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A blended church celebrates historic milestone with new name

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A blended community of two historic churches where neighbors can gather in faith, is marking 160 years of spiritual support with a new name.

Established in the Gold Rush days, First Congregational Church of Murphys and Union Congregational Church of Angels Camp grew alongside the mining communities that gave rise to both towns. Recently christened the Open Door United Church of Christ, the churches, which combined in 2023, continue their shared legacy of providing spiritual support as evidenced by the slogan, “Open doors, open minds, open hearts.”

The circa 1895 sanctuary formerly known as the First Congregational Church of Murphys was renamed in 2026 the Open Door United Church of Christ. It is blended from the Murphys congregation and that of the Union Congregational Church of Angels Camp. Both churches' separate historical roots date back to the California Gold Rush. Courtesy photo provided by Open Door United Church of Christ

According to church officials, after many decades of existing separately but sharing some pastoral leadership, the two congregations merged after which a decision was made to create something new while preserving the legacy of both. The newly coined moniker reflects the church's identity as an "open and affirming congregation," and its belief that all people are welcome regardless of background, life experience, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, age, or circumstance.

While honoring more than a century and a half of faithful service, officials stated that the Open Door United Church of Christ extends an open door invitation for all people to find community, belonging, and spiritual support; emphasizing that beyond the church walls, the congregation's legacy further builds upon its historical commitment to compassionate community engagement, support and care for their neighbors.

Church member Darlene Davis, who has been working on a combined history of the churches, shared that they are among the oldest continuously operating congregations in Calaveras County. The current sanctuary in Murphys, constructed in 1895, replaced the congregation's earlier church building. The white wooden structure with its distinctive bell tower, one of Murphys' recognizable historic landmarks, has remained remarkably intact and continues to be used for worship, weddings, memorial services, concerts, and community gatherings.

Interfaith activities include Holy Week observances and support for the Mother Lode Jewish community such as through the restoration of a historic 90-foot Torah, reflecting the church's longstanding commitment to cooperation, understanding, and service across faith traditions.

Celebrating history, roots

Welcoming local and nonlocal visitors interested in the rich history of the community, the church participates in historical tours; special events such as Murphys Irish Day and Day of the Dead celebrations.

The first church building in Murphys was erected shortly after its Gold Rush period congregation–largely miners, merchants, ranchers, and families–came together. Over the years, the footprint expanded through the acquisition of neighboring properties, including the Fred Fiske property, which provided additional office and meeting space for ministry and community activities.

Among the locally well-known pioneer family names that were a part of building the congregation was Mrs. Eva Stephens, the daughter of Walter Mercer, who discovered Mercer Caverns. Mrs. Stephens served as its first Sunday School Superintendent, Clerk, Music Director, Organist, and President of the "Ladies Aid." According to Davis, she served as

narrator at the church's 75th Anniversary celebration and was still an active member when the church celebrated its centennial in 1966.

Mrs. James Sperry, whose husband owned the Murphys and Calaveras Big Trees hotels, was responsible for helping found the church by writing a letter to a Rev. Starr in San Francisco, requesting that he come preach in Murphys. According to Davis, on Sept. 23, 1866, the meeting between the Reverend and 10 men and women who gathered in Mrs. Sperry's home culminated in the initial formation of the First Congregational Church of Murphys. Among the other historically notable early members and financial supporters was Eliza Hoyt, the wife of John Perry, owner of the Sperry and Perry Hotel now known as Historic Murphys Hotel. The Matteson Family, who operated the stage coach lines, were also members.

The roots of Union Congregational Church of Angels Camp also harken back to Gold Rush days. According to church historians, in 1869, Rev. John W. Brier met with local people and they organized a Congregational church. Several pastors served it in the early days, One, Rev. Dennis Goodsell, also served First Congregational Church of Murphys and lived in their parsonage. Often after holding Saturday evening services in Copperopolis, he would return to Angels Camp, stable his horse near the church and sleep on one of the pews in order to be ready for the Sunday morning service. He compared his ministry to that of a Methodist Circuit Rider, because he served so many areas of Calaveras County.

As there was no other library in the area, in 1927 Rev. Cookman started one and opened it to the public. Shelves built along one wall of Pioneer Hall were filled with donated books and volunteers served as staff. This arrangement continued until the Calaveras County Library was established.

Like its Murphys counterpart, Union Congregational Church/UCC resolved to become an open and affirming congregation with a primary purpose "to proclaim and extend God's extravagant welcome to all people." Welcoming and accepting all people regardless of race, sex, nationality, physical disability, marital status, mental ability, economic status, or sexual orientation, the congregation members believed that the greatest commandments are to love God with all their hearts, souls and minds, and to love their neighbors as themselves.

Support then, now

"As both a history enthusiast and a member of the congregation, I am continually inspired by the fact that our church has been serving this community since 1866," Davis confided. "When I sit in our historic sanctuary, I often think about the generations of people who have come before us—Gold Rush families, miners, ranchers, merchants, teachers, and community leaders — who gathered in faith, celebrated life's joys, and supported one another through challenges. There is something deeply meaningful about being part of a legacy that has endured for 160 years.

"What I find most remarkable is that while the world around us has changed dramatically, the heart of the church has remained the same," she continued. "Our mission has always been about welcoming people, caring for our neighbors, and creating a place where people can find hope, connection, and purpose. At the same time, our church is not simply a museum of the past. The history gives us roots, but it also gives us responsibility. We honor those who came before us by continuing to evolve and respond to the needs of our community today. That's one reason the name Open Door United Church of Christ feels so meaningful to me. It reflects both our heritage and our future—a church whose doors are open to everyone and whose members are committed to stepping outside those doors to serve others."

For anyone searching for a place of faith, belonging, and acceptance, church officials said the congregation offers something special: a community grounded in history, guided by compassion, and committed to living out faith through love and service. The church continues to develop and administer programs for social justice and community outreach, which includes hosting 12-step program meetings, supporting community partners like The Resource Connection, Habitat for Humanity Calaveras, Golden San Andreas Care Center, and other local programs as well as providing food from its "Blessing Box" and other assistance to local homeless residents.

Church services are held at 10 a.m. every Sunday at the sanctuary, located at 509 N. Algiers. St. A Wednesday morning prayer time at 8:15 a.m. via Zoom is led by Interim Pastor Rev. Dr. Gary Percesepe. A musical sanctuary and guided meditation by Musical Director Kate Moody is held monthly on the fourth Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. Other pastoral staff members include Pastor Emeritus Rev. Dr. John Randlett and retired UCC ministers Reverends Penny Sarvis and Mickey Williamson. Office hours are weekdays from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. when a live person can generally be reached at (209) 728-3141.

"Open Door UCC is an amazingly warm, loving, and compassionate congregation," Rev. Williamson said. "Our Interim Minister Gary Percesepe said that is what drew him to accept the position with the church. We live in a time when it is not automatic that people go to church, and young families' lives are filled with youth sports and jobs for teenagers that make church attendance very difficult. We are exploring a variety of ways to reach people, including streaming our worship services, so that more and more folks in our region will discover the blessings of Open Door UCC."

While the church community is planning to host a celebration this fall, upcoming events open to the public included a Peddler's Faire that was held this past weekend. There is also a free Vacation Bible School for youth ages 5 to 11 July 27-31 along with a new teen program in July with details shortly to come. In August, the congregation will hold its annual Outdoor Service at White Pines Lake. Come September, they will support the community Pride in the Park event in Murphys Community Park near the historic downtown. While a revamping of the church

website is underway, for more information about its programs and activities, visit the current one at fccmurph.org.

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