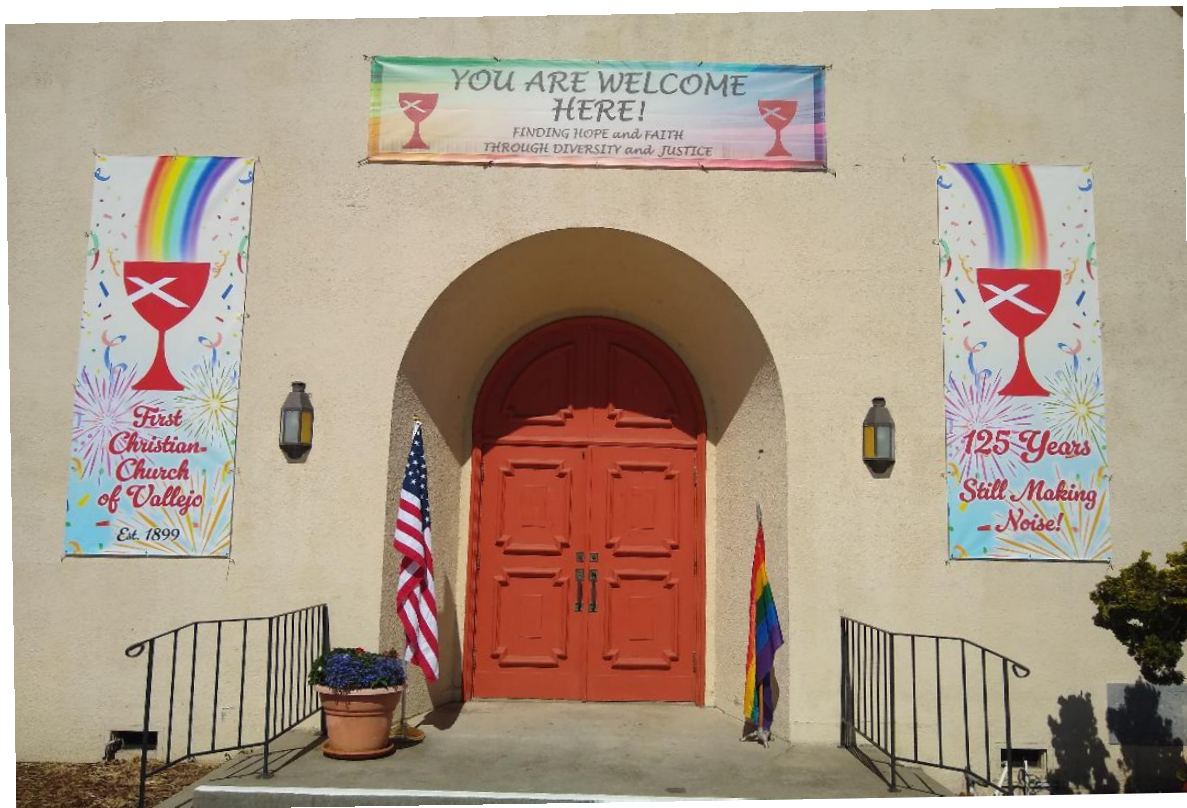


Looking Back... Living Forward

By Jon Mezzera



A 13-Month Series Celebrating Where We Have Been, Where We Are, And Where We Are Going - From The Pages of First Christian Church's Newsletter "The Living Word".

Founding of the Church

Next September we will celebrate our 125th anniversary! In fact, we will be celebrating throughout the upcoming year leading up to the big event in September. At our last Ministry Council meeting, we started to discuss multiple ideas for how that year-long celebration will look. The seeds have been planted on a number of events, so you will be hearing more about that going forward. We will also be tying our anniversary into certain aspects of our Church life including our upcoming Stewardship Campaign which you will hear more about from Suzanne Awalt in the upcoming weeks.

Another idea that arose from Suzanne was this new monthly feature here in The Living Word where we will look back on something from our 124 year history while looking ahead to the future. For the first one, I thought “why not go all the way back to the beginning?” While there had been a Disciples of Christ church in Vallejo as early as 1870, it did not last long. The seeds of our church were planted in May of 1899 when a group of Vallejo women created the Society of Christian Workers which would meet weekly throughout the summer. Those women, along with husbands and friends who would join them would ultimately enter into an agreement for the formal organization of our church. The Covenant between Disciples of Christ in Vallejo was entered into on September 3rd. Part of the Covenant reads:

...we agree to band ourselves together as a body of christians to be known and recognized as the church of Jesus Christ in Vallejo Cal.; and we further promise and agree to take the holy scriptures as our only rule of faith and practice in all things pertaining to life and godliness, and we further promise and agree that we will endeavor to conform our lives to the teachings of the scriptures in all things, keeping all the precepts, examples, and commands there-in, letting our “light shine” that others seeing our good works may glorify God in their bodies and spirits which are his...

A few things about this stand out to me. For one, it was a group of women who really started this church. Over the years, women have remained very strong leaders in the church - both the laity and the pastoral staff, and continue to do so. Looking at the Covenant itself, I feel that we continue to let our “light shine” as an example to all, through our garden, our work with Common Ground and Vallejo Together, the Global Holiday Faire, and in many other ways. Let us continue to do so as we look forward to the future.

For more about the formation of our church and anything about the first 100 years of our history, don’t forget to read “To Live, Thrive, and Survive” by Vince Mezzera (there are extra copies in the church - talk to Jeanne if you want to borrow one!).

I look forward to this section of the newsletter going forward for the next year. Remember, after 125 years, we are still making noise!

Virginia St. Church

I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.

First Christian Church of Vallejo existed for over 8 years before the first service was held at the first building which we could truly call our own. Our first church building located on Virginia Street was dedicated on November 17, 1907 with a day full of services and festivities. That section of Virginia St. is on a steep hill which was not paved at that time and could get very muddy in the wet winter. If getting to the building up a steep and often muddy hill wasn't hard enough, to get to the sanctuary on the second floor of the building (the first floor held several Sunday School classrooms and a parlor), churchgoers had to walk up 22 steps. It took a lot of dedication just to get to worship on Sundays, but nobody wanted to be late due to the unusual configuration of the sanctuary. People entered from the front of the sanctuary, in full view of the congregants in the pews - so anyone arriving late would be quite conspicuous!

In the 8 years before the Virginia St. church opened, the members of the church met in multiple different locations. At the time of the church building dedication, the membership was around 80 people. Before that building opened, these people were meeting in a tent on the lot after it had been purchased earlier that year. Before that, they met in at least four different social halls in downtown Vallejo. Before securing a deal to meet in the first of these halls - the Golden State Hall of the International Order of Odd Fellows for \$12 a month - the church met in the homes of various members of the congregation. Imagine so many locations of worship services for the new church over 8 years. It took an amazing amount of dedication to keep up the good work of the church before that permanent home was built.

Thinking about those early members of the church not having a permanent home over those years makes me think about what we went through during the Covid pandemic. Just as the early church met in members' homes, we were meeting in all of our own homes simultaneously through the magic of modern technology, aka Zoom. As tragic as the pandemic has been and as disruptive as it was on all of our lives, we were able to navigate it so much easier due to the technology that we had access to. The situation would have been so much worse if it happened just 10 years earlier. We meet on Zoom every Sunday for well over a year. To this day, we continue to offer a hybrid worship with some of us in person in the sanctuary and some of us at home on Zoom. This has allowed for members who have moved across the country to continue to be connected with us at First Christian Church, Vallejo. Our Admin Council, Ministry Council and Elders continue to mostly meet remotely, giving easier access for our members who might not be able to make it to the building that day.

This all raises the question of what is the church? It is not a building, although I am very grateful to have our building. We have met in homes, social halls, two church owned buildings and Zoom. Throughout it all, we have remained the church. And we will continue to be the church as we move into our 125th year.

Fighting Hunger

November is a month for giving thanks. For many of us Americans, that takes the form of a very large meal on the fourth Thursday of the month. We tend to overeat and indulge a little too much. It is also a time to remember those who are less fortunate and can't afford to overeat or indulge in a large feast. This is a time when we often give to soup kitchens and food pantries so that more people have the chance to partake in some type of Thanksgiving celebration. Thinking about all of this has made me think about the amazing history our church has in regards to feeding hungry people.

In the 1970s, an ecumenical mission effort called Lunchless Mondays began which lasted over 15 years. Once a month, the group would meet at one of the participating churches, skip lunch and donate the money that they would have spent on lunch to various hunger relief charities. There would be some type of program at these meetings like a guest speaker, a film or a discussion on important world hunger topics.

In the 1980s, the church started participating in the annual Vallejo CROP Walk - a 10k walk around town where the walkers acquired pledges per kilometer. In 1989, we raised nearly \$1000 alone for the CROP Walk. In 1994, we had 23 walkers participate including several from our church youth group. After a long hiatus, a little over 10 years ago FCC Vallejo under the leadership of Carl Cordes helped bring back the CROP Walk, now re-named the Vallejo Hunger Walk which raised money for both CROP as well as three local hunger relief agencies. The walk lasted several years before going on another hiatus.

Another long standing hunger effort of our church was the weekly produce table. This table was started by Louise and Lyston Johnson with produce from their own huge garden. As churchgoers left the sanctuary, they could make a donation to take home some of the amazing fruits, vegetables and flowers available that week. That money would be donated to various organizations including CROP, Heifer International and UNICEF. The produce table continued for many years, with other members donating produce when they could.

In the spirit of the Johnson's produce table, a church garden was started in 2009 after a suggestion from Fred Jones to his wife, our pastor Judith on what we could do with the open lawn area at the side of the sanctuary. Ultimately dedicated as the Johnson Garden Ranch, the initial effort did well at first, but unfortunately didn't last long. However, after partnering with Sustainable Solano to refurbish the garden, it was rededicated in 2020 and continues to thrive with the produce donated to local groups like The Sparrow Project and Food Faith Fridays.

Looking into the future, I see FCCV continuing to be a leading voice in fighting world hunger. We will continue financially supporting important organizations. We will continue to grow food for our hungry neighbors. There is already talk about the Hunger Walk returning in the spring. As we head to our 125th anniversary, this is a great legacy for us to celebrate and continue.

Alternative Faire

Bill and Mary Jacobs served as the Co-Pastors of First Christian Church, Vallejo for 6 years starting in 1978. One of the things that they emphasized during their time with us was an increased focus on Mission Action. That focus continued in the church with our next Pastor, Karen Stanley who started in 1985. 1986 would see the start of a good amount of growth in church attendance and membership, and an increased mission budget of \$5,935.

The focus on Mission Action was not limited to the budget. In the Fall of 86, the church held its first alternative Christmas faire, cleverly titled The Alternative Faire. That first Faire featured Christmas cards from Heifer International, Bibles from the American Bible Society, and hand-made items from all over the world through SERRV International. Church Members donated crafts to raise money for various mission organizations including CROP. Alternative giving was available. The first Alternative Faire raised \$724 and would become an annual event for several years through the early 90s as it grew over that time. While a success, the Faire was limited in scope, taking place for just our own members after church on a Sunday in November.

After a several year hiatus, Helen Mezzera felt that the Alternative Faire should return. She knew that our church was smaller than it had been when the Faire stopped, so she decided to reach out to friends at other churches to get them involved and the first ever Ecumenical Global Holiday Faire was held in November, 1998 (yup, the early GHFs were held in November, usually the Saturday after Thanksgiving until they eventually moved to the first Saturday of December where they remain to this day).

The feeling was that by getting other churches involved, by moving the event to Saturday, and opening it up to the public, we would be more successful which has proven to be true. Our records from the early Faire's are a bit spotty, but we know that by the second year, we had raised over \$2,000. By 2003, we had hit \$5,000. In 2006, we got over \$10,000 for the first time. We raised the most money so far in 2019 with \$15,631.22. Even during the pandemic when we were forced to have a Virtual Marketplace instead of an in person Faire, we still brought in over \$8,000 in 2020 and 2021. Our grand total raised in 25 years is over \$230,000!

In that time, we have raised money for over 55 organizations, including Heifer and SERRV which have been part of all 25 GHFs, and will be again on December 2nd for our upcoming 26th Faire. In addition to the crafts, alternative gifts and handmade items from around the world that were part of the early Faires, the GHF has evolved to include gift baskets, baked goods and a homemade chili, hot dog and lumpia lunch. Where we once used the stage for games for kids, we now use it for musicians to entertain the shoppers. We've had pictures with Santa. We tried a silent auction one year. We now even take credit cards! We still have the Virtual Marketplace on our website (globalholidayfaire.org) for those who can't come in person. Looking forward, it will be exciting to see how the Faire grows and changes. It is our largest Mission Action effort of the year and has been a huge success because of the tireless efforts of many of our members over the past 26 years.

Membership Cloth

In last month's Looking Back...Living Forward, I mentioned Bill and Mary Jacobs who served as the Co-Pastors of First Christian Church, Vallejo for 6 years starting in 1978. How was I to know that Bill and Mary would join us in our worship the day after that Living Word was published? During our prayer time, Mary mentioned our special membership communion tablecloth which is a tradition that started with the Jabobs. So, I figure this month would be a perfect time to look at the history of the membership cloth (in full honesty, I was 100% going to do this anyway because of Epiphany, but the timing was very serendipitous!).

Bill and Mary were fresh out of seminary and not yet ordained when they were called to be our pastors in the fall of 1978. They were then ordained in the church on January 7, 1979 (one day after Epiphany). As part of the planning for the ordination, members of the church were asked to donate a piece of material to be made into a cloth for the communion table for the ordination service, and it was given to the Jabobs afterwards. When they left the church in 1984, they gifted the cloth back to the church to be used and added onto over the years.

We are almost to the 45th anniversary of the first use of that tablecloth and it has grown a lot as every new member who has joined the church since then has been invited to donate their own cloth to the growing communal quilt. The tradition began to honor those new members and present their piece of material to the church at our annual Epiphany Dinner. For many years, that dinner actually took place on January 6th, regardless of the day of the week. Eventually, we moved the dinner to a lunch on Epiphany Sunday after worship, but the tradition of introducing our new members and having them present their pieces of material has continued.

The membership tablecloth is a beautiful patchwork cloth that weaves together the history of the membership of our church over these last 45 years! Plus, many of the original cloths from 1979 were donated by long-time members, meaning the connection to our past goes far beyond these last 45 years. Whenever we have it on display in the sanctuary, I know I don't just speak for myself when I say it is comforting to see. It is fun to go up and look at it after worship and try to remember which cloth came from which member. I know mine, do you remember yours? I also know that there are some long-time members who never got around to donating a piece of material. If that's you, it is never too late!

In the future, I look forward to seeing the membership cloth continue to grow. Every new member who joins us in the future will be joining a congregation that is almost 125 years old! We have connections with each other, and with all who came before us. That connection is symbolized by the membership communion tablecloth and reminds us all of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

Ecumenical Efforts

Did you know that our Sunday morning worship services started meeting at 10:30 am (instead of 11) in September of 1974? Do you know why we made this change? The answer is that for the first time in our history, we had formed an agreement to allow another church to meet in our building. Originally, First Christian Church, Vallejo and Liberty Baptist agreed to a 6 month trial to see how the partnership would go. That 6 months is now going on nearly 50 years! Over the years, we have had ministers “swap” places with Liberty Baptist’s ministers on special Sundays, held joint worship services, and invited them to dine with us at our Thanksgiving Dinner. They were also an early partner in the Global Holiday Faire. But, perhaps we haven’t been as strong in that partnership in the last few years? How will it be in the future?

The agreement with Liberty Baptist was not the first major ecumenical effort of FCCV, but the 1970s was definitely a time of expansion in these types of relationships, spearheaded by then Pastor Gary Weatherly. In 1969, a Catholic priest was invited to preach at FCCV for the first time. In 1970, we formed a partnership for a combined Sunday School with Community Congregational Church of Benicia. In 1971, the church joined the newly formed Vallejo chapter of the Consultation of Church Union which included 9 denominations. The purpose of the COCU according to Weatherly was to “reach across barriers which have separated us for hundreds of years.” In a past Looking Back... Living Forward, you read about the ecumenical Lunch-less Mondays program that started in 1976. These are just some examples of the ecumenical spirit of the 1970s, which has continued to this day.

Liberty Baptist isn’t alone among churches which have worshiped in our sanctuary. In 1983, the Filipino-American United Church of Christ started meeting in our building, an arrangement that continued until 1996 when the UCC church got a building of its own. Starting in the early 2000s, under the leadership of Pastor Judith Jones, we again began relationships with churches to use our building starting with St. Victor’s Community Catholic Church which formed a strong partnership with us. While St. Victor’s closed a few years ago, Iglesia Apostolica de la Fe en Christo Jesus also used our sanctuary for the last several years until very recently. Another congregation which used our upstairs chapel has come and gone in that time too.

In addition to forming partnerships with these churches to use our building, our ecumenical efforts have continued in many forms including the Global Holiday Faire, our partnership with other churches in the Vallejo Hunger Walk, and our membership in Common Ground with several local non-profit organizations including many churches. Over the years, we have donated food to charities run by at least four other Vallejo churches. These and other efforts will continue into the future. As we look forward, what will these relationships look like? Will other congregations use our sanctuary? For one year, we formed “Churches of the Cure”, a team with one other church at the Vallejo/Benicia Relay for Life. Will we try to do that again? What other partnerships might we form? Whatever the answer is to these questions, I know ecumenism will remain a major part of who we are.

Women's History

March is Women's History Month, so let's look at some First Christian Church, Vallejo's Women's History. We have a strong history of women both in participation and leadership in the church. As noted in the first edition of Looking Back...Living Forward, the roots of our church started at a meeting of about a dozen women in May 1899. Various women's groups were part of the church from the start including the Christian Women's Board of Missions and the Ladies Aid Society which remained active through the early 1920s. A female member of the church, Alice Sponsler served as a member of the board in 1907! Despite all of this, women were still largely second class members within the church for many decades. That was the reality of church life in the early 1900s. However, strong women continued to contribute to the church, forming a new group, Ecclesia Women in 1934. This group met regularly for social events, educational programs, and mission efforts. Ecclesia Women were responsible for much of the church's hospitality and fund raising which was so successful that women remained heavily involved in fundraising efforts moving forward, including for the eventual new building fund in the 1940s.

A landmark date in FCCV's history was June 2, 1959. That was the day that our church elected its first two women elders. The idea of having women elders had been brought up as early as 1955, but there were members of the leadership who weren't quite ready for that to happen. However, when the slate of officers was presented to the church at the congregational meeting in '59, Jean Bradley and Louise Johnson were nominated from the floor as new elders. They were voted in with the rest of the slate of officers. We are celebrating 65 years of women elders in our church! Two years later, Bess Ely, the widow of former pastor Marcellus Ely, was named Elder Emeritus, despite never officially serving as an elder. This goes to show how strongly women were involved in church leadership, even if they didn't or couldn't hold official positions in the church. Since then, many women have served as elders, moderators and other board positions, worship leaders, and other various important roles within the life of FCCV.

In 1978, we called our first woman pastor, Mary Jacobs along with her husband Bill who served as co-pastors for 6 years. Our next settled pastor was Karen Stanley, our first solo woman pastor. Karen was also a single mom, another amazing milestone. Karen served until 1994 and oversaw our church becoming Open & Affirming. She was followed by another husband and wife co-pastorate in Greg and Karen Guy, who were followed by the 11 year pastorate of Judith Jones, who was followed by the 10 year pastorate of Christy Newton. Christy was also our first openly gay pastor. We have also had women interims in that time — Susan Lincoln, Cheri Pierre and our current interim Nicki Arnold-Swindle. In fact, since the Jacobs started in '78, our church has not had a solo male settled pastor. I know many people who are still uncomfortable in 2024 with the thought of a woman minister or priest, despite the fact that the first evangelists to witness and preach the good news of Jesus' resurrection in the Bible were women. I'm glad to have grown up in a church where those types of views have long been rejected.

A Dark Time

First Christian Church, Vallejo has had its ups and downs. So far, Looking Back...Living Forward has definitely focused on the ups. For instance, we've looked at the founding of the church, moving into our first building, the history of the Global Holiday Faire, and important ecumenical efforts we've undertaken over the years. However, we can't just pretend that the history of our church is all rainbows and butterflies. There have been storms along the way.

A major storm started brewing in 1918 during the pastorate of William B. Phillips. Phillips' time as pastor started off well with him overseeing much needed improvements to the fairly new church building. However, trouble started within his first year as pastor, as his headstrong push to make changes was met with resistance from some members of the church board. There were disagreements about what to do about the shrinking attendance which started in August 1918. Phillips made attempts to load the board with members who agreed with him about the correct course of action to increase membership at that time which led to further conflict.

Things grew more heated the following summer with disagreements over the pastor's compensation. A board meeting ended abruptly when the president wasn't happy with the direction of the meeting and called it into adjournment. By the fall, there were members of the church who were pushing Phillips to resign. Unfortunately, there isn't a record of more specific problems which led to this issue. But, charges were brought up against Phillips to the State Missionary Board dealing with conduct unbecoming a minister. The church was actually split between those who supported Phillips and those who wanted him gone. Eventually, the old, anti-Phillips board was ousted in favor of a pro-Phillips one. The old board continued to meet, refusing to recognize the legal authority of the new one.

Eventually, the original board regained control and held a meeting to oust Phillips which passed unanimously (due to his supporters refusing to attend the meeting). A month later, another meeting was held in which twelve members were voted in violation of the church's bylaws and were ousted from their membership. Phillips refused to leave the church building, and his splinter group held that they were legally in charge of the church. Phillips and seven others were even arrested for trespassing. Phillips ultimately started holding services of his own in one of the social halls which was used by FCCV before the first building opened. The problems continued for several months. There is far too much to the story to include, so I encourage you to read the whole story in chapter 9 of "To Live, Strive, and Survive."

I often get discouraged at the size of our church. I was sad when Christy resigned, and I knew it would be a lot of work to get ready to find a new pastor. I get frustrated at times with certain problems that we face today. I'm guessing that most of you feel the same from time to time. But, this church has been through so much over the years. I wanted to include a story like this in this monthly article to remind us that we've been through the storm before. We got through it then, and we will get through it again. The rainbows and butterflies will be back next month!

The Youth

One of the surprising things that has shaped our church over 125 years has been Sunday School. At multiple times in our history, the need for Sunday School has been more important than the need for worship services. One of the boons of moving into our first building was the ability to host more students at Sunday School. By 1913, there were 128 students enrolled. There was a shortage of both space and teachers. So, the church had to work to solve the problem and by 1916, there were finally enough teachers to meet the demands of the students.

In World War II, the church's membership grew as Mare Island became paramount to the Navy, and the city's population exploded. The old building wasn't big enough, particularly for Sunday School. By November 1942, we reached an all time high in average Sunday School attendance. I'll be exploring this new building effort next month, but the need for more classroom space was a big part of the desire for a new building. That same need pushed the church to complete the final wing of the building 16 years later. While trying to get a new building, FCC stepped up to face a large community need by helping to found a new Disciples Church in Vallejo, The Chabot Community Church which had its first service on Easter, 1943. The need for this church grew out of the booming population plus gas rationing which meant residents from the growing outskirts of town could not drive downtown to attend services. More importantly, there were no church schools, and the Chabot Church started as a school before becoming a church.

As the congregation's numbers have gone up and down, so too has the youth involvement. At times, it grew so substantially that there wasn't enough space in the designated classrooms for the students. Classes were held in the Fellowship Hall, in the hallway, throughout the sanctuary including in the balcony, and in the Pastor's parsonage! On the other end of the spectrum, we've had times when all the children shared one class because the numbers were so low.

In addition to Sunday School attendance, there have been times when the church has had a strong Youth Group (grades 6-12). A long period of Youth Group success was from the mid-80s through 97. Under the leadership of Youth Group Coordinator Helen Mezzera, and Pastor Karen Stanley, that group put on the first of several annual Youth Sundays in March 1987. This was not merely a service with some youth participation. The Youth Group planned and put on the entire service. During this time, the group grew with members encouraged to invite friends from outside the church. Under the leadership of Carl Cordes, this practice continued and the Youth Group took on more Mission efforts, including trips to All Peoples Community Center in LA in 93 and 94. Members attended regional camps and participated in the Regional Youth Council. After this boom, there was a slow period with practically no youth. When the church started to grow with younger kids in attendance, Pastor Judith Jones started a group called Just Kidding. That went well for a time before sizzling out. More recently, we had another period with more children, and Children's Time once again became part of our service. We don't have a lot of kids at the moment. But this has happened before, as those numbers have fluctuated. Hopefully soon, we will see another time of growth for young families and a rejuvenation of the Sunday School which has been such a major part of this church's history.

Indiana St. Church

As of publication of this newsletter, we are a few days away from the 80th anniversary of the dedication of our new (and current) building on June 4, 1944. The story of how we managed to build during World War II is a long one which can be read in full in the church history book. But, we will look at it in brief here. The need for a new building was felt as far back as 1915. The honeymoon with the still new Virginia St. building was short lived. By 1925, the church was starting to outgrow the space. A Building Fund Committee was created to raise money for an eventual move in May, 1926. Over the next decade, the desire for a new building went up and down. Some lots were even identified for purchase, but those purchases never occurred for various reasons. Our location was first scouted in 1940 when the desire to build a new site rose in the congregation once again. The lot was purchased by the end of the year for \$2,000.

Money for the construction was already in a fund, but not nearly enough. More funds were procured by selling the Virginia St. church to the Church of Christ for \$4,000, but not until 1943. The other funds for building came from donations (from church members as well as from the community at large), fund raisers, loans and help from the region. As funds were being raised, an architect was hired in September, 1943. The bid for the construction was \$49,675.

The big obstacle to building was the War. The War Production Board declined the church's petition to build in February, 1943. Pastor David Kratz was instrumental in lobbying for the importance of the new building in order to obtain the needed materials. The growing population of Vallejo during the Mare Island boom, along with gas rationing, had made it difficult to meet the needs of the community at Virginia St. But, a patriotic argument from Kratz to serve the community well in the time of war helped to get the clearance from the Board. Then the naval commandant on Mare Island endorsed the new building in June of 43. In order to get approval, the church agreed to a stripped down plan to save money and materials. The southern wing would have to wait another 16 years, and a bell tower that was planned never happened. With these and other concessions, the church finally got permission to build in September.

The church broke ground on the new site on November, 14, 1943. The cornerstone was laid on January 23, 1944. While the hope was to open by Easter, the building was finished in early June without pews! The church borrowed 300 chairs. Rev. Kratz and his family donated the stained glass window at the front of the sanctuary. Moving from Virginia St. was a huge job, but it got done. On June 4th, a day-long celebration occurred, with many services and ceremonies.

The education wing was dedicated in 1960. The old social hall upstairs became what we call the Fish Room and the office next to it. The old kitchen upstairs became two bathrooms. The old nursery became the new kitchen. The new wing had a nursery and several classrooms. Since then, we've done many things to improve the building most notably, Mini-Miracle Day in 2009. A capital campaign culminated in 2020 which raised \$50,000 to greatly improve the building. But, the building still needs so much work. A 125th Future Fund has been set up to meet the current building needs. And we will meet those needs just like we've met so many needs for a new building, a new wing, and new improvements over the years.

Open & Affirming

We just passed a big anniversary in the history of First Christian Church, Vallejo. On June 26, 1994, the church voted to become an Open & Affirming congregation. This meeting and vote was the culmination of several months of study and discussion on the issue following the leadership of Pastor Karen Stanley. The process included small group meetings and guest speakers. At the time, we were the 27th Disciple-affiliated organization (including churches, campus ministry groups and other organizations) to become Open & Affirming. We were the first church in Vallejo to openly welcome members of the gay and lesbian community. In fact, I remember not that long ago when a Lutheran church in town became just the second Open & Affirming Vallejo Church. We were definitely, ahead of a lot of Christians on this issue.

At that meeting in 1994, our Open & Affirming Statement was adopted. You can read the statement in its entirety in the history book or on our website (on the website, you can see a special video on the anniversary starring Ted & Glenda!). The main point of the statement was that the congregation would welcome anyone into full membership in the church regardless of age, gender, race, class, family configuration, sexual orientation and medical condition.

What I find interesting about the vote is that it wasn't unanimous. The motion to adopt the statement and declare ourselves to be Open & Affirming passed 27-9 with 2 abstentions. While I am proud to have grown up in a church that was so progressive, this was still a divisive issue in 1994 even in our welcoming church. It was not an easy decision. If it had been, we wouldn't have taken months to study and discuss the topic. We also did very little if anything to actually reach out to the LGBTQ+ community for several years after that big decision in 1994. So, how committed were we to the idea of being that welcoming to "those" people? But, it was an important start to becoming the truly welcoming church that we would become over time, and continue to aspire to be.

Rev. Judith Jones would start doing some evangelism to the LGBTQ+ community early in her time with us as our pastor. It started with a letter to the editor that she sent to the Vallejo Times-Herald. A few gay couples read that letter and started coming to the church in the early 2000s. That part of our congregation grew in large part due to a few of them reaching out to the gay community in Vallejo to spread the word that we were a welcoming church to all people. In the last 20 years, we have had many gay members as well as transgender members. We've had a member transition after joining our church with a brave letter sent out to all of the congregation saying that we assumed she was a woman, but he is a man. We've had multiple gay couples married in our church. With Rev. Christy Newton, we called our first openly gay pastor. I can say with great certainty that that would not have happened 30 years ago even after voting to become Open & Affirming. Becoming Open & Affirming isn't really something that just happened on June 26, 1994. It has been a 30 year process. We aren't that far removed from our then Minister-In-Training Godfrey McIntyre leading a class on gender identity to continue our education on these important issues. I'm sure as we move into the future, we will continue to grow and work on being truly open and welcoming to all of God's children.

Shalom Congregation

Being a congregation that supports the importance of peace in our world didn't start in the 1980s, but we officially became a Shalom Congregation on October 3, 1982 after the encouragement of pastors Bill and Mary Jacobs. As our pastors, the Jacobs increased an already impressive focus on mission action programs within the church. For instance, under their leadership, our mission action budget grew, we continued the Lunchless Mondays program, we increased our support for Meals on Wheels, and we helped start the Christian Help Center, an emergency housing shelter which still operates today.

The last of those came through the leadership of the church's Shalom Task Force which had formed when we became a Shalom Congregation. That decision came after Mary Jacobs brought the concept of Shalom Congregations to the church for study and consideration. A task force was formed and concluded that the church already engaged in "acts of Shalom" even if we didn't use that phrase. To be a Shalom Congregation meant understanding the meaning of God's Shalom, elevating the importance of Shalom in worship, sharing God's love around the world, and being connected to other believers locally and globally. After a year, the church voted unanimously to continue as a Shalom Congregation and started meeting with other regional Disciples and UCC churches to encourage them to become part of the program as well. It was during this time that the Christian Help Center was founded and the Shalom Task Force took on the leadership of helping prepare meals at the Center, and spent over \$3000 in 1985 to outfit the kitchen there with a stove, oven and sink. Something that sounds very familiar to us in the church today in the way that many of us wear multiple hats, the Shalom Task Force and the Mission Action group shared several members and worked together closely.

In 1987, the idea of being a Shalom Congregation had grown somewhat stale. We weren't being nearly as active as we had been two years earlier. But, the church did vote to continue as a Shalom Congregation as a way of doing ministry and mission, even if it was no longer a specific program of the church. The term faded out over the next few years.

However, our commitment to shalom and peace didn't stop there. Members of the church were among the founders of the Solano Peace & Justice coalition which was founded as a peaceful response to the horrors of 9/11. The group met in the church building for several years. SPJC with help from other organizations including the church got a Peace Pole planted at the Vallejo Ferry Terminal. Many years later, our church rejuvenated our courtyard and turned it into a Peace Garden including our very own Peace Pole which proclaims in multiple languages "May Peace Prevail on Earth." A monthly Peace Service began in the mid-2000's, on a Monday night to give worshipers a chance to meet and focus on issues of peace and justice. This lasted a few years. Just last year, at the request of Helen Mezzer (who also started the Peace Service and was part of many if not all of the above described efforts), we started a monthly Pause for Peace during our worship services as a time to share and meditate on the importance of bringing about God's peace in our lifetime. These are just a few examples of our long history of being about God's Shalom, even if we didn't always call it that.

100th Anniversary

Much of the information that I've used for these articles has come from "To Live, Thrive, and Survive" by Vince Mezzera which was written as part of our 100th anniversary celebration in 1999. Here we are, 25 years later, about to have another big anniversary.

For the 100th anniversary, we had a year-long celebration which started with a block party in September 1998. Over the course of the year, the church had a kitchen shower in February, a concert in May, and an ice cream social in July. Another part of the year's celebration was the birth of The Global Holiday Faire, which was a return of the Alternative Fair which had gone on hiatus for several years. As opposed to the original fair, The GHF was open to the public and ecumenical as we were joined by Liberty Baptist and Holy Family Catholic Church. I love the fact that what started out as a part of our 100th anniversary celebration is still going strong 25 years later. All of these events (including the Faire) had a fundraising aspect to help pay for the big two-day event which culminated the celebration. Another fundraiser was the creation of a commemorative glass Christmas ornament which many of us still put on our trees every year.

On September 25, 1999, the church hosted a banquet for current and former members, and past ministers of the church. Rev. C. William Nichols, a former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) gave the main address at the banquet. The next day, at our Sunday Worship on the 26th, then Regional Minister Chuck Blaisell delivered the sermon. The service was followed by a lunch to conclude the weekend and the year. The 100th celebration was started during the Pastorate of Revs. Greg & Karen Guy and continued with Pastor Rev. Judith Jones. Along with the Pastors, the year-long event was a success due to the leadership of the committee which was made up of Carl & Jeanne Cordes, Glenda Goode, Louise Johnson, Murray Mattice, and Vince Mezzera.

Our current 125th committee has been made up of Suzanne Awalt, Carl & Jeanne Cordes (some things never change!), Shannon Gomez, John & Beth Grose, Helen Mezzera, Jon & Allison Mezzera, Sara Steenhouse, with help from Interim Pastor Nicki Arnold-Swindle. Like 25 years ago, we have had a series of events throughout the year such as the Vallejo Hunger Walk, National Night Out, and the Even Jesus Was An Immigrant symposium. We also have had fundraisers like a yard sale and our ongoing raffle (don't forget to get your tickets if you haven't already!). And we will also culminate with a two-day celebration on September 21st and 22nd which will feature the current General Minister and President, Terri Hord Owens.

We have benefited by the work that happened by the 100th Anniversary committee all those years ago. As I said above, I could not have done these 13 articles looking back on our history without the work of my brother's book. I know that committee had looked back on previous celebrations for inspiration. We continue to build on the legacy of our church. We continue the work that was started by a small group of dedicated women who met on May 4, 1899 to start the process of establishing what would become the First Christian Church of Vallejo on September 3.

