

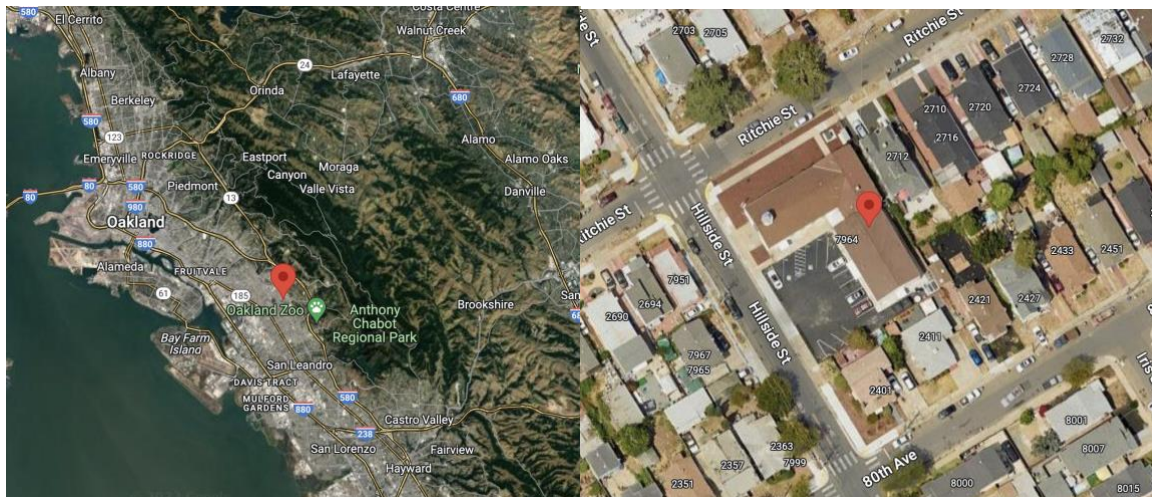
CASE STUDY: Hillside Presbyterian Church Closure T-CARE (Truth Commission Assessing Race and Equity) September 2023 Rick Leong

Preamble: This case study is based on the research completed by one member of T-CARE (Rick Leong). It was based on the written record; not on extensive interviews or focus groups. It should not be taken as a comprehensive report of the issue but as a beginning of a conversation process. These events created, exacerbated, and stirred up deep emotion, much of which is still felt and carried by the people who participated or witnessed them. Our presbytery still needs to reckon with these events. We recommend the Reparations and Community Healing Commission engage with these events by holding a Truth and Reconciliation Process.

Introduction

Hillside Presbyterian Church (HPC) in East Oakland was closed in the early 2000's and the property was sold by the Presbytery of San Francisco (PSF). The property, 2708 Ritchie St., Oakland, CA 94605, is currently occupied and owned by Genesis Worship Center (<https://genesisworshipcenter.com/>).

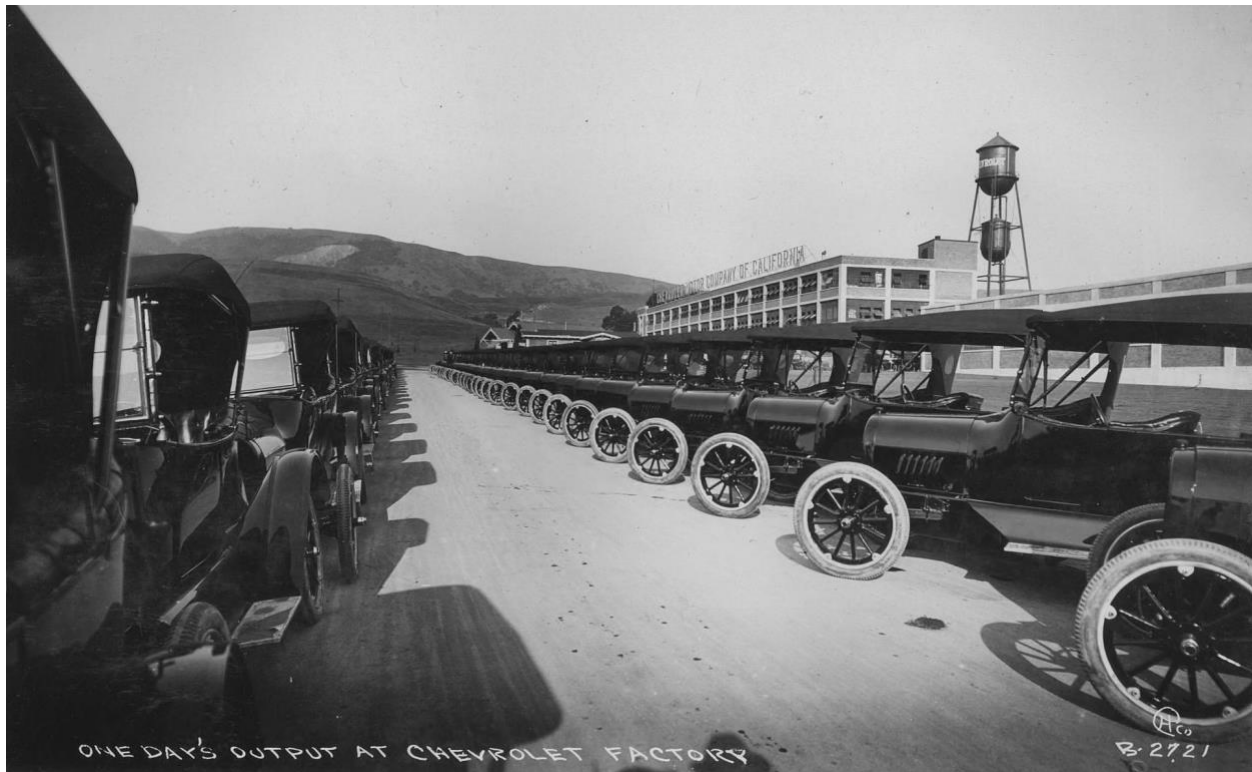
This review focuses upon a time period of decline at HPC and the Presbytery of San Francisco's (PSF) relationship with HPC (1993 - present).



([Google Maps](#); accessed 25 Sep 2023)

HPC Origins

HPC was founded in 1927 and served an area of East Oakland known as the “Chevrolet Plant field” as at its center was built a Chevrolet automobile plant (1916). In its early years, HPC was primarily a majority white congregation.



(Chevrolet assembly plant, Oakland, CA circa 1917; source [Wikipedia](#))

Following World War II, the Elmhurst neighborhood of Oakland began to change as larger manufacturing facilities began to close/relocate. The demographics of the neighborhood began to shift from predominantly white to, over time, to predominantly a black population. The congregation of HPC also reflected this change. (*Litherland, Rev. R.H.; "Final Report - Interim Pastorate; Hillside Presbyterian Church; January 1992 - September 1992"*)

As changes in the neighborhood continued, the size of the HPC congregation became smaller. In turn, financial stability started to become an issue. Litherland noted that HPC was financially stable prior to the changes in the neighborhood over two decades (1960's - 1980's), which led to financial concerns for HPC. In the mid-1970's, Litherland notes that subsidies (in the form of PSF grants along with donations from other local Presbyterian congregations) began to occur on a regular basis. Session minutes from the 1990's also reflect this condition of financial instability and shrinking congregation size.

HPC/PSF Relationship - 1980's/1990's

During the 1980's and 1990's, HPC reached out to the PSF with requests for assistance and support during this period of struggle. PSF appeared to be somewhat responsive to HPC (particularly in providing annual grants/subsidies), but it appeared that most PSF responses were in the form of providing what could be possible based upon existing PC(USA) policies and

past practices. This included requests for HPC to pursue PSF processes and to provide the necessary information needed outlined by PSF. One example of this was the need for HPC to complete a "mission study" (part of the initial process of approaching the PSF's Committee on Ministry regarding a pastoral search). It appeared that HPC did not have the person-power resources to complete a full mission study, although the then interim pastor helped HPC complete what they called, "1993 Mission Design for Hillside Presbyterian Church".

The financial struggles of HPC also contributed to the inability of HPC to be able to hire anything more than short-term, interim pastoral support between 1987 - 2004. (*Unknown author; handwritten "History of HPC Pastors 1926-2004"*). PSF attempted to assist HPC in finding temporary pastoral support (interim pastors, temporary designated pastors, part-time support from seminary students, etc.) but did not look beyond this traditional paradigm rather than examining the Presbytery's mission in this neighborhood beyond the need of hiring a part-time pastor.

In the documents that T-CARE was able to locate in PSF files and elsewhere, it was noted (in more than one document by different individuals that had been involved with HPC during the 1990's and early 2000's) that the PSF "neglected" this congregation, including one comment specifically attributing this to "institutional racism". (*Carrie Buckner conversation with Paul Connor; email June 23, 2004*)

The decline of HPC continued and issues of mistrust grew amongst those remaining in the congregation during the late 1990's into the early 2000's. The decline appeared to peak in March 2004 when HPC Elder Abner D. Walton sent a letter to the PSF's Committee On Ministry (COM) recommending the dissolution of HPC. (*Walton; "Closure of Hillside Presbyterian Church"; letter to Committee On Ministry; March 2, 2004*)

During this period of time, it was also recommended that a study be completed to discern the mission of the Presbyterian Church in this neighborhood of East Oakland.

Closure of HPC/Sale of Church Property

An Administrative Commission was formed to evaluate the situation at HPC along with the HPC Session. The work of the Administrative Commission concluded that the closure of HPC and the sale of the church property were the appropriate actions to be taken.

Pastors from six (6) remaining predominantly black churches in the PSF authored a letter to the PSF recommending that the proceeds from the sale of the HPC property be shared amongst the remaining black congregations in order to "honor the intent to support and foster vital congregational mission for and by African-American churches in our Presbytery." (*Multiple authors, "From majority African American/African Congregations of San Francisco Presbytery"; "Statement on the Legacy and Witness of Hillside Presbyterian Church"; undated*).

Research completed by the late Rev. Leonard Nielson in early 2017 indicated that the distribution of the proceeds of the sale of the HPC property to the remaining African American/African congregations was agreed upon but had not been completed despite the sale of the property in 2005. (*Nielson, L.; "Hillside Sale Proceeds - Initial Research"; Jan. 3, 2017*). Further research by T-CARE confirmed that the first distribution of these funds did occur, but not until February 22, 2018 (thirteen years after the sale of the HPC property). A second distribution was made on October 17, 2018, while the third and final distribution was made on July 29, 2019. The payments included PSF's estimated interest that would have accrued between 2005 and 2018. (*PSF; "Vendor QuickReports - January 2018 - December 2019"; Accounting records of distributions printed June 30, 2023; PSF; Excel Spreadsheet "Hillside Summary for Investment Committee, May 5, 2008; PSF; "Interest Calculations"; undated*)

Again, as part of this property sale process, it was recommended that a task force of some kind be established to examine ministry needs and to strategize for a Presbyterian presence in East Oakland. It is unclear if this work ever was completed or even gained any traction.

Summary/Findings

Based upon available information, T-CARE has identified the practice of institutionalized and systemic racism as part of the PSF's response to the decline of HPC and also the handling of the sale proceeds from the sale of the HPC property (delayed distribution while utilizing the proceeds for other PSF priorities at the time, including as security for the refinancing of the loan for Westminster House in 2005 and an equity share loan to Interim Executive Craig Palmer in 2007). Also, instead of looking in-depth into how the Presbyterian church could change to meet the needs of the community, it appears the PSF came to the conclusion that the "square peg" of the Presbyterian church just could not fit into the "round opening" representing the needs in the community from this church, therefore HPC was dissolved. (PSF: Excel Spreadsheet "Hillside Summary for Investment Committee, May 5, 2008;)

(These are background notes that contributed to the draft narrative above)

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The closure of HPC was identified as a case study of interest for the Truth Commission Assessing Race and Equity) T-Care's history task group (examination of specific periods of time, specific events, etc. that can be used to evaluate the PSF and determine how it either responded or not in relation to issues related to race). HPC, at the time, was one of the predominantly African American congregations in the PSF.

The issues that were initially unclear to T-Care members regarding the closure of HPC:

- (1) Disposition/distribution of the proceeds from the sale of the HPC property
 - (a) Six predominantly African American/African immigrant congregations in the PSF proposed that the proceeds from the sale of HPC be distributed evenly between their congregations
 - (i) Elmhurst Presbyterian Church
 - (ii) Faith Presbyterian Church
 - (iii) Ingleside Presbyterian Church
 - (iv) New Bridges Presbyterian Church
 - (v) New Liberation Presbyterian
 - (vi) Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church
 - (b) T-Care requested from information from PSF files related to the closure of HPC
 - (c) Was there documentation of these distributions being made and when?**
- (2) Relationship between PSF HPC during their decline, but prior to the decision to close.
 - (a) It is not clear what the relationship between the PSF and HPC was like prior to the church's closure.
 - (b) What was the nature of this relationship prior to the closure of HPC?**
 - (i) What actions or effort, if any, did the PSF take to come alongside, support, encourage, or assist HPC during the church's decline (well before the decision to close)?

FINDINGS

(1) PSF Records/Files on HPC Closure

- (a) After placing the request to the PSF, several of the staff responded that they would search the PSF files for this material.

- (b) Marda Quon Stothers, Partner of Mission and Church Assets (Transitional Executive Partner) provided T-Care with several electronic documents.
 - (i) The documents included specific information on the sale process of the HPC property.
 - (ii) Also included were summary notes compiled by the late Rev. Leonard Nielsen from 2017-2018. (*"Hillside Sale Proceeds Initial Research of the Records From Leonard Nielson Jan. 3, 2017"*)
 - 1) The notes documented the decision made by PSF to close HPC.
 - 2) Details of the sale of the HPC property.
 - 3) Discussions regarding the distribution/use of the proceeds from this real estate transaction.
 - a) Letter from the 6 predominantly African American/African immigrant congregations in the PSF (requesting that the proceeds be distributed evenly between these 6 congregations in order to further the ministry of HPC/support African American/African immigrant ministries within the PSF/or in East Oakland.
 - b) Nielsen's summary notes of his research of PSF files, meeting minutes, etc. regarding HPC
 - i) March 2004 - PSF established Administrative Commission (AC) to work with HPC
 - ii) September 2004 -AC submits report at PSF meeting; PSF approves motion:
 - 1. Concurs with recommendation to close HPC.
 - 2. AC to continue to work with HPC
 - 3. Allow AC to convene a meeting of representatives from Healthy Congregations Ctte, HPC Session, and FPOC to determine future use of HPC property for ministry*
 - 4. **"In the Presbytery minutes I found no record of who may have been on that Task Force and if/when it was established, or of a formal*

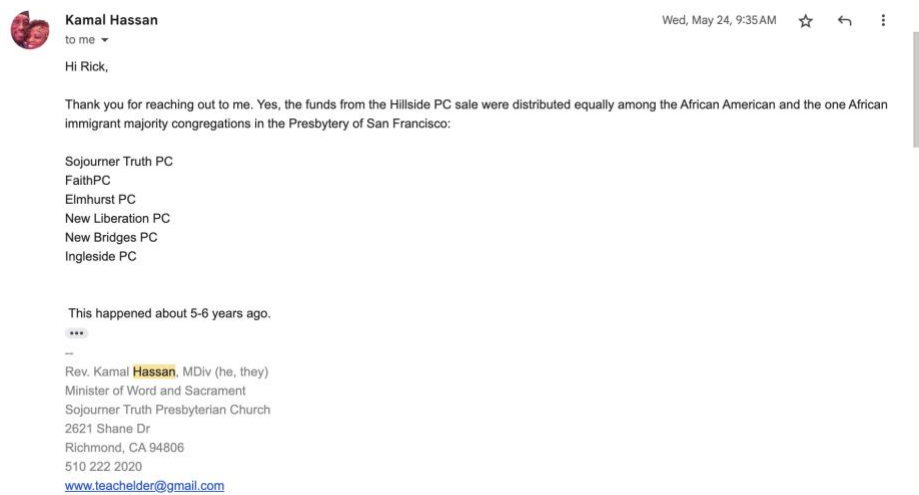
proposal for an urban strategy in East Oakland. Pete thought that Greg Chan and Joan Fong might have served on the Task Force, and that any report may have gone to Council. Greg reports that he was not on the TF. Joan has since passed away. There are no official minutes of the Council in the archives.”

5. *“Whatever happens I would like to get this to the Feb. 2018 Presbytery meeting for a formal vote.” **If the closure of HPC was approved in 2004, why is it that discussions were continuing in 2018?***

(iii) **Is there any additional information documenting any existence/work of this “Task Force” (urban ministry/East Oakland)?**

(c) Email exchange with Rev Kamal Hassan (May 24, 2023) - re: sale proceeds

- (i) T-Care member Rick Leong emailed Rev. Kamal Hassan, present pastor of Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, and asked Rev. Hassan if he knew anything about the distribution of the HPC property sale proceeds. Rev. Hassan responded,



- (ii) June 30, 2023: Received email from from Marda Quon Stothers with information and attachments (pdf document/source PSF Treasurer) that document Hillside proceed distributions were made to Ingleside, New Bridges, Faith, Sojourner Truth, Elmhurst, and New Liberation congregations in Feb. 2018.
- (iii) The sale of Hillside property occurred in 2005. **What were the reasons that caused approximately 13 years to pass before the processing of the payments to the 6 churches.?**
- (iv) **Where did the proceeds from the sale of the church property reside in the Presbytery during the decade between the completion of the sale and actual disbursement to the churches? Also - need to review**

how the interest-earned was calculated in order to confirm that the amounts dispersed to remaining African-American churches was done accurately.

(2) The Decline of HPC

From ***Report of Hillside Administrative Commission***; 3080; Sept. 14, 2004 -
Presbytery of San Francisco; Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church; Appendix 7, Page 1

- (a) “Prior to the March 4th meeting, COM had received a four-page letter from Elder Abner Walton, a current session member at Hillside, indicating ‘a session that is totally dysfunctional and cannot provide effective leadership to the congregation as well as the community.’ Elder Walton closed his letter by stating, ‘I strongly recommend the dissolution of Hillside Presbyterian Church.’”

(i) Is there a copy of Elder Walton’s letter in PSF files?

- 1) Copy of letter from Elder Abner D. Walton to Committee on Ministry (COM - PSF); dated March 2, 2004; located in “Hillside” files stored at the former Fruitvale Pres Church (Follow-up research; Aug 15, 2023)

- a) “It is my sincere belief with the present membership in place, Hillside needs a drastic change in order to survive, and I don’t see that in the near future. I strongly recommend dissolution of Hillside Presbyterian Church.”

- (b) “The Administrative Commission decided to contact several African-American leaders within the presbytery to seek their insights and consultation.”

(i) Are there records of these insights and consultation with these leaders within PSF records?

- 1) Email correspondence was discovered during follow-up research (Aug 15, 2023)

- a) Joan Huff to Administrative Commission (email, June 17, 2004); RE: Joan Huff conversation with Carmen Mason-Browne; “*She felt that the presbytery did not respond to the needs of the church at that time [when Mason-Browne served as part-time solo pastor at Hillside] or since then.*”
- b) Ron Thompson to Administrative Commission (email, June 22, 2004); RE: Ron Thompson conversation with James

Noel; "Sell property and hold funds until a new ministry under new leadership can begin in a viable neighborhood. (Did not someone tell us that close-by are young Af/Am families with children?)"

- c) Carrie Buckner to Administrative Commission (email, June 23, 2004); RE: Carrie Buckner conversation with Paul Connor; "He did raise two key themes I think we should address. *First, what he called institutional racism in the presbytery about neglecting the issues/concerns at Hillside for so long. He also mentioned that it is not good to place new seminary grads (all African-American) at Hillside and the 'string' of dynamic pastors who have been burned out by their experiences there.*"
- d) Josie Abrams to Administrative Commission (email, June 21, 2004); RE: Josie Abrams conversation with Roland Gordon; "He was unaware it was this close to closure. He felt Hillside and Elmhurst should have merged a long time ago."

(c) "July 11, 2004: The Administrative Commission met with the HPC session to discuss the health and the mission of the church."

- (i) Ron Thompson to Administrative Commission (email, July 11, 2004); RE: Adm Comm, meeting with Hillside Session: "*We apologized for Presbytery not giving the kind of help and support for pastors and Hillside. We told of calling African-American pastors asking them for their insights.*"; "We encouraged them to consider other Presbyterian churches in the areas and that *down the road Presbytery would continue to be active in the area.*"

(d) "July 21, 2004: The Administrative Commission met to hear reports on conversations with African-American who were contacted. *It was clear from the reports that the presbytery should have intervened years ago. The term "benign neglect" was used repeatedly by persons when referring to the presbytery's handling of Hillside.*"

(e) Meeting minutes; Administrative Commission; July 21, 2004. "Ron asked what we learned from our conversations about Hillside with key African-American leaders in the Presbytery. Overall, the people we talked to with who have a long history in the Presbytery support closing the church. *Ron commented on how 'alone' pastors who have served at Hillside have felt.* This has been a learning for him regarding solo pastors in our urban churches." "Dave [Hawbecker] reported

on his conversation with Frank Jackson. *Frank shared that he hoped there would be a new initiative in East Oakland - an active, healthy, positive Presbyterian presence. As the convenor of the African-American pastors group in East Oakland, Frank felt that the group would support a new vision/ministry opportunity in East Oakland.*

- (f) “August 17, 2004: Upon hearing a report from Elder Abrams-Lawrence, Elder Sweis and Rev. Thompson, the Administrative Commission listed their finds from the various meetings they had with members of Hillside Church:

The following list was compiled:

No Christian education program;
Lack of accountability on finances;
No common/shared vision;
No officer training;
Property not maintained;
Lack of record keeping;
Session does not provide spiritual leadership;
No Bible study;
No mission outreach;
No youth presence;
Limited pastoral care;
Lack of fellowship/care;
Poor administration”

(i) For what period of time were these conditions present?

- 1) Congregational Meeting Minutes Based upon available HPC Session meeting minutes (earliest available from 1992), the decline of HPC goes back as far as the early 1990’s.
- 2) Additional documents/correspondence between Synod of the Pacific/Presbytery of San Francisco and HPC documents the pastoral vacancy issue as early as 1978.
 - a) Synod/Presbytery recommendation to HPC in the 70’s and 80’s was to pursue interim/designated/stated supply pastoral services while a process for developing “the study on the future if Presbyterian witness and ministry in the East Oakland area”. (Memorandum dated Sept 22, 1987; Bert Tom to Woody Bussee and Mose Thornton)
 - b) Reference to a “strategy” for East Oakland is mentioned in 1979, 1987, and in 2004.

(3) Relationship Between PSF and HPC During HOPC’s Decline

(a) What, if any, did the PSF do to come alongside this congregation during this period of decline?

- (i) An undated document titled, "Hillside Notes" appears to be a summary from the Rev. Wanda Shannon, stated supply (based upon the contents of the document). *"I hope you will allow me to express my personal concerns. The presbytery has failed this congregation by allowing them to continue so long in a state of inertia. The session has become a group of people in whom bad habits have become the norm. For years too long to count the church has been falling apart from any formal governance, drifting away into no known structure. I have tried to create an atmosphere where the members on the periphery would feel safe to return. I called everyone even Elizabeth Walton and promised to help correct the situation of rule by the power and control seekers. There are those who will never return until they see some form of concern set forth by the presbytery. With a constant turnover of pastors, with the extended use of temporary supply and the lack of strong administrators how can the presbytery expect this church to survive." "I am asking you to help. Even if this church closes the few who love the Lord deserve to leave with dignity, knowing that all was done within reason by the presbytery to help."*
- (b) Consideration of Partnership between HPC and Elmhurst Presbyterian Church
 - (i) Memo dated 9 July 1998; To: Matt Croughan and Janet Russell, From Bert Tom (attachment: "Draft of Plan for Hillside Presbyterian Church, Oakland; June 28, 1998")
 - (ii) What actions, if any, did the Presbytery take in response to
 - 1) Partnership between HPC and Elmhurst
 - 2) Need for Mission Study for HPC
- (c) "Temporary" pastoral leadership
 - (i) *"Ms. Vanessa Johnson, Parish Assistant (1994-1998); Rev. Dr. Ophelia Manney, Temporary Stated Supply (1997); Rev. Dr. Richard Litherland, Temporary Stated Supply (1998-1999); Rev. Dr. Reginald Nichols, Stated Supply (2000-2001); Rev. Charles Tinsley, Temporary Supply (2001-2002); Rev. Wanda Shannon, (9/2003 - 2/2004); Rev. Charles Tinsley, Pulpit Supply (2/2004 - 10/2004) (from undated handwritten pastoral history list for period 1994-2004)*
 - (ii) *"Future Staffing Possibilities: For over a dozen years Hillside Church has had only comparatively short term (maximum 3 years) pastoral leadership, subsidized by the Presbytery."* (from letter to Healthy Congregations Committee of PSF from Rev. Litherland dated October 11, 1999) + attached "Brief Summary 1998 - October 1999 Hillside Presbyterian Church Oakland California")
 - (iii) *"Even with subsidies from the Presbytery and from sister churches, the church (HPC) has only been able to pay only for part-time ordained*

leadership. (Since about 1980)". (from Sept 29, 1993 "Final Report - Interim Pastorate" by Rev. Dr. Richard Litherland)

(d) "Future of Presbyterian Witness and Ministry in the East Oakland Area"

(i) Reference to a "strategy" for East Oakland is mentioned in 1983, 1987 and later in 2004.

- 1) *"The REM Committee [Racial Ethnic Ministries Committee] was concerned that the long period of time it takes to call a pastor may delay the plans of the REM Committee to review, in depth, the mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) activities in the East Oakland area. The REM Committee believes that it is conceivable that a totally new mission strategy for Presbyterian witness in the East Oakland area may emerge from the review."* (Memorandum dated Sept 29, 1983; Bert Tom to Rev. Bob Bennett and Rev. Bill Nebo)
- 2) Synod/Presbytery recommendation to HPC in the 70's and 80's was to pursue interim/designated/stated supply pastoral services while a process for developing *"the study on the future if Presbyterian witness and ministry in the East Oakland area"*. *"This task begins sometime in October and is scheduled to be completed by June 30, 1988 or soon thereafter."* (Memorandum dated Sept 22, 1987; Bert Tom to Woody Bussee and Mose Thornton)
- 3)
- 4) Potential resources yet to be located: (referenced in Sept 29, 1993 "Final Report - Interim Pastorate" by Rev. Dr. Richard Litherland)
 - a) "Informational Paper"; East Oakland Ministry Task Force, Presbytery of San Francisco; 1987
 - b) "The Council of Oakland Presbyterian Churches: A model for the urban ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the 1980's"; Tyler L. Breese

(ii)

(4) Potential Interviews

- (a) Rev. Dave Hawbecker**
- (b) Rev. Wanda Shannon**
- (c) Rev. Joel Mackey**

[Link to Linda Spencer's document on Fund Accounting: Linda's Hillside Accounting Notes.docx](#)

