

# San Francisco's First Church Is Still Restless After 125 Years

Accent the Congregation:  
Old First Presbyterian Church  
San Francisco, California

by Lincoln Richardson

Quick arithmetic gives away the origins of Old First Church in San Francisco, which is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. . . . Yes, a congregation of forty-niners.

San Francisco is still, in significant part, a city of the restless and rootless seeking good fortune; Old First is still, in part, a congregation of the restless, together with those who have taken root.

The Christmas celebration at Old First does not conclude with the service the Sunday before Christmas or the night before Christmas, but on Christmas Day, when friends and members of the church crowd the social hall to share the holiday meal with others. The church is engaged in a rewarding ministry, and, much of the time, a precarious one.

It is a ministry maintained in large part by those who have settled. Celebrating the present anniversary is a small handful of members who have seen a full half of the church's history, who remember the large Gothic sanctuary that was destroyed by fire on April 20, 1906—yes, by the fire that followed the earthquake.

Just so is the history of the church coextensive with the history of the city, and more, because the church is not only as old as the city, but it was the church that, in a number of impressive ways, provided the institutions that made the city a city.

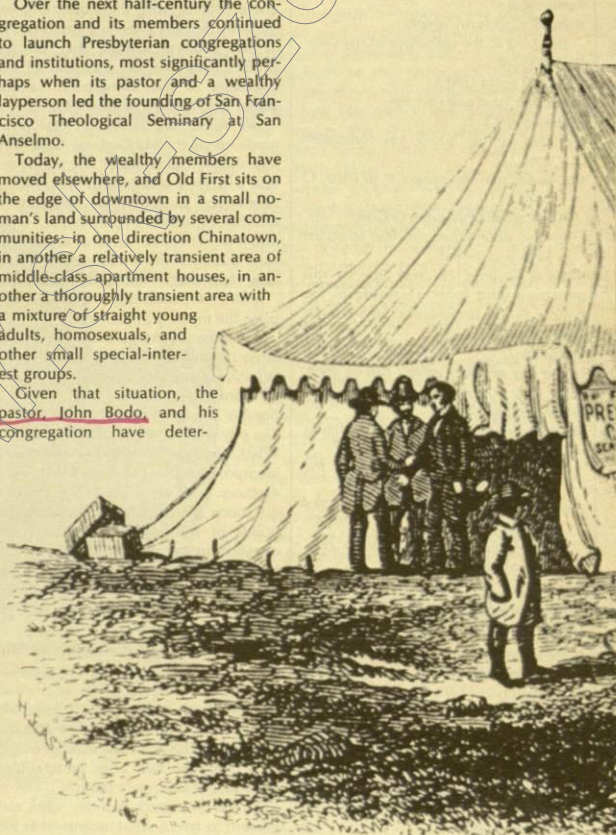
Its first pastor founded California's first public school. Its second pastor organized the College of California across the bay in Berkeley; it soon became the University of California. The church founded the city's YMCA, and also helped to establish the world-

famous social agency, Cameron House.

Over the next half-century the congregation and its members continued to launch Presbyterian congregations and institutions, most significantly perhaps when its pastor and a wealthy layperson led the founding of San Francisco Theological Seminary at San Anselmo.

Today, the wealthy members have moved elsewhere, and Old First sits on the edge of downtown in a small no-man's land surrounded by several communities: in one direction Chinatown, in another a relatively transient area of middle-class apartment houses, in another a thoroughly transient area with a mixture of straight young adults, homosexuals, and other small special-interest groups.

Given that situation, the pastor John Bodo and his congregation have deter-



Old First Presbyterian Church traces its origin to the time of the erection of this tent.

Here California's first Protestant congregation worshiped during the fall and summer of 1849 in what is now the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown.

mined to define the church's situation theologically rather than sociologically, to proclaim and celebrate the gospel so that people coming any distance from any direction can participate in the good news.

The result is a thoroughly diverse congregation that carries on a program of ministry that can be shared by any of the diverse communities that surround it: tutoring in English for Hong Kong and Taiwan

immigrants, a weekly senior citizen activity program, a weekly young adult program, and, most ambitiously, a program in the performing arts.

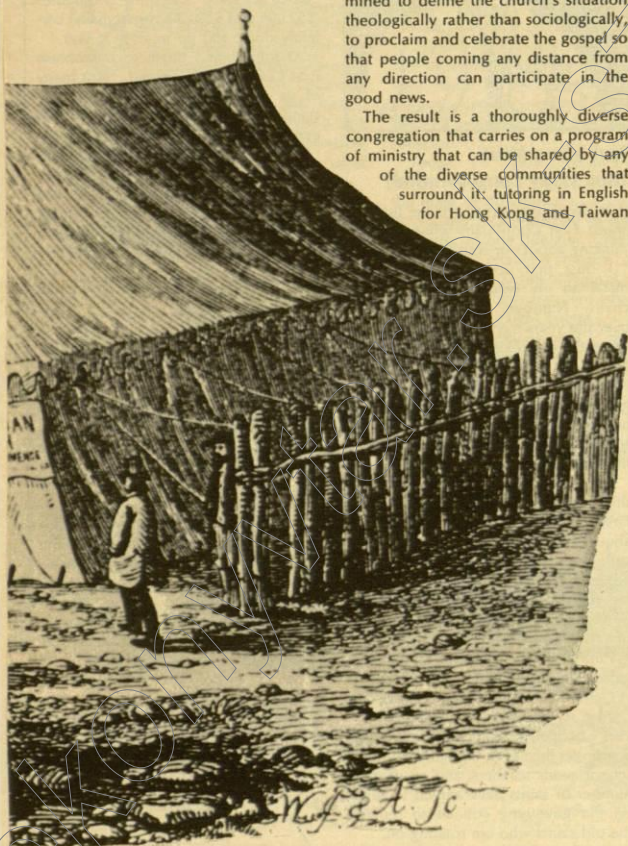
The fruits of that program are evident in the anniversary celebration now under way. The church and its friends are hearing the Oakland Symphony Chamber Chorus, pianist Sari Biro, baritone James Tippey, cellist Laszlo Varga, and mezzo Donna Petersen, all of whom have donated their services.

The primary purpose of the performing arts program is to provide young artists with audiences and to provide people of modest means with a chance to go to live performances. Tens of thousands of people have been to dance and music programs at Old First in the past three years, all for a dollar a head or a free-will offering.

As reckoned on the East Coast, much less in Pastor Bodo's native Budapest, 125 years is not a very long time. But in the American city of San Francisco, that span stands on the brink of eternity, for that is the only history.

This congregation, the oldest in California, does well, then, to celebrate and appreciate a witness that has never ceased, even though witness in the heart of this secular, restless city has never been simple, easy, or assured. It can celebrate, too, its discovery that its best assurance is in facing its difficult task, for in declining to be distracted from that task, Old First Church has found the vitality to allow it to anticipate more decades, or centuries, of ministry. A.D.

Lincoln Richardson was formerly associate editor of *Presbyterian Life*. Currently he is engaged in independent writing for West Coast magazines.



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