



**170 W. Sierra Madre Blvd.
Sierra Madre First
Congregational Church
1928**

By Maggie Ellis
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Compiled from information provided by Jim Constantian, Church Historian, with some additional information provided by Pastor Richard Anderson, prior Church Administrator Ken Cromeenes, and architect Dale Brown.

After meeting in several locations around town, the Congregational Church congregation finally built their first home, now called the Old North Church, in 1890. For the history of that church building, see The Old North Church, 191 W. Sierra Madre Blvd.



Photo: smcnet.org

In the mid-1920s, they began building on a large lot across the street. The first structure at the new location, Pritchard Hall, was built in 1925 at a cost of \$40,000. It is now used as an education wing, fellowship hall and Sunday school classrooms.

Ground was broken for the new church in 1927, and, by 1928, enough had been completed that it was time for a ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone for the tower. At that ceremony, items were placed into a time capsule, a copper box that was later soldered shut and placed within the cornerstone. Into the box went a Bible, an American flag, a history of the church, financial statements, significant sermons given by church pastors, and lists of members, officers, children, etc., as well of a list of young churchmen who had gone into WWI. Into it also went photographs of the old church and the groundbreaking for the parsonage which originally was on Central (now Sierra Madre Blvd) but later was moved directly south of the new church. For a history of the parsonage, see *The Parsonage*, 40 S. Hermosa.



The sanctuary cost \$35,000 to build, with the furnishings costing an additional \$5,000. In her history of Sierra Madre, *Southern California Story*, Michele Zack writes that the architects Marsh, Smith and Powell were the designers, and she identifies the style of the church as Romanesque Revival.

According to Dale Brown of Onyx Architects, who re-built the tower after the 1991 Sierra Madre earthquake, the tower had been partially remodeled in the 1970s when it sustained some earthquake damage to the top. At that time, the original concrete block walls were removed from the top to reduce weight, and were replaced with wood and plaster.

Although the church had been reinforced to withstand earthquakes before the 1991 Sierra Madre earthquake occurred, that earthquake twisted the building and the tower, whose concrete "stones" had been built in such a way that they could not be reinforced.

The Los Angeles Times wrote of the damage to the church:

"On Sierra Madre Boulevard, this local version of Main Street, U.S.A., worshipers inspected [Pastor Richard] Anderson's badly damaged church and said amen to the fact that \$130,000 worth of earthquake reinforcement had been completed six months ago.

"The old church, completed in 1928 and still bearing scars from the 1933 Long Beach quake, may have cracked, but it had not collapsed.

"If we hadn't done the retrofitting, we'd have a bunch of dead people in there," said Amos Broughton, a church elder.

"The tower was fractured and even the letters advertising the Sunday sermon were jolted off the bulletin board. Before 7:43 a.m., at least, the topic had been 'Living With Ambiguity.' Broughton remarked that in the Book of Revelations, wars and earthquakes are predicted as precursors to Armageddon. 'I don't know when it will happen. Nobody knows,' he said. 'This is just a reminder that the inhabitor of eternity, which is God, is more powerful than anything man can devise.' " [Neighborliness Shines Through in Sierra Madre; June 29, 1991, Scott Harris, Staff Writer]

Although the main building was deemed still safe, the tower was too damaged and had to be replaced. It was torn down, and a deep hole for a new, stronger foundation, was dug. The new tower was reinforced to meet current earthquake standards. Architect Dale Brown says that the original architectural drawings for the church, which were faithfully followed for the reconstruction, indicated that the original building and the tower was to have a plastered surface, and he speculates that the church ran out of project funds back in the 1920s and did not complete that final step. The grout between the cement blocks of the church is flush with them, which would not be the case if the intention had been to have an unplastered exterior. Consequently, the rebuilt tower needed to have its mortar match that style to create a surface uniform with the church's, and color was added to the mortar. The new concrete blocks were sandblasted so they matched the texture and color of the original blocks. Very little of the original tower block was salvageable, but pieces of it were used to construct the sign along Sierra Madre Boulevard, a low wall for Anderson Terrace at the corner of Sierra Madre Boulevard and Hermosa, and the rectangular "tables" along Hermosa. The historic windows, frames, stairs and bell were all saved and were faithfully reinstalled. (Inside the tower there is a stairwell up to a landing, and after that, a ladder up to the bell tower loft.)

A small but important detail was corrected when the tower was rebuilt. The original drawings and historic photographs confirmed the cross at the top of the tower had been installed in the wrong direction when the tower was remodeled in the 1970s. When the tower was rebuilt the cross was re-installed correctly.

At that time, the time capsule was opened, then resealed and cemented into the west exterior wall, but its present location isn't easily visible due to plantings. Not long after the earthquake, the kitchen was expanded, with a dishwashing room below and offices above. This portion of the building was strengthened by embedding columns in the walls.

In 2007, thanks to donations, the four clear glass windows in the south transept were replaced with stained glass so that they matched the stained glass windows in the north transept.