north west corner of 24th and L Streets but the deal did not go through.

The new building still seemed far away. On September 18, 1922, Mr. Miller resigned to accept a call from Alameda. In his letter he said, 'Five years of study and experience in this church have convinced me that the only solution is a new location. I have been unable to accomplish this, but I am sure God will send you a man who can'. The events which were to transpire in the next few years made it appear as though Mr. Miller's resignation had been a hard felt spur to the church. His words left no doubt but that action was necessary.

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A bold action was taken on March 19th when the lot at 29th and J Streets was purchased for \$6,300 and the church voted to build a structure on it that would cost them \$60,000.

The last service in the building, which had served the Congregationalists in Sacramento for 68 years was held on April 15, 1923. An historical service was held in the morning. Concerts by the Schubert and McNeill Clubs were presented in the afternoon and Vespers were held at 6 p.m., before the evening service.

The final sermon was preached by Rev. J. B. Silcox, the man who, nearly a quarter of a century before, had delivered the Golden Jubilee sermon.

In May, just before the work of dismantling the building was begun to make room for the amusement center that was to take its place, a movement to save the old church was launched by Sacramento's Mayor, Albert Elkus. The mayor appealed to the people of the city for \$50,000 to preserve the pioneer building for posterity, but the necessary response was not forthcoming. For many years the old church had provided the only auditorium in the city for public gatherings. The Saturday Club presented its concerts there for a long time.

Since the previous September, the church had been without a pastor and now it was without a place of worship of its own. The Sunday services, however, were held in the Tuesday Clubhouse and the business meetings of the organization were held in the Young Men's Christian Association Building.

Full credit must be given to two men who helped to give the church the lift it needed during those months. Rev. Robert Porter had come from the east to become the temporary pastor. He was an eloquent, well liked man and the church, on several occasions, asked him to become its permanent pastor, each offer being refused for his own personal reasons. Mr. Silcox stepped into the pulpit for the third time, temporarily and seemed to hold the congregation together with flawless oratory and apt leadership.

In April of 1923, the church voted to call Rev. Harley Hayes Gill from Stockton, California. Mr. Gill already had been offered and had refused the superintendency of the Northern California Conference of Congregational Churches. He accepted and began his pastorate here on July 7, 1923.

He almost immediately began a series of advertisements in the daily newspapers, calling attention to the church services in the Tuesday Clubhouse. Attendance improved. The church plunged anew into the task of preparing its new home. Plans were drawn, committees were formed, and the never ending search for the necessary funds went on.

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More church members were needed and in early 1924, the first extensive membership drive in years was launched. The result was the attainment of a goal of 100 new members, an achievement which served to give a spiritual uplift to the church as a whole.

On September 16, 1924, the Diamond Jubilee of the church was held in the Native Sons Hall at 11th and J Streets. A dinner was served to 150 persons. Talks were given and letters from former pastors of the church were read.

Since the sale of the old building, plans had been made to erect the new church at 29th and J Streets. The architect's drawings revealed however, that the lot apparently was too small and the building would be cramped. Then the idea was conceived by R. C. Wilks that the church buy the property at the corner of 27th and L Streets, opposite Sutter's Fort and that the edifice be called Pioneer Memorial Congregational Church. This idea met with immediate favor and enthusiasm and the negotiations for the property were begun.

The two corner lots were purchased, but it was some time before an agreement could be made for the 50 foot portion of the ground immediately next to the Tuesday Clubhouse. When the deal was finally made, the plans were redrawn for the building as it now stands.

The year 1926 opened auspiciously for the church. The reports of committees at the annual meeting on January 12th showed that great progress was being made. The reports were greeted by applause. There were 344 members at the time and the organization was in a solvent condition, \$8,388 having come into the coffers during the previous year. The trustees went so far as to recommend the hiring of an assistant pastor.

Ground breaking ceremonies for the new building were held at five o'clock in the afternoon of March 30, 1926, and the cornerstone was laid on June 5th by Mr. Gill with former pastor Harvey Miller assisting in the ceremonies.

The building of the new church was the biggest event in the modern history of the organization. A tremendous financial responsibility had to be assumed because the total cost of the venture was about \$135,000, including the property. A loan was made from the national church building society to go with a gift from the same source. Proceeds from the sale of the old building and from the sale of the lot at 29th and J Streets helped. Building fund campaigns brought forth some money, but still a mortgage of \$60,000 had to be taken.

The church was erected by the McGillivray Construction Company at cost plus \$1 through the generosity of George C. Bassett, head of the company and a member of the church. Much credit for work done during the building was given to Dr. Eugene H. Pitts, chairman of the board of trustees.

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The church was dedicated November 21, 1926, with ceremonies which lasted all day, beginning with a breakfast program. Guests were present from San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Stockton and other cities in northern California. Communion was served at 11 o'clock and 77 new members, one for each year of the church's history, were received.

The dedication service in the afternoon was featured by the formal presentation of the building by George Bassett and the construction company to Clarence H. Kromer, chairman of the building committee. He in turn presented it to Dr. Pitts who accepted it on behalf of the church. The sermon was preached by Mr. Gill and the dedicatory prayer was offered by Rev. W. J. Minchin, superintendent of the Northern California Conference. Open house was held after the services. Tea was served and the Delta Rho Girls acted as guides for visitors in showing off the building. A sacred concert was given in the evening.

Many gifts were presented to the new church. A chancel window was given by Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Witherbee (insert picture here) and a pair on the main floor by Mrs. Lester Hinsdale.

Part of the historic Crocker organ was used in the church. One full set of new pipes was given by Mrs. A. G. Folger and a set of organ chimes by Mrs. Mary E. Noyes.

The large painting in the narthex of the church was done by the daughter of John E. Benton, brother of Dr. Benton, and was presented to the church by members of the Benton family.

Soon after the church was dedicated, the old historic bell was rehung in the tower and it rang out again for the first time on the first Sunday in 1927. The bell had been cast in Troy, New York, in 1854 and made the trip around the Horn in a windjammer to be hung in the belfry of the church on Sixth Street. It was donated by Richard F. Toomer, an early day Sacramento businessman. Not only did the bell call the congregation to Sunday worship, but it served as the city's fire alarm and also to summon the vigilante committees. A previous bell had been damaged in the fire in 1854.

The enthusiasm engendered by the building of the fine new Gothic structure as a place of worship carried the members along in renewed effort. In January of 1929 the church had a total of 501 members, the first time in history that figure was reached. It has never stopped growing since. In March of that year, a director of religious education and young people's work was hired, also for the first time as a full time, paid position.

Mr. Gill resigned as pastor late in 1929 to accept, as of January 1, 1930, the position of superintendent of the Northern California Congregational Conference. He left with regret

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but with the expressed feeling that he had accomplished his mission in Sacramento, that of getting the new church built.

Rev. Lawrence Wilson of San Diego assumed the pastorate in 1930 and the church continued to grow in membership year by year. Under Mr. Wilson, the College of Life was organized with its own chapel service and study groups. Later, it became the Pilgrim Fellowship. The Women's League, composed of representatives of all the women's organizations in the church, was formed during Mr. Wilson's tenure. He was also appointed chaplain for the California State Assembly in 1931.

Mr. Wilson resigned in 1939 and on June 13th of that year and Dr. Torrance Phelps arrived from the First Congregational Church in Pasadena, California. His reputation as a builder had preceded him. In Kalamazoo, Michigan, Dr. Phelps had built a \$250,000 church free of debt. In Pasadena, he gathered more than 600 new members.

In Sacramento, Dr. Phelps lost no time in making use of the fine new church building. New members began to arrive, church attendance soared, new clubs were formed and the colony system was introduced. Five and a half years after Dr. Phelps arrived the final indebtedness was cleared. Since the Emancipation Campaign in 1936, the last \$30,000 had been whittled steadily down to about \$20,000 in 1944. Then, with the help of \$12,000 from a legacy of Mrs. Cornelia Fratt and \$8,000 in subscriptions, the mortgage was burned on October 8, 1944.

In the spring of 1945, the 40 by 80 foot lot at the rear of the church across the alley and fronting 27th Street was purchased by Thomas Richards. He gave the lot to the church, who originally used it for parking. Later, that lot became the home of Pioneer House, a care facility for senior citizens.

Since 1939, more than 1,300 new members had joined the church and about two thirds of them remained resident members. The achievement of Dr. Phelps in that work won him a nationwide reputation. As a feature of the Centennial celebration, a class of about 150 new members joined the church.

Dr. Phelps became chaplain of the California State Assembly. He served in 1945 and 1946 and again in 1949. His prayers to open the daily sessions of the lawmakers have won him nationwide newspaper attention for the unusual subject, clarity and frankness.

The Sunday school enrollment leaped from about 125 to more than 400 under the membership work of the new pastor. In addition, the Cradle Roll, under Mrs. A. C. (Ora B.) Sullivan, has increased to about 350 children, one of the largest in the west.

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During World War II, when gasoline rationing was begun, the time of the Sunday school was changed to coincide with church time. Previously, the Sunday school had met earlier in the morning and in years before had held its classes in the early afternoon. The change allowed parents and children to be in the building at the same time. Attendance in both places was excellent and the system has prevailed.

Throughout Dr. Phelps' pastorate the windows in the sanctuary were replaced with stained glass windows donated by friends, families and members in honor and memory of special loved ones. The Clerestory windows are the only remaining windows that need to be replaced with stained glass.

Dr. Phelps submitted his letter of resignation effective March 1, 1955. The cabinet was unable to persuade him to continue and reluctantly accepted his resignation.

The pulpit was filled on September 25, 1955 by Rev. R. Wilbur Simmons. His pastorate witnessed a substantial increase in benevolence giving and the remodeling of the education wing. The Passion Play was presented in the Sanctuary in 1956 and the ground work was laid for establishing the Cathedral Pioneer Church Home. Unfortunately, problems arose that could not be resolved and Mr. Simmons was asked to leave Pioneer in 1961.

Rev. Robert Carlson stepped into his pastorate with the church in February of 1962. In that same year the Cathedral Pioneer Church Homes concept was approved. The congregation voted to put a membership policy in place that stated it was open to all regardless of race or national origin.

In 1964, the name of the church was changed from First Congregational to Pioneer Congregational Church.

1966 was an important year for Pioneer and the City of Sacramento. Dedication ceremonies took place for two housing facilities that are aimed at senior care, Pioneer House located at 5th and P Streets and Trinity House, located behind the church on the corner of Capitol and 27th Street. These facilities will be cared for under the joint guidance of the non-profit organizations, Retirement Housing Foundation, an organization that was founded to provide quality housing for seniors and the handicapped, Pioneer United Church of Christ and Trinity Episcopal Cathedral.

Church attendance rose and so did giving. The church voted to become part of the new Church Service Bureau. Our youth remained very active in the conference and regional activities.

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Rev. Carlson tendered his resignation in 1972. On February 25, 1973, Kermit White was installed as Pioneer's seventeenth called pastor. Kermit possessed strong skills in administration and was tasked with bringing the budget back to a stable state. During his pastorate, outreach shrank and there was frustration experienced with him by the Christian Education Department.

Pioneer Church celebrated its 125th Anniversary in the year 1974. The festivities kicked off with a Wild West picnic in Elk Grove Park. The Conestoga Club was chartered. All of the United Church of Christ churches in the greater Sacramento area participated in a service held at 4:00 p.m. on September 15, 1974. A reception, hosted by the Deacons and Deaconesses followed.

Dr. White preached Rev. Benton's sermon that he delivered on November 12, 1871 and on September 8th, Communion Sunday, The sterling silver chalice presented to Dr. Benton by his Sunday School Class and later to Pioneer Church by Joseph Benton Wirt, was featured in Dr. White's sermon, 'The Amazing Cup.' I Corinthians 11:23-27.

A Black Oak tree was planted on the grounds of Fort Sutter as a living memorial of our 125th Anniversary by Dr. White and the Sunday school. The Ladies Aid was honored by the Women's League for its long and continuous service both to the church and the community.

The culmination of this celebration was a joint banquet held at the Scottish Rite Temple. The participants were St. Paul's Cathedral, First United Methodist Church and the City of Sacramento. The three churches were presented with resolutions from the city marking this milestone in Sacramento's history.

In 1979, a unanimous vote was taken to call Wayne Martin, from Boston to be an associate pastor focusing on church growth and youth. This was well received by several of the young adults attending the church at the time, but many were against him from the start because of the way information was not disclosed before the vote.

In 1980, Wayne Martin tendered his resignation from Pioneer. In 1981 the cabinet called for Dr. White's resignation.

Rev. Lewis Knight was installed as minister of Pioneer on February 15, 1983, membership was 350. Mr Knight is best remembered for his ministry with Francis House and with AIDS patients. He was well liked by most members of the congregation. During his pastorate, an outreach was opened upstairs, 'Spiritual Dimensions in Victim Care'.

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The climate of the downtown area has experienced a lot of changes. Homelessness is an ongoing concern of the community. Pioneer has already barred its downstairs windows because of break-ins. On June 3, 1985, the Trustees adopted a resolution that, 'No street person shall come into the building for any reason.' The doors of the church were closed and locked after the beginning of services. Fortunately, this did not last long.

In 1983 her royal majesty, the Queen of England, paid a visit to Sacramento and toured Sutter's Fort. Pioneer's bell rang in greeting to her while in the upstairs chapel members gathered at the windows to catch a look and wave to her in greeting. Security precautions prevented anyone from opening a window or going up to the roof, so we had no choice but to settle for the closed windows. Later, Queen Elizabeth sent a letter to the church thanking us for our warm welcome.

Rev. Knight tendered his resignation from Pioneer in early 1991.

During the search for a new minister, Rev. Ray Welles stepped in as the interim to assist the church in healing rifts that had developed between generations and help us to become a community again with goals and visions for Pioneer.

George Meier began his pastorate with Pioneer on September 1, 1992. He was tasked with leading the congregation toward renewal and revitalization. George was fresh out of Pacific School of religion and not yet ordained. His ordination and installation took place here at Pioneer on January 10, 1993.

During his pastorate the church did a lot of exploration of who we are. Our mission statement, 'Spiritual Pioneers caring for God's diverse community' developed out of an early planning session to set goals and define who we, as a church are. He saw this wonderful building as being a central place in the community and set about working with the choir director to get a summer music camp going that was very successful that year. Unfortunately, lack of resources the next summer prevented the camp from being repeated.

New opportunities for spiritual growth were made available in retreats, small group activities and community events, such as the annual auction, Halloween parties and intergenerational gatherings.

The Mother's Play Group also started in the upstairs Sunday School room providing a place for mothers to bring their young children for a day of activity.

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One of the rooms upstairs, long disused, now hums with the sound of sewing machines as volunteers work on a portion of the AIDS quilt that is here.

Laity involvement in the worship service was encouraged. Scripture readers were almost always members and the children were always invited up to the altar for a children's message from the pastor before going off to their Sunday school classes. In 1995, Michele Champion and Cynthia Lee, Sunday school teachers at the time, worked with the Sunday school and the curriculum to do the worship service during the Lenten and Christmas seasons. Both services were very well received.

A congregation of Samoans approached Pioneer in 1995 asking if they could share our building while they raised funds to build a church of their own. They began services in April of the same year paying a reduced rent to us in exchange for assistance with our landscaping and house keeping chores. They gave a luau in appreciation of the new relationship that was formed.

In 1996 the congregation voted to take a bold step and remodel the church. Several serious discussions had taken place before the vote. Even the question of selling was put to the congregation. The overwhelming vote for that was NO! It had become painfully obvious that the building was outdated. If we were to expand our outreach and ministry we were going to have to do a major remodel of the building. Membership loans were pledged and funding secured. The plans were drawn that would include updating the church's electrical wiring, restroom facilities to accommodate the disabled and an elevator would be installed for that same purpose, making the building accessible to all. Several walls were also moved. When Phase I of the project was finished in 1999, we were relieved. This had been a painful process for all of us to go through, but as we have done so many times since the founding of this body, we persevered and pulled together in support through all the trying times.

The California Council of Churches moved into part of the upstairs of Pioneer in 1998. This is an organization that is pledged to advocate for social justice in Sacramento as well as the state of California. It's dedication ceremony was held here at Pioneer on the afternoon of September 20, 1998. Members of the United Church of Christ and other Protestant denominations participated in this dedication.

During the time that the remodeling was in progress, a committee was formed to explore the possibility of installing a permanent labyrinth in the courtyard in front of the Church. It would be similar to the one at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. The purpose would be to offer this to the public for use in meditative walking and healing. Sutter Hospital is very close and the benefits of having such a tool available to patients and families, as well as the community at large was a very exciting prospect for some. The labyrinth has

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met with some opposition in the congregation. Some are concerned that a labyrinth in too New Age or just a fad.

The remodel project is not yet complete. Repairs to the outside of the church, including the bell tower need to be made so that our great old bell can once again ring.

In the tradition of accepting all persons who seek a relationship with God, the congregation voted on June 28, 1998 to publicly declare itself to be Open and Affirming, pledging to welcome into full membership, leadership and participation in our church all persons and their families, of every race, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, economic status and personal opinion. We believe our diversity enriches our fellowship and we celebrate the infinite variety of gifts from God among us.

Pastor George Meier submitted his resignation on August 24, 1998 having been called to the Community Church of the Monterey Peninsula. The Council convened and with great reluctance accepted it. The church celebrated with George and his wife Therese on October 4, 1998 amid song, a last communion service and tearful good-byes.

We will celebrate our 150th anniversary with our own services and we will celebrate with the two other churches that began in that same year in a rough little town that was on the way to gold. We stand at the door of a new millenium, with a rich history to draw from and the vision of what is yet to come to carry us ever forward to do God's service in Sacramento. For this, God be praised!

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