

# Grace Centennial

## The Grace Music Ministry ~ under the Direction of Nona Cowles Essingham

by Jacqueline Stong

Music has always been an integral and meaningful part of the worship at Grace Church.

My family moved to Azusa in September 1948, and we began to attend the little church on Vista Bonita Avenue. Father Wallace Essingham was the Rector, and his wife, Nona Cowles Essingham, was the organist and choir director. Right away, my mother, Roberta Stong, joined the Senior Choir (adults), and I joined the Junior Choir (grades 4-12). The Senior Choir sang for the 11:00 a.m. service. The Juniors sang at the 9:30 a.m. service.

Back then, only boys could be acolytes, so Junior Choir was for girls. Our choir had about 20-25 members, and we sang three-part music for treble voices (SSA). I sang second soprano. Muriel Stevens (the daughter of Howard Stevens) and I would ride the “red car” (streetcar) from Azusa to Glendora and back again every Thursday afternoon for choir rehearsal. During my time in the Junior Choir, I made many friends. I still keep in touch with Sandra Menser Robison.

A highlight for me was when Dorchen Rubel requested the Junior Choir to sing for her wedding to John Forman on July 15, 1950. What a thrill that was! In the picture, I am the first person in the front row on the right side.

Another memorable occasion was having our choir invited by Joseph Clokey to sing at Bridges Hall of Music (Little Bridges) on the Pomona College campus for the American Guild of Organist’s conference. Dr. Clokey was a local composer of organ and sacred vocal music and a close friend of Mrs. Essingham. We sang some of his compositions, and we were well received! At age 9, it was an awesome experience to sing in such a beautiful place. Little did I know at that time that, as an adult, I would be performing in that venue as a member of the Claremont Symphony Orchestra.



Pauline Stumm, a member of Grace Church, was also a good friend of Mrs. Essingham. Many times, she invited our choir to sing for musicales that she held in her home. We all loved her delicious refreshments after the performances.

My mother, Roberta Stong, sang alto in the Senior Choir under Mrs. Essingham’s direction. They sang cantatas on special occasions, in addition to regular Sunday morning anthems and service music. I especially remember one Holy Week when the Senior Choir sang *Olivet to Calvary*, by J.H. Maunder. The beautiful singing of the Senior Choir, especially on Christmas Eve, has made a lasting impression on me.

Mrs. Essingham was a wonderful musician and a special person who always gave of herself. I will always remember her service to Grace Church. Her gift of music provided the good foundation for Grace’s Music Ministry that lasts to the present day. We are now blessed to have beautiful music presented by our handbell choirs and parish choir.