

**A History
of the
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Vicksburg, Mississippi**

Vicksburg was first settled in 1811. Incorporation followed on January 29, 1825. The Mississippi River has played a large role in the history of Vicksburg. During the 1800's Vicksburg grew in importance with its location at the conjunction of three rivers, the Mississippi, the Big Black, and the Yazoo rivers, and its location at the connection of major east - west rail lines. For the next one hundred and twenty five years Vicksburg continued to grow. This growth was challenged by two interruptions. One of these was the invasion and siege of the 'Gibraltar of the South' during the 'late unpleasantness.' The other was the Mississippi River doing that which Union forces had failed to do. The river re-routed itself through DeSoto Point destroying the railroad and ferry and effectively leaving the river city, Vicksburg, without a river. The result however proved providential when in 1873, the Vicksburg office of the Army Corps of Engineers was established to control the river. After twenty five years the Yazoo River was diverted, the port restored, and on January 7, 1903, Vicksburg was able to again be 'the river city.'

In 1826, the year following the incorporation of Vicksburg, the First Presbyterian Church was founded, though not officially incorporated until 1830. For one hundred and twenty five years from its founding, First Presbyterian was the only Presbyterian Church in Vicksburg. However the area of Vicksburg located southeast down Halls Ferry Road experienced tremendous growth following the close of World War II. Halls Ferry Road was a major concrete thoroughfare leading to the Army Corps of Engineers and Waterways Experiment Station. Dr. William F. Mansell was instrumental in leading the officers of First Presbyterian Church to establish another Presbyterian church in the Halls Ferry growth area. To this end a plan for organization of the new Presbyterian Church was approved on May 7, 1950.

On July 8, 1951, a commission of Central Mississippi Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the United States constituted Westminster Presbyterian Church as a particular congregation. Dr. W. F. Mansell served as chairman. A total of fifty-seven charter communicant members, twenty-one baptized children, and one associate member were received. The following men were elected and installed as elders: Mr. H. C. Kauffman, Jr., Mr. James C. Anderson, Mr. Claude Thompson, and Mr. W. R. Ferris. The following men were elected and installed as deacons: Mr. Benson Guyton, Mr. B. W. Jenkins, Mr. V. G. Kaufman, Mr. Wallace Geddings, Mr. J. W. Smollen, Mr. James C. Hamilton, Sr., Mr. Sam H.

Buchanan, and Mr. Al H. Barnes. Mr. John Harvey Thompson, who had been called as Assistant to Dr. Mansell in order to help in organizing the new congregation, was called by the new church on July 15, 1951. Mr. Thompson was installed as the first minister of Westminster by a commission of Central Mississippi Presbytery on September 9, 1951.

As a new congregation this marked the beginning of a number of firsts. On August 21, 1951, the Session approved a motion that on September 9th the first "full program of Sunday services including Sunday School and Morning and Evening Worship services" would be initiated. They also approved the beginning of Wednesday evening Prayer Service on September 12th. The first communion service was held on October 7th. The first meeting of a Men's Club organization was held on September 25th. This same Men's Club prepared the first Thanksgiving morning breakfast and service which was held on November 22, 1951. These men also sponsored the initiation of the church Library on January 18, 1953. The first officers of the Women in the Church were approved by the Session October 16, 1951: Mrs. F. R. Bufkin as President; Mrs. R. G. Ahlvin as Vice-President; Mrs. Vernon Palmer as Secretary; and Mrs. Forrest Colebank as Treasurer. The first Laymen Visitation Evangelism program was approved October 26th for implementation beginning in the second week of November. The Session continued to be very active in planning special preaching services both in the fall of the year and during the week before Easter. They also initiated Catechism memory and rewards for the young, and a Boy Scout program.

Construction of the first church manse began in 1953, based upon three year pledge cards made by the members of the congregation and submitted to the bank as collateral. Westminster also opened her doors to the Community Baptist Church beginning April 19, 1953, in efforts to promote the gospel and good inter-church relations in Vicksburg.

On November 3, 1953, the Session made a timely challenge to the church to take up the full responsibility for the salary of the pastor. The Presbytery's Committee on Church Extension had paid half the pastor's salary and First Presbyterian had paid the insurance on the church facilities. Beginning in January of 1954, Westminster assumed these responsibilities.

On December 5, 1953, Vicksburg was struck by a deadly tornado. The Westminster church building became a center for food and clothing collection and members of the congregation worked long hours in rescue and relief efforts for storm victims.

On May 30, 1954, the Session received the report from Pastor John Thompson of his reception of a call to French Camp Academy and the local congregation adjacent the Academy. Pastor Thompson preached his last communion service at Westminster on June 30th. The Session took on a very

visible and obvious leadership role during this interim period. The Session examined the financial status of the church and found that while the membership had doubled that financial support had seen “very little increase” since the church was organized. They wrote letters and vigorously encouraged the congregation to faithful attendance and support of the work of the church. During the interim while the church was without a pastor they continued their leadership of the worship, teaching, and other ministries.

On November 21, 1954, Dr. Robert C. Duhs was called by the congregation of the Westminster Presbyterian Church. He took up his duties as pastor in January of 1955. The report filed with the denomination at the end of 1954, shows the congregation made up of 111 communicant members with 119 enrolled in Sunday School and 18 families having family worship.

During the ministry of Dr. Duhs the church was blessed to send Mr. Bob Kaufman into the ministry in 1955 and Mr. Robert Fitler in 1957. Mr. Fitler worked during the summers as Assistant to the Pastor. Dr. Duhs also hosted a Bible radio program on WQBC which was sustained through volunteer financial support from the congregation and the youth group. November was designated “Consecration Month” with all the programs of the church presenting this emphasis to the congregation. A summer internist was also initiated to work with youth choirs, VBS, Christian Education, and retreats. Considerable energy was spent on consideration of air-conditioning the church facility but this was not approved until the building expansion in 1962. A tradition was begun of recognizing with a plant the oldest and youngest mothers present at the morning worship service on Mother’s Day.

Westminster approved starting a Kindergarten in July 1956. A part time secretary was also hired. The church also began, in 1956, to have concern over resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the PCUS. A representative was sent to the Laymen’s Steering Committee in July 1957. This period marks the beginning of concerns over literature and publications which the church used from the denomination.

Close attention was paid to church budgets so that in October of 1957, the Session provided for Monthly Financial Statements, Current Consolidated Financial Statements, and Current Bi-Annual Financial Statements to be available for members of the congregation to examine in the church office with arrangements made by the pastor. At a November 18, 1956, Congregational Meeting the Diaconate Chairman reported that 50% of the membership contribute over 90% of the financial needs of the church.

Westminster closed the 1950’s and faced the new decade with her budget nearly tripling from those first years. Her membership had grown from those first fifty-seven to 223 communicants. Despite this initial growth attendance goals

adopted by the Session in 1955 for the following year were still in the process of being realized five years later. The church Session was concerned about attendance of the Men's Club, Youth Group, and sought better times for improved Sunday evening attendance. A leading feature of the growth of the church was the presence of families with children with the result that Sunday School average attendance had grown from sixty-five in 1951 to 124 in 1960. Close attention was paid to Sunday School attendance and minute records were kept under the leadership of a few men and a dedicated staff of lay teachers. This Sunday School growth prompted a study of a building expansion to accommodate this growth. October 27, 1961, marked the groundbreaking for a new \$60,000 three-story education addition to the church facility.

The decade of the 1960's brought increasing tension with liberal elements in the denomination including a formal overture from the Session of Westminster that Central Mississippi Presbytery urge the PCUS to withdraw from membership in the National Council of Churches (July 1963). Since Westminster was forced to discontinue the use of the denominational children and youth literature the church found difficulty with para-church publishers. These publishers included aberrant doctrinal and practical matters in their literature which caused the Session to carefully examine which materials would be used.

Dr. Duhs continued to promote numerical goals: 200 in Sunday School, 100 regularly attending evening worship, 150 regularly attending morning worship, and 50 new members during the coming year. Dr. Duhs was even requested to consider being a candidate for the House of Representatives in the state of Mississippi which he was counseled to decline.

The sixties also marked a period of forced segregation in the state of Mississippi. The Session of Westminster sent an overture which was adopted by the Central Mississippi Presbytery protesting plans supported by the National and World Council of Churches and others outside the state to force integration of churches. Reports of plans to force integration of churches through mass entrances of churches in the delta, Vicksburg, and across the state, even at the expense of the disruption of worship, caused grave concern on the part of the Westminster session. The church was visited by a black Council of Federated Organizations member. He was neither thrown or shut out, however there was concern in the Session over his motives for attending worship. The church wished to assure that those who genuinely desired to worship would not be looked upon with suspicion. Although there was disagreement from some members of the Session and Diaconate, a segregationist policy was adopted and officers were posted to lock doors in the case of a forced mass attempt to desegregate the worship services of the church. Social issues such as integration, debates concerning the World Council of Churches, communism, and the like, and the responses these

engendered in individual members of the congregation, caused the Session to invest a great deal of time and energy in these matters. An example of this is that the Session had to deal with complaints arising due to the emphasis or overemphasis placed upon these matters by teachers in Sunday school classrooms.

Dr. Duhs received a call from a church in Biloxi and completed his duties as pastor of Westminster in May 1965. Mr. Henry Mueller served as interim pastor. Statistics at the end of 1964, report that Westminster now had 307 communicants on the role.

On October 10, 1965, the congregation issued a call to Mr. Brister Ware as pastor, however this call was declined by Mr. Ware. After considerable search and prayer Mr. John Allen was called as the third pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. He was installed on April 3, 1966. Pastor Allen instigated visitation of newcomers to the Vicksburg community, the elders meeting with the pastor prior to worship for prayer, and the calling of the congregation to silent devotion before the worship service began. As Pastor Allen began his service as pastor of Westminster the year end report of 1966 showed a total of 306 communicants on the role and an enrollment of 171 for Sunday School. The budget for 1967 totaled: \$29,250. This included a Current Expense budget of \$19,450, a Benevolent Causes budget of \$3,800, and a Building Fund budget of \$6,000. At this time Deacons served on a rotating class basis while Elders were elected to serve for life unless service was terminated by resignation or direction of a church court. However a rotational system for the Session was instituted. The Session continued to administer the Westminster Kindergarten of 28 students until Ms. Reno resigned her position of leadership in 1967, upon which the Session moved to close this work citing the difficulty of acquiring teachers. The statistical report ending 1970, revealed the movement of 49 people to the inactive roll resulting in a total of 245 communicants. Sunday School enrollment stood at 158. Budget giving stood at \$31,820. Sanctuary renovation plans including lowering of the pulpit area were formalized and executed in 1971.

The late sixties and early seventies marked a period of intense concern over fidelity to Christ and the direction of the Presbyterian Church US. This concern was accentuated by the proposed plan of union with the Presbyterian Church USA. Pastor Allen joined with conservative "Presbyterian Churchmen United" and led the congregation of Westminster through the process of withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church US and into the newly formed Presbyterian Church in America. As early as December of 1969, Pastor Allen and clerk of Session Mr. Claude Thompson (who had served as Clerk of Session since his election on July 17, 1951), attended a meeting of Churchmen United in Atlanta. Westminster hosted Central Mississippi Presbytery on April 12, 1973, at which Dr. Morton Smith presented an overture requesting the study of procedures for Presbytery

action dealing with requests of churches and ministers seeking to leave the Presbytery. The Session did not officially endorse the Convocation of Sessions May 18-19 in Atlanta, which was called to plan for a new church in 1973, but did send observers. A Joint officers meeting on May 10, 1973, considered Bulletin No. 26, April 1973, published by The Concerned Presbyterians detailing "Reaffirmations of 1973." They also discussed a meeting at the Forrest Presbyterian Church with Pastor Paul Settle, Executive Secretary of Presbyterian Churchmen United and Judge Mike Carr. One of those attending this meeting, Mr. Shockley commented, "It appears there currently exist three viewpoints on separation within the churches. These are (1) now; (2) later; and (3) never. These viewpoints will have to be arrived at by each church member through prayerful consideration of the issues." On July 15, 1973, Pastor Paul Settle spoke on reasons to leave the PCUS. The Session also made great efforts to gain a speaker for remaining in the denomination and secured Pastor Daniels.

At a Session meeting held on September 16, 1973, the Session called a Congregational Meeting for September 30, 1973. This call included:

"....After adequate time for discussion, a secret ballot will be taken on the categorical question--"Shall the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Vicksburg, Mississippi, request dismissal from the Presbyterian church in the United States to the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley? Yes _____; No _____. If three-fourths of those present and voting vote "yes," this particular church will be dismissed as requested. This dismissal shall not relieve the particular church of any actual indebtedness as of the 30th of September 1973 it may have to the Presbytery or to any board or agency of the Presbytery, Synod or Presbyterian Church in the United States. If less than three-fourths of those present and voting "yes," the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Vicksburg will be continued as a congregation of the Presbytery of Central Mississippi."

At a meeting on September 25, 1973, the Session, after much prayer and study of the issues, voted unanimously to "recommend that Westminster Presbyterian Church request dismissal from the Presbyterian church in the United States to the Presbytery of Mississippi Valley. This decision was forwarded to the congregation.

On September 30, 1973, the congregation of Westminster voted on the motion above as made by Mr. McLaughlin and seconded by Mr. Ables. Of the 142 voting members attending (plus two affiliate members), 139 voted "yes," 1 "no," and 2 "unmarked." Westminster was granted a certificate of dismissal to Mississippi Valley Presbytery and on October 18, Westminster Presbyterian Church and Pastor John Allen were registered as charter members of that Presbytery. The Session also called a Congregational Meeting for November 18, 1973, recommending

Westminster signify its desire to be a member of the new Continuing Presbyterian Church which was to hold its First General Assembly December 4-7 in Birmingham, Alabama, at Briarwood Presbyterian Church. This motion was adopted unanimously. At a December 9, 1973, Session Meeting Pastor Allen and Clerk Claude Thompson presented a report of the First General Assembly (composed of 250 churches with 55,000 members). They reported, "Some 244 churches indicated intention to attend the Assembly, however, 212 churches with 173 ministers and 382 commissioners were registered and voting." At a Session Meeting on September 25, 1974, report was made on the Second Assembly held at First Presbyterian, Macon, GA. and the adoption of the name "Presbyterian Church in America."

By 1980, Westminster had grown to 296 communicant members (43 non-communicants) reflecting 148 family units with a total Sunday School enrollment of 91. Budget distributions were \$104,806, and an estimated average Sunday morning attendance of 150 for the year 1981. In 1978, Westminster approved a rotational system for the elders. By 1984, the church experienced a slump with 74 being the estimated average Sunday morning attendance. However the number of family units remained relatively the same at 146, while total communicants were 267 and non-communicating members had fallen to 6, with a Sunday School enrollment of 122, and \$155,437 in total disbursements. By 1988, estimated average Sunday morning attendance was 143, with 268 total communicants and 73 non-communicating members, and a Sunday School enrollment of 144. Total disbursements for 1988, were \$153,802. In November of 1997, Westminster began its search for a ministerial intern. In November 1998 Mr. Matt Schilling a student of Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, became Westminster's student intern and served for two years.

Pastor John Allen retired in 1998, after thirty-two years of faithful ministry at Westminster Presbyterian Church. In 1970, the congregation was made up of a total of 245 communicants, a Sunday School enrollment of 158, and a budget of \$31,820. By 1998, Westminster was composed of 179 total membership (100 family units with Sunday school attendance of 64 and Sunday morning attendance of 104) however total church income had grown to \$242,121. At a Session meeting held on February 18, 1998, Pastor Allen's request for honorable retirement from the Westminster pulpit on March 1, 1998, was accepted with "great sadness." On April 12, 1998, Pastor Allen presented a special sacred music concert for the congregation at their request.

A number of professors from Reformed Seminary in Jackson and other ministers filled the Westminster pulpit during this interim period. Dr. Derek Thomas was of special assistance as the interim pastor during this period. The

Session took action to recall those members who were not active and clean the rolls during this period.

Pastor Scott Reiber was called at a congregational meeting held August 22, 1999, and was installed in October 1999.