



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

The First Christian Church has been a landmark on Watsonville's East Lake Avenue since 1928. The congregation was established in 1859.

# Watsonville's pink church has storied history

Churches - 2000

First Christian Church opened in its current Madison Street location in 1928

By KIRSTEN FAIRCHILDS

newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — Maria Elena De La Garza never gave much thought to the pink-colored building two blocks from her home.

During evening strolls around their East Lake Avenue neighborhood, De La Garza and her partner Marc Sander routinely passed what they assumed was an abandoned building.

So, on a Sunday morning in January 2009, it came as a huge surprise to De La Garza to see a sign hanging above the wide-open front doors detailing Sunday 11 a.m. worship services with "All are welcome" printed at the bottom.

Upon closer inspection, De La Garza came to the realization that she had indeed been living down the street



The Rev. Yolanda Moreno enjoys lunch with junior and senior high school students at First Christian Church.

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# CHURCH

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for nearly two decades from a pink church.

After taking the banner at its word, De La Garza and Sander attended a service and felt so welcomed that they made First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) their church home. In doing so, the couple learned that the building they had once inaccurately thought was abandoned was actually an occupied Watsonville landmark with a long history.

On the corner of East Lake Avenue and Madison Street, the structure was built in 1928 by renowned local architect W.H. Weeks. Various newspaper accounts from the time housed in the church's scrapbooks described a thriving congregation that numbered in the hundreds.

The publications also revealed that the setting was not the first location for First Christian Church, which was established in Watsonville homes in 1859. Before the 15 Madison St. location, the church had been housed in three different structures, but all had been destroyed by fire.

"Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was the first Christian church formed in America and is a break-off from the Presbyterians," said the Rev. Yolanda Moreno, before a recent Palm Sunday service. "First Christian Church has a long history in this building, but no one knew what it was. People have thought it was a government building or a place where priests lived."

Having developed a reputation as a "church saver" in her 18 years as a minister, Moreno arrived in Watsonville in January 2009 to a church that she described as on the brink of "financial ruin" with a congregation that had dwindled down to approximately 30.

A former product specialist at Control Data Systems in Milwaukee, Moreno, 59, had an accounting and sales background that has served her well in turning around churches that were close to "dying."

## IF YOU GO

### FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

**WHAT:** Established in Watsonville in 1859, First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) moved into its current location in 1928. Built by renowned local architect W.H. Weeks, the church's exterior was painted a shade of pink in the early 1990s. Often referred to by Watsonville residents as the 'pink church,' First Christian Church shares the space with two other churches that offer Spanish-only services, Holy Trinity Church and Iglesia Catolica Anglicana Senor De La Misericordia. The church also rents out space to Santa Cruz County Community Schools, Esperanza Middle School (grades 6-8) and Success Academy (grades 7-12). In Spring 2010, First Christian Church voted to become an 'Open and Affirming' church that welcomes gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons.

**WHERE:** First Christian Church, 15 Madison St., Watsonville.

**WHEN:** 11 a.m., Easter Sunday Service.

**INFORMATION:** 724-4517.

**ADMISSION:** Free and open to the public.

"There was no accounting system here when I arrived — no one knew where we really were at financially — so I set up a simple automated accounting system," said Moreno, a Hayward resident that commutes to Watsonville on weekends. "Then, it became so obvious to me that there was all this potential for the building itself to generate money.

"I had the church spend money to refurbish a one-bedroom apartment to rent out on the top floor and I went on Craigslist to advertise the space for schools or churches that were looking for a home," Moreno said. "We're finally to the point that financial stability has been achieved, so we can now begin to look to the future and become more of a presence in this community."

First Christian Church brings in revenue by renting out space to two Santa Cruz County Community Schools as

well as two churches that offer Spanish-only services, Holy Trinity Church and Iglesia Catolica Anglicana Senor De La Misericordia.

Founded in 1990 by the Rev. Mirsha Sharone Mondragon, Holy Trinity Church had rented space once before in the building in 2004, but had its lease unexpectedly terminated in 2006, according to Mondragon through a Spanish translator.

Although he said he believes the structure that houses a church is not what is most important, Mondragon said that being back in the "pink church" makes it an easier location for new members to find.

"The church was already painted pink when we came here the first time," said Mondragon, after his church's Palm Sunday service. "In 2004, all of the occupants of the church decided to paint the outside of the church because the color had faded. We decided to paint it the same color it was."

Although both Moreno and Mondragon said they had heard talk that the church was initially painted pink because a large supply of the color was available at a reduced price, no such account could be verified in the church's records or scrapbooks.

A polling of several longtime members revealed that they did not remember an exact date or reason for the color change; however, Regan Huerta, the archive coordinator of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association, said her records showed the church was painted pink in 1993 by Martin Lasich.

In the church's scrapbooks, some photographs logged as having been taken in the 1990s show a cream-colored exterior with a dark-pink trim while others display the exterior as having a shade of pink that could also be called "rose" or "raspberry."

Whatever the exact color or reason for it may be, the "pink church" is becoming better known by De La Garza.

"I had no idea what kind of a building it was and I never saw anyone go in or out," De La Garza said. "Then, to find out all the things that have gone on here and do go on here — I just didn't know what I was looking at."