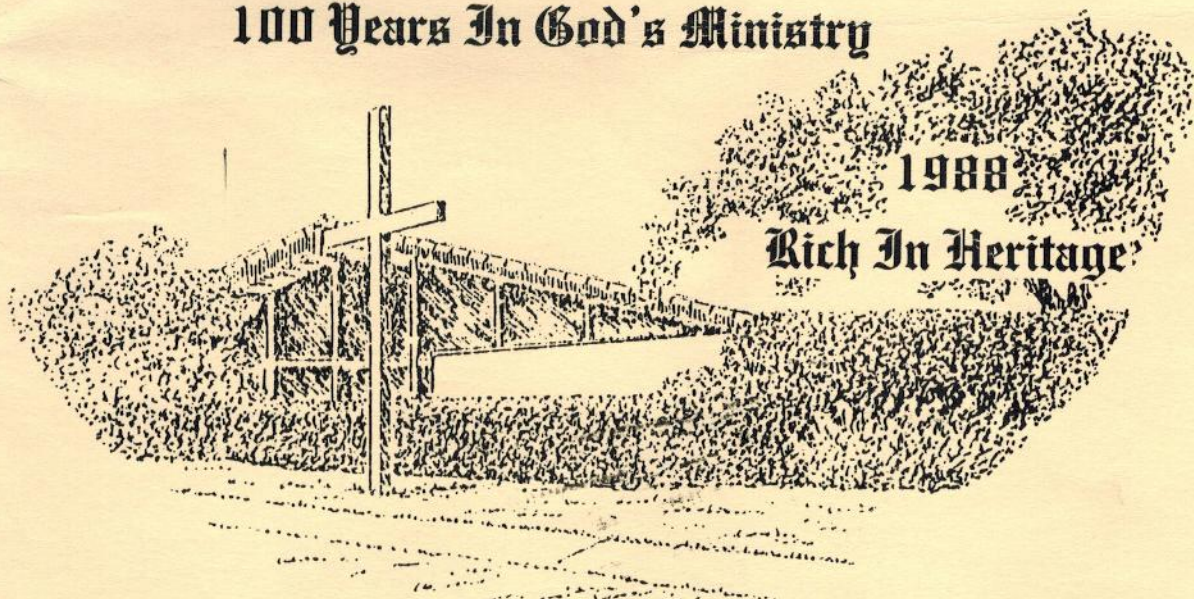


1888

Rich In Faith

100 Years In God's Ministry



1988

Rich In Heritage

Chatsworth United Methodist Church

A Brief History

A Story of the  
United Methodist Church  
Chatsworth, California

1888

1988

The first American family to homestead in the Chatsworth area came in 1870. Ann and Neils Johnson brought their family and carved a home from the rocky Santa Susanna Mountains in that year.

It was at their ranch home that Ann held Sunday School for her children and study for those few children from neighboring ranches as well. Church was held when an itinerant Baptist Circuit Rider came through the area. On one of his visits Ann was baptised and remained a Baptist all her life. Besides Ann's ranch, the church was sometimes held in the warm summer months on the area which later became Chatsworth Lake Reservoir, a facility of Los Angeles Dept. of Water and Power. The huge oak trees, that still grow there today, made a shady canopy for the worshipers.

As more people moved into the area, the Santa Susanna Grammar School was built to accommodate the children who walked to the school from their ranches. Some of those pioneers were the Iversons, Hills, Williams, and Grays. Minnie Hill Palmer was born on the homestead in 1886 and lived there most of her life. Nelson Gray and family moved here about 1895 and bought land, vast acres from Topanga Canyon Blvd., west to the county line. It was Gray who gave the land on which the Santa Susanna Grammar School was built and named for the surrounding mountains. It was a county school and a small minimum attendance had to be maintained. Ann used to go with her horse and buggy and round up the children from the various ranches if there were not enough in attendance on a given day to maintain the quota. Ann must have been proud when her daughter Leonora later taught at this school.

Ann and Neils had a two-story home built on their ranch with a swimming pool near the front of the home. Often church was held in this home, and after the Grays came and built a 13 room, two-story home at Lassen and Farralone, church was held at their home as well. Nelson Gray donated the land from his extensive properties at the corner of Devonshire and Topanga Canyon Boulevards, the same site where the Chatsworth Park Elementary School still stands today. A one room school was built, and shortly a second room was added. Mr. Gray had a bell cast in Philadelphia and shipped around the horn in the late 1890's. It hung in the belfry to call children to school. It also called those pioneer folk to worship, for church service was held in the school for many years.

The folks of this community wanted to have more consistent religious leadership than that provided by the laity and the occasional Baptist Circuit Rider. At that time the MacClay School of Religion was in San Fernando. This school became the seminary at the Methodist University of Southern California. Later it was transferred again and is now the Methodist Seminary at Claremont. Anyway, the pioneer folks appealed to the Methodist Conference to appoint a minister to found a Methodist Church in Chatsworth. That was at the Conference in September 1888. They appointed Reverend E.C. Elliot as the first pastor.

The various student ministers, most of whom were young men, were guests at the potluck dinners following Sunday Service, usually held at the Johnson or Gray homes. Often the men stayed overnight and drove the horse and buggy back to school on Monday morning. At least one young minister, for the record, fell in love with Edith Gray and so they were married: Reverend and Mrs. Harry McFarland.

Gray's youngest daughter <sup>2nd Helen Youngest</sup> Gladys tells us about the meeting held in the community when concerned citizens felt there should be a house of worship in Chatsworth. A great deal of discussion took place, but Gray remained unusually quiet until they decided it must be built. But where would they obtain the land? It was then that Gray leaned forward and offered the acre of land halfway between the school and town center (which at that time was near Lassen and Topanga Canyon Blvd.). The address was 10051 Topanga Canyon Blvd.

And so it was then the building which is now the oldest Protestant Church building in the San Fernando Valley was erected in 1903. It was built by volunteer labor and financed by volunteers as well. Virginia Watson, Chatsworth Historian, has sought verification that the distinguished architect Nuzum had designed the building, but has been unable to find the fact behind the rumor. The foundation was of large blocks of native sandstone, quarried northwest of the church property. It came from the same quarry that sent tons and tons of rock to form the core of the Los Angeles breakwater at San Pedro. The cornerstone block is on display at the present United Methodist Church. The stone had a simple hollow carved in one side. In it was placed a list of those in attendance at the ground breaking, Sunday School and church papers and a small Bible the adults persuaded a young girl to donate. Over this was a sheet of tin and the church erected over all. The church was of frame construction and New England Victorian type of architecture. There was one large room for the church services and two smaller rooms at the back. These rooms could be thrown open to accommodate an overflow crowd. The census record for 1900 placed the population of Chatsworth

as 23! The small rooms were used for Sunday School. There was a traditional wood burning stove at the back of the room to provide heat in the cold winters when the north wind blew. Small cardboard fans with wooden handles (advertising the closest mortuary in San Fernando) were the only air conditioning in the summer.

Stained glass windows were placed in the church donated by organizations and individuals. They were of diamond paned cathedral glass in amber color with a round stained glass design in the upper half of each window. One had the Epworth League emblem with the words of Wesley "Look Up and Lift Up." Another window from the Sunday School had a Bible in the stained glass portion. The chandeliers hung on long black chains and were lovely lalique glass approximately 14 inches long. The pulpit for the church was placed on a raised dais and was a small simple table about 24 inches square. The original pulpit Bible was rescued by the late Harold Johnson (grandson of Ann Johnson) when it had been trashed. Someone had donated a new one. Both the Bible and the pulpit may be seen at the present United Methodist Church.

After a number of years the bell was removed from the school and hung in the bell tower of the church. On a quiet Sunday morning, in a quiet small town, the sound rang out to call worshipers at 10:45 for the 11:00 a.m. service. The young people coveted the opportunity to ring the bell by pulling at the long rope and were at service early in case an adult would give over the privilege to them. Ringing had to be done very carefully, for if too much strength was brought to the task, the bell turned over and the rope came off the track. Then the men had to get out the tall ladder and climb into the bell tower and get everything back in place. The bell also rang each New Year's Eve to welcome the year that everyone hoped would be a good one.

This church was financed in a variety of ways. First were the gifts from members such as the Johnsons and Grays. The women played a crucial role; did a bit of quilting to earn money. I have seen one such quilt still in the Gray family. The people in the church and town signed their names around the design, Mrs. Gray embroidered their signatures, and the women put the quilt together. It was sold at an auction and Nelson Gray purchased it with the highest bid of \$25.00, which by the way, was just double the price paid for each of his extensive acres purchased from Kelly Johnson's dad in the late 1800's. The ladies had box socials, chicken dinners, ice cream socials, barbecues, and really helped finance that church. Later, a mortgage was placed on the building; a loan from Charles Wilden Johnson (a son of Ann Johnson), and it was always a great worry to meet the payment we owed.

To my knowledge, we never did. He just kept reducing the payment until it met the amount the people had been able to raise that year. Mary Shadwick Swartz remembers one special barbecue that was held to raise money. A deep pit was dug on the church grounds, and in it was placed the heifer someone had donated and a hog that someone else had contributed for an overnight barbecuing. The women contributed the beans, corn and other food, and the entire community came for the event. A "goodly" sum was raised.

In the early 1900's, the Chatsworth Methodist Episcopal Church was partially supported by the Conference, and nearly all the pastors were students at MacClay or USC. When a pastor and family stayed long enough, the church would seek to give them a raise. But, of course, the money went to the Conference to pay back a portion of the support they had been providing and never did filter back to the pastor.

When Reverend and Mrs. Howard Ahlf were appointed to Chatsworth in 1920, they were newlyweds of six weeks. They stayed for two years, and it was during their time that White Oak Hall was built. Reverend Ahlf enlisted in the help of fellow students at USC to work in the construction. The structure had a hall large enough to accommodate about 100 people, a stage, and meeting room that doubled as a dressing room for productions, and a kitchen. It was used for all kinds of church and community events.

Newlyweds were appointed again in 1927. Reverend and Mrs. Kemp Winkler stayed for two years as well. It was during their time the parsonage was built, a pretty little two bedroom Spanish style bungalow. The Winkler's parents supplied a major portion of the financing. The Ladies Aid work earned a major portion of the remaining money needed. The town was still a farming community with a population of approximately 500; that is, if you counted those living at the Twin Lakes and Chatsworth Lake Manor developments as well.

When Reverend Charles and Martha Bacon were assigned this charge in the 30's, he had a difficult task to keep the church afloat and in service to the needy in that great depression. The Bacons contributed greatly to the growth of the church. It was really ecumenical with the two sons of the only Jewish family in town attending; five or six Catholic young people were there each week, and the gamut of Protestant or Evangelical faiths represented, especially in the youth programs. The wife of the only registered member of the Communist Party in Chatsworth was an active member.

The church was the social center for the youth, and the Bacons took them to camp at Arroyo Grande; Martha did a lot of the cooking. The counselor for the Epworth League was Katherine Johnson (Kelly, her husband, was her very able assistant). They had many good times at their home with the youth candy making, popcorn popping, taffy pulls, rousing sings with Katherine at the piano or Julio Lomardi with his accordian. And wonderful beach trips, weiner bakes at Castle Rock (now called Malibu), and Grunion hunts that to my knowledge never produced a grunion but were lots of fun anyway. We did a lot of folk games in those days as folk "dancing" was frowned upon, but it looked the same to me whatever the name. At Katherine and Kelly's home, at the conclusion of the socials, the youth "cleaned up", girls did the dishes, handed them to boys to dry, who tossed them to a boy standing beside the cupboard, who put them away. These were often her hand-painted or Bavarian China - now that's dedication to youth!

It was during these hard times that the church/community soup kitchen was established for the hungry; those needy within the community as well as those just passing through "ridin' the rails." Farmers donated produce to use, the meat market with enough meat to make it tasty, and the ladies made it all into very good soup. The hobos who had a camp up near the second railroad tunnel often came down for this before drifting on to another town.

A camp for vagrant young men was established in the hills north of us. They did county flood control and road work, fought hillside fires, and were paid their room and board and a small pittance more. When they earned enough to pay their fare, the county shipped them back home. The Epworth League provided religious services each Sunday morning at the camp.

When the "knights of the road" stopped at the parsonage for a handout, Martha Bacon would always feed them, but she had them split a little wood for the meal. It was often this wood that provided the heat for that stove at the back of the church. And during this period, Martha Bacon had a little boy born to the family that now numbered four children.

When Reverend Marvin Davis, wife Mary Lou and tiny daughter Janey came to this church, we were all so pleased and proud too. Marvin was a local boy from a Van Nuys church, and it seemed so special to have him with us. They too had a son born during their time here.

When Reverend and Mrs. Stone were here in the 40's, a Building Fund was started, for the facilities had long been outgrown by the church family. But during World War II years, building could not take place. It was during the time of the Stones that John Abbot was so tragically murdered, and Mrs. Abbot donated the baptismal font in his memory. Reverend Stone selected the beautiful marble and had it created. Our Methodist babies (and adults) have been baptized from the font for over four decades; turning great sadness into joy.

Our first woman pastor was appointed along these years; Reverend Helen Toner. She had to leave soon after, but left us a legacy of her devotional book "When Lights Burn Low."

Reverend Millard Wolfe and his wife Marian were appointed in the 50's. They arrived to find the Official Board had been planning to dissolve the congregation, but no one had told the District Superintendent what they had been planning. It was a big surprise to the Wolfes. They soon had us turned around with a PLAN. Marian proposed to the women that we use our talents and make "A Dollar Grow." Some baked cakes, some babysat, some gave luncheons or dinners. However they made their dollars grow, it gave new heart to all, but trouble came again! Because Marian's asthma bothered her so much in this climate, they moved to Arizona in the middle of their year.

The Conference could not provide us with a pastor, so God provided. Dr. Harold Hayward and his wife Loucille came to minister to us. He had been a chaplain at the Veteran's Hospital near us and was willing to be our pastor as long as he could live in his own home in Granada Hills. It was during this period we grew by the proverbial "leaps and bounds." In order to provide more room, the plant was enlarged. Louise Arnold Lounge was added to link White Oak Hall and the church. The church room was reoriented to the west creating a long nave; a choir loft was built; an office and restrooms added; the two Sunday School rooms were linked together; the "Katherine Johnson Youth Chapel" was created to honor Katherine's many years of service, and to the fellows who were in the Armed Forces during World War II. Paul Ruff arranged for a gift of a small home, and it was relocated on the rear of the property, and with Paul doing a great deal of the work it was soon usable. All of these rooms were filled with Sunday School children as well as the rooms in the parsonage and the parsonage garage. Two large services were held each Sunday morning, and a somewhat smaller service at 8:00 a.m. During this time of change, the Johnson family donated the beautiful stained glass window (at the back of the present sanctuary) to honor the memory of Charles Wilden Johnson, their father and grandfather.

About this time, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were sent to minister to us. They moved to their ranch at the extension of Lassen Street where many of their TV movies were made. Dale taught the Adult Sunday School class when she could - always one Sunday a month for sure. Juanita Murray was the long time president of the class.

Sometime previous to this period, Lloyd Fellows and other laymen in the Valley formed the San Fernando Valley Union. Each member of the West Valley Methodist Churches contributed 25 cents. Later, this amount was budgeted by these same churches. The money was used to assist in the creation of new churches in the area. Later, this group became the Santa Barbara District Union for Church Extension. Hundreds of new people were pouring into the Valley. Chatsworth was able to retain its rural atmosphere and orchards because large housing tracts could not be built this far west.

All this tremendous growth made a very difficult decision necessary. Should we move to a larger plot of land and build our church, or should we remain at the same site and move the parsonage elsewhere and create more parking and restructure some of the buildings. The final decision was not reached without many a noisy argument, but gradually the largest percentage of the membership favored relocating. The Methodist Conference at this time required the purchase of a five acre plot when building or relocating a church plant. John Spinks purchased the Pioneer Church and the acre of land (it was he who owned the surrounding land, and he wanted to develop a shopping center), and a five acre plot was located at the foot of Stoney Point complete with a small cottage and surrounding orange groves.

When the decision was made to move, the church could not get financing. Walter Ericson knew the President of Glendale Federal Savings & Loan, and they finally provided the loan we needed. We had the money that had been accumulating in the Building Fund, the money paid by Spinks for the land, and now the mortgage money. Work could move ahead, but the members also brought their tithe money and other gifts to the project. Eileen Janess recalls (she was a member of the Finance Committee then, as she has been these many years until the present) that an important step was taken then. It was decided to tithe the money people gave to us for our building project and contribute it to help establish new churches in this rapidly growing valley. Chuck Janess was Lay Leader at this time and for the next decade.



Reverend Wesley Neil and wife Wanita brought leadership through this period. He taught us an appreciation of our African brothers and sisters, and many gifts were sent to that country to help in the ministry.

Reverend Bob Fehlman and his wife Francis was our pastor at the actual time of moving to the new site. The cottage located on Topanga Canyon Blvd. (then called Santa Susanna Ave.) was relocated to face Andora Ave. on the east side of the five acres. The Youth Chapel and offices were built on the south side of the acreage and the education buildings on the north. However, the northwest portion was reserved for the sanctuary we all knew would be needed in the near future! It was a thrill for all to watch these changes taking place. Finally, the ground breaking ceremonies were held, and we did move in with much to be done. As each new project was completed, it brought a real sense of satisfaction.

At this time, the Chatsworth Historical Society was founded to save the old Pioneer Church building. Katherine Johnson wrote the letter to the newly appointed Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board which resulted in the naming of the building as Los Angeles Historical Monument #14. Katherine had played a leading role in the church since she came here in the 1920's as the bride of Kelly Johnson. The church was moved after the site was cleared at Oakwood Memorial Park, practically on the spot where those first foundation stones were quarried back in 1903. Charles Janess and Virginia Watson were co-founders of the Historical Society with Katherine, and Chuck was the founding president. Dale Evans gave the first gift toward the project to honor the memory of their daughter Debbie, and hosted our thank you reception for the many folks who had helped with the project. Bill and Frank Schepler chaired the actual moving and rehabilitation. Lila Schepler was president of the Society at this period. After raising \$20,000 with the help of the community, the building was rehabilitated and presented to the Oakwood Memorial Park Association who pledged to keep the building in perpetuity for the town. They have done that, and are now renting it to an Anglican Catholic Church for their services.

Later, Dr. Richard Brooks and wife Ruth were appointed, and he brought great leadership and many changes. First he added the new Social Hall which was a much needed facility. It was Richard and L. Murray who designed and created the altar rail as well. The shade shutters on each side of the sanctuary were his design. He added a large living room and utility area for the parsonage. The membership grew and the church thrived. It was during these years that many new churches were built in our town: Catholic, Nazarene, Four Square, Baptist, Lutheran, Congregational and others. We now have 14 in all.

Reverend Stanley Creighton and Lucille came to minister to us in these next two years. They gave new impetus in training teachers for the Sunday School and Vacation Bible School which in turn drew many children into the program. Reverend Creighton was active in the community with the Coordinating Council and other civic organizations linking the town and church programs for teenagers.

Reverend Ray Firth and Isobel stayed two years with us. He had just completed building the large Methodist Church in Westchester. A new program was instituted under their leadership; small "cells" or "groups" of families met together, shared dinners, attended special events and became well acquainted sharing in the life of the church. It was designed to draw the new members into a church family so they could more easily become an integral part of the church.

During the stay of Reverend Robert Bjorkland and his wife Margaret, the old parsonage was rented out as Bjorklands purchased their own home in Chatsworth. During this period, the church sponsored a Cuban family and helped them begin a new life; they later returned to the Florida area. Donna Boldon was chairperson of the Social Concerns Committee when we sponsored two families from Vietnam. The Le family (pronounced Lay) of seven members, and later the Nguyen (pronounced Nin) family of eight. Both are now well established in Los Angeles County. We rejoiced with the Bjorklands when Bob received his Doctorate while assigned to Chatsworth.

When Reverend Rex Wignall and Barbara were assigned here, it was the first time young children had lived in the parsonage for many years, and it was a joy to have them and the vitality they brought. During this period, the old parsonage was completely rebuilt. The contractor was Charles Johnson, great grandson of Ann Johnson, though it was with volunteer labor that the task was primarily accomplished. The membership not only did sanding, painting and concrete work, but loaned the financing as well. It was an ingenious idea of many small loans of \$1000 to \$3000 that made it feasible to create the beautiful home it is today. Rex led us in many creative services of worship: Worldwide communion with the kinds of bread used in different countries; Maundy Thursday dinner and service modeled after the Last Supper; sermons at Sunday morning worship where he played the role of various disciples and preached from that person's viewpoint.

Reverend Sandy Lidell was a local girl raised in the Chatsworth Church. She moved away, was married and had a family, and then became a minister.

When her husband transferred to this area, she came to minister to us on a part-time basis. She worked with the young people through clubs and teaching, with young married people in social clubs as well, as they sought guidance in raising their children, deepening their faith and in service to their church. We rejoiced with Sandy when she received her appointment as Associate Pastor at Camarillo Methodist.

Our present minister, Reverend Jerry Steele, wife Elaine and daughter Missy came to us three years ago. He has led us to rediscover our talents and abilities, strengthened our membership roll, and has led us in seeking a sound financial base. During this period, we have dedicated a new organ for the sanctuary, and we are now embarked on a project of capital improvements. First, the improvement of lighting on the grounds; secondly, the replacement of aged septic lines; and soon to come, air conditioning and heating for the sanctuary, offices and social hall.

Reverend Dot Graham serves as part-time Associate Pastor, and part-time at the Santa Barbara District Office (now located at our education building). We look forward to her time of preaching with us, her children's sermons, her uplifting prayers and praise. We know her excellent ministry is being shared throughout the Santa Barbara District and is a great blessing. We are fortunate to have a Registered Lay Preacher in our church - Nellie Smith. It is a great joy when she gives her leadership to preaching or program.

In this Centennial Year, it is interesting to look back so briefly on our pioneer roots. We give thanks to God for Ann Johnson, Nelson Gray, and the other pioneers who gave us our early beginnings. We give thanks to God for the "Endless Line of Splendor" - those pastors and families who gave of their lives and service to create what is now the United Methodist Church of Chatsworth. We remember with joy and gratitude the men, women and youth who gave themselves in laymen's leadership through these past 100 years.

We also remember that John Wesley said "The World is My Parish," as we now dedicate our lives in service to God's children and the work of telling the Good News to all people.

Lila Swartz Schepler  
September 25, 1988

## FORMER PASTORS

1888	J.C. Elliott	1925	Geo. Bourgaize
1890	E.S. Robertson	1926	H.J. Smith
1891	W.H. Marks	1927	Kemp Winkler
1892	Adam Bland	1929	J.B. Soules
1893	A.W. Fields	1931	C.T. Harrison
1895	J.H. Ainsworth	1932	W.H.D. Hornaday
1896	F.W. Warrington	1934	(Feb.) H. Preston
1902	S. Gascoigne		Chas. M. Bacon
1904	Charles H. Scott	1938	J. Marvin Davis
1905	O.W. Cook	1940	Geo. W. Richnire
1906	A.E. Chase	1942	M.D. Stone
1907	E.D. Guild	1946	Thos. W. Walker
1908	F.M. Moody	1947	Helen L. Toner
1909	C.D. Husted	1948	(Mar.) S.R. Smith Jr.
1910	J.H. Henry	1950	Millard W. Wolfe
1911	J.H. Henry	1953	Harold Hayward
	H. Goodsell	1958	J. Wesley Neil
1912	W.V. Smith	1960	Robt. B. Fehlman
1914	Jas. Blackledge	1963	Richard L. Brooks
1915	W.V. Smith	1968	Stanley Creighton
1916	F.D. Mather	1970	Ray H. Firth
1917	Hugh Pomeroy	1972	David M. Peters
1918	S.A. Thompson		Morris Fisher
1919	J.L. Muchmore	1974	Robt. C. Bjorklund
1920	Howard Ahlf	1980	Rex S. Wignall
1923	H.D. Shepherd	1985	Jerry Steele
1924	Alex Lyall		