

Presbyterian Church Marks 150th Birthday

Don Lattin, Chronicle Religion Writer

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(05-20) 04:00 PDT San Francisco -- San Francisco was not a place of Protestant piety when church pioneer Albert Williams disembarked in March 1849 from the Oregon, one of the first steamships to make it here for the Gold Rush.

The captain of the first Gold Rush steamer had already described his passengers as "the scum of creation -- black legs, gamblers, thieves, runners and drunkards."

Within a couple of months, on May 20, 1849, Williams emerged from makeshift worship services at the Public School House on Portsmouth Square and presented a petition to establish the First Presbyterian Church.

Today, exactly 150 years later, the folks at Old First Presbyterian Church -- the oldest Protestant congregation in California -- begin a series of celebrations to mark that anniversary.

There will be a jazz vespers tomorrow night, a history walk Saturday and a worship service Sunday featuring the Rev. Douglas Oldenberg, a national leader of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

Next month, Marin County writer Anne Lamott, author of the best-selling "Traveling Mercies," will appear at the church to raise money for gay rights in the Presbyterian church.

Old First's pastor, the Rev. Tim Hart-Andersen, sees the June 26 Lamott benefit as part of the congregation's long tradition of social activism.

Over the years, leaders of the church have housed orphans, fought waves of anti-Chinese fervor, led the religious crusade against slavery, helped found the University of California and spoken out against the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

It all began in a tent. The Gold Rush congregation began worship services in the summer of 1849 in a tent bought for \$200 from a mining company. The congregation moved into its first real building in 1851, only to see it burn down six months later.

Old First moved from Chinatown to its current location at Van Ness Avenue and Sacramento Street in 1882, into a gothic style wooden building that was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire.

In 1911, the cornerstone was laid for the congregation's present Byzantine-style edifice, which is graced by a magnificent rose window of stained glass.

Membership peaked in the 1950s, to around 1,000 congregants. It began a long decline late in that decade, however, when the church was rocked by a financial scandal involving its longtime pastor, the Rev. John Creighton, and then it crashed amid the rising San Francisco secularism of the 1960s and 1970s. It now claims around 300 members.

In a new book on the church, titled "Pioneer Community of Faith," author Stephen Taber writes that Old First has in some ways returned to its roots.

Today, like 150 years ago, it remains "a small band of believers struggling to establish a community of Christians in a city of immigrants who were lured here by the prospect of wealth and whose commitment to community and religious values is marginal."