

History of Sonoma UCC



History of the First 132 Years in the Life of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, 1871 – 2003

1869 – An Age of “New Beginnings”

It was the time of high-button shoes and celluloid collars . . . the age of the first transcontinental railroads . . . the year Susan B. Anthony founded the Women’s Suffrage Association and that the Smith Brothers patented their cough drops. Ulysses S. Grant was president.

The West was still wild . . . some four million buffalo still roamed the plains, and cowboys were making their first cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail.

A mere 20 years had passed since San Francisco’s meager population of 412 was swelled by hordes of gold-seekers — thus changing forever the languid, lonely land called California. The Gold Rush had ended. But the enchantment of California had captivated many westering argonauts, who stayed on to become farmers and merchants. A spirit of unbounded optimism prevailed.

But in the village of Sonoma, there was no optimism. During the 21 years the town had remained unincorporated, fire had consumed most of the adobe dwellings around the plaza, including M.G. Vallejo’s two-story Casa Grande. The plaza had degenerated. There were no trees. Cattle wandered where Vallejo’s troops had once proudly marched.

Then in the midst of this milieu of depression, a group of townsfolk who foresaw a brighter future for Sonoma, formed the Society of California Pioneers. With eagerness and determination, they set to work planting trees, building fences to keep out the livestock, and laying plans to erect a building for their headquarters, right in the middle of the plaza. Their zeal was contagious.

Now the stage was set for the Sonoma of the Future. And for New Beginnings.

The Big Tree Sunday School

Meanwhile, some distance from the village, Edwin Sutherland was operating a ranch on property that is now the Sonoma Golf Club. Mr. Sutherland had five children. His sister, Mrs. Fanny Dunn, and her husband lived across the road with their six children.

Thus, when Mr. Sutherland decided that his children must have some organized religious instruction, he already had the nucleus of a church school in his own back yard, under the protecting branches of a large live-oak tree.

Almost immediately, the Big Tree Sunday School became popular. People from around about came, both parents and children — in fact, most of the families from the west side of the Valley.

It's true that three churches had already started in Sonoma — the Methodist, the Mission, and the Cumberland Presbyterian College. But they were quite some distance from these people on the west side. And so the Big Tree Sunday School continued to flourish. During the winter months, the Sunday School held its meetings in the Harvey Schoolhouse.

It was in 1870 that the leaders of the Sunday School put in motion plans to establish a church in Sonoma. Partly because of the activity of the Home Missionary Society in this part of California at that time, and partly because the Congregational Church was quite ready to receive the faiths of many churches, it was decided that this would be a Congregational church.

On April 2, 1871, sixty people met with an agent of the Home Missionary Society to explore possibilities. Twenty people signed up to pledge their support. The name of the church was to be the First Congregational Church of Christ of Sonoma. A Constitution was drawn up, a Council established to select and install officers, and a call was sent to the Rev. Michael Croswell, a minister who had preached frequently at the Cumberland Presbyterian College, at what is now Broadway and MacArthur.

It was voted, also, to spend \$100 to buy chairs to seat the prospective congregation. Not surprisingly, it was a group of women who were selected to devise the means of raising the money.

On May 2, 1871, a meeting was held in the Public Schoolhouse to ordain and install the officers of the church. Invitations had been sent out to surrounding communities, and a large crowd gathered for the occasion.

And thus, May 2, 1871 became the official date for the founding of the First Congregational Church of Christ in Sonoma. Of the twelve people who became charter members, five were Congregationalists, three Presbyterians, three Baptists, and one Episcopalian.

A true ecumenical beginning.

One cannot but wonder if those early founders did not feel some pangs of regret mixed with apprehension when they left their Big Tree to begin the arduous task of building a church with all the difficult problems involved. A church must have walls and a roof and all the things that go within it.

Still, a church is for all seasons, not just for balmy summer days. But would music ever sound quite the same again, confined by walls, as it used to on those Sunday mornings under the Big Tree?

Outgrowing the Big Tree

For two years, services were held in the schoolhouse. But in February 1873, members began laying plans to buy a lot so they could have a church of their own. The site selected was a lot on Broadway (across from the present post office) for which they paid \$300.

In the months and years that followed, the congregation was preoccupied with the completion of the building, and with a constant struggle to raise money.

Instead of money, some of the men and their sons contributed labor. But it was spasmodic, and work proceeded slowly. By autumn, it was clear something would have to be done to make the building suitable for use during the approaching winter.

One of the most successful projects was a harvest festival. The unfinished building was filled to overflowing with farm produce brought in by members and friends of the church. Two commission merchants were called in from San Francisco and sold the produce for the church without charging any commission. The event netted \$400 — a handsome sum for the time.

And so on October 5, the first public worship service was held in the new church. The building was still in an unfinished state, but the excitement must have been intense.

Records of the day state that “every possible means that could be considered honorable were used to raise funds.” By 1879 enough cash had been raised to finish walls and ceilings with natural wood, to lay a red carpet, and to provide the pews with red cushions. In fact, the pew cushions provided one of the chief sources of income. The middle pews were rented for \$30 a year; those in the rear and on the sides were cheaper. Small families were permitted to rent half a pew. But pew rentals and Sunday collections never seemed to pay the bills. So the congregation turned to renting out portions of the church itself.

At the time, many church members were engaged in viticulture. Hence there was little objection raised when it was decided to rent the lower part of the church to the Grange for its meeting place, and for the Viticulture Society to display its choice wines.

Certain restrictions were laid down. The organizations had to agree not to use the building on Sundays, nor to use the building for any purpose not approved by the church membership. It was specifically stipulated that no public dances were to be allowed.

This profitable arrangement lasted for two years and might have continued indefinitely had it not been for an incident that occurred at one of the church socials. When one of the members, J.B. Morris, was asked to offer a toast, he turned out this poetic bit:

Spirits above, spirits of love
Spirits below, spirits of woe
Spirits above, spirits divine
Spirits below, spirits of wine

The wife of one of the deacons was so incensed by this little rhyme that she embarked on a campaign to generate sufficient indignation among the membership to bring about the removal of the Viticultural Society from the lower floor.

Meanwhile, other improvements were made. A member named “Yankee” Thomas installed a spiral staircase between the first and second floors. Unfortunately, it had to be removed sometime later because older people found it difficult to negotiate.

There was no money for pulpit furniture — that came later. But in 1875 the congregation had some good fortune. Pastor Crosswell was granted a four-month leave to tend to business in the East, and when he returned he brought two handsome chandeliers, a gift from the North Congregational Church of New Haven, Connecticut.

A Bell for Sonoma

During the pastorate of Reverend Harry Wykoff (1880 – 1888), the church acquired a handsome bell to call the congregation to worship.

It was thanks to a group of young women who had formed under the leadership of Janet Cooper, going by the name of the Busy Bees. Due to their hard work and ingenuity \$400 was raised to buy the bell.

Installation of the bell was the occasion for a grand celebration. There was a Saturday dinner held in the church parlors. There were speeches and singing and appropriate ceremonies. But the crowning event of the day was the first ringing of the bell. Each one of the Busy Bees had a hand on the rope, which extended out into the street.

Every Sunday the bell rang out. And later, when World War I called many lads of Sonoma to service, the Reverend Isaac Cookman rang the church bell at noon each day as a signal for all who heard it to offer a prayer for our boys overseas.

Alas, the life of the bell ringing was cut short. When a strong wind blew, the belfry wasn't safe. So in 1921 the belfry was removed to prevent damage to the entire building, and the bell was taken down to be stored at Jake Yenni's farm. Not until 1961, when the church had been moved to a new site, did the bell ring again. Now it once again calls members to worship as it did when the Busy Bees pulled the rope with such enthusiasm.

Yet efforts of the Busy Bees notwithstanding, the church soon found itself, with the rest of the nation, facing a serious Depression. During 1893-94, the church had more than its usual difficulty meeting its financial obligations. The pastor at that time, Reverend Chase, offered to relieve the situation by forgoing his regular salary of \$1,000 a year. He said he'd accept whatever amount remained after running expenses had been met. In addition, due to some misunderstanding about a mortgage held by Obed Chart on the parsonage, Reverend Chase had to provide his own home.

This loose method of doing business afterwards caused dissension, and although Reverend Chase served the church for some seven years, it appears these unfortunate conditions produced somewhat of a strained relation between pastor and people. However, it is heartening to report that the church finally paid up his back salary.

As for the parsonage, at the time of Mr Chart's death, the mortgage amounted to about \$300, with the note being shortly due. The church couldn't get refinancing, so finally the parsonage was sold for \$350. The church retained a lot on the corner of Broadway and MacArthur, on which was later built another parsonage.

In August 1897, the church was blessed with a wondrous gift, the stained glass window that is still in place today. Records of the time were extremely sketchy (it is possible that no one then realized the magnificence of the gift), but a newspaper account of August 21 that year states that they were given by Mrs. Rouse of Oakland in honor of the memory of her aunt and uncle, Phoebe and Obed Chart, who were among the founders in 1869.

A Lingering Case of Financial Anxiety

Records reveal few years that there wasn't some struggle to come out even financially.

Often it was the women's organization that came to the rescue and filled empty pockets. Wrote Carrie Burlingame in her 1960 church history, "The Ladies Aid, founded in 1871 as the Sewing Circle, has always been one of the chief supporters of the church through the years, both financially and socially."

At times, it appears, matters went beyond that. At a special meeting called on April 9, 1905, it was disclosed that for the past nine months the Ladies Aid Society had paid half the minister's salary. The Society president stated that the ladies were no longer able to cope with this situation, and it was suggested that the business methods of the church be improved by all the members — and that the men in particular take more interest.

When it came to lively fundraising, the young people's organizations weren't far behind the ladies. It was during Dr. Day's pastorate (1907-1911) that the church decided to borrow \$1,000 and build a \$1,700 parsonage. Rising to the occasion, the teen-aged Busy Bees (this time the daughters of the "Bees" who financed the church bell 20 years previous) raised enough money to buy the parsonage bathroom fixtures. (No formal dedication ceremonies at the site were recorded ... but the gift was undoubtedly deeply appreciated by the Days.)

Things weren't always bad. In 1941, the auditor prepared a table of the previous 13 years' finances. He showed a deficit in six of the years, a surplus in seven. It wasn't clear whether the lean years and the fat were consecutive or alternating. But there is comfort in learning that the fat were in the majority.

Of all financial reports presented at the annual meeting, the report of January 1967 is the most distressing.

“We are a small congregation of 213 members on an operating budget of approximately \$24,000. In our 1963 building program we were not able to secure sufficient financing through the bank. Therefore, 12 families made individual loans to the church to the amount of \$10,600, to be repaid with interest in two years. Four years later, neither principal nor little interest has been paid.

“In the spring of 1967, a committee was appointed at the instigation of our pastor as to how this problem should be faced. The Committee suggested that a special effort be made at once for the purpose of securing pledges and cash for the repayment of those personal loans.

“On May 26, at a dinner of the church families, \$11,167 was donated or pledged. Perhaps it should be stated here that a considerable portion of this amount was raised by the cancellation of the loans altogether, or in part, by the members who had made the loans.”

The picture brightened considerably, however, by the end of 1967. Here’s a direct quote from the historian’s report for the year 1967: “On the scene appeared one man, aloof in his manner, but professional in every respect in his field of fundraising. Mr. Jack Krause came to our congregation with his wife to devote their talents according to their skills and time. Mr. Krause launched a campaign that resulted in debt-free Burlingame Hall. In addition, pledges given at the end of the year were doubled.”

In January 1968, Burlingame Hall was given over to a child daycare center. The trustees reported at the close of the year: “This very worthwhile civic activity has been successful. Moreover, it has more than paid its way.”

Carrie Appleton Burlingame

A woman of enormous energy, Carrie Burlingame made Sonoma the scene of her spirited activities for most of nine decades. In 1960, at the age of 85, she told a San Francisco reporter that she simply “had no time to grow old.” No one in the Congregational Church would have doubted that statement, for she was the spark plug of the church.

She was born in 1875 on the ranch of her father, who was one of the first to join the church after it had been founded. Horace Appleton arrived in California for the 1849 Gold Rush, then went on to the Australian gold rush to try out his new rock-crushing machine. When that petered out, he came back to California to raise grapes, fight biloxi blight, and finally to raise cattle and horses.

Carrie’s mother, Hannah Appleton, was no stay-at-home either. Daughter of a Massachusetts sea captain, she had sailed around Cape Horn, sailed to Australia, and crossed the Isthmus to California by the time she was 14, studying navigation on the way. She joined the Sonoma Congregational church in 1873 and was a tireless worker.

The miracle was that either of them settled down long enough to raise four children on their ranch in the Valley of the Moon. Carrie’s playmates were the daughters of General Vallejo. She

went to the old Flowery School, rode horseback, took to a naturalist's interest by the time she was ten.

In 1893 she married Claude Burlingame, a skilled horseman and famous professional jockey, and traveled the country with him, leading the gypsy life his work entailed.

But by 1907 the marriage had failed, and Carrie came back to Sonoma. She joined the Congregational Church and with characteristic élan set about the task of directing the activities of the Women's Society for the next two decades.

She spent her afternoons riding the hills with Jack London and Charmian, joined the Sierra Club and climbed the Sierra's most rugged peaks. She took up botany and hybridized the iris, learned color photography, then taught herself watercolor painting. At a time when the nation had no more than 500 miles of concrete roadbed, she bought her first car and took a 5,000-mile journey to visit the National Parks, sleeping outdoors all the way.

At age 60, with her widowed mother to look after, she built a small home: drew the plans, did all the landscaping, including tons of rock work, herself.

In the records of the Congregational Church for five decades, there is scarcely a page that does not include the name of Carrie Burlingame. On the day of her 90th birthday, the trustees announced, "The social hall shall on the 16th of May, 1965, be named Burlingame Hall in honor of Mrs. Carrie Appleton Burlingame, long a faithful member of the church."

The entire day was designated Burlingame Day, and a "This is Your Life" program was presented for more than 200 people in attendance. A representative from each of the Valley organizations to which she had belonged spoke, paying high tribute to her. A redwood plaque naming the hall in her honor was placed at the entrance.

Asked if she ever sat down to contemplate such a life of adventure and to form a philosophy, she replied, "Whenever I sit down I am bound to see something that ought to be done. Then I get up and do it. My philosophy is mostly in action. There are so many things crying to be accomplished that I don't have much time for philosophy. Living is so exciting, so demanding."

The Sound of Music

As early as the days of the Big Tree Sunday School, music had always been a centerpiece of the church services.

Wrote Carrie Burlingame in her history of the church, "The Big Tree Sunday School boasted an excellent choir. Mr. J.B. Morris had a fine tenor voice, his wife sang soprano. With Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland, who were a fine bass and alto, music became an important part of the Sunday gatherings. In fact, this became our first church choir."

It is easy to picture the scene on a fine summer's day, with the a cappella voices carried on a breeze across the mustard-covered fields. Perhaps they would never sound quite the same again confined within the church walls.

When the move was made into the first church on Broadway, the congregation got its first pipe organ — the gift of Mrs. Sophia Craig, one of the church's first organizers.

Then again in July 1897, Sophia Craig came forward and presented a new pipe organ — “a model of beauty and exquisitely lovely in tone,” according to an account in the Sonoma Index-Tribune. William Hyde, “the silver-tongued choir leader” for a number of years, performed on the keyboard on the occasion of its dedication. The news account further stated that, “On July 30, Kate Hutchinson of San Francisco will preside at the instrument, along with other musical talent in the evening's entertainment. The nominal sum of 25¢ will be charged for admission.”

But in the long run, it was Natalie Hope Davis who played the organ for all services for a period of twenty years without pay. She and Hannah Appleton (Carrie Burlingame's mother) in collaboration, rehearsed and presented many beautiful cantatas, which kept the treasury of the Ladies Aid replenished. Meanwhile, in a cubbyhole behind the organ, young Horace Appleton sat through the lengthy services pumping the organ by hand. He was the first of many young lads assigned to that post before a motor was installed. Their initials carved into the wall remain as a monument to their tour of duty.

Today, that organ is regarded as a rare treasure, the last of the fully manual organs built by John Bergstrom & Sons in San Francisco. It was almost lost sometime in the 1950s, when pressure was brought to bear to install a Hammond organ in its place, but organist Daniel Ruggles campaigned to keep the beauty. The decorative Victorian-design pipes were repainted by June Townsend in 1960.

In April 1969, Sonoma was honored by the presence of Alexander Schreiner, master organist from Salt Lake City, and the Index-Tribune lost control of adjectives in describing his appearance. “He gave three superb recitals and his delightful warm personality and the charm of his attractive wife genuinely impressed everyone they met, while the inspired music Dr. Schreiner produced swept through the Valley of the Moon like a cool breeze on a warm summer day. We did not have the pleasure of hearing his program at the Congregational Church, but we understand the little old organ never sounded better. Dr. Schreiner says it is a well-built instrument, properly placed within the four walls of the room, and that the mid-Victorian pattern on the pipes is beautiful. He congratulated the church in keeping it in excellent condition.”

In June 1988, the delegates to the Organ Historical Society in San Francisco made a special journey to Sonoma to see and listen to the Bergstrom, and determined then that the organ “is probably the only instrument of this type on the Pacific Coast to remain unaltered.”

The organ has had its problems, mainly due to old age — pedals sticking, keyboard not reliable, a blower blowing noisily. But under the direction of organist JoAnne Connor Metzger, it has been brought up to a high standard. It remains a stunning centerpiece of the sanctuary.

The Choir

Mention of the Music Department and the choir appear frequently in old church records. At the annual meeting in January 1933, it was proudly reported by choir director Daniel Ruggles that new anthem books had been purchased — “fully subscribed and paid for.”

At that same meeting, particular note was made that “a pleasant feature of the meeting was solos by various choir members, interspersed throughout the business meeting.”
Not a bad idea!

The Youth Choir of 1965 was saluted for its increase in membership. Remarked Grace Smalley, accompanist for the Youth Choir, “If you should walk by the Fireside Room any Monday at four o’clock you may wonder what the commotion is. Listen for a minute and you will hear Dan Ruggles’ wonderful baritone voice trying to bring about a little law and order to 22 choir children aged five years to 13. We are proud to say we average 100 percent attendance at these practices. They are hard-working, energetic ‘little adults’ who spend many hours perfecting the songs they sing for your enjoyment at the church service at least once a month.”

More “New Beginnings”

Since the early 1940s, there had been ongoing discussions concerning the church site. There was no question the congregation had outgrown its present building. But what was the solution?

They owned a vacant lot on the corner. Should they build a Sunday School there? Meeting rooms? Perhaps they should sell the lot and enlarge the church. Another alternative: Sell it all and start elsewhere.

A Building Committee was formed to study the alternatives. But at each meeting, they decided to put off deciding. Matters almost came to a head when Richfield Oil offered \$10,000 for the corner lot. But again, more discussion was needed. For one thing, building materials were hard to get. And the lot should be worth more than that.

Finally, in the early years of the 1950s, the picture cleared. Commercial enterprises were closing in on the Broadway-Patten site. The church would soon find itself in the midst of business ventures. More than that, the church was now sitting on real estate that had become valuable monetarily.

The Building Committee set out to find a new location for the church. In November 1955, they found a lot they considered ideal, and in November an agreement was signed to purchase a site on Spain Street for \$12,000. They put down \$2,000 and agreed to pay the rest within five years at 5 percent interest, payable quarterly. In February 1956, a “For Sale” sign was put out to sell the old church property. The price being asked was \$60,000.

Considerable intensive labor was involved in dismantling the old church. For one thing, the Bergstrom organ had to be taken apart and stored until the new sanctuary was ready. A temporary home was found for organ and pipes in an empty chicken house on Castle Road. Pews were removed and stored. It was a gigantic undertaking for the men of the church. In the interim,

another organ had been acquired when the Piedmont Presbyterian Church burned down. The men had another chance to haul that and store it in a church loft.

Meanwhile ... back at the Spain Street site, architectural wings were being built to branch out from the sanctuary. These would be the home of the Christian Education department, the Women's Fellowship and other activities.

While all this was happening, the congregation had its Sunday worship at various locales around town, sometimes a mortuary, most often at the Community Center.

And on Friday, May 27, 1960, the actual move took place. Excitement was intense. The top part of the church was mounted on dollies, then placed on trucks. PG&E was alerted and on hand to protect wires as the church lumbered down Broadway. It made its turn toward Spain Street on the west side of the plaza. The turn onto Spain was critical, with only inches to spare. PG&E lifted their wires and the turn was made.

At the new Spain Street site, the church was gently lowered onto a spot near the back of the lot, because it was originally intended that the old church would become a pioneer memorial chapel, and that a new, grander sanctuary would be built in the front.

Now it was time for the men of the church to rescue the Bergstrom organ and haul it to the new site. The pews were brought in, sanded and stained, then new cushions were installed on the pews. New windows were installed because the old ones were plain, with paper stuck on to make them look like stained glass.

And on Sunday, November 27, the new church received its members in the quarters everyone had worked so hard to achieve. The sacrament of Communion was celebrated and new members were received. Said Pat Yenni, recalling that occasion, "I was so excited! It was just glorious! One of the Big Moments of my life!"

Two years later, the Building Committee was authorized to go ahead with plans to add on a church school wing and a kitchen and dining hall unit, financed by a \$50,000 bank loan and \$25,000 in private loans. On a Sunday morning in June 1962, the congregation walked from the church to the groundbreaking site singing "The Church's One Foundation."

Reverend Hoff said a prayer, Col. Wetsel spoke on behalf of the trustees, Reverend Hoff turned the first spadeful of earth, and the mayor offered congratulations.

Actual construction was delayed for a year, and on May 24, 1964, dedication services were held. A year following that, the social hall was named Burlingame Hall.

Those were great years for the church. There was a large Sunday School enrollment. Enthusiasm was high. A group of young-marrieds formed a social group called the Twig Benders and got together once a month — sometimes for barbecue picnics at the Yenni ranch, exploring the hills on a haywagon. The Doers Club was formed to raise money. Everyone took on a money-making enterprise (Glenn Yenni chopped wood to sell) to contribute to church funds. There were three choirs — adult, young people, and small children. There was great esprit d' corps.

As the Twig is Bent ...

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the church originally started as a Sunday School. But it's remarkable that throughout the church's early years, Sunday School enrollment remained high and steady.

In 1930, for example, church membership was 80 (54 women, 26 men). But Sunday School enrollment was 123. Three choirs were maintained (sometimes four) — adult, young people, children.

For high school-age churchgoers, the Christian Endeavor Society was a main link in growing up. In 1971, when the church celebrated its Centennial, there was a reunion of the 1932 group, and more than 40 showed up to greet one another and remember old times.

Branching Out

Being Congregationalists, members were always eager to reach out a hand of fellowship to other denominations.

For a period of several months, the Seventh Day Adventists used our facilities while their new church was being completed. Reported the historian, Reuben Woodworth, "We have come to know this group as a warm, kind and friendly people. Their worshipping in our church has deepened an understanding between us despite a difference in religious concepts." Before they left the premises in the summer of 1967, "one of their members painted the exterior of Pioneer Chapel, a most appreciated act of kindness."

A year later, in April 1968, historian Jeanne Osburn reported, "Another outstanding ecumenical event took place in Burlingame Hall where the Passover was reenacted. This ceremony was conducted by Rabbi Leo Trepp of Napa. The event was sponsored by the Sonoma Valley Ministerial Association. The program was well attended and received."

During the summer months of 1969, the deacons approved the suggestion of the Ecumenical Committee to share the Sunday morning services with the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. A previous attempt to combine the parishes of Sonoma, Glen Ellen and Kenwood in 1931 had to be abandoned as being cumbersome to manage. But this collaboration with Presbyterians and Episcopalians proved quite successful and was repeated in the following summer.

Two attempts were made to unite with the Methodists. In 1931, members of both congregations voted on the prospect of a merger. Forms were sent out from the San Francisco offices of both churches and sent back there to be counted. The Congregationalists voted 32 to 2 in favor of the federation. But the idea was overwhelmingly defeated in the Methodist church.

Nevertheless, the idea arose again in 1949. Churches were seeing a decline in membership, a decline in revenues, and besides that, the Methodist church (then on First Street East) was declared to be infested with termites. All of this worked together to suggest that a union of the two denominations would be favorable. It was understood that this federation would be in effect

for three years, at the end of which time a decision would be made concerning any further arrangements.

The federated church was to be called the Pioneer United Church. The meeting place would be the Congregational Church, the pastor would be Olan Terrell, a Methodist.

A pall of silence falls over the records for these three years. Perhaps the Methodists have kept the records. Suffice it to say that the federation was discontinued at the end of the three-year period, to the mutual relief and satisfaction of both churches.

Back to the Future

In 1971, the First Congregational Church of Sonoma prepared to celebrate its 100th year since the Big Tree Sunday School graduated into a formal church on May 2. In commemoration, Winifred Verbeck wrote an excellent booklet on the history of the church, a good bit of which has found its way into this volume.

In an epilogue, she poses some deeply introspective questions that perhaps remain to be answered today. Some of her concerns were lodged in the education of the children. “One of the main reasons for building the wings (from the Sanctuary) was to provide classrooms for our church school. It is true that our church school has dwindled rapidly in recent months. Questions frequently asked these days are these: ‘What has happened to our church school?’ ‘Where are the children?’ We started as a Sunday school. Does this Centennial Year mark its end?”

“Perhaps the church school as it once was is coming to an end, not just in our church but in many churches. It has become a cliché to remark these days that the church must change to meet the needs of a changing world. Painful as the thought may be to many of us, we cannot deny that the cliché may be true. And if it is true, we can rest assured that the children will return, when we have found a way to meet their present needs.

“This Centennial year probably makes us even more sharply aware of the changes that are taking place in our church and in our community and in the world at large. We naturally have had our thoughts turned toward the past. In contemplating what from our present standpoint appears to be a far less complicated way of life, we have become somewhat wistful.

Perhaps we have almost reached the point where we wish we might walk away from it all, back to the sheltering Big Oak Tree where we could sit and sing together.

“We know we cannot go back to the Big Oak. And we really don’t want to. Uncertain as we are today as to what the future holds for the Church and for our church in particular, we know we must go ahead.”

True then, her words are even more on-the-mark today. This is still a time for “New Beginnings.”

The Next Quarter-Century

In the quarter century since Winifred Verbeck's 1971 concerned look to the future, our country and the world have raced into two- and one-half decades with alarming velocity. Values have changed throughout all levels of society. Morality, ethics and personal judgments have been battered by violence, racial conflicts and injustices.

Yet the Church in America has faced the challenges and has remained a strong force — has in some ways even grown. Here in Sonoma, the Congregational Church has seen two changes of pastor, whose visions have moved our church into new directions and given new dimensions to the interpretation of Christianity.

The strong core of longtime members has been augmented by new members, drawn in part by the warm feeling of friendliness and caring that permeates the congregation.

New programs have been installed that have created a binding force among members, as well as provided a means of outreach to the community.

For one, the Thrift Shop, operated by the Women's Fellowship, has been a boon to low-income families. Clothing and household objects donated by members have turned the Thrift Shop into a bargain center for shoppers who come on Thursdays (when volunteers serve as sales clerks) to clothe their families, furnish their kitchens and decorate their homes affordably.

And as a bonus, the Women's Fellowship has once again — as in all the years past — managed to turn the small profits of Thrift Shop sales into significant financial contributions to the church.

When general funds won't stretch ... count on the women!

Another fundraiser that has become a jolly ritual is the Independence Day metamorphosis of the back parking lot into a hot dog and popcorn bazaar. With the annual fireworks display playing itself out in the open fields beyond the church, it was a natural to cook up the dogs, pop the corn, twirl the cotton candy, and dispense cookies and cold drinks to the crowds waiting for sundown to bring on the show. Profitable ... but more than that, fun.

In 1991, church members found themselves signing up for another money-making activity. Here was a chance to be a part of the annual September Vintage Festival on the Sonoma Town Square. Selling pizza gave members another chance to work together, laugh together, be a part of one of Sonoma's famous events ... and contribute to the church's financial welfare.

In the summer of 1993, church members found there was a new pastor in the pulpit — a man with a strong Scottish accent. A cleverly arranged exchange put David McCracken in the pulpit of the Old West Kirk in Greenock, Scotland, for three months, while the Reverend James Fields left his country to preach in the Sonoma Congregational Church. It proved to be a completely energizing experience for both pastors, and for the two churches as well.

One of the social events of the church that has served to bring members closer to one another is the concept of Circles of Eight. Every four months, a new circle of eight people is drawn from

the hat, with the object of meeting together for an evening or afternoon. Usually this comes to a potluck meal in the home of one couple (though many more imaginative arrangements have been made). It has been an amazingly clever way for everyone to have close ties to members they might not have contact with.

The Burlingame room continued to be used as a daycare center, and it has been refreshing to see the tots walking hand-in-hand heading for the playground behind the church. For parents, it has been a godsend, a safe place for their children.

Other rooms of our building have offered a service to other worthy organizations — the Salvation Army, social services, and Twelve Step programs for the addicted.

One room, the Johnson room, has been totally redecorated and is now used by the church for meetings.

New ties with the Jewish community have been forged by allowing Congregation Shir Shalom to use our sanctuary for their worship services. A strong friendship with their congregants has resulted. Their worshipping in our church has deepened our understanding of their tenets and strengthens our firm belief in ecumenical bonds.

A Grand Year-Long Celebration

Looking forward to the next 125 years, the congregation set about rejoicing in the achievements of the pioneers who had brought the First Congregational Church of Sonoma through the first 125 years of dedicated service.

A committee was appointed to develop plans, and one of the first items on the agenda was the publication of an anniversary cookbook. This being a church of excellent cooks, the recipe collection box was soon filled with the best they had to offer.

Enthusiasm ran high, and even local restaurants and wineries joined in with their best. The result was an elegant cookbook, enhanced by intriguing historical notes from the church's past. The day of May 26 was set for the anniversary celebration, and a grand affair it was. The morning service included singing, a bagpiper, and a play depicting events and personalities from the church's history.

Everyone attending had brought a box lunch, imaginatively wrapped, and after services the colorful packages were auctioned off to the highest bidder. The day was fine, the lawns green, and a feeling of festivity prevailed.

After lunch there was more. JoAnne Connor Metzger, the music director, arranged a program of spirituals that set feet tapping. After that the young people of the Sunday School served cookies and ice cream. It was a wonderful celebration of a momentous event.

Ministers of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma

Curren Reichert 2016-present
Alan Claassen (interim) 2015-2016
Nancy Taylor 2006-2015
Ken Barnes 2004-(interim) 2005-2006
David E. McCracken 1984-2004
Deborah Streeter (interim) 1983-1984
Edie Shank (interim) 1983
Winthrop B. Yinger 1978-1983
Chauncy Blossom (interim) 1978
Harold W. Putney (interim) 1978
Harold W. Heckman 1965-1978
Walter Brock (assistant) 1964-1965
John Hoff 1960-1965
Baron McLean 1956-1959
Ernest Morrill 1952-1956
(in conference with Methodist church)
Olan A. Terrell (Methodist) 1949-1952
Marshall (interim, six months) 1949
Joseph O. Todd 1946-1949
E. W. Perry 1937-1946
R. C. Day 1934-1936
(associate minister) 1931-1934
Wesley Gordon (Larger Parish)
Frank Boren (senior minister) 1931-1934
Charles Mikkeken (supply) 1931
James E. Enman 1928-1931
Stewart Potter (assistant) 1925-1926
Isaac Cookman 1918-1927
Harry Pfeiffer (Fifer) 1918
Voern 1917
T. M. Price 1913-1916
A. B. Roberts 1911-1912
W. C. Day 1907-1911
C. C. Cragin 1905-1907
Francis Reid 1904-1905
C. C. Kirtland 1902-1904
Charles Millikan 1898-1902
C. E. Chase 1891-1898
David Reid 1888-1890
Harry H. Wykoff 1880-1888
F. B. Perkins 1877-1880
Michael Samson Crowell 1871-1877