

## Westminster Presbyterian Church: Our History

The church we know today as Westminster Presbyterian Church in Albany, NY opened in 1862 as the State Street Presbyterian Church. It came into existence after three other Presbyterian churches had already been established in New York's capital city: First Presbyterian in 1782, at its present site; Second Presbyterian in 1813, at the corner of Chapel and Lodge Streets; and Third Presbyterian in 1817, at Clinton Square.

After flourishing for almost 100 years, Second and Third Presbyterian Churches merged in 1910, retaining the Second Presbyterian Church name and location. Then in 1918, during World War I, the people of that church and those of State Street Presbyterian, our predecessor, decided to join together as a temporary measure, since Second Presbyterian could not get enough coal to heat its building due to wartime shortages, and State Street Presbyterian was without a minister.

A year later, in 1919, the two churches officially merged and were renamed the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Our first minister was the Rev. J. V. Moldenhawer, who had become very popular at Second Presbyterian. He served the new Westminster Church until 1928, when he left to become the pastor of the prestigious First Presbyterian Church in New York City.

The Rev. Kenneth B. Welles became Westminster's pastor that same year, which was also a year marked by a church disaster. A fire caused by sparks from a blowtorch while the roof was under repair destroyed the building. But a decision was soon made to rebuild the church structure and to add an educational building to house meeting rooms, offices, a lounge, and a kitchen. During the reconstruction, worship services were held at Temple Beth Emeth, then located around the

corner at Lancaster and Swan Streets. The first services in our rebuilt church were held on Palm Sunday, April 13, 1930.

Dr. Welles led the worship and mission of Westminster for 25 years, through the Depression and all the changes that came about in American society during and after

***Westminster had 17 pastoral assistants between 1944 and 1998, one of whom – the Rev. Robert K. Hudnut – ran for mayor of Albany in 1961. He led a group that challenged the city's Democratic machine, losing but setting the stage for later reforms.***

World War II. It has been noted in an earlier church history that "the rebirth of our spiritual home saw a similar expansion in our spiritual activities." The membership grew to more than 800 during the 1930s and then to 1,300 by 1941, and the mortgage was repaid by 1942.

In those days, hundreds of members took part in musical and dramatic productions, with the first chancel drama, *Peter's Denial*, presented in 1934. Our active Church School engaged in a 20-year character research program which stressed the teaching of Christian and humanitarian ethics and values, in association with faculty from Union College in Schenectady. Under Dr. Welles' direction, outreach to the community was gradually expanded, starting in 1943 with the establishment of a game room and a woodworking shop for neighborhood youth. A Couples Club was formed during the 1940s that remained active for many years.

After Dr. Welles' death in 1953, the Rev. Harold L. Ogden served as Westminster pastor

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from 1954 to 1957. Two years later, the Rev. John C. Laske became our senior pastor and then ably guided us through the turbulent years of the 1960s. It was during this decade that we began to join with other downtown churches for musical and dramatic programs. In 1967 these cooperative efforts led to our joining with three other churches in an association called the Focus Churches of Capitol Hill, which expanded to include missionary, worship, and fellowship activities. It also sponsored a popular educational institute, which offered social action courses taught by faculty members from area colleges. Later joined by other nearby churches and called simply FOCUS, the organization still serves our neighborhood community in many ways, including a breakfast program held at Westminster during the winter months.

***Long-term pastor Kenneth Welles favored having women on Church boards, but it wasn't until 1957 that two women became elders. Today women outnumber men as church officers.***

From 1973 to 1982, Westminster's senior pastor was the Rev. Carl L. Cooper, who added early communion and Evensong services. He gave his support to a repertory theater group that involved parishioners, both youths and adults, in a number of well-attended productions. Westminster's outstanding musical tradition was well known by this time, and a summer camp was started for both church and neighborhood children, featuring singing, handbell ringing, bible study, and crafts.

As church memberships were declining throughout the country during these years, Westminster's was no exception. But our next minister, the Rev. S. Albert Newman, who came to Westminster in 1983 and stayed until 1999, helped strengthen our reputation as

supporters of civil rights and meaningful mission. Church members continued to work on projects to benefit the needy, and our involvement in FOCUS programs kept that organization thriving.

Dr. Newman helped establish a distinguished speaker series that brought New York Governor Mario Cuomo, and Dr. William Sloane Coffin Jr. of Yale University (Dr. Newman's alma mater), among others, to our sanctuary. He led a special service in 1987 recognizing eleven young persons who were raised in our congregation and had become ministers. He was a mentor to the first woman serving Westminster as an associate pastor, Betty Sutherland, who expanded church evangelism efforts from 1990 to 1994.

Westminster's highly-regarded music ministry became even more central to our identity when Alfred and Susan Fedak came in 1990 to serve as church organist and choir director, respectively. And this year, 2004, we have celebrated the renovation and return of our original Skinner pipe organ to the sanctuary.

In the fall of 2002, the Westminster congregation voted unanimously to call the Rev. James L. Reisner as our seventh senior pastor, after the Rev. Sandra Lee Hanna had served us for two years as an interim pastor. Jim Reisner brings experience, enthusiasm, and compassion to his role here, and we look forward to continuing our strong tradition of Christian witness at Westminster, almost a century and a half after people first gathered at this site to worship God.

***January 2004***

***This information was researched – or recalled – by Ada Linklater, who began attending this church in 1917 when it was still State Street Presbyterian. She was a leader of our Christian Education program for over 70 years, and died in 2003.***