

The Oldest Church in the Southern California- Arizona Conference

In recent years, as churches have become more conscious of their history, the question of which is the oldest church in the Southern California-Arizona Conference has been raised more than once. The issue has created a friendly but at times rather spirited rivalry among those who have felt a claim upon the title. The unavailability of old Southern Methodist journals has been partially responsible for the question being as yet unresolved. All of these journals have been available for this study, and it now seems clear, from the evidence given below, that First Methodist Church of Los Angeles is the oldest church.

Four churches have at times contended for the claim: First Methodist, Compton; First Methodist, Los Angeles; Carpinteria, and St. Paul's, San Bernardino. The first two were former Methodist Episcopal Churches, Carpinteria was a Southern Methodist, and the present St. Paul's is a union of the former San Bernardino Methodist Episcopal Church and St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, South. To this list the author wishes also to add First (Grace), Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo, both former Methodist Episcopal Churches.

The raising of the following points will help to clarify the question and ultimately to resolve it. By the oldest church does one mean: (1) the place at which the earliest circuit rider worked; (2) the place at which any historical record states that "a church was organized"; that is, where an official board (to use a more modern term) was established by the minister and laymen;¹ (3) the place at which the first Quarterly Conference, the basic structure of a local church, was held; (4) the place at which there was a continuous ministry; that is, the place where there was no break in the ministerial work? The six churches will now be examined one by one.

There is no doubt that Los Angeles was the first place where Bland, the earliest minister, labored. His presence in Los Angeles is confirmed by his own letter to Owen and by Anthony. The report to the Conference in 1854 shows a membership of fifteen and ten probationers. No records survive by which one can tell if "a church

was organized" as stated in point two above. At least one other town—Santa Barbara—was visited by Bland in 1854: "Adam Bland, Presiding Elder . . . held services as early as 1854. The circumstances not being encouraging, no regular service was attempted until 1867."² From 1858 to 1866 there was no work by the Methodist Episcopal Church in southern California, and total reorganization, had to take place in 1867. In the spring of that year the first Quarterly Conference of either denomination ever held in southern California occurred at Los Angeles, and the Rev. Columbus Gillet was appointed the pastor. With this appointment there begins an unbroken appointment of ministers to First Church, Los Angeles, substantiated by every Annual Conference Journal.³

Turning to Compton, the available data indicates that the church was organized on April 12, 1868.⁴ The first Quarterly Conference was held on October 23, 1869.⁵ It is most likely that A. P. Hendon, who was pastor at Los Angeles station in the fall of 1867, visited the present Compton area and was the one who organized the church in April. It was probably Hendon who held the Quarterly Conference there in 1869 since he was assigned during that year to the Los Angeles Circuit (Los Angeles station also was an appointment). The name "Compton" does not appear in the list of appointments until 1869. Thereafter it appears without a break of an appointed minister.

At Santa Barbara, after Bland's departure, occasional services apparently were held without any pastor. The town is listed in the appointments for 1855 and 1856 "to be supplied," but no pastor was sent. In 1867, with the appointment of R. R. Dunlap, Santa Barbara appears again in the list of appointments and thenceforth without any break. During 1867, at least, Santa Barbara was part of a large circuit. The following year the church was organized.⁶ Whether or not it remained part of a circuit is not absolutely clear. In 1874 for the first time the appointment of ministers lists Santa Barbara and Santa Barbara Circuit.

San Luis Obispo appears on the list of appointments for the first time in the fall of 1867. In December of that year the first members were enrolled, and by the next Conference a fully organized church with 66 members and 35 probationers was reported.⁷ During these early years, however, and until about 1876 San Luis Obispo was part of a circuit which embraced Cayucos, Olmsted, and San Simeon.

At Carpinteria the appearance of the Rev. J. C. Stewart and the gathering of the first members is established in 1862 from the church register. This is supported partially at least by Simmons, who states that the Rev. J. C. Stewart was in the Los Angeles area in 1862-1864,

although no mention is made of precise localities.⁸ He definitely did not remain only at Carpinteria because his presence in San Bernardino is a known fact. Carpinteria then, at best, was part of a huge circuit.⁹ In 1864 Stewart was killed, and the work in southern California passed to S. W. Davies and in the following year to S. M. Hogue. Carpinteria, as such, does not appear in the list of Conference appointments until 1873 and then as a circuit under R. A. Lattimer.¹⁰ The church register and the Conference journals seem definitely to indicate that no work was done, or at least none worth mentioning, from 1863 to 1868.

Looking finally at St. Paul's San Bernardino, the evidence is again rather hazy. The earliest work in San Bernardino was begun by the Rev. J. A. Burns in 1858.¹¹ Appointments appear to this circuit again in 1859 and 1860. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the presence of Stewart in San Bernardino in 1862 or 1863 and the organization of a church in 1863 definitely is established. The presence of Hogue at San Bernardino, if he was in southern California, is at least probable in view of the previous work there. In 1866, the first year in which there is a record of Hogue's appointment, his name appears opposite Los Angeles. San Bernardino is not given in the list of appointments. The following year, 1867, only one appointment in the southern California area was made: J. E. Miller, to Los Angeles. In 1868 San Bernardino again appears as an appointment, but it is considered a "Mission," filled by M. W. Glover. The next year Glover returned to San Bernardino, this time a station. From the fall of 1868, when San Bernardino is listed as a Mission, the town appears as a continuous appointment, though in 1870 it was supplied by the Presiding Elder.

From all of the available evidence, it seems clear that First Church, Los Angeles, is the oldest church in the present Conference. Certainly it was the location of the earliest ministerial activity and reported some kind of organization to the 1854 Conference. For the beginning of a continuous ministry and the first Quarterly Conference, the fall of 1867 definitely, and the spring of 1867 possibly, can be established. By the fall of 1868, First Church, Los Angeles, was a full station appointment because an appointment to Los Angeles Circuit also appears at that time. Documentation shows that Compton, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara were organized in 1868 and that a continuous ministry existed thereafter. For a few years all three were probably on a circuit basis. Carpinteria may have been formally organized in 1862, but definitely work was most irregular there, if there was any at all, for the remainder of the war years and for some time thereafter. Certainly no regular pastorate can be docu-

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mented there, even on a circuit basis, until late 1868 when Miller was assigned to Santa Barbara. Conference journals indicate that most of the coastal region for some years was on a circuit. St. Paul's San Bernardino, was organized in 1863, but the war clearly created breaks in the work and the necessity of reorganization in 1868 as a mission. It is only from 1868, a year after First Church, Los Angeles, that the existence of an unbroken ministry can be established.