

# Out of the FIRE



Santa Cruz firefighters battle the blaze at Grace United Methodist Church in October 2000. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

## Three local Methodist churches consider uniting as one congregation

Churches

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The charred remains of Grace United Methodist Church had not been removed yet when people began asking the Rev. Rebecca Irelan, "When will you rebuild?"

Now, 15 months after the historic sanctuary on the corner of Soquel Avenue and Cayuga Street was destroyed because of a furnace fire, the three United Methodist churches in Santa Cruz are considering a quite different solution.



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First, Grace and Live Oak United Methodist churches will vote Sunday whether the churches should combine to create one United Methodist church in Santa Cruz.

"I'm strongly in favor of it," said Scott

Williams, 38, a lifelong member at First. "I think it's the right idea and the right time for our community and our church."

Williams serves on the Tri-Church Task Force that recommended the churches could better serve the community by joining.

Faced with declining attendance and strapped for cash, all three churches struggle to meet financial goals and maintain vitality. Between 50 and 75 people worship at each church on a given Sunday.

But with their combined properties, the churches sit on \$14 million in assets. Some, including the church district, think that's too much money committed to less than 200 people.

"We have a lot of resources in buildings and grounds and so forth. We spend too much time and money on maintaining the buildings," said Bill Schuette, a member of Grace for 69 years. "Individually, the three churches really only do enough to take care of their own needs. We can do a better job working together than we can separately."

While combining seems a logical and financially sound decision, emotions run high. Each church is distinct: A neighborhood church most members can walk to, Live Oak has a surf club and a steel drum group; Grace strives to be an extended com-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

This empty lot is all that remains of Grace United Methodist Church today.

munity center reaching out to the homeless and the mentally disabled; and First has a rich historical tradition stretching back to 1847.

"This is a hard decision for our church because it represents a change in our focus from a real specific outreach to the Live Oak neighborhood and community," said the Rev. Alpha Goto, pastor at Live Oak.

But by using joint resources, members see a chance to expand existing programs for the community, such as Live Oak's Christian day-care program for children grades K-5. Schuette of Grace said he would like to see that program continue because "it fills a real need in the community for good day care."

No matter what the vote, Grace will have to find a new home.

"The positive thing about not having a building is that the congregation has been able to let go," Irelan said. "We have an advantage over the others because, when you have nothing to lose, you have everything to gain."

Her congregation has been worshipping alternately at the other two churches since September.

Most likely, a new church eventually would worship at the First location at 250

California St. since it is the largest property with adequate parking space. However, Graeme McIver, pastor at First, said the existing buildings may be remodeled or rebuilt to reflect a more contemporary style of worship.

Church leaders say a combined Methodist message could reach more Santa Cruzans, citing the church's focus on social justice and inclusiveness. A new church could "provide a thriving community church where like-minded people can feel comfortable, welcomed and accepted," said Williams. "I think we do that now, but we could do a better job."

Questions about leadership, location and identity of a new church wait on the outcome of the vote. Gertie Johnson, a 30-year member of Live Oak, is "not 100 percent behind" the churches joining.

"My biggest concern is that we need to keep the presence of the church in the community. That church on 17th Avenue is very important to that community," she said.

But, she added, "I do want what's best for my church, and I want it to survive. Whatever happens, I'm still going to be part of it."

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