

Celebrating 125 Years in Eureka

By Jae Emenhiser

Presbyterians in Eureka celebrate the church's 125th anniversary.

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church of Eureka. It was June 30, 1890, when pioneer missionary, the Rev. J. S. McDonald, and fifty-four Presbyterians from the Congregational Church, met at the Eureka Business College at Second and E Streets to establish a new church in town. Three years later, women of the congregation started Ladies Aid, an organization that continues to meet today, making hand-sewn items to benefit others.

By 1896 church membership increased to 153 and the congregation moved from its first home in Brett Hall at Fifth and E Streets to 939 F Street, the site now occupied by St. Innocent's Orthodox Church. Rather than provide a pay raise for the pastor, the Session voted to give him an additional seventy-five cents per month to cover the water bill at his residence south of the church.

On March 10, 1909, the Rev. R. A. Crichton of Healdsburg was called as minister. Among other civic activities, he helped start the Good Government League of Eureka, which dealt with a number of community problems, including alcohol abuse. Ever since 1896, when some young folks in the church organized a temperance committee, Eureka Presbyterians had been concerned with the profusion of saloons in town—there were some fifty-nine and counting.

In 1929, the church bought the city block surrounded by 14th and 15th and I and J Streets for \$10,000, and, despite the Great Depression, managed to build a sanctuary, a social hall, and office space by 1931. A year later Rev. Crichton retired after twenty-three years in Eureka.

The building has been expanded and remodeled several times. The church built a manse at the corner of J and 15th Streets in 1954. Later a tower was constructed to house an electronic carillon announcing Sunday services. Most recently, a million dollar renovation project, designed by local architect David Pierce and built by the Pierson Company, refurbished the entire building, enlarging the social hall to provide gymnasium space for youth and adding an elevator for persons with disabilities.

From 1959 to 1980, the Reverend James Brown led the church and strengthened its involvement in community affairs, such as beginning a special program for persons with developmental disabilities, and local radio broadcasts of his sermons. Working with two Humboldt County Superior Court judges, The Hon. William Ferroggiaro and The Hon. Charles Thomas, a member



The First Presbyterian Church of Eureka, 2015

of the church, Rev. Brown regularly visited prisoners in the county jail, helped start Humboldt Connections to serve youth at risk, and also Teen Court to divert first-time youth offenders from the juvenile system to a restorative justice program. Further, an International Scholarship Fund was established that, for example, aided a local youth from a Cambodian refugee family to improve his English, to attend College of the Redwoods and a technical school, and to obtain his United States citizenship.

During the 1980s the church helped support Humboldt Habitat for Humanity. It raised money to purchase property and buy materials to build and remodel modest homes in Eureka, Samoa, and McKinleyville, and church members helped Habitat recipients assume the responsibilities of home ownership.

In 1990 Marilyn and Blair Groven, who for many years ran the church's Tall Trees Nursery School, volunteered to teach English at Keisen Jokguen High School for Girls in Tokyo. They helped establish an ongoing homestay program, where girls from Tokyo and boys



Ladies Aid and Missionary Society, 1893



Current members for over fifty years. Standing: Ray & Mary (Martin) Jerland, Sharalee Wrigley, Shirley & Bruce Miner, Kenneth Nelson, Ron Turner, Debbie Hartman. Seated: Alfred & Mary Jane Ratjen, Jean Shimasaki, Helen Stromberg, Jan Turner, Beverly Morris, Irene Crichton, and Judy Hartman. Not shown: Gladys Sinquefield, Walter Shimasaki, and Betty Osborne.

and girls from Eureka exchange homes for a month in alternate summers.

For the past twenty-one years the Rev. Dr. Daniel Price has been the church's minister. With his Ph.D. work at the University of Aberdeen and his previous pastorate in Zurich, Dr. Price contributes a global perspective. Additionally, he has helped bring Betty Chinn and the Eureka Police Department together to provide food and safety for homeless persons and is currently president of the Betty Kwan Chinn Homeless Foundation. For years the church assisted Chinn by making its kitchen available to prepare sandwiches, and by helping her obtain funds from Presbytery of the Redwoods to help purchase a vehicle equipped to deliver food for the hungry. Other mission activities include contributing funds to purchase medical supplies for a hospital in Zimbabwe and farm animals for families in the developing world through Heifer Project International.

Numerous musicians have played the church organ and piano, led the sanctuary choir, and performed as soloists and in small ensembles. In 1912 the church purchased a pipe organ from the Kimball Co. of Chicago and installed it at the F Street site. This means that it must have been transported by rail to San Francisco and on to Eureka by ship. In 1989 Timothy Carter of Fortuna completely refurbished the organ and continues to give it tender care. Among those who have devoted their talents directing the sanctuary choir in recent decades have been Don Moehnke, Lee Barlow, Val Phillips, Sue Mullen, and Steve Lewis.

In 1986 a new sound was heard in the sanctuary. Under the direction of Mary Martin Jerland from 1987 to 2003, the Presby Ringers grew to ten members, and with a gift from Helen Larson of an additional octave of hand bells and a set of chimes, it has performed at Sunday services and special community events, including an ordination of a Roman Catholic priest.

As in most mainline churches, membership at Eureka Presbyterian leveled off in the mid-1970s. With fewer young couples at church, and fewer babies and toddlers in the nursery, membership declined in the early 1990s. Today most members are over fifty years of age. Many have moved away to be nearer their grown children and grandchildren.

To address this situation, Dr. Price initiated a popular 9:00 a.m. contemporary worship service in 1999. A renewed emphasis on youth and children's programs, and youth work projects, such as pouring concrete for a school building in Mexico during spring break, has attracted more young folks.

With many changes in leadership, programs, and facilities over the past 125 years, the First Presbyterian Church of Eureka continues to serve local and global communities, and to work for justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

HH

SOURCES

Jack Silvey, "Eureka Presbyterians Celebrate Centennial," *Humboldt Historian*, May-June 1990.

Wallace and Cloyce Martin, "The History of the First Presbyterian Church, 1890-1960."

Interviews with Timothy Carter, Irene Crichton, Mary Martin Jerland, Shirley Miner (Clerk of the Council), The Rev. Dr. Dan Price, and Carolyn Thomas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jae Emenhiser was a professor of American government and culture for fifty years, conducting research and teaching at the University of Redlands, Utah State University, Humboldt State University, University of Saigon, Colgate University, the Utah Legislature, Ramstein Air Base, Congressional Research Service, National University of Ireland, Galway, and Université de Mons.