

Our History

The Idea of Valley

On August 1, 1957, the Presbytery of San Francisco elected the Rev. H. George Vorsheim, D.D. as the organizing pastor of a new church to be developed in the Woodside-Portola Valley area. Soon after, Dwight and Eleanor Johnson opened their Woodside home on Winding Way for weekly prayer and Bible study meetings in anticipation of the new church. With the help of Eleanor and Helen Wild of the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, it was decided that when Sunday worship services began, church school and youth work would also begin.

Meanwhile Dr. Vorsheim had begun to organize a congregation. He searched for a suitable assembly hall for the budding church and arranged to use the quaint multi-purpose room at the Portola Valley School on a temporary basis. With some 30 people in attendance and Mrs. Vorsheim and her daughter alternating on piano and tending the nursery across the road at the Valley Beauty Parlor, the first worship service was held on November 17, 1957. And the inaugural youth fellowship meeting was held on the night of the first worship service in the Johnson home, under the direction of Mrs. Robert Sweet. Dr. Vorsheim, having moved from San Jose to a new home in Portola Valley, founded the first church office in a small room behind the Woodside Library.

A commission of the San Francisco Presbytery led the official service of organization on July 20, 1958 in the Portola Valley School. The church was called the Woodside-Portola Valley Church of Woodside, California, although the congregation had been meeting on San Mateo County land not belonging to the town of Woodside. That day, the 47 charter members vowed to 'walk together as disciples of Jesus Christ.' The congregation's first corporate act was to elect six Elders and six Deacons. Their next act was to serve refreshments. Dr. Vorsheim was called as permanent pastor in August 1958, and was installed on September 14, 1958.

Finding a Home

At the church's first Annual Meeting, a Building Committee was selected, with Floyd Carley as the chair. They went to work on securing property and permission to build, a process that lasted several years. The first use permit site at Sand Hill and Manzanita in Woodside was denied by the Town of Woodside, so a 10-acre walnut orchard at 1430 Portola Road was purchased for \$40,600. The congregation approved the architect's plans, but the Town of Woodside again denied the use of the site for a public building, even after receiving a petition with 558 Woodside resident signatures. So the congregation continued harvesting walnuts.

On November 14, 1961, the church was incorporated by the state as Valley United Presbyterian Church. The congregation now had 157 members and still worshipped at the school. Dr. Vorsheim and Woodside realtor Fred Ballentine found a parcel at 945 Portola Road, the home of charter members Robert and Tillie Williams. San Mateo County was much more obliging in granting the church a use permit, and it did so in November, 1962. The following month, the transaction was made for the Williams' 2.7-acre property and the Fontane family land across the creek for a total of \$60,000.

Building in the Redwoods

The Building Committee now chaired by Leonard Larson, retained the architectural firm of Inwood & Hoover in February 1963, for this challenging new site that included a redwood grove. The congregation approved their master plan in April. In that same year, the walnut grove land was sold for \$72,000 and a building fund drive raised about \$64,000. The Williams' stable was remodeled by Tom Revfem and volunteers into a church school and the Williams' house was moved to the rear of the property and dedicated as the Kirk House and church office.

On May 17, 1964, Dr. Vorsheim broke ground for the new sanctuary. Builder Carl N. Swenson completed all construction in time for the church to move its equipment out of the Portola School immediately after the last legally permissible service there on January 24, 1965. The church had grown to occupy the multi-purpose room for worship and five classrooms for nursery and church school. Dr. Vorsheim served the congregation until Feb. 1, 1966. Two interim pastors served the church until Rev. Donald J. Peterson was selected as pastor and installed on November 15, 1966. Rev. Robert Flagg later served as Assistant Pastor.

Growth & Change

Rev. Lloyd D. Auchard began his tenure on September 1, 1971. His pastorship was notable for the growth of the mission, Deacons, fellowship, youth and music programs, and membership grew steadily during his 14-year tenure. In 1981, the church decided an Assistant Pastor was needed, and Rev. Keith Wintermute was called. He was instrumental in founding of the Kids of the Ark summer Bible Camp, and was admired for his depth of knowledge of the Scripture, and his talent in the pulpit. By 1985, membership was about 350.

While both pastors were well-liked and respected, a conflict arose in 1985 between the two, and a difficult decision was made for both to resign. Rev. John Snyder was called to preach on December 9, 1985, and he preached a legendary sermon to the broken congregation, speaking of the need to see problems clearly and objectively in order to find solutions, and sharing his story of a battle with a serious eye condition. Dr. Snyder was later called to become Interim Pastor, and served for a year and a half.

Recent History

A Pastor Nominating Committee was formed and worked for more than a year, finally recommending Dr. Mark Goodman-Morris, Senior Pastor, and wife Rev. Cheryl Goodman-Morris as Parish Associate. That recommendation was enthusiastically accepted by the congregation. The GM's began their work with VPC on July 1, 1987. They brought several new perspectives to ministry at VPC, the most notable of which is the use of theater in both worship and in events for the community. Other programs include a personal Spiritual Direction program, a holistic perspective on spiritual and physical health with the establishment of a Parish Nurse program and international mission relationship with a sister church in Mexico.