Epworth United Methodist Church (Portland)

From its beginnings as a mission in the late 1890s, Epworth United Methodist Church in Portland has been an important religious and community center for Japanese American residents. It is the only Japanese Methodist church in the state and one of only sixteen in the nation.

After the number of Japanese immigrants (Issei) settling in the Portland area increased from 30 in 1887 to 100 in 1892, the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church in San Francisco assigned a missionary to study the need for a permanent ministry in the Pacific Northwest. Reverend Teikichi Kawabe, an ordained deacon from San Francisco, served as circuit preacher, meeting with Issei throughout the Pacific Northwest. After three visits to Portland, he proposed that the city become a center for evangelism in the greater Northwest. In February 1893, Reverend Kawabe opened the Japanese Methodist Mission in a rented house at 54 Southwest First Avenue.

During its early evangelism, the mission grew rapidly, attracting more than 100 Issei by 1894 and renting its fourth building by 1895. After it made its first building purchase in 1897, the mission expanded its programs to include a Sunday School and a ladies' society. In 1902, plans were made to form a church, and the next year a house on Northwest 15th and Glisan was purchased. While members and friends raised $2,500, the Methodist Episcopal National Board of Missions granted $3,500 toward the purchase. The congregation grew from mostly men to include "cute children and graceful ladies." An English-speaking kindergarten gave Nisei (second generation) children the chance to improve their language skills.

By 1919, the church had purchased a dance hall attached to a house on Northwest 16th Avenue to serve the expanding congregation. The dance hall became the sanctuary, social hall, and classroom, and the house became the parsonage and meeting room. In the 1920s, a bus was donated to transport children to the church's kindergarten. In the early 1930s, Reverend Chiyokichi Tagashira became the first pastor to speak fluently in both Japanese and English.

The greatest change came during World War II, when in 1942 all Japanese living in the Portland area were ordered to report to the Portland Assembly Center, a former stockyard in North Portland, before being moved by rail to the Minidoka Relocation Center near Jerome, Idaho. From 1942 to 1945, the church ceased to function.

Following Victory over Japan Day, on August 15, 1945, the church building served as a hostel for displaced individuals until they could find suitable housing. Reverend Francis Hayashi led the church's reorganization, and the Japanese Methodist Church was renamed the Epworth Methodist Church. The Hayashis also began the community graduation banquet, now a cherished tradition that honors Japanese American high school graduates in Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington Counties.

In 1952, the congregation moved to its present location at 1333 Southeast 28th Avenue, the former Grace German Methodist Church, which it purchased for $20,000, including the parsonage. In June 1964, the Japanese Methodist churches integrated with other Methodist churches within the Western Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church.

A period of significant growth began in 1978 when Reverend Chester V. Earls, the first non-Japanese minister of the church, extended his temporary appointment from three months to twelve years. Reverend Earls led the church's building renovation and expansion, which included a two-story educational wing, an enlarged sanctuary, and a renovated dining hall. Four years after the groundbreaking ceremony on February 27, 1983, the church held a mortgage-burning service.

Since 1985, Epworth has hosted the Ikoi-no-kai (Meeting Place) hot lunch program five days a week for the community's elderly. In all, seventeen ministers have served the church since 1893. In 2011, Epworth had about 220 church members, 95 percent of whom are Japanese Americans.

Written by George Azumano

Further Reading:

Kamano, Yoshimi, and Shinya Maruya, trans. *From Simple Roots: A Celebration of Christian Growth: Epworth United Methodist Church 1893-1948*. Portland, Ore.: Epworth United Methodist Church, 1982.

Kamano, Yoshimi, trans. *History of Epworth United Methodist Church, Portland, Oregon*. Additions by Rev. Shinya Maruya. Portland, Ore.: Epworth United Methodist Church, 1982.

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