



Bethany Congregational Church

Loving God, Loving People

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BETHANY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

In 1907, Mrs. Harriet Butler of the First Congregational Church started an English night school in a Chinese Mission for resident Japanese. From this humble beginning emerged what was to become the Japanese Congregational Church, with Rev. Tsutomu Kawata as the first pastor in 1911. His early ministry was characterized by strict discipline and puritanical decrees, which alienated the membership, until a visiting evangelist from Japan, Rev. Kanamori, gave him prayerful and helpful advice. This resulted in a completely changed attitude and heart on the part of the pastor, which enabled him to win back many to the church. On March 16, 1916, however, while interceding in a quarrel, Rev. Kawata was fatally shot; thus becoming a martyr and the “seed of the church.”

The Rev. Takeshi Banno succeeded Rev. Kawata. Through his leadership, the Japanese Congregational Church was erected in 1917 on East Canon Perdido Street (across from the main Post Office and where a partial cement-rock wall still stands!). Successive pastors and laity carried on the ministry. The church was self-supporting until the 1041 Evacuation Order caused all persons of Japanese ancestry to be sent to inland relocation camps.

During the postwar years, a small group of returning Santa Barbarans struggled to pick up the pieces. In 1948, the Rev. Masayoshi Ohmura was called from Riverside, and a former missionary to Japan, Miss Frances Davidson, helped organize the Sunday School. Professor Vasey of Westmont College assisted in organizing a young people’s group out of which came the nucleus of our American-born Nisei (2nd generation) leadership.

When Rev. Ohmura retired in 1956, the Rev. George Takaya was called from the Japanese Free Methodist Conference to be our first Nisei English-speaking pastor. The work grew and the Japanese Congregational Church was re-named the Bethany Congregational Church in 1958.

Following Rev. Takaya’s return to his Conference in 1960, Dr. Paul Waterhouse, fondly known as “Papa-San,” served as interim pastor from 1961-1963. At this time, the downtown property was sold and our Hope Avenue property was purchased.

The Rev. Roy Takaya came to Santa Barbara following “Papa-San’s” retirement, and it was under his able leadership and vision (1963-1966) that our present sanctuary and fellowship hall were completed in 1966.

The Rev. Hisao Kayama, who was from Japan, was called in 1966. He was ordained at Bethany in 1967, and returned to Japan in 1968.

In 1969, the Rev. Willis Carrico, who had spent many years as a missionary in Japan, was called. He led the church out of the United Church of Christ because of its liberal theological stance.

In 1970, Rev. Dan Brannen, son of missionaries to Japan, came directly out of seminary to serve Bethany as its pastor. Rev. Brannen served until April, 1976.

Rev. Roy Takaya returned as an interim pastor from 1977-1978, helping to consolidate and prepare the church in Christ's love for its next pastor.

In January, 1978, Rev. Dan Hodgson came to Bethany shortly after finishing seminary, and for several years, Bethany enjoyed a time of growth and common purpose. He served until October, 1984.

The Rev. Koichi Hirano came to Bethany in 1984, a few months prior to Rev. Hodgson's leaving, to serve as an Associate Pastor with the specific responsibility of ministering to the Japanese community. He was appointed Senior Pastor after Rev. Hodgson left. The church grew and prospered under his ministry. An active ministry to Japan also developed under his leadership. In 1990, Rev. Hirano left Bethany to return to Japan with the full support of the congregation, who recognized his call to Japan.

Rev. Nobuo Watanabe, who traveled each weekend to Bethany to assist in serving the Japanese-speaking congregation, was called as Assistant Pastor in 1989. He began his ministry to the Japanese congregation after Rev. Hirano returned to Japan.

Rev. Bryan Jeffery Leech served as interim pastor during 1989-1991. His preaching ministry was greatly appreciated. During this period, Rev. Nobuo Watanabe was ordained.

In 1991, Rev. Timothy Stelling was called to serve the English-speaking congregation. He was active in ministering to the Asian-American Christian Fellowship at the UCSB campus. Rev. Stelling left in 1992.

The Rev. Nobuo Watanabe was named Pastor-In-Charge in 1993, serving both the English and Japanese-speaking congregations, and became Senior Pastor in 1993. With his bi-lingual skills, Rev. Watanabe ably ministered and served Bethany until August, 1999.

In 2000, the Rev. Takeshi Shiraishi was called to serve as the Japanese-speaking pastor. During his time at Bethany, he also provided shepherding ministry to the English-speaking congregation while guest speakers provided the pulpit ministry through 2001. Rev. Takeshi Shiraishi was called back to ministry in Japan in 2004.

In November, 2001, Pastor David Graham was called to serve as Senior Pastor. He served for five years before leaving in March, 2007, to serve as Senior Pastor in Garner, Iowa.

In 2004, Pastor Shozo Yamamoto came to Bethany to serve as the part-time Japanese-speaking pastor, while serving in the same position at the J.A.C.C. church in Camarillo. Pastor Yamamoto and his family returned to Japan in June, 2013.

Pastor Anthony Chaboya began his ministry as Senior Pastor at Bethany in April, 2008. Pastor Anthony has been instrumental in bringing positive and needed change, both physical and spiritual, to Bethany. The physical can be seen in the upgraded infrastructure. The spiritual is “unseen” but felt in our worship and spiritual growth. Pastor Anthony will be leaving Bethany in April, 2016, to begin a home-group based ministry.