The Church in Ocean Park

The Church in Ocean Park is the birthplace of Santa Monica's progressive movement. Since its founding in 1875, the City of Santa Monica had been a practical, business-oriented place that left compassion for those in need in the hands of churches and well-intentioned socialites. Then came Reverend James Conn in 1972 with a vision for a multi-cultural church community that worked to establish effective new social service institutions. Hosted by the United Methodist Church, the Church in Ocean Park became a spawning ground for a host of non-profit organizations that forever changed the way people in crisis are supported in the city and in the region. They also established a highly organized neighborhood association that helped fight crime and improve the quality of life in the Ocean Park neighborhood. On a parallel, but occasionally overlapping track, Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights was formed in 1977 to pass a rent control charter amendment in the city. Their success in 1979 led to a new generation of progressive city council members. With support for progressive values both on the ground and in City Hall, Santa Monica became a national leader among progressive cities for its social justice, housing, and environmental policies.

Methodist Beginnings

The roots of the Church in Ocean Park trace back to Santa Monica's original Methodist Church building erected in 1875 on a double lot at the corner of Sixth Street and Arizona Avenue. The land was donated by town founders Senator John P. Jones and Robert S. Baker. The small congregation was responsible for raising the funds to construct and furnish the church in a community that had a total of fewer than 100 families, many of whom were not Methodists.

> *At first the prospect appeared decidedly gloomy; but the congregation – remembering, we suppose, that a "faint heart" never built a church, pushed ahead. It is true the building is not a very stately edifice, but it meets the present demands very well – and we should not despise the day of small things.*[1]

It was a true community effort. Mr. Snow donated three weeks of carpentry work along with the young Reverend J.C. Crum, who rolled up his sleeves to help. Mr. and Mrs. Skinner donated the pulpit, and Mr. Stahl, the windows, which were glazed by Mr. Bundy. The panel door was a gift from Mr. Perry who lived in Los Angeles, and the pews were sent from a Methodist Church in Los Angeles whose pastor also sent over a large Bible. The lamps were a gift from Judge Widney. It was a simple building in the Carpenter Gothic style with beadboard wainscoting on the walls; only the ceiling was plastered. It had a steep gable roof, clapboard siding, and a belfry. A small entry portico in the center of the front elevation provided access. In October 1875, Methodists began holding services above the Fifth Street hardware store of J.O. Brady. By the end of December, their church was completed. It was dedicated on January 2, the first Sunday in 1876. Reverend Mr. Tansy gave the dedication sermon and Santa Monica's own

[1] *(untitled)*, Santa Monica Outlook, Santa Monica, California, January 5, 1976

Reverend Crum officiated. It was the first dedicated church building of any denomination to be erected in Santa Monica, but the Presbyterians were not far behind, breaking ground on their church on January 19, and holding their dedication on February 21, 1876. In March talk of building an Episcopalian Church began. The first Catholic Church in Santa Monica was built in 1884.

This was Reverend Crum's first post as a pastor. It was a successful beginning to his career because he helped the congregation transition from the hardware store to their first building in only 3 months. He was reassigned later that year, according to the Methodist tradition of itineration. He was succeeded in Santa Monica by Reverend John Allen. Allen fell ill soon after his appointment, so Crum was brought back until 1878. Reverend S.S. Russell took over for a year, and then, beginning in 1879, the church went three years with no pastor. The city had plunged into a sharp decline as a result of the takeover of the Los Angeles and Independence Railroad, and the destruction of the Jones Wharf at its Colorado Avenue terminus, by the Southern Pacific Railroad. The overall population of Santa Monica dropped by 60%.

In 1883, Reverend J.B. Howard was sent to a recovering Santa Monica where he found three remaining Methodist congregants. He moved the church building to a pair of new lots at Fourth Street and Arizona Avenue, closer to the center of town and succeeded in rebuilding a congregation. In 1890, a few years and a few pastors later, the congregation had climbed to 53, and a social hall was built onto the rear of the original little building. A dispute led 31 of them to withdraw their affiliation with their fellow Methodists to establish the Prohibition Congregational Church. Prohibition Congregational in Santa Monica only lasted a few years, although the campaign against drink that was a common interest among its members, continued. In 1892 Frederick H. Rindge joined the Methodist congregation and Reverend William Stevenson became the pastor. Rindge was an ardent prohibitionist. It's likely, though not documented, that he was able to reunify the two Methodist factions in the city under one steeple. In 1895, Rindge, who was additionally very religious and very wealthy, broke ground on a new, more opulent First Methodist Church of Santa Monica, which was dedicated on the first Sunday in 1896, exactly 20 years after the dedication of the first little church. The old church was moved to the rear of the parcel and was used for Sunday School and kindergarten classes. Reverend Stevenson stayed on until 1897, when Reverend R.C. Wuestenberg was sent to take over. In 1898, the Methodist Church Society voted to move the little old church building to South Santa Monica where Methodists had begun meeting in the old pavilion next to the Santa Fe Railroad depot at Hill Street. In August of 1899, after some dragging of feet, a charter was taken out with the Methodist organization establishing the Ocean Park Methodist Church. It was the first church to be officially incorporated in the Ocean Park neighborhood. In February 1901, the Methodist Episcopal Church purchased lot 14 of block N in Vawter's Ocean View Tract, 2621 Lake Street (Second Street), from Mary and Florence Leavitt for $250. The building was finally transported to the newly developing south side where Reverend Robert S. Fisher served 11 parishioners.

Once the church was settled, Reverend B.D. Snudden took over. After a year of "steady and substantial" growth, the Ocean Park Methodist Church was enlarged in June 1902. The addition was along the entire south elevation from front to back, making it 50% wider. The entrance was relocated to the new addition on the south edge of the elevation fronting Lake Street (Second Street). The original entry portico became a bay window. Reverend Snudden was followed by Reverend W.C. Botkin in 1903 and then Reverend E.W. Pasko in 1904. In May 1905, the church purchased lot 10 in block M of Vawter's Ocean View Tract for $650 as a parsonage site. The parcel was at the corner of Beach Street, around the block from the church, at 2548 South Third Street. In June a permit was pulled by designer-builder George D. Snyder on behalf of the church for a one-story cottage costing $1400. The parsonage, though no longer on its original site, retains most of its original features today. A front porch spanning the west half of the primary elevation is recessed under the hipped roof, which is supported by two square columns and capped with a center dormer with a small hipped roof and punctuated with a slatted vent. It is clad in narrow horizontal lapped siding. The porch wall is dominated by a non-original entry door in an original opening, and a large stationary window with one large pane on the bottom two-thirds and the upper third divided into a grid of small lights. A bay window fills the east half of the primary façade with a similar stationary window in the center and a double hung, single-paned sash window on either side of it. Another bay with the same design protrudes from the west elevation of the cottage. The rest of the windows have double hung, single-paned sashes and all appear to be original. A rectangular bay with a single window projects from the east elevation near the rear of the structure. All the windows align with a single continuous sill course that runs around the entire structure. The only exception is a small casement window, likely serving to light and vent a closet, on the east elevation. Inside, the original flooring and most of the original five-panel doors and fluted window and door trims are extant. The front room with the bay window is accessed by an extant pair of original pocket doors. A wall that once enclosed a closet appears to have been removed from that room to make it larger.

In 1907, a large school room filled the rear of the church parcel, separated from the church itself by only five feet. Reverend R.L. Bruce was sent to Ocean Park in 1908, the year the church finally paid off the parsonage debt. Reverend George C. Skafte took over in 1909, the same year Mrs. F.E. Royston and Mrs. Ida M. Patterson presented new "opera chairs" for the sanctuary. The church interior was refreshed that year at a cost of $1000, raised through donations from the congregation. Reverend W.J. Boyd took the pulpit in 1915. Still standing today at 2621 Second Street, the city's original Methodist church is quite possibly the oldest wooden structure in the city today (only the brick Rapp Saloon is known to be older, by a few months). It was converted to a privately-owned residence by artist Helen Sheats in 1972. Sheats was described in her 1999 obituary as an artist, architect, and civil rights advocate. Sheats replaced the plain glass in two original front openings on either side of the original portico with stained art glass of her own design, reflecting the bright, neo-fauvist style for which she was known. Her architecture work was decidedly modern as evidenced by more than one collaboration with modernist architect John Launtner, but her conversion of the Carpenter Gothic style church into a home and art studio involved very little intervention. The nail holes in the floor where the

pews had been anchored were still visible and the belfry served as her meditation room. The building remains substantially unaltered since the 1902 addition.

A New Church Building

Reverend A.C. Welch became pastor at the Ocean Park Methodist Church in 1917. Under his tenure, a capital fund was initiated to build a new larger church. Reverend William McKinley Walker was the pastor beginning in 1920. Membership boomed under his recruitment efforts. He became a strong advocate for a substantial new church building worthy of his flourishing congregation. Reverend D.K. Burnham took over in October 1921 and continued the movement towards a new building. By July 1922, the Ladies' Aid Society was raising money for the project. In December 1922, the Methodist Church purchased the double parcel on the corner of Second and Hill Streets immediately south of the old church for $10,000. The 100 x 100-foot lot is at 231-235 Hill Street. By the end of January, the parcel was nearly paid off. Through the groundbreaking in July 1923, the members continued raising money to pay for construction. The Ladies' Aid Society was bringing in a thousand dollars a month through bazaars and fundraising dinners. They made and sold quilts, rag rugs, and other handicrafts for the cause. The church choir and its soloist, Janet MacGregor Wilson, gave vocal recitals to add to the building fund. Mrs. Wilson, a native of Scotland, had toured as a professional concert performer before her marriage. Her talents were a great asset to the church. The original Methodist Church the congregation had enjoyed in Ocean Park since 1901 was sold to a civil war organization for Union Veterans, which established it as a Patriotic Hall where organizations such as the G.A.R., the Women's Relief Corps, and other patriotic groups could meet. The contract allowed the church to continue to use the space until the new building was ready. The parcel under the parsonage on the corner of Beach and Third Streets was also sold to add to the fund. The parsonage building was moved onto the new lot fronting Hill Street, and was given the address 237 Hill Street, where it remains today.

In the early 1920s a few commercial buildings began to creep up Hill Street from Main Street towards the two grand new churches that were now on either side of Hill Street at Second Street, the new Methodist Church on the north corner, and the Baptist Church on the south side, which had opened in 1916. Soon after the city adopted its first zoning ordinance in 1922, there were petitions to stop any more commercial development from moving into the neighborhood. Hill Street had not been zoned for commercial uses but a practice of spot zoning, which was not yet illegal, had left the door open to it. Within a few years, Main Street would be widened, allowing for more traffic flow and wider sidewalks, incentivizing commercial development there and taking care of the problem.

The Ocean Park Methodist Church was designed by congregant James T. Peasgood, who had been trained as an architect early in his career but spent decades serving as the Building Official for the City of Santa Monica. In 1923 when he drew up the plans, he was president of the Church Board of Trustees. It was fast work getting the permits approved because the project architect and city building inspector were the same man. Contractor J.L. Schimmer built the 78

x 52-foot structure for $20,000. The first floor consisted of reinforced concrete blocks and the second floor was brick and plaster. Because the congregation was still raising money, it was at first reported that the finishes in the auditorium on the second-floor were to be deferred, but it appears that the funding came through and the building was completed all at once. The plans included a large auditorium, a choir loft, several first-floor classrooms, and a social parlor. The Ladies' Aid Society continued fundraising through construction with a cooked food sale at Young's Grocery on Main Street every two weeks, and at monthly bazaars where they sold more quilts, rugs, and handicrafts. The congregation held its first services in the new building on December 2, 1923. A dedication sermon was delivered by the Methodist district superintendent, Dr. Alfred J. Hughes, with additional addresses from Santa Monica Mayor S.L. Berkley and others.

A combination of Italianate and Gothic architectural styles are represented in what was then known as the Ocean Park Methodist Episcopal Church. It features a flat-roofed Italianate style structure with a projecting tile cornice at the base of a parapet. The ground floor, which sits partially below grade, is clad in concrete block. On the second floor, red brick is accented by darker brick quoining at the corners, below the cornice, and around the windows. A concrete-finished Tuscan tower element at the southwest corner of the structure houses a belfry and is capped with a hipped clay roof. It contains a staircase and marks the entry to the church. A low front stoop accessed by two shallow steps at the base of the tower is protected by a tiled canopy supported with Tuscan columns. A non-original single-light entry door with narrow side lights is made of dark-stained wood. Notable arched Gothic stained-glass windows mark the front and both side elevations of the second floor. Vents on all four sides of the tower element around the belfry echo the Gothic form of the windows. Originally featuring 11 stained-glass windows, one of which on the north end of the east-facing elevation is no longer extant; there are ten in place today. Eight of the extant windows feature multicolored, opalescent slag glass with center medallions containing images inspired by scripture and Christian tradition. The other two windows, which are centered on the west and east walls in the main sanctuary, contain detailed pictorial images of Jesus at Gethsemane and Jesus as the Good Shepherd, respectively. All the windows include ribbon banners across the bottom where painted inscriptions recognize people who made significant contributions to the construction of the new church. They are inscribed to the Woman's Aid Society (curiously not shown as the Ladies' Aid Society as they were referred to in every newspaper article), Mr. and Mrs. B.G. Hurlburt, Mrs. Ada E. Verge, and Mr. and Mrs. F.E. Royston. The window at the main landing as one enters the sanctuary on the second floor, which is centered on the primary elevation facing Hill Street and is slightly larger than the others, is dedicated "In Appreciation of Our Architect James T. Peasgood." Other windows were dedicated to the memories of members of the congregation, in particular, Mrs. Jane Peasgood (the architect's wife), Joyce Irene Burton, Geo. D. Hughes, Junior Sanders, and William Kester. The latter two share a window, and two other windows have no dedications. The painterly use of glass combined with a double-paning technique (stacking one layer of glass upon another to create a sense of light or movement), use of opalescent glass, and richly colored images drawn from nature is reminiscent of the Tiffany style. The windows also reflect the Neo-Gothic movement popular in churches and

universities during a high point in popularity of stained glass in the United States, which spanned 1870 to 1930.

Today, the exterior of the church building is very much intact, and the interior also retains a high degree of physical integrity. Inside the church all the original woodwork remains extant. Dark-stained wood railings, molding, paneling, stairs, and doors remain unpainted. The pulpit is fronted by an original wooden railing with ball finials in front of an arched proscenium framing a recessed apse. The apse has all rounded corners but is not spherical. An arched doorway in the west wall of the apse leads to a small sacristy. Original wooden steps lead up to each side of a platform in front of the apse. Above the proscenium are seven decorative vents, and above those a crown molding circles the room. The sanctuary retains its original wood paneling, which rises to about four feet above the floor. New artificial wood flooring was installed in the 1990s. Original ceiling light fixtures and wall sconces retain their original glass globes. A lectern and two large oak chairs that remain on site appear to be original furnishings. A carved oak altar, which is also extant, was built by congregant Donald Carlson in 1957. Carlson also built an oak baptismal font for the church in 1958. The baptismal font appears to be missing, though some part of it may still be on site. A choir loft that now serves as a mezzanine extends across the upper half of the south end of the room opposite the pulpit. It appears it was originally separated into three bays, all open to the sanctuary below. All three bays have been infilled to various degrees, probably in the 1970s and 1980s to create office space. Unpainted, dark-stained moldings and trim remain extant. In 2016, a new wooden railing at the edge of the choir loft replaced an undated non-original railing made of metal pipe. On the sanctuary floor below the east third of the mezzanine, a series of retractable wooden doors makes that corner available either as part of the larger room or separated off for other purposes as needed. This area may be the parlor mentioned in early descriptions of the church. The belfry is accessed by the front stairs, which continue up past the mezzanine level, ending in a ladder for the final stretch. The bell is still extant and in working condition. It was damaged during the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, and was refurbished in 2015. As a contributor to the Third Street Neighborhood Historic District designated in 1990, the church is protected by the city's landmarks ordinance, and qualifies for use of the State Historic Building Code that allows for safe workarounds to codes that could otherwise require the alteration or removal of historic features. It was noted in the 2010 update of the Santa Monica Historic Resources Inventory that the Ocean Park Methodist Church is eligible as a National Register Landmark for its architectural significance and high degree of integrity inside and out. Because of the events that took place at the Church in the 1970s and 1980s, it may also qualify for listing on the National Register for Historic Places for its cultural significance.

In 1925 Reverend Burnham was replaced by Reverend Edward J. Bradner. In July, the Ladies' Aid Society held a fundraising dinner prepared by stalwart donor and fundraiser Ada Verge to pay for the carpeting they had just installed in the church. In October, Mrs. Verge sponsored the purchase and installation of an illuminated, revolving cross for the top of the church tower. It was dedicated to her husband, Walter J. Verge, who had passed away in 1911. After Reverend Bradner delivered the dedication in February 1926, Mrs. Verge pressed the button

that lit the cross and started it turning. It was 10 feet tall, lit by 25 bulbs, and revolved four times a minute with the aid of a 1.6 horsepower motor. Ocean Park Methodist was sometimes referred to as “the church with the flaming cross” after that. No records were found on how long the revolving cross remained in place.

Reverend Bradner was replaced by Reverend John B. Soules in 1931. The Reverend in Ocean Park beginning in 1934 was George W. Richmire. In the late 1930s, the Ocean Park neighborhood had been listed by the Home Owners’ Loan Association as a place too risky for bank loans because of its working-class population of whites, African-Americans, Mexicans and other immigrants. Little if any new construction or improvements could occur in the area with funding blocked. Over the next decade or so, deferred maintenance became a way of life in Ocean Park. In 1940, the pastor at the Ocean Park Methodist Church became Reverend M.W. Bennett, followed by Reverend Paul I. Hershey in 1943, Reverend W. Archie Matson in 1945, and Reverend Gilbert J. Gray in 1949. In 1949, Reverend F.G.H. Stephens, a 73-year-old pastor who gave the first sermon of his career as a student appointee at the newly established Ocean Park Methodist Church in the pavilion on Hill Street 50 years earlier, celebrated the anniversary by riding his bicycle from Pasadena to the Ocean Park Methodist Church where he delivered a facsimile of his first sermon. By this time, the lack of new investment in Ocean Park led the City of Santa Monica to classify much of the neighborhood as blighted. This made the city, run primarily by bankers and people with real estate interests, eligible to receive federal redevelopment funding for major projects. Planning began to raze hundreds of beach cottages to make way for hi-rise luxury apartment buildings, and to implement a series of highway improvements that widened Fourth Street and Ocean Park Boulevard to allow swift access to the hi-rises from the new Santa Monica Freeway. More than 1500 people, many of whom were elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors who had moved to the beach to retire, were displaced by the Ocean Park Redevelopment Project, and 212 businesses were lost. The Ocean Park Methodist Church nearly closed during this period of dramatic change in the area as uncertainty eroded the area’s social structures. The next group of pastors were much more social services oriented than those who came before in light of the disenfranchised population.

Reverend Fred Strathdee took over in 1952. Strathdee was outspoken against the demolition of affordable beach cottages in Ocean Park. Because of his advocacy for the homes of Jewish refugees and his participation in several interfaith events, his own home was attacked by violent anti-Semites. Also during Strathdee’s tenure, members of the Ocean Park Methodist Church built the “No Room at the Inn” tableau for the well-known Christmas Nativity display in Palisades Park, which was first established in 1953 and was re-installed every winter for the next 63 years. Don Carlson, the carpenter who built the church altar, helped with the Nativity scenes. Reverend Strathdee had another cause for which he raised money from his 225 members: to bring communist refugee families to the United States. It was a refugee family from Indonesia that donated the baptismal font to the church in 1958. A community preschool that was part of a regional program began operating from the church basement in approximately 1955 under the management of a woman named Betty Phillips. Reverend Clarence Spier came on in 1957, continuing Strathdee’s advocacy for the elderly who were

being displaced by the Redevelopment Project, until Reverend Russell Hafner took the helm in 1960. Reverend Dan Kennedy took over in 1961. By this time there was little going on at the church. Most of the old-time parishioners has passed away or moved on. Ocean Park was now considered seedy and dangerous due to the lack of investment in the area over more than two decades. But to Kennedy the mixture of old beatniks, young gays, aging Hollywood starlets, and juvenile delinquents who made up the community was intriguing. A nationwide crime study that included Santa Monica in its scope found Ocean Park to have one of the highest crime rates in the country. The study fingered juveniles as the source of the trouble, so Kennedy opened a Teen Center.

The Ocean Park Methodist Church campus consisted of two buildings, the church and the parsonage. But in the late 1950s, the parcel that abutted the parsonage on Hill Street and extended to the corner of Third Street (lot 8, block N of Vawter's Ocean View Tract) was purchased by the church. This included a four-square house at 245 Hill Street at the corner of Hill and Third Streets. It's backyard (the west half of the lot) was undeveloped and serves as the church parking lot today. The house is known as Archer House in honor of its builder and original occupants Alvin and Louetta Archer. Alvin Archer was a Civil War Veteran who fought for the Union and carried a musket ball in his shoulder for the rest of his life to prove it. After the war he moved about for many years, finally settling in Santa Monica in 1892 for his health. As a carpenter, he helped build the Ocean Park Y.M.C.A. at the beach, which was among the first developments on the south side and which eventually gave the neighborhood its name. He was the first police officer on the south side when it began to be populated and he was the first chief of Santa Monica Fire Company No. 2, which he organized for the south side in 1900 when more people started living in the area year-round. In 1905, Archer served on the Freeholder's Committee that wrote the city's first charter. A freeholder is someone who owns real estate free and clear. Renters and those who held mortgages, were not invited to participate in the creation of city charters at that time. In 1892, Archer married 18-year-old Louetta Litch, 30 years his junior. By 1899, Alvin and Louetta were living at 1137 Lake Street (Second Street) with their first two children and a large apricot tree in the yard. This cottage was across the street from the old Methodist Church. In 1900, they purchased the parcel at Hill and Third Streets where Alvin built a simple house in which they could raise their family. According to Luther Ingersoll, Beulah, the eldest Archer child, was the "first child born of American parents in South Santa Monica," by which he meant the she was the first child born in the area who was not of Mexican or indigenous descent. Their other three children were named Reed, Glen, and Altha.

Archer House is a rare early example of the American Foursquare style in Santa Monica. The simple, box-like structure is clad in narrow clapboard and covered by a hipped roof with boxed-in eaves. A front porch accessed by four steps more or less in its center, spans most of the slightly asymmetrical primary elevation. The flat porch roof is supported by four square pillars, creating a balcony above, which is accessed by a narrow door from a second-floor hallway. Both the porch and the balcony are enclosed by simple railings with square balustrades. The windows consist of double hung, single-light sashes. The porch was rebuilt in-kind in the 1980s, and storage sheds were added to the west side of the building. Archer House has a high degree

of physical integrity and is considered eligible for listing in the National Register for Historic Places as a rare, intact example of its architectural type. Alvin Archer is a significant person to the history and development of Ocean Park. He died in 1923. Louetta Archer occupied 245 Hill Street until 1947, when she moved in with her daughter on the north side, likely due as much to the decline of the neighborhood as old age. She stayed with her daughter until her death in 1956. The house was purchased by the Methodist Church from the Archer family in the late 1950s but remained vacant for several years. Reverend Kennedy opened it up for his Teen Center in 1962. He hired engaging counselors likely to be trusted by teens. Through the center, teens could find job listings, psychiatric services, and homework assistance. It was a safe place to spend time off the streets, and receive family services, counseling, and age-group specific programming for younger boys and girls. It became known as the Ocean Park Community Center (OPCC).

By the time Reverend Kennedy left Ocean Park, OPCC was in the charge of director Frederick Jones, a UCLA law student. In 1965, 28-year-old Reverend D. Michael Cooney was appointed to be the church pastor, and Donald Thompson became the assistant pastor. While in Ocean Park, they worked to establish a similar community center in the Oakwood neighborhood in Venice, which suffered from many of the same difficulties as Ocean Park. They were both reassigned in 1968 to work full time at the new center, and the Methodist Church, which provided most of the funding for both centers, withdrew its support from Ocean Park. Reverend Robert Howard was sent to replace Cooney and Thompson at the church, and OPCC managed to eke out survival funding through community donations. In 1970, Reverend John Mills Jr. took the chair at the church and Terry Timmons took over the directorship of OPCC, which now had a board of directors and Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency (EYOA) funding. Unfortunately, the funds were mishandled, and OPCC was on the rocks again in 1971. It was not clear if the funds were misspent or just not properly tracked, but the center was forced to suspend most of the services while advocates tried to raise more money. The Ocean Park Methodist Church, on the other hand, went completely dark in 1972.

A Post-Modern Church

In 1973, fledging minister James Conn finished Seminary. Conn was from Stockton, California. He earned a bachelor's degree from U.C. Santa Barbara, a master's degree in Religion and Culture from the Claremont School of Theology, and another master's degree in Urban Studies from Occidental College. He was living in Venice where he experienced the crisis-level situation in the area firsthand. For his first assignment, he asked the Bishop to allow him to create an alternative program in the three buildings owned by the Methodist Church in Ocean Park. The daycare center in the basement and the teen center limped along on the site but there was no new energy being invested in either. Permission was granted. Conn's first year's salary was paid by the church, with a plan to contribute one-third less each year. By the fourth year, unless the new program was financially self-sufficient, the larger church could involve itself with their programs, or decide to shut them down in order to redirect funds.

Conn envisioned a post-modern church based on pluralistic goals of unity and community uplift, which prioritized work that brought relief to those struggling with poverty. His mission was founded in caring and empathy and held the dignity of those served in high regard. In printed materials, Reverend Conn often quoted the Hebrew Scriptures directive, “Thou shalt not stand idly by,” and that of Jesus, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” The official name of the church was changed from the Ocean Park United Methodist Church to the Church in Ocean Park (by consensus, which became the way all decisions were made), to reflect the pluralistic vision.

When he began work at his new post, Reverend Conn presented Sunday morning services for a small group of traditional Methodist parishioners who still hung on. After the church had closed the previous year, the 15 or so member families affiliated themselves with the Methodist church on Eleventh Street on the north side of town. When Conn reopened the doors, some returned, thinking the church they had known was being re-established. But a traditional religious structure was not what Conn had in mind for the church, and Conn wasn’t what the old-timers had in mind either. Attendance diminished as parishioners realized that they weren’t going to find what they had there before the shutdown. The services were discontinued after about a year. The preschool in the church basement and the Community Center, now under-funded and barely staffed, became the foundation of what Reverend Conn would make of the Church in Ocean Park.

The Ocean Park Neighborhood was disenfranchised from the City of Santa Monica, which was not supporting city services equally throughout the city. The City Council didn’t believe that government should provide social services, however desperately needed they were in Ocean Park and also in the Pico Neighborhood. Furthermore, as a rule, the city did not apply for federal grants because the City Council saw federal money as federal intervention, a way of thinking that further narrowed the possibilities for funding for sorely needed services. At this time, an outlandish and divisive plan was proposed to the city that included demolition of the Santa Monica Municipal Pier. A causeway was proposed to be built off the coast that would serve as an expressway to reach Malibu from the terminus of the new I-10 freeway. The project would be funded by a series of large hotels built on an island created by the causeway. Outrage over this expensive, fanciful, and destructive idea led to the ouster of several council members at the next election. With a few new, slightly more socially conscious votes on Santa Monica’s still-all-Republican city council, Conn was able to secure a social services grant of $10,000 from the city for OPCC. It was a first in the City of Santa Monica.

Legal Aid and a Revived Community Center

Most of the people who came to the Church in Ocean Park regularly over the first year were also on the board of directors. They held monthly meetings that ran past midnight. The first board included Bob Medeiros, a seminary student from the Claremont School of Theology, who took charge of the Ocean Park Community Center and lived in the parsonage. His salary was funded by the city grant, and he rented the parsonage from the church to house himself and his

family. The church campus was now teeming with children served once again by a wide variety of programs. Church Board Member Jim Carroll opened a law office in the back of the church, which he called the Community Assistance League. Others who joined the Church in Ocean Park board included Judy Abdo, Ernie Powell, and Frances (FrancEyE) Smith. Powell came on as a community organizer, living off a small portion of Conn's meager salary. A board member named Hope Blacker served as the "feminist in residence" and lived in the belfry.

The first church programs offered were designed to identify and draw in the people they hoped to work with and those they hoped to serve. The events, which all took place on Sunday nights, exemplified the culture of the 1970s including poetry reading, folk guitar, classical guitar, political talks, and nude dancing. A screening of the film, *Deep Throat*, drew 150 viewers strictly through word-of-mouth. They passed a hat to pay for the wine and popcorn they provided but the popular programs didn't bring in money they needed for their work. For that, they rented out space in the church for group meetings and classes including ballet, yoga, topless belly dancing, and Reichian therapy.

The Westside Women's Center and Clinic

In 1974, after a year of service, Medeiros moved on and was replaced by Punkin Stephens who took over charge of OPCC and joined the church board. She reshaped the program to focus on more than just local youth. One of her innovations was to conduct trainings for the Santa Monica Police to better assist people in crisis and people living on the streets. She also expanded the crisis and referral services with a 24-hour telephone line. Since Medeiros had vacated the parsonage, the Westside Women's Center, which primarily served the lesbian community at that time, moved in. That same year, Hope Blacker started the Westside Women's Clinic as a partnership between the Women's Center and the Church in Ocean Park with some funding from the Methodist Church as well. The clinic was at 17th Street and Ocean Park Boulevard. Among the many women's health services they provided were abortions which had only become a protected right a year before. By this time the liberal nature of the Church in Ocean Park had become well-known in the city. Their frequent large events were often broken up by police who were called by a particular neighbor up the street, often in anticipation of activity that was barely getting started.

Opposing Redevelopment and the Main Street Fair

That same year, Ernie Powell started the Civic Association to continue opposition to the Ocean Park Redevelopment Project, which was planning a second phase that included the demolition of four more blocks worth of affordable homes near the beach in Ocean Park to replace them with more high-rent towers. The Civic Association advocated for revised plans that included public open space around the towers and inclusionary low-cost housing within them, organizing neighbors at numerous meetings and distributing pamphlets and leaflets. They also organized rent strikes against unfair landlords. The group established a Main Street Fair to improve spirit and to attract people from outside the neighborhood to the businesses on Main Street.

At the Main Street Fair, merchants set up booths up and down the street for face painting, childcare, woodworking, and more. The Church in Ocean Park booth sold burritos and chili. The church also ran a photo booth that made photo-buttons for a small donation. Hope Blacker gave away colored condoms at her booth. The Fair drew everyone from traditional families to local hippies, becoming an annual event for a couple of years. Sherbie Barber, a single mother who at first owned a bead shop on Main Street, sold that and opened a "free store" called 90405, named for the local zip code, where payment for goods was optional, based on need. She was a tireless promoter of the Main Street Fair, going door to door to raise money for it with her children in tow. Because of the difficult relationship with law enforcement in the city, which was suspicious of the young liberals who threw good parties, the church board trained a group among themselves to police the Fair, and convinced the Santa Monica Police to stay away. When an officer did appear at one event, Barber politely escorted him away.

Spirituality and Political Conscience

Two years in, the Church in Ocean Park was still holding regular programs on Sunday nights. Themed events, workshops, and retreats to discuss and develop everyone's political conscience, social conscience, and a generally liberal world view took place. Topics included "Sexuality as Celebration," "The Music of Cosmic Consciousness," and "Experimental Cities." An invitation for one monthly potluck read, "Eat, dance, hang out, rap on 'What it Means to be an American,'" concluding with the promise of "a casual, intimate time." Many evenings still ended in nude dancing with a house band. Some of the retreats were overnights where everyone slept in the church so they could discuss issues of race, sex, art, or politics at greater length.

One of the Sunday night performers was a small improv group called Public Works, comprised of Dale Eunson Morse, Marlene Rasnick, and Luke Johnson. They became the resident theater company at the church, performing every Friday and Saturday night. They were soon joined by a number of additional players including Norbert Weisser, Darrell Larson, and Elinor Graham. There were other performers coming through, presenting Brecht plays, original productions, comedy, dance, and poetry. Local musicians were also regulars including Stephen Fiske, Ronee Blackley, Ross Altman, Rosalie Sorrels, Frankie Armstrong, Bernie Pearl, and The Rebel Rockers. Children's productions and a puppet theater were regularly part of the schedule.

Some people decided they wanted something on Sunday mornings too. There was no group leader at first, just a small circle of about 10 people sitting cross-legged on the floor talking and sharing. Sometimes there would be themes, or someone would bring in a reading to discuss. Eventually Jim Conn and Stephen Fiske began to lead the Sunday mornings with Fiske singing and Conn "rapping" on various topics in the style of a "happening" rather than a traditional religious service. One flyer promised "participation from the community in a spirit of creative coming together at the Church in Ocean Park." There was a lot of music and not much talking. Sunday mornings became very popular and Sunday night events began to fade away.

The board was a large group of 20-30 people that rotated chairs and did everything by consensus. Comprised of an opinionated group of political organizers, social service providers, legal aid providers, flower children, and activists for change, consensus was not always easy to come by. Consensus often meant that after long discussions, dissenting board members would agree not to block a decision. A mural painted by two women named Ziona and Charlotte in the stairway of the church around this time was intended to depict the "creation" of the new community at the Church in Ocean Park. Debates over the mural's content became very contentious leading to awkward compromises. For example, to avoid racial stereotypes, all the figures were given blue skin. The debates alienated Punkin Stephens enough that she separated OPCC from the church, which turned out to be a helpful change that opened the door to funding from the city, which would now fund social services but not a religious institution.

Services Evolve and Mature

Punkin Stephens became a polarizing figure at OPCC. Her many great ideas and good intentions were not backed up by an effective management style, leading to programs that didn't deliver what they promised. When it was discovered that the volunteer base was frustrated and at risk of leaving in March 1975, she was asked to leave first. Ariana Manov and Mollie Lowery stepped in as the new director and associate director. Judy Abdo served on the board of OPCC by this time, providing continuity through this change and stayed through several more decades. Manov and Lowery ran OPCC as a collective according to their liberal philosophical and political leanings and enhanced by a strong background in psychology and therapy. Door-to-door polling in the neighborhood to determine actual needs informed the menu of services they offered. They provided crisis intervention, counseling, and emergency food, clothing, and shelter. It was all provided in a non-judgmental, egalitarian environment where those who needed the services would be comfortable coming to get them. Around this same time the Westside Women's Center died out and was replaced by a more inclusive Women's Center. Jim Carroll's law practice in the Church was replaced by Central Legal, a poverty law center run by a group of Chicano law students from UCLA who wanted to serve the Spanish speaking community. And the Betty Phillips who ran the day care, the last vestige of the old guard at the church, retired. The Children's Place, as the nursery school was renamed, came into alignment with the philosophy and values of its new management by adding children of color to its enrollment for the first time. The preschool now had a bi-lingual staff and a sliding scale enrollment fee based on ability to pay.

Starting in Local Politics

In 1974, just after Watergate, the city responded to a nationwide move against corruption by offering to pay the mailing expenses for anyone who ran for city council in that year's election. At that time, five of the seven council members lived within a few blocks of each other on the north side. Thus, there was an initiative that would establish district voting in the city on the ballot that year. A group at the Church in Ocean Park, under-represented as its neighborhood was on city council, led by Jim Conn, Ernie Powell and a woman named Frances, ran 20

candidates for city council. Each candidate created a mailer that promoted district voting in an effort to leverage the free postage. The city saw through the scheme and refused to pay the postage, but the group raised money to get the leaflets sent out anyway. If the ballot initiative had passed, it would have provided for seven council districts in the city. The electorate of each district would have been able to get a recall of their councilperson onto the ballot with only 150 signatures. Organizers later acknowledged that it would have been "total anarchy," but at that time, anarchy was what they were after. It was a stunning defeat, a 70%:30% vote. But it was an incredible learning experience for the Church in Ocean Park community members, who had discovered hands-on, local politics.

City Hall, sensing a challenge they shouldn't ignore, hit back during the election. In creating their districts maps, all drawn by hand, district voting proponents made a mistake in placement of one line, slightly changing the population count in the districts as they were promoted in the leaflet text. The city attorney found the error and brought civil fraud charges asking $10,000 in damages in an attempt to demoralize the campaigners and drain their funds. After the campaign, many of them wore buttons that said "So, sue me."

Financial Independence

In 1975, the Church in Ocean Park sought to increase and stabilize its regular income to meet its budget because the subsidy from the Methodist Church was about to expire. OPCC, the Women's Center, The Children's Place, and Central Legal all began paying rent. Groups that used the space on an ad-hoc basis were asked to make donations. The Church in Ocean Park considered asking for an extension of the funding from their parent organization but decided the financially independent route was preferable. Ownership of a Methodist Church building is typically passed to a financially independent congregation. It can't be sold or disposed of, but neither can the greater Church leadership close it down, take it back, or interfere with what they do there as long as they remain self-sufficient. In the event of the dissolution of a congregation as had occurred prior to the establishment of the Church in Ocean Park, the ownership reverts to the Los Angeles Missionary Society, which is the local holding company for the Methodist Church.

During the 1975 election, the Ocean Park progressives (not the Church as an entity, but a group that included many of its members) supported a ballot measure called Prop U which would have stopped the construction of an enclosed shopping mall proposed for downtown Santa Monica called Santa Monica Place because they thought it was a bad use of tax increment financing, bad for Ocean Park, bad for tenants, and bad for low-income people. They lost that battle but this time by a much smaller margin than the district voting loss, 56%:44%. Chris Reed, a moderate Republican elected to the city council that year, was the most liberal council member yet.

Liberty Hill and Sojourn

The Liberty Hill Foundation was established in 1976 by four philanthropic young progressives. Its first offices were rented from the Church in Ocean Park, where a small staff raised money from socially conscious donors and granted it to grassroots groups seeking social change. The $5000 grants typically went to groups that would have had difficulty getting funding from traditional foundations. The mission of Liberty Hill was very much aligned with the mission of the Church in Ocean Park, in that both groups sought to support the underdogs. Liberty Hill operated out of its offices at the church for several years, until it outgrew them.

Ernie Powell had taken on a lot of the church administrative work, but in 1977, he moved on. The church hired performer, musician, and board member Elinor Graham to take on some of the load such as scheduling, bookkeeping and answering phones. It was around this time that the Women's Center began planning to establish a shelter for women who were victims of domestic violence. This was a relatively new idea in the 1970s, so there were few models. Only one shelter existed in Southern California, in Pasadena. Sojourn, as they called it, would be the first shelter in the Los Angeles basin. Organizers included Ariana Manov and Molly Lowery who had recently joined the leadership at OPCC, along with Judy Abdo and Jim Conn. Because Manov was bed-bound from a back injury, all the initial planning took place in her bedroom where she was recovering. A $20,000 down payment for a house was donated by Ken Edwards, who later became mayor of Santa Monica, leaving Sojourn to make only mortgage payments, which was manageable given the lower property values of the time. But grant money for operations was not forthcoming. So, instead of hiring, they established a volunteer staff of 20 women to run the shelter. It operated as a collective where there had to be consensus on every decision, from what kind of food to serve to the color of the paint. Each volunteer worked 10 hours per week. The pioneering shelter was widely acclaimed, soon allowing it to attract state funding to hire staff and serve as a model program of its kind. In those early days, there was room for three women and their children at Sojourn. Just as at OPCC, the mission was to provide services that empowered clients who were survivors of adversity. It was not charity; the mission was to secure the rights of clients to food, shelter and safety.

Manov and Lowery continued to write grants and received state funding for a juvenile diversion program at OPCC at the end of 1976. Another federal jobs grant under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) allowed them to establish the Handy Women project, which trained women to work in non-traditional roles such as carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. They hired the skilled women to go around the neighborhood and rehabilitate homes belonging to elderly and low-income people who couldn't afford essential repairs.

Communitas and Rent Control

By this time many of the leaders at the Church in Ocean Park were involved in one or more of the social service projects that had grown out of their community of activists. Some were also developing an interest in local politics. All of them understood the importance of fostering city

leadership that shared their values of social justice to achieve their goals. For various legal, fundraising, and organizational reasons, many of the projects established themselves as separate entities, which would become increasingly important as the work of this small activist group of individuals continued to overlap and lines blurred.

The Church in Ocean Park members were not the only progressives in the city. Housing rental prices were rising rapidly in a city that was 80% renters. Everyone knew someone who had lost their home as a result. These were the seeds of a tenant uprising. Santa Monica, one of few cities in liberal California where a majority voted for Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential election, had promoted so much growth in the previous decade that 14,000 new apartments had been added to the city's supply. The traditional pro-growth model pursued by a long-standing business orientation in the city dating back to its founding had gone so far that it tipped the demographics of the city leading to a renter majority for the first time in Santa Monica history. Until the issues that led to rent control boiled up, renters, who tended to be more liberal than Santa Monica homeowners, generally didn't vote on local measures.

In 1977, 65-year-old labor arbitrator Syd Rose established the Santa Monica Committee on Fair Rents with five New Deal-era activists, Tima Tomash, Rose Boin, Lillian Storik, Ida Singer and Sylvia Hill. He also invited Reverend Jim Conn, Millie and Herman Rosenstein, and Dan Cohen, who chaired the local Democratic Club, to serve on the steering committee. The retirees among them on fixed incomes particularly felt the pinch of rising rents and the fear of random evictions. Rose approached young Legal Aide Society attorney Robert Meyers to draft a rent control measure for the ballot. There were rent control laws already on the books in the United States at the time, but most were weak, and some had been overturned in the courts. Meyers' law focused on protecting tenant security, preserving the existing housing stock, and controlling condominium conversions. The Committee on Fair Rents kicked off its campaign at a rally at Santa Monica High School to foster interest in passing rent control laws. They spent the next six months gathering the signatures necessary to qualify it for the ballot as Prop P in June 1978.

Syd Rose was prepared to let Prop P speak for itself once it was officially approved for the ballot. But other members of the Committee on Fair Rents saw a need for a more proactive, agressive election campaign. They reached out to the local chapter of the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED), led by Tom Hayden, who lived in Ocean Park at the time, seeking the CED's high-octane support and Get-Out-the-Vote expertise to pass rent control. The CED declined to take on the issue. Some say they were focusing all their resources on a solar energy campaign; some say they didn't think rent control would be a winning cause. But the CED's Denny Zane and Parke Skelton, who had taken the time to analyze the situation and report back to the CED, were hooked. They took leaves of absence to join the rent control movement in Santa Monica. Zane and Skelton established the Santa Monica Fair Housing Alliance along with Cheryl Rhoden, who ran the day-to-day operations with Michael Tarbet, Lynda Vitale, Susan Morrow and Moe Stavnezer. They ran it out of Rose's garage. A Santa Monica Tenants Union had sprung up in the Pico Neighborhood in the meantime to picket unfair landlords; it also joined the campaign. More support came from members of the Church in Ocean Park, where

they had natural allies, though no one from the Board of Directors participated directly. Zane and Skelton ran the rent control campaign under the name Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights (SMRR), which included people from the original Committee on Fair Rents, the Santa Monica Fair Housing Alliance (SMFHA), members of the Santa Monica Democratic Club, the Tenants Union, Zane and Skelton from the CED, and later on, a new group called the Ocean Park Electoral Network (OPEN). Prop 13, which limited the tax rate on real estate, was on the same ballot. Anti-rent control interests convinced many voters that if they voted for Prop 13, landlords would so benefit from the tax savings it provided that they would no longer need to raise rents. Prop P lost by a narrow margin. Prop 13 passed, but rents continued to rise, and evictions remained rampant, numbering in the thousands over the next two years.

SMRR had lost but was not defeated. They prepared Prop A, a second rent control measure for the next ballot, and had enough signatures to qualify in only six weeks. A strategically revised ordinance exempted owner-occupied properties of three units or less to quell opposition from mom-and-pop landlords. And, the revisions established a rent control board to carry out the law's provisions. SMRR hand-picked two city council candidates for the same ballot, Ruth Yannatta Goldway and William H. Jennings. The campaign raised more than $50,000 by hosting monthly dances and hosting a speaker-series at the Church in Ocean Park and at the Retail Clerk's Union Hall on Colorado Boulevard near Fifth Street, in what organizers called the "Boogie Strategy." This time, Zane and Skelton convinced the local CED chapter to join the SMRR coalition and bring their significant campaign and Get-Out-The-Vote experience with them. A vigorous campaign with mailers highlighting the struggle of poor and elderly renters faced with eviction effectively silenced efforts of the old-school opposition to depict rent control as a subversive communist plot. Rent control passed on April 10, 1979, and the new council members were both seated. The rent control passed as a city charter amendment, endowing it with a high degree of permanence and authority. It established the nation's first elected Rent Control Board. All of the SMRR-endorsed Rent Control Board Members were elected in June. The summer was spent in court defeating lawsuits that strove to overturn the new laws. In November, an election was held on a landlord-sponsored proposition, called the Fair Rent Ordinance, that would allow vacancy de-control of rents. There was also a council seat on that ballot due to the unexpected resignation of Donna Swink. SMRR defeated the vacancy de-control measure, got Cheryl Rhoden elected to city council, and earned a name for itself as a political force. SMRR became a membership organization in 1984, operating on a system of consensus for all its major decisions, and has remained a force in Santa Monica politics for decades.

Meanwhile, the Church in Ocean Park maintained its focus on developing services to alleviate community problems. By the time rent control passed, the Church in Ocean Park had become the epicenter of a new vibrant Ocean Park and a progressive Santa Monica. It served 500 to 1000 people from the community every week. Some came for religious services, but most were there for the social services (legal assistance, childcare, etc.) and the social connections offered though political forums, parties, theatrical events, live music and more. The church had become a trusted resource that brought people together and inspired them to work together.

Now that Ocean Park had become the focal point of a movement, a new monthly publication called the *Ocean Park Perspective* was created in late 1979 by a group of volunteer activists. They dropped a copy off at every door in Ocean Park themselves in order to reach their constituents. The *Perspective* opened dialog on everything from gender to housing rights, from arts and the environment to overdevelopment. The traditionalist *Santa Monica Outlook* was no longer the only voice in the community.

That's when the church discovered a grant offered by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the United States Department of Justice to help fight crime. They decided to apply. The grant was for $250,000 and the application was successful. The non-profit corporation Ocean Park Projects (OPP) was formed to receive the funds, and the program was named Communitas. Carole Cullum was hired as the director of OPP. By this time, Graham had left the administrative work in the office at the Church in Ocean Park and Judy Abdo, who had taken a leave from her teaching career, stepped in as a consultant and part-time administrator. Abdo and Conn worked as a team to run the church. Abdo continued in that role for 37 years. Abdo was also hired to be the assistant director of Communitas. They rented a basement office in the Mendota Block, a brick commercial building one block from the church at 2671 Main Street at Hill Street.

The plan for Communitas was through direct contact with its residents, to identify problems and provide tools to handle them. A system of "block clubs" created strong new relationships between Ocean Park neighbors and made the neighborhood safer and more welcoming. Fifty-six clubs were formed within four "area councils" during the first 18 months of OPPs existence. They organized Neighborhood Watch, self-defense classes, and other programs to reduce crime. In the course of this work, they resolved other safety issues too, ranging from lack of stop signs to toxic waste to housing. Ocean Park was no longer disenfranchised. An OPP congress attended by 300 people at the end of the first year resulted in the formation of a permanent non-profit neighborhood group called the Ocean Park Community Organization (OPCO). OPCO elected a steering committee and drafted 42 resolutions to work towards. In its second year, Ocean Park Projects established The Energy Project, which promoted conservation, and through pamphlets and home visits, helped Ocean Park residents implement energy saving measures in their homes.

OPCO was not involved in the campaign for rent control, and never spent any of the federal grant money on campaigning, but they were accused of it. The community that had grown around the Church in Ocean Park, the groundbreaking social service programs they established, and the final piece, a community organization to keep people connected and aware certainly influenced and was leveraged by the political organizing conducted by SMRR, but the non-profits did not cross the line into politics. Those who opposed rent control in the city mounted numerous investigations into the books at OPP. Under the leadership of trained organizer Carole Cullum, they had run a squeaky-clean operation. Conversation about elections was not permitted in any of the non-profit offices. It was particularly important to be resolute on that

point because the offices for the rent control campaign were, by sheer coincidence, in the same building on an upper floor. Cullum had worked in the office of New York Congressmember Bella Abzug. That experience made her able to anticipate and avoid running afoul of scrutiny.

By this time, the Women's Center, now called Womanspace was still operating in the parsonage, and OPCC was in Archer House with Sojourn, which used a room there for its administrative offices. And, they had added a shelter for runaway youth and a rape hotline to their services. Liberty Hill and Central Legal still rented offices inside the church. Communitas had to leave its basement office on Main Street when the landlord decided to remodel. It moved out of the neighborhood to downtown Santa Monica. To bring everyone back on site, the Church in Ocean Park shuffled tenants around to make room for OPCO to take over the parsonage. For the church's part, Sunday morning events continued with the music now led by Graham instead of Fiske. Graham continued in that role until her death in 2009.

A SMRR City Council and Community Corps

After rent control passed in 1979, SMRR held an issues conference to learn more about their constituency and develop progressive solutions to more of the city's problems. Steering Committee members wrote white papers that addressed the various issues that came up and other aspects of a progressive city government based on research into new trends and best practices. The research resulted in a 14-page document they called The *Principles of Unity Between Members of the Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights Coalition*. In 1981, The *Principles of Unity* became the foundation for the platforms of a full slate of four SMRR candidates for city council. Topics included the airport (they wanted to close it), commercial development (should be carefully vetted by the city and the public), housing (listed a number of strategies for making it more affordable), self-government (support for neighborhood organizations), crime and public safety (bolster both police and preventative social services), social service programs (for seniors and children, also library, arts, parks and recreation) city administration (public participation encouraged), energy (solar conversion), environmental health (air quality, toxin disposal), and human rights (affirmative action, women's rights, non-discrimination).

Jim Conn, Denny Zane, Dolores Press and Ken Edwards, all four SMRR-endorsed candidates, easily won seats. For Conn's part, as a reverend with close ties to numerous non-profit organizations, the electoral win clouded the separation of his non-profit work from his politics. All the agencies had separate funding, separate staff, and separate boards, nonetheless donors with a distaste for politics began to pull their funding. None of that took away from the triumph of the landslide progressive victory. It was the same year republican Ronald Reagan swept the national polls to become President of the United States. Santa Monica's ultra-progressive election results attracted attention in the national press – the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and even some international papers took notice. The new council opposed high-rise development, a few examples of which had begun to dot the city's downtown. The city established a Commission on the Status of Women and an Arts Commission. The progressive leadership sponsored the Santa Monica Farmers Market and

began to demand inclusionary affordable housing in mixed-use projects seeking Development Agreements. These and many other programs they implemented have continued to evolve and grow over the past 40 years.

Like the city council, OPCC experienced a major transition in 1981 when Mollie Lowery became its executive director bringing the collective management days of the organization to an end. It was a terrific affirmation that the grassroots organization had grown and professionalized. Ironically, the change to a traditional management structure helped the organization become more diverse. To operate successfully as a collective, everyone involved had to share goals and beliefs with a certain degree of homogeneity to allow them to ever reach a consensus. In the early, all-volunteer days, it was noted that it was more important that volunteers be like-minded than that they have particular skills. Skills can be taught. The upshot of all this was that most of the organizations created and operated for the first decade after the Church in Ocean Park came on the scene were run by college-educated white women. Lowery stayed in the role until 1984, when a series of new directors came and went including Barrie Levy, Amy Sommer, a stint by board members Judy Abdo and Ellen Friedman, and finally Vivian Rothstein who served for 10 years beginning in 1987.

Several important programs, many of which have served and still serve Santa Monica as of this writing, came out of OPCC. Stepping Stone (1979) is a crisis shelter for runaway youth. Turning Point (1983) is a shelter providing transitional housing for single men and women who often move from there into their own apartments. Campion (1984) is a counseling center for OPCC clients. The OPCC Homeless Outreach Team (1986) reaches out to mentally ill or substance addicted unhoused people who won't seek help on their own. Middle House (1987) is a long-term shelter for runaway youth. Daybreak (1987) is a day care center for mentally disturbed homeless women. OPCC was also instrumental in establishing the Westside Food Bank, the Latino Resource Organization, and the Westside Shelter Coalition. In 2016, OPCC merged with Lamp Community, another community services organization, to form The People Concern, a leading provider of, and advocate for, evidence-based solutions to the multifaceted challenges inherent in homelessness and domestic violence.

When the four new SMRR council members were seated in 1981, they hired John Alschuler to be the new City Manager. He was given a copy of the *Principles of Unity* to serve as a guide for the transformation of the city government they envisioned. They also hired Robert Myers, who authored the Rent Control Charter Amendment, as the new City Attorney. Meanwhile, OPCO created a housing committee and studied the same new trends and theories for best practices in housing as the SMRR Steering Committee. Both groups concluded the city needed a Community Housing Development Corporation. SMRR documented their finding in the *Principles of Unity*, and OPCO made it known at its third congress in 1981, with a resolution that read, "OPCO will initiate the formulation of a Community Development Corporation (CDC) to rehabilitate, renovate, and/or build low- and moderate-income housing." At an impromptu meeting between Alschuler and Judy Abdo, who now served as OPCO's executive director, she

asked if he would support a $5,000 budget allocation to study a plan for an affordable housing non-profit. He suggested they skip the study and submit a full proposal to the city council.

With consensus across Santa Monica's community of progressives, Paul Silvern wrote up a proposal for a new non-profit on behalf of the OPCO housing committee. The SMRR City Council granted OPCO $19,000 in funding to hire UCLA Urban Planning Professor Allen Heskin to set up and get the housing development corporation off the ground. As a result, in 1982 Community Corporation of Santa Monica (CCSM) emerged as the non-profit organization that would protect and create affordable housing in Santa Monica. Its first board was comprised of people from the Ocean Park and Pico neighborhoods. CCSM's initial funding came from a Community Development Block Grant from the city. The first outside director of CCSM was Gary Squier. He was followed by Neal Richman and Kathy Weremuik. Joan Ling, who had been part of the organization from the beginning, took the helm in the early 1990s. She held the leadership position for two decades. Under Ling's leadership and with broad community support, Community Corporation thrived. Today Community Corps (as it is now called) manages over 1800 deed-restricted affordable units in Santa Monica across nearly 100 apartment buildings.

Like the original mission of the Church in Ocean Park, all of the organizations that came from it strove to meet the needs of those who were shunned or overlooked by traditional agencies. Many of the programs were national firsts and most became models for others.

In 1995, Reverend James Conn left his position at the Church in Ocean Park after more than 20 years. He was replaced by Reverend Sandie Richards, and she by Reverend Janet McKeithen in 2005, who remains there as of this writing. The church and its members continue to stand for social justice, caring, and inclusiveness in Santa Monica and beyond.

…a "faint heart" never built a church…

Nina Fresco
January 2022

Organizations and Services Established Through CIOP

Teen / Community Center (1962)

Ocean Park Community Center 1973
- Stepping Stone (1979)
- Turning Point (1983)
- Campion (1984)
- The OPCC Homeless Outreach Team (1986)
- Middle House (1987
- Daybreak (1987)
- Westside Food Bank
- Latino Resource Organization
- Westside Shelter Coalition

Nursey School (1955)
The Children's Place (1975)

Sunday Nights (1973)
Public Works Theater Company (1975)
Sunday Mornings (1975)

Community Assistance League (1973)
Central Legal (1975)

Westside Women's Center (1974)
Women's Center (1975)
Womanspace (1979)

Westside Women's Clinic (1974)

Civic Association (1974)

Main Street Fair (1974)

Handy Women (1975)

Liberty Hill Foundation (1976)

Sojourn (1977)

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Communitas (1979)
OPCO (1979)

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