California's Oldest Protestant Congregation

Among the many accomplishments of the Methodist people in Santa Clara Valley is their history as the first early-American Protestant congregation in California. How that dignity is dated-- and *which* Methodist church it properly belongs-- is the trickier question.

The beginnings of methodism in the Valley belongs to the Imus-Aram emigrant party which left Missouri, May 1846. Twenty-three wagons trekked across the Great Plains and arid, mountainous West, arriving at Mission Santa Clara within 5-1/2 months.

The exact arrival date of the Imus-Aram company was Oct. 16th, 1846. But other reckonings cite early-November. Nonetheless, Margaret Hecox's first-hand account-- in her *Overland Trail Memoirs*-- provides the earliest and most reliable date.

Mrs. Hecox was the wife of the Rev. Adna Hecox who cared for the Santa Clara emigrants during their sufferings in the out-buildings (some occupancies were mere stables) of the crumbling Mission for the winter, Oct. 1846-Feb. 1847.

By 1847 Springtime, home construction began, and more settlers were arriving. Among the new emigrants that came at the end of summer of 1847 was the Rev. Elihu Anthony, who came with his family, joined with 157 Americans. His first sermon, and keeping regular fellowship, thereafter, was Nov. 1, 1847.

Rev. Anthony took over Mr. Campbell's evangelical charity. Campbell belonged to Cpt. Aram's original group, and he can be credited for holding the Methodist community together after the Hecox family left for Soquel, continuing the social meetings Hecox began.

So, there are two dates: the oldest is the initial arrival, or sheltering, of Aram's caravan at the Spanish Mission, Oct. 16th, 1846, which included the Campbell and Hecox families.

The second is the 1847 arrival of the Anthonys, marked by Elihu's Nov. 1 sermon, picking up the earlier labor of Campbell and Hecox, but extending it from Santa Clara to San Jose. Meanwhile, Hecox and others who departed for Monterey Bay made meetings there.

Differences over the date likely have to do with mixing up Anthony's Nov. 1st sermon with Aram's Oct. 16th sheltering.

Anyhow, considering such movements, there's at least three claims to the dignity of the 'first' Protestant (and Methodist) church in California— i.e., the churches in Santa Cruz (founded in part by Hecox), San Jose (much to do with Rev. Anthony), & Santa Clara (a good measure kept by Campbell).

Unfortunately, two years ago, the First San Jose Church basically closed due to COVID losses, leaving Santa Cruz and Santa Clara UMC the last actual progenitors.

But Santa Clara, by dint of the colonial Mission, is the very site where Aram's company sheltered, preceding the removal of certain families to Santa Cruz. Nonetheless, the bulk of each party belongs to Cpt. Aram's original emigrant caravan, as reported by Mrs. Hecox. So, historical identification between Santa Clara and Santa Cruz UMC can be generous. Both churches can claim the 1846 date.

We will discuss the abovementioned founding personalities more, as well as the first decade of their gospel labors, in coming articles. –

Charles Bartlett

"Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can."-- John Wesley

Santa Clara UMC Mission Statement
Love God, Love Others, Serve the Lord