

San Jose First UMC - Our story

The church was founded in 1847.

San Jose First has a long history of reaching out into the neighborhood. This church was the first Methodist church in San Jose – people left this church to start other local churches.

In Feb. 1869, the KKK burned the church down after Chinese children were allowed to participate in Sunday school classes for three weeks.

When Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps, members of the church held property and belongings in trust for them. It's my understanding the church stored some belongings in the basement.

After the 1991 fire, the church members made the decision, more than once, to stay on the corner of 5th and Santa Clara Streets to continue being a downtown church ministering to the neighborhood.

The members of the church fought the insurance company for several years to get an appropriate settlement so there would be funds to rebuild the building and fund the future of the church.

Members also fought with the City of San Jose to be able to rebuild the church on the corner after the city decided to relocate City Hall across the street.

In the early 2000s, the church welcomed a Vietnamese church into the building.

The church created Community Services, Inc. to provide space for use by programs offering services to the homeless and other disadvantaged persons or families. It included a jobs program, mailboxes for homeless people, a clothes closet, meals, and much more.

In 2005, the church moved to Horace Mann Elementary School for worship until there was a new building.

After substantial renovation work was done, the church dedicated the Vintage Tower to the neighborhood as housing for low-income tenants.

All this time, the church never gave up on the idea of returning to the corner to minister to the neighborhood.

During the process that brought us into this building, the building committee was mindful we didn't know who we were building this building for. We expected there was a good chance we were building it for people we didn't know. People we hadn't met. With that in mind, we did our best to keep spaces "undesignated" and flexible.

In 2010, Jonathan joined our staff. His primary focus was starting a young adult ministry. He had only limited success because we didn't have many young adults for him to start with and he wasn't able to find ways to grow the group. And in 2011, Susan

Crawford's health crisis hit. Jonathan took on other ministry tasks to support Jim as he cared for Susan.

In 2012, Jim retired.

In 2012, Shinya was appointed to the church. His initial study of the neighborhood showed the people living in the radius around 24 N 5th St were predominately Spanish-speaking. Many of them spoke only Spanish.

Shinya speaks English and Japanese. He needed help with outreach to Spanish speakers. Because of that need, we met Gerardo and came to know his heart for ministry. We made decisions to support his Green Card application process beginning with a Religious Visa which required connection to ministry at the church.

At the October 24, 2012, VLT meeting the team discussed the future. Shinya proposed a three-step process for how to grow the church. Plans were made for how Shinya and Jonathan would split the pastoral responsibilities. Shinya would focus on outreach, supervising office staff, leading PPRC (now SPRC) and the VLT. Jonathan would focus on hospitality, worship, music, education, and pastoral care. A six-year budget plan was introduced. The plan included two full-time pastors for the six years.

At the December 5, 2012, VLT meeting there was further discussion about how to implement this new plan as well as how the work of the members of the congregation fit into the plan.

This was a detailed plan of the work that would be required to grow the church.

At some point, we had a church conference to commit to spending the money required to implement this plan. I can't find the notes from that meeting, but I can find references to it. And I remember attending it.

In 2012, our average attendance was 60 people per Sunday. We were looking at moving into the building in late 2013. We expected we'd have time to put things in place and in motion to be ready to capture the momentum of the new building.

In 2013, we also decided to create and support ministry programs for Spanish-speakers. This included ACTS worship, the furniture ministry, and a food program that became Open Pantry.

We moved into the building on Nov. 24, 2013. At a special meeting on Dec. 18, 2013, just 3 1/2 weeks later, the members of VLT, Pastor Parish Relations Committee, and Finance met to discuss closing the second pastor position - Jonathan's position, because of budget concerns.

There were several special meetings about this question over the next couple of weeks. On Jan. 5, 2014, Jonathan said he would be requesting a new appointment for July 1, 2014. The VLT passed a motion to close the position.

There was discussion about how Shinya would manage a pastoral leadership position we thought needed to be shared by two pastors. It was discussed that members of the congregation would step up, but those plans weren't implemented.

I would say this is when we gave up on growing the English-speaking ministry.

Shinya went to Mexico to meet the people in El Maguey. This was the beginning of our connection to Cristo Vive and the people of El Maguey.

Jonathan left in June 2014.

In the fall of 2014, we began our relationship with Little Einstein's Montessori Preschool; a Spanish-English bilingual preschool. When we planned for having a preschool in the building, we expected to have a relationship with them. We hoped at least some of the families would join the church. That hasn't turned out to be a connection the parents who find the preschool are looking for.

In 2014, our attendance in the new building averaged 73 people per week. So, we did have opportunities to connect with new people, but no one to lead that effort.

In March of 2015, Shinya, Joey, Kristeen and Gerardo went to El Maguey to get to know the people of Cristo Vive and the town.

In 2015, we said our five priorities were discipleship, worship, fellowship/hospitality, children and youth, and Spanish-speaking ministry. Our average attendance was 66.

May 1, 2016, we voted to become a Reconciling Congregation. We believe in this decision, but we haven't been able to create a ministry to the LGBTQ community. However, this decision has turned out to be especially important for the Hispanic/Latino community.

We watched as Gerardo shared his heart with our neighbors. We celebrated as the membership in this ministry grew and we got to know new people, even with a language barrier.

We've tried to create some opportunities for the worship groups to come together.

We had bilingual worship one Sunday a month. Bilingual Sundays were a lot of work to put together. Attendance for both worship groups dropped on these Sundays. Between the two groups very few of us are bilingual. People want to worship in the language of their heart, not in a process split by language.

We tried including Spanish-speakers on committees. The need for translation made it awkward so it wasn't successful.

We explored different ESL class formats to help Spanish-speakers improve their English and for English-speakers to maybe pick up a little Spanish. Members of Wesley UMC joined us in these events and others.

The Spanish-speaking worship group celebrates Day of the Dead, Las Posadas, Mariachi Sunday. English-speakers are always invited, but not many of us attend.

In 2016, the average attendance was 52.

June of 2017, our team went to El Maguey to create a library.

That same month, Shinya became a DS and left this church.

In 2017, the average English-speaking attendance was 44.

When the Master Leadership Team reviewed our 2015 priorities in 2018, Spanish-speaking ministry was the only one of our five goals we said we were doing well. We weren't making progress on discipleship, worship, fellowship/hospitality, children and youth.

In 2018, the average English-speaking attendance was 37. Gerardo added a Thursday night worship service to his program.

Part of the process, while Renee was with us, was figuring out how to go forward after she left us. We knew Gerardo would be appointed full-time. We looked at the budget and discussed the idea of a part-time pastor for the English-speaking worship group. Renee pointed out a part-time pastor would have time for worship, meetings, and possibly a few pastoral calls, but they would not have time to help us do the work of figuring out what our future might be. We could go with a part-time pastor and save some money, but it was very unlikely we would figure out how to grow the church.

We decided to commit to spending additional funds from the endowment fund to cover the cost of two full-time pastors. We committed to seven years because we didn't want to artificially cut ourselves short. We committed to not getting scared and giving up. We made this commitment even as we understood an average worship attendance of 37 didn't really show a need for a full-time pastor. But we hoped continuing with a full-time pastor for English-speaking ministries would help us find opportunities to create growth. At the very least, we wanted to try a new full-time senior pastor to see what might be possible. I don't know that we actually considered the idea that a new pastor might not see a way for us to grow.

Jeffrey was appointed to join us in July 2019. The first tasks for any new pastor are to get to know people and identify what's what at/with the church. And Jeffrey will talk about that.

But we know Jeffrey discovered the same thing Shinya, Gerardo, and Renee found – the neighborhood around the church is Spanish-speaking. If we want to grow the English-speaking ministry it will take a lot of work, not just by the pastor, by all of us. There isn't any "magic" to make it happen.

We don't get very many visitors. People don't just stop by to worship with us. We would have to go out into the valley and find them, encourage them to come downtown,

and be ready for them if they came. It's difficult for a small group of people to start new programs to be ready for new people.

It doesn't seem like now we have the critical mass required to start new programs and do outreach into an undefined neighborhood to try to grow the ministry. We've lost ground. Our congregation has gotten smaller and older while the work to grow hasn't gotten any easier than the plan we had in 2012. In 2014, we had a band and seasonal choirs to offer music opportunities to people. We still have the bell choir, but haven't had much success adding members to it.

There's never a good time to make a hard decision. It's our nature to try to put off hard decisions. We want to try one more thing or wait just a little longer in case things change. Sometimes that means circumstances take the decision out of our hands.

But sometimes God calls us to do hard things. God calls us to use the resources we have in the best way possible.

The size of the English-speaking worship group continues to be less than the number that calls for a full-time pastor or even, really, a half-time pastor. The truth is, without our Endowment fund, we would most likely be looking at closing the church.

So, what is the best way to use the resources we have?

We created and have been supporting a ministry to the people in the neighborhood. That ministry is thriving while our ministry is getting smaller.

I believe we're called to make a hard decision. A decision that brings sadness, but also a decision we can be proud of and celebrate. A decision that brings new opportunities we haven't been looking for, but God knows.

The results of this decision will open new opportunities for both worship groups. Spanish-speakers will inherit this building and its potential. I believe it will be amazing.

Change is hard, but English-speakers don't know what waits for us in God's future. We will find new possibilities. We will be called to new ministry. We will find places where we can thrive and it will be amazing.

We have a unique chance to transition this building to provide opportunities we can't even imagine for people who don't have many options for a church home. When the building committee was planning the building we talked about how we might be building the building for people we didn't know. We actually created programs and ministry to bring them in. And now they are here. We have a tremendous gift to give to their future.