

A Brief History of Westwood Baptist Church

In April 1961, five families began the process of determining the feasibility of starting a new mission church in the West Springfield area. In May of that year, a motion was made at the First Baptist Church of Springfield that a committee be established to determine the need for a mission church. The Moderator of First Baptist Church, Springfield appointed John Black as chairman of the committee. In addition to Mr. Black, there were four others on the committee. With the blessing of the Mount Vernon Baptist Association, the committee requested the sponsorship of Del Ray Baptist Church in Alexandria, who embraced the challenge in July of that year and sponsored the new work in West Springfield.

The first service of the new chapel was held September 24, 1961, in Washington Irving Intermediate School. Thirty-seven people attended that service, with 24 placing their membership with the new chapel. The speaker for that first service was Rev. William J. Cumbie, Superintendent of Missions for the Mount Vernon Baptist Association (now known as NorthStar Church Network). Mr. Cumbie suggested the name, Westwood, because the new mission was located in the western part of the Association and was situated in a wooded area. The following Sunday, U.S. Army Chaplain, Major Clayton E. Day took over the duties as interim pastor until such time that a full-time minister could be called.

During 1962, a full Southern Baptist program was developed. Del Ray Baptist Church provided a bus with which to transport children and others for Sunday school. Prior to having the bus, transportation was provided by greatly overloaded private automobiles. At that time, Old Keene Mill Road was a rough, two-lane road whose hard surface ended at Rolling Road. Going further west, the road was gravel and dirt. However, in the area beyond Rolling Road there were numerous country/rural homes that had children needing the benefits of the new chapel. With faithful and dedicated outreach, many of those children were soon coming to Westwood. Also in May, 1962, Wednesday night prayer services began. Membership grew to 67 by the end of 1963.

With continued growth during 1963, the chapel (as it was designated at that time) began its search for a full-time pastor. On April 1, 1964, Dr. Robert D. Whitten, a graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was called to be the church's first full-time pastor, serving in that capacity for thirty-five years until his retirement in 1999.

With a full-time pastor in place, the Chapel was officially chartered as Westwood Baptist Church on June 7, 1964, with 95 charter members. Later that same month, the new congregation, through the capable negotiation of Dr. Whitten, obtained a choice parcel of property on Old Keene Mill Road. Slightly less than five acres, (4.9265 acres to be precise) this property, which continues to be the church's home, was purchased for \$24,632 from Edward R. Carr, Inc., developer of the Cardinal Forest community. The architectural firm of Kohler, Misner, and Daniels was selected in December, 1964, to design a master plan, including the first building unit which would house both educational and worship space.

Westwood members worked to clear the property in preparation for building. Bill Riley provided a bulldozer from his construction business that greatly reduced the time needed to clear the land. Charter member, Tom Lovelace, commenting on the experience said, "There was little or no injury to anyone; the only loss was the axe that Don Hudson somehow got caught up in the debris of stumps and brush. The women of the church brought LOTS of lemonade and sandwiches that were truly appreciated." The spirit of fellowship and unity was evident as many hands participated in many different ways during these days. Great effort was also given to preserve the natural setting that was, and continues to be, an important part of the character of Westwood.

Construction began in October, 1965, with a projected cost of \$143,633. The first building included what now houses Whitten Hall and the classrooms downstairs. During construction it was found that there was a natural flow of underground water at the intersection of Old Keene Mill Road and Carrleigh Parkway, passing under the northwest corner of the building site, causing the soil to be unstable. This brought about the unexpected expense of having to put in 70 pilings to form a stable platform for the building. (That part of Westwood will always have a FIRM foundation.)

The expenses associated with the added pilings resulted in a change of plans. The building was to have been a square when viewed from above, with a cross directly in the middle. Instead, this first building was shortened by 18 feet toward the rear (away from Old Keene Mill Road), and finished with wood in anticipation of completing that portion in the next building phase. The underground water has long since been abated due to other construction in the area.

After several delays, including the infamous "blizzard of 66," the new building was dedicated on October 2, 1966, as the cornerstone was laid in a special service at noon. A copy of the original charter, constitution, and by-laws was placed in an archival box inside the southwest cornerstone, engraved with the year, "1966." The regular schedule of services began the following Sunday.

Membership grew rapidly, and by 1967, two worship services were needed. Trailers were brought onsite to accommodate the growing Sunday School, and by 1969 multiple Sunday Schools were also needed. Planning for the second building phase started that year, extending the building thirty-six feet to the rear, twice the length that had been reduced from the original building. The new structure was completed and occupied in October of 1971, at a cost of \$165,000.

Westwood continued its growth and outreach to the community. In May of 1968, representatives from nine churches in the West Springfield area met to consider how they might partner together to minister to the growing social needs in the area. In February of 1969, officers were elected and ECHO (Ecumenical Community Serving Others) was established as a ministry vehicle to empower churches to work together to serve the community. Westwood was a founding member of the organization and has continued to be a faithful partner in this ministry for more than four decades. Westwood established The Mission Commission in 1973 as a means of coordinating its outreach. Recognizing the growing need for child care in the area, the

Mother's Day Out program was begun that same year and continues to serve children and their families in our church and community today. Westwood participated in and supported many other community ministries, including sponsoring Vietnamese and Laotian refugee families fleeing their war-torn countries in 1977 and 1979, respectively. The church also adopted and maintained an open-building policy that enabled many community groups to use its facilities.

Westwood added much-needed staff in 1976, when Robert Jones was ordained by the church and became Assistant Minister. In 1977, under his leadership, Westwood initiated the Wednesday Church Family Night ministry with a meal and a variety of study, service, training, and fellowship opportunities. In 1978, Rev. Jones accepted a call to pastor a church in Kentucky. In that same year, Westwood called Pamela Jean Williams to be Minister of Education and Youth. In September, 1979, Westwood ordained Ms. Williams to the ministry, and in doing so, became the first church in Virginia to ordain a female staff member. A few years earlier, Westwood began ordaining women to serve as deacons.

Under Rev. Williams' leadership, the youth began a project that forged a relationship with Resurrection Baptist Church in Montpelier, Vermont, and their Southern Baptist home missionaries, Jim and Connie Markham. Each year, from 1981 through 1992, a team from Westwood traveled to Montpelier to lead a children's day camp. In the fall of 1978, a puppet ministry was begun by the youth. In October of that year, Mrs. Beth Irwin was called as Director of Music and Organist.

By 1978, Westwood had grown to a membership of more than 800, requiring space to be borrowed from the nearby Cary Building to accommodate Sunday School needs. A study was conducted to determine the direction of a much needed building program. It was determined that the most pressing need was for new worship space, allowing the existing worship area to be reconfigured for Sunday School space. Thus, the third phase of construction began in 1979, and the sanctuary was dedicated in November of 1981 with Lawrence Cook serving as architect for this phase.

In 1982, working with the Mount Vernon Baptist Association (now known as NorthStar), Westwood helped start a new mission work in the Pohick area. This new church start became South Run Baptist Church, which called its own pastor, Rev. Tom MacMillan, in August of 1983, and has since grown into a self-sustaining, independent church.

With the departure of Rev. Williams to a church in Louisiana in 1985, Westwood called Rev. Terry Maples to be Minister of Education in April, 1986. In July of that year, Rev. Steven Beck became Minister of Music and Youth.

The increased staff and the congregation outgrew both the education and music space, and some classes took up temporary residence in the Cary Building. In 1989, a double Sunday School session became necessary again, and planning began for the last of the four building phases. The resulting building, with four modules housing preschool and adult classrooms, the office complex, and the music suite, as well as the beautiful courtyard, was completed in 1992.

Once again, Lawrence Cook served as architect for this project. It is indeed worth noting that Mr. Cook received multiple professional awards for his Westwood designs.

During this same time, staff changes were taking place. In 1991, David Roderick was called to be Minister to Students and ordained in 1992. Dr. Jack Schmidt became Minister of Music in 1992, and Rev. Mark Price joined Westwood as Minister for Education in 1993.

The Mount Vernon Baptist Association identified the need to provide a Baptist witness to the large Chinese population in Northern Virginia, and in 1993, Westwood responded to that need by sponsoring a mission to this Chinese-speaking population. In mid-1997, Rev. Fred Lee joined the staff to lead this growing congregation which met at Westwood. In 2008, the Chinese Mission moved to a new location to accommodate its growing congregation.

Later in 1997, Pat Close returned to Westwood as the Director of Music Ministry, a position she had previously held from 1971-1976. Also in late 1997, Beth Toler was called to be Pastor of Student and Community Ministries. The staff now also included full-time and part-time secretaries, an organist, and a custodian.

In response to the growing tensions in the Southern Baptist Convention, Westwood was drawn to a new identity with the establishment of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991. By the mid-nineties, after much prayer and discussion, the congregation formally voted to place its missional connection with the CBF. Dr. Whitten was selected in 1995 as a representative to the Coordinating Council of the CBF, and in 1997 was elected chair of its Church Resources Ministry Division. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Virginia Baptist Mission Board continue to be Westwood's largest mission partners.

In February 1999, founding Senior Pastor and able leader for 35 years, Dr. Robert Whitten, retired. In April, Rev. Wade D. Tucker, Sr. was called as Westwood's Intentional Interim Pastor as the search began for a new Senior Pastor. In March 2000, Rev. Gary Long joined Westwood as Pastor for Congregational Ministries.

Rev. James K. Abernathy was called to be Westwood's second Senior Pastor on June 10, 2001, and began his duties on August 19. With encouragement and support from the congregation, he received his Doctor of Ministry Degree from Drew University in May, 2007.

Westwood again reconfigured its staff, calling Rev. Mark Brasler as Minister for Spiritual Development in 2003 and Rev. Nancy Hollomon-Peede as Minister for Community Involvement later that same year. Stephen Gray become Associate Pastor With Youth and Children in 2004 and was ordained at Westwood in 2007. In 2004, a part-time staff position was added as Lora Johnson became Director of Preschool Ministries, followed by Brandi McKenzie in 2008, and Holly Bryant in 2011, who currently serves as Director of Preschool and Children's Ministries.

The music ministry of Westwood was enhanced in 2003 by the purchase of a new Rodgers organ for the sanctuary. The dedication concert was performed in September of that year by Dan Miller. Generous gifts allowed for the purchase of handbells in 2011 and a handbell

group was initiated that continues to involve children, youth, and adults in worship through the playing of these beautiful instruments.

Westwood began a review in 2007 to determine the need for improving existing facilities. Dennis Milam was named chairman and the Bold Challenge Team was formed. The selected improvements, including new skylights, carpeting, wood flooring, and resurfacing of pews in the sanctuary, as well as new window and door frames in the narthex, a new church bus, and painting and carpeting in various spaces throughout the building, were started in 2009, completed in 2010, and the debt for these renovations paid in full in 2012.

In the fall of 2011, ministry staff roles were reviewed and Rev. Stephen Gray's job title was changed as he became Associate Pastor for Spiritual Development and Administration. At the same time, Holly Bryant was called to an expanded position of Director of Preschool and Children's Ministries. Andre Towner was called to be Director of Youth Ministries in September of 2012.

Missions and outreach have continued at the forefront of Westwood's identity. Since 1999, the youth of Westwood have been involved every summer in Impact Virginia where they, along with their adult leaders, partner with churches across Virginia to provide repairs to family dwellings in impoverished areas of the state. From new roofs, to painting, plumbing, building ramps and other structural needs, these young men and women encourage the homeowners they encounter not only by the repairs they make, but the love of Christ they share. In 2004, Westwood entered into an Adopt-A-People partnership with Persian World Outreach through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Teams were sent to assist at PWO's headquarters in New Jersey, and Mitch and Pat Tosan came to Westwood to speak in worship services and lead seminars in our community. When the partnership with PWO came to an end in 2010, Westwood began a new mission partnership with ServeTrust, a ministry to the poor and neglected people of India, led by Leena Levanya. Westwood's Pastor Emeritus, Dr. Bob Whitten, has traveled to India to help in ServeTrust's ministry and currently serves on their board of directors. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 along the Gulf Coast moved Westwood to send two teams, one to Pearl, Mississippi and another to Houston, Texas to aid with relief work. There is a continuing relationship with the residents of Springfield Gardens Apartments, particularly through ongoing ministries such as the Giving Tree and Back to School projects, as well as mentoring and other services provided in Title One Schools such as Crestwood and Lynbrook Elementary.

The vision that started a Baptist mission in the western woods of Fairfax County in 1961, continues to broaden and enrich lives in the greater Springfield area and beyond. "Fifty Years and Still Growing" is not just an anniversary slogan, but a statement of faith as the congregation known as Westwood Baptist Church continues to share the light and love of Christ. Thanks be to God!