

**“I Belong to...”**  
**I Corinthians 3:4-11; I Kings 8:22-30**

On March 24, 1963, Westminster Presbyterian Church gathered to dedicate its new sanctuary. For many in this room that day, it had been a dizzying ascent. Only sixteen years before, on Mother’s Day 1947, Dr. Charles Nabors, pastor of First Presbyterian Church here in Greenville had invited all interested to attend a meeting concerning the planting of a new Presbyterian church in the rapidly growing Augusta Road area. One hundred and one people showed up that day, deciding to pitch a tent on the property for their organizational meeting.

That tent held the first worship services, led by Presbyterian College faculty. The tent also became a scene of minor chaos on the Sunday a snake was discovered in it. Also, a place of disappointment the Sunday it turned cold and the piano froze up.

The first six month budget for October 1947 through March 31, 1948 was for \$18,155.25, \$13,000 of which went to the Building Fund. But significantly, in addition to this, a priority was formulated that would become a theme of the church to this day, the elders declaring they hoped to contribute another \$1200 to missions.

But, despite the snake and frozen piano, the 145 charter members who enlisted on March 31, 1948 endured, meeting for a time in the Augusta Circle School and then the old Plaza Theatre. Two smaller buildings were finally replaced by today’s Winn Building, where the weekday school office now resides. With Dwight Chalmers having been called as pastor on February 15, 1948, the church bought property facing Augusta Road and built the adjoining Dodenhoff – MacGregor Building, where the library is today.

After Dr. Chalmers left to become the editor of John Knox Press, on March 18, 1956, John Haley was elected the second pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. With John’s arrival, activities and membership all accelerated. A building committee kicked into high gear. The well known Philadelphia architect, Harold Wagoner was retained to design a sanctuary and administrative and educational wings.

But the road was not always smooth. When it was learned Harold Wagoner had drawn plans that would place the choir and organ in the rear of the sanctuary, there was such an outcry that Mr. Wagoner and Walter Holtkamp, of the Holtkamp Organ Campaign in Cleveland, were brought down for a congregational meeting. As Sue Inman tells the story in her history of Westminster: “After much discussion, Mr. Holtkamp spoke up and said that Westminster could do whatever it wished, and change the complete architectural plan if that was what was decided, but that *his* organ would go nowhere else in the sanctuary because the balcony was the right place for it.”

In true Westminster fashion, they gathered facts, discussed them, discussed them again, but then made the right decision — the choir and organ remained in the back.

Plans continued for a modified gothic structure unlike any other in the area. As Claude Sullivan noted in his early history of Westminster: “We were known as the church which had ‘gone wild.’” As the arches went up, wrapped in bright foil, some thought the world’s largest McDonald’s was being built.

So, on March 24, 1963, when this congregation gathered to dedicate this sanctuary, they did so with an enormous amount of pride, gratitude, and anticipation. Once again, Westminster established a theme that would carry her through the years, buildings provide opportunity for ministries.

Listen to Claude Sullivan as he is quoted in Sara Payne’s 1987 history:

We were out on the main thoroughfare and we were there for all to see. We faced the city and the city faced us. Sometimes we were uncomfortable, but we were also proud to demonstrate our identity...The Session took a stand against racism, adopted a policy of inclusiveness, agreed to support the General Assembly in retaining our organizational ties with fellow Creedal churches through the national Council of Churches...Instead of retreating from progress, Westminster has embraced it in the service of Christ.

The proclamation of God’s word in this sanctuary, the teaching of Christ-like living in the rooms of these buildings has led this church to give a home to Meals on Wheels, house the Hollis Center, develop ministries in the Dominican Republic and Malawi, dig wells in Senegal and refurbish schools in Pakistan, make possible the Westminster Retirement Center, initiate the Pleasant Valley programs, underwrite the United Ministries educational work and lavish support on presbytery and General Assembly missions.

Now, I could go on for the next hour talking about Westminster’s ministries, our focus on missions and a faith that engages the mind as well as the heart, or detailing the pastoral years of Al Montgomery and Zane Moore, senior ministers who continued to build on a tradition exemplifying strength of faith and generosity of spirit. But since 1963, whoever the pastor or associate pastors were, it all began in this room where we have gathered as the Body of Christ to hear God’s Word and practice it in our lives and the life of this church.

And so we come today to dedicate this sanctuary once again. There is new space and a new organ. But like good South Carolinians, family and tradition were always close by. Mr. Crosby Willet, now almost eighty, and the son of the original window builder designed our new windows. Chris Holtkamp, grandson of the original Mr. “you will put my organ there” Holtkamp, built our new transept organ. And Lynn Yeargin, son of the original contractor, Bob Yeargin, has constructed our new space so that it still looks like our old space.

But even more importantly, the faith proclaimed from this pulpit in 1963, will be the same faith declared on this day. For sixty-two years this church has joined with the Apostle Paul echoing his words in the first chapter of Romans: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...”

There is a reason the cross graces the top of the bell tower, the highest point of our church buildings. It rises as our sign, symbol, seal, belief that the love and forgiveness manifested in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the power of God to change each of our lives and the world. Every dollar we give, every deed we accomplish, every lesson we teach finds its origin and meaning in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That does not mean all of us agree on every issue, whether it is where to put the organ or how to fix healthcare, but it does announce that what we believe, what unites us, is far more powerful and important than what divides us. From its founding, this church has declared that intellectual inquiry is consistent with the gospel and that faith is always expressed in missions. These two core beliefs find expression in an inclusiveness that proclaims the doors of this sanctuary are open to anyone seeking to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

As Charlie Bell, chair of the 1963 Building Committee wrote in the sanctuary dedication booklet, A Faith Affirmed: “Beyond our own needs we see the needs of others. We dedicate ourselves to the important responsibility of developing here a spiritual ‘lighthouse’ that will give light to the lives of many who otherwise might flounder upon the hidden rocks of life.”

We believe what the Bible tells us, that every one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Yet, in this place, we learn that we can be redeemed of every sin, that the love and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ can touch and save even the most fallen, even you and me.

This is not just a beautiful room, it is:

a hospital for sinners,

a school for faith,

a chapel for the consecration of marriage

a welcome area for those entering the faith by baptism,

a sacred and holy place where we meet God and God touches us.

As Jacob said when in a dream he saw a ladder reaching to heaven: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” We have not just built another beautiful building, but the house of God, a gate to heaven.

“For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

The Corinthians were fighting over which person deserved their allegiance. Each of them had a specific individual who brought them to faith, or taught them

about Jesus, and wanted to give credit to him. But the Apostle Paul says none of that matters. Each of us builds on the work done before us. Yet, all of us are just helpers, it is always God who makes it possible.

Today, we gather to dedicate this wonderful sanctuary. Fittingly the new has been built onto the old. We remember those who gave sacrificially of their time, money, and talents in 1963, as well as honor all of you whose giving is now making this possible. The Apostle Paul said it best: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

Today:

Harold Wagoner planted, Allen Freeman watered, but God gave the growth.

Bob Yeargin planted, Lynn Yeargin watered, but God gave the growth.

Charlie Bell planted, Paul O'Neal watered, but God gave the growth.

The Building Committee and Sessions planted, the A Place for  
Everyone Campaign Committee watered, but God gave the growth.

The 1963 members of Westminster Presbyterian Church planted, you  
watered, but God gave the growth.

We dedicate this beautiful and holy sanctuary to the glory of God. May it always be a place where its pastors plant the gospel, its members water it, and God gives it growth.

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