Breaking Bread, Building Bridges

A Sunday In America's First Interracial Church

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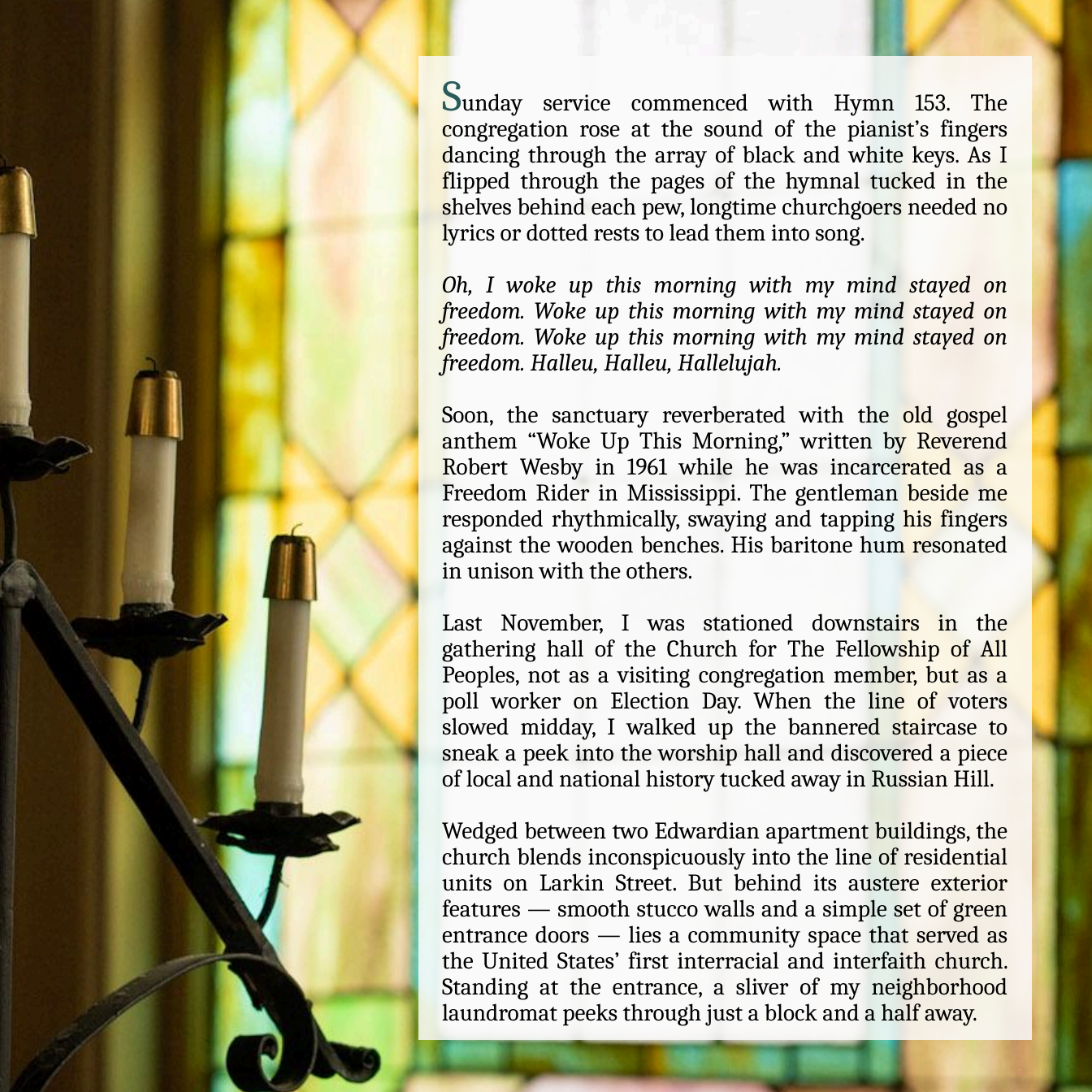


Sunday service commenced with Hymn 153. The congregation rose at the sound of the pianist's fingers dancing through the array of black and white keys. As I flipped through the pages of the hymnal tucked in the shelves behind each pew, longtime churchgoers needed no lyrics or dotted rests to lead them into song.

Oh, I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom. Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom. Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom. Halleu, Halleu, Hallelujah.

Soon, the sanctuary reverberated with the old gospel anthem "Woke Up This Morning," written by Reverend Robert Wesby in 1961 while he was incarcerated as a Freedom Rider in Mississippi. The gentleman beside me responded rhythmically, swaying and tapping his fingers against the wooden benches. His baritone hum resonated in unison with the others.

Last November, I was stationed downstairs in the gathering hall of the Church for The Fellowship of All Peoples, not as a visiting congregation member, but as a poll worker on Election Day. When the line of voters slowed midday, I walked up the bannered staircase to sneak a peek into the worship hall and discovered a piece of local and national history tucked away in Russian Hill.

Wedged between two Edwardian apartment buildings, the church blends inconspicuously into the line of residential units on Larkin Street. But behind its austere exterior features — smooth stucco walls and a simple set of green entrance doors — lies a community space that served as the United States' first interracial and interfaith church. Standing at the entrance, a sliver of my neighborhood laundromat peeks through just a block and a half away.

In 1943, Presbyterian clergyman and philosophy professor Dr. Alfred G. Fisk envisioned an inclusive place of worship that challenged the conventions of the highly-segregated American church. He then enlisted Dr. Howard Thurman, a theological scholar at Howard University, as his partner in ministry. The two shared the same dream: to establish a permanent, full-time church led by co-pastors — one white and one African American — who ministered based on their gifts rather than group affiliations. In October 1944, Fellowship Church hosted its inaugural service, welcoming various cultural and interdenominational leaders from across the city.

The United States Supreme Court would not see its landmark racial integration case, Brown v. Board of Education, until ten years later in 1954. Meanwhile, interracial communion thrived over Sunday gatherings, dinners, and musical performances at Fellowship Church.

“The Church is a creative experiment in interracial and intercultural communion, deriving its inspiration from a spiritual interpretation of the meaning of life and the dignity of man,” Thurman wrote, recounting the inception of the ministry in the 1945 Spring issue of Common Ground, an intercultural literary magazine. “To those of us who have dreamed of it for years, it represents an authentic growing edge for far-reaching social change in making possible communities of friendly men in a world grown gray with suffering and hate.”

“It was a place where [my parents] could go and be in an integrated setting, or even be among predominantly African Americans at that time,” Peter Fitzsimmons told me, explaining why his father, a African American jazz musician, and his mother, a white medical worker in the Presidio, gravitated toward Fellowship in the late 1940s. We chatted over the phone after meeting at Fellowship the week prior, and Fitzsimmons fondly recalled his early memories from church.

As a child, Fitzsimmons accompanied his mother to choir practice and napped in the background while the group rehearsed. On Sundays, he’d attend church school before being escorted into the main service.

The choir performed from the pews, donning black and yellow robes. “Then there would be this guy, Howard Thurman, on the pulpit, and he was speaking about religious things and using the word God,” Fitzsimmons said.

“I remember being mesmerized by his speech habits. Most folks who have heard him would always attest to the fact that Howard Thurman would pause mid-sentence and connect to something almost otherworldly,” he said. “I could feel something special about the folks that were listening to him and how they were responding to what he was saying. So I knew it was something that maybe I couldn't necessarily comprehend.”

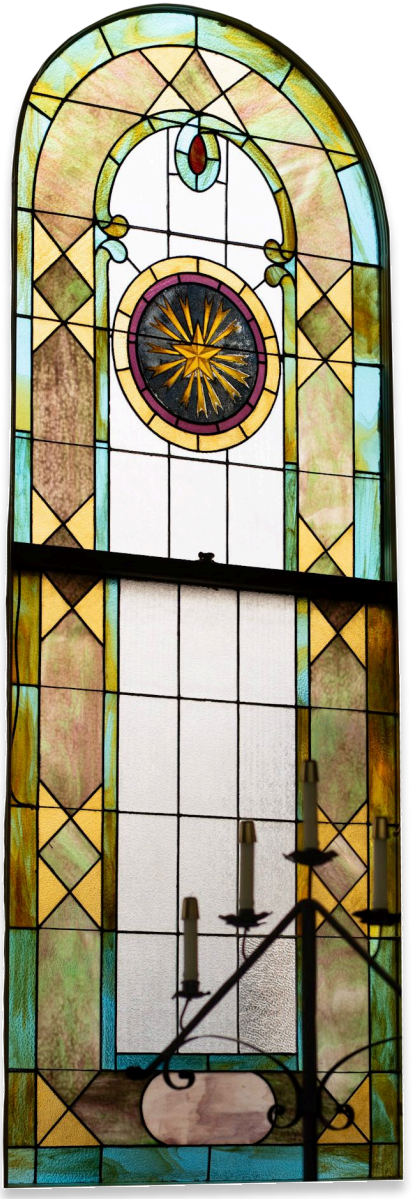
But it wasn’t until his teenage years that Fitzsimmons resonated with Thurman’s spiritual messages — those that were famously grounded in acceptance, community, and justice. “It was a feeling of seeing multiracial groups gathering together without any animosity, and a joy of celebrating their diversity,” he explained. The church facilitated frequent community events outside of Sundays, and Fitzsimmons found a sense of belonging at retreats where families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds gathered over meals and game nights.

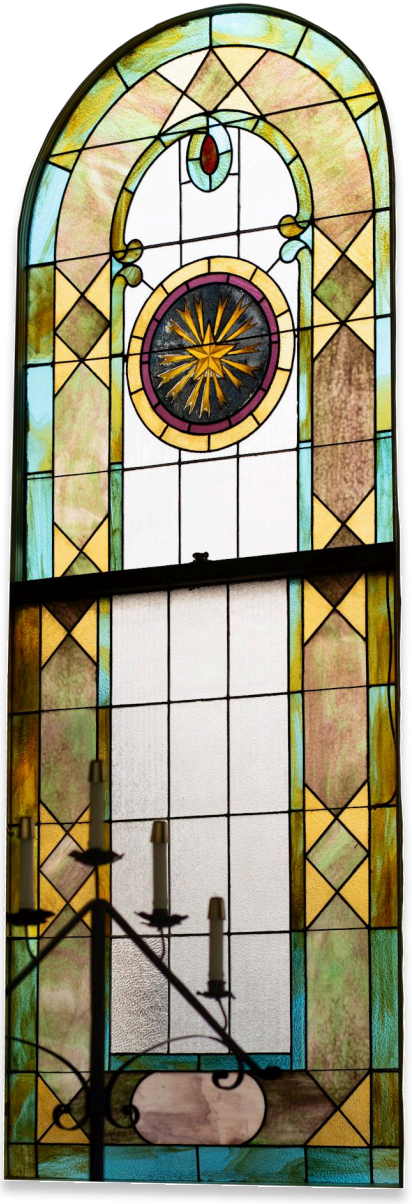
It was an escape from the external reality of racial tension and division. “That was a time for me to understand my heritage, which was an African American father, white Minnesota mother, being mixed racially, and trying to deal with what that meant on many different levels,” he said. For Fitzsimmons and many others, Fellowship Church was a safe place to land.

Although Thurman left San Francisco in 1954 for a position at Boston University, his justice-forward theology remained foundational within and outside the church, even extending its influence to the impending civil rights movement and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr.

Decades later, Fitzsimmons still spends Sunday mornings in the same pews he grew up in. More recently, he has become passionate about preserving the legacy of Howard Thurman and the church beyond its walls. In October 2024, the congregation unveiled the Dr. Howard Thurman Commemorative Street Marker at the corner of Pfeiffer and Stockton Streets in North Beach, Thurman’s last residence before his passing in 1981.

The year prior, Fellowship was awarded local landmark





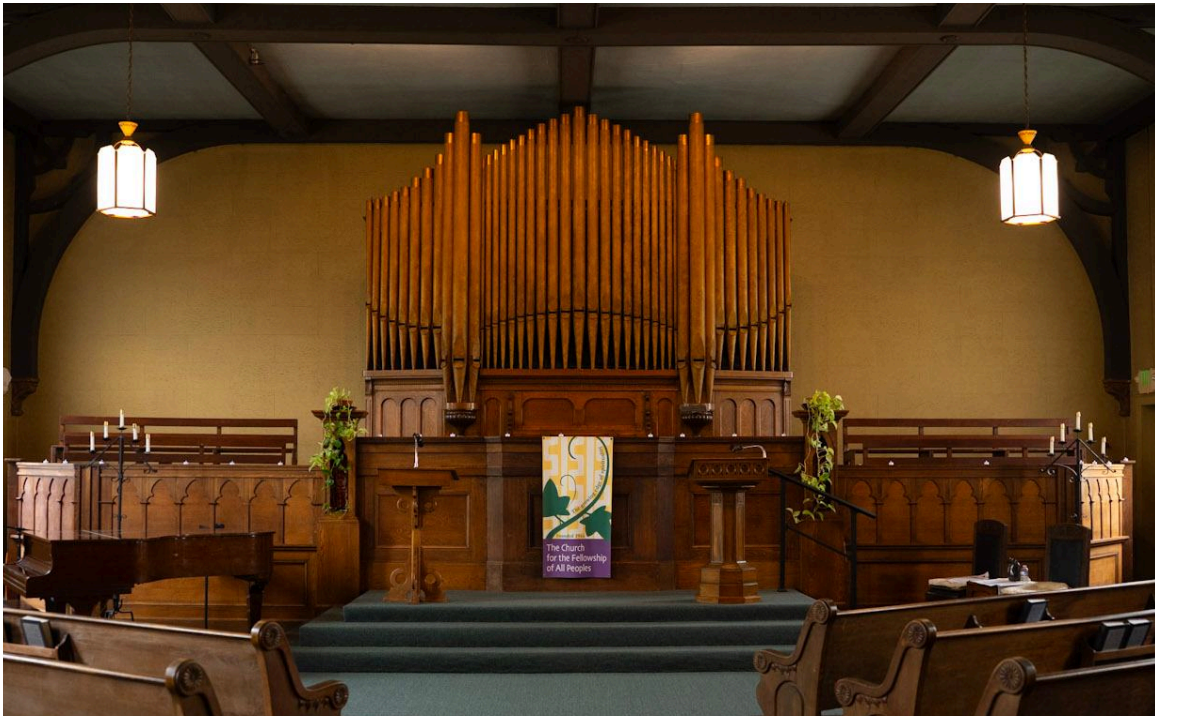
recognition by San Francisco's Historic Preservation Commission.

"We're riding a wave of beautiful recognition for this great mind, this great revolutionary figure, this friend of Martin Luther King Jr.'s, this man who traveled to India and met with Mahatma Gandhi to talk about peace in the world," Fitzsimmons acknowledged. Future ideas include adding a paver by the street sign and installing a park bench in honor of Thurman and his wife, Sue Bailey.

Nowadays, Fellowship Church meets in person on the first, third, and fifth Sundays of each month. Reverend Dr. Kathryn Benton serves as the presiding minister of the church and, with the support of its members, delivers services that combine music, meditation, and prayer.

To close, the music director invited the congregation into song once again. The refrain from a traditional hymnal rang joyfully as the service came to an end.

Let us break bread together on our knees. Let us drink wine together on our knees. Let us praise God together on our knees.



Congregants trickled out, greeting Dr. Benton before heading downstairs for a social hour. But I lingered in the wooden pews for a moment. Before me stood two speaker podiums and ministers' chairs, preceded by the co-founders who once led the space together. From the stained glass windows that lined the walls, symbols of light and justice were illuminated in marbled hues of blue and yellow by the midday sun. I closed my eyes and stepped into the shoes of those who came 80 years before me.

Amid the fight for civil rights, and in the face of an insurmountable racial divide, people gathered, resisted, and dreamt in this very space.

Murmurings of the social hour grew louder and louder, beckoning me to join downstairs, where I was met with warm smiles and friendly greetings. Just as generations did before, we fellowshipped over shared stories, laughter, and found common ground as we broke bread and communed over coffee and slices of homemade apple cake.