



THE STORY OF FAITH

February 2013 and February 2015

Westminster Presbyterian Church
115 N. 25th Avenue
Hattiesburg, MS 39401

STORY OF FAITH

The Story of Faith is a result of a directive by the Session to create a document reflective of the period between February 2013 and February 2015. On February 13, 2013, the entire campus of Westminster was heavily damaged by a tornado which swept through southeast Mississippi. Recently, interest has grown in adding a history of the period following the tornado. The members and friends of WPC were invited to share their memories and feelings.

The following pages are the words as they shared them—personal, heartfelt and informative. A common thread of deep faith in the God we worship at Westminster prevailed in all of these submissions. These do not read like a commercial newscast - not how many board feet of timber was lost or how many businesses were forever closed. Such can be found in newspaper archives and other commercial sources.

This story is a reflection, often repeated, of how the individuals who shared their feelings reacted to the damage of the tornado. *The Story of Faith* begins with a summary statement written by Dr. Steve Ramp, pastor, immediately followed with David Arnold's account of community response, and other memories by other church members. Closing with words written by Tommy Suttle, Westminster's Director of Discipleship, this order seeks to reflect WPC as a congregation who faced the challenges as a body of faith. One idea pervades - the sure knowledge that God's leadership would lead us "home."

In response to the Session's efforts to have the stories of congregational members the historic event through which the congregation struggled in 2013-2015, preserved, a committee was formed and the following letter went out to the congregation:

Dear Members and Friends of Westminster Presbyterian Church,

Following an informative and attractive display of our church history presented on a Wednesday night in 2023, a discussion began about collecting the history from the time of the devastating tornado on February 10, 2013, until the present. The Session determined sufficient interest existed to justify collecting this information and making it available. A committee was then created to work on this project.

In January 2025, members and friends of WPC were informed of the project. The request to participate by sending your response was open-ended. The past few months have been especially busy, slowing progress; however, the interest in completing the addition to the history of this period continues. With your efforts and contributions, a late fall publication is possible.

It was suggested that anyone who was a member of the church or who attended WPC during that time until the present could serve on this committee. With this letter, then, I am inviting you to be a part of our committee. I am also inviting you to share in our work by doing the following:

- 1. Pray that the results of our work will reflect the Body of Christ correctly.*
- 2. Write your memories as you recall this period in our church. Please use paragraph form if possible or simply provide phrases or words that explain your recollection of an event or program that took place at WPC in this time frame. Note, a tentative outline of the collected history for the final draft will include these areas among others.*
 - a. Worship*
 - b. Care of the membership*
 - c. Mission Activities*
 - d. Youth Activities*
 - e. Reconstruction of the church*

These years are a shared "Story of Faith." Your contribution is part of that story and is needed for it to be as nearly complete as possible.

Feel free to submit your handwritten or typed memories and photographs by mailing them to WPC (with "Story of Faith" indicated on the envelope). You may also email your reflections and photographs to westminster@wpchattiesburg.com.

Finally, it is possible that you might choose to interview someone else to gather their reflections. The committee will gladly receive such work. Simply transcribe the record of such a conversation and submit it to the committee in the ways already described.

*Please send your memories by **SEPTEMBER 15 (2025)** using the information given in this letter.*

Thank you for your help and participation with this project. We believe that this information is a vital part of the history of WPC. The committee looks forward to working with you on this task.

Iris Easterling, Committee Chair

A HISTORY OF THE STORM AND ITS AFTERMATH

By Rev. Steve Ramp from the March 2013 Westminster Newsletter

Just over a month ago (February 10, 2013), a major tornado ripped a 78-mile gash through south Mississippi. Our beloved church and outer buildings took a direct hit. The McCaa, Jones, and Wright Houses are completely destroyed, but our sanctuary and bell tower are going to be fine.

The next day, in driving rain, we dismantled the organ and carried wet furniture and soggy books to storage pods in our parking lot. We also removed 15 huge trees from the roofs and structures and put up tarps to keep the rain from doing more harm to our buildings.

On Tuesday, I met with Pastor Eddie Rester, who graciously offered us worship space at Parkway Heights United Methodist Church. That was a huge relief, and we gratefully said, "Thank you!" Also on Tuesday, more than 100 Cursillo friends from Presbyterian churches in Pascagoula, Ocean Springs, Gautier, Long Beach, Handsboro, Bay St. Louis, Vicksburg, and Jackson arrived to help us remove debris and haul wet contents to the pods.

We opened the Westminster Relief Fund at BancorpSouth (thanks to Mary Clare Royals and Debbie Hudson), rented a spacious 10,000 sq. foot warehouse (thanks to Robert Cummings) and began moving things from the pods to our new warehouse. Richard Potin, David Arnold, and Chuck Brown have done a great job organizing the warehouse. Thanks to Gene Owens, Kay Salter has a very nice office at Owens Business Machines, 2108 Hardy Street.

By the end of the first week the exposed part of the organ was professionally removed to storage. Miraculously, the pipes in the upper chambers and above the chancel area were not damaged by water or wind and remain covered in place. David and Susan Finch will repair the wind chests and create new frameworks. All things considered, we were very fortunate with the organ.

The pews were expertly dismantled and carried to North Carolina to be repaired and refinished. Stained glass experts from Birmingham came to see about repairing our windows.

We secured the north wall of the second floor and put a temporary fence on Pearl Street to protect motorists and passers-by from falling debris. The gas, electric, and cable companies moved their lines on Pearl Street. All power to the church is off for now.

On Saturday (February 16), thanks to Pastor Dwayne Higgason (Grace Temple) and Mitch Williams, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes sent in more than 100 student athletes and coaches to help us remove debris at the church and in other locations.

INSURANCE

From day one, our insurance agent, Teb Jones, and our insurance company, Guide One, of Des Moines, IA, have been working closely with us. Guide One brought in structural engineers, adjusters, and contractors to assess the damage. Adjusting a claim is detailed, exacting, time-consuming work. They look at EVERYTHING and try to determine whether it's damaged and, if so, what should be the cost to replace it. They take into account the age of the item and depreciation. (This is not something that can be done in a week or two.)

On February 18, the Session appointed a Tornado Commission to protect our property and deal with the insurance company. A Commission acts for the Session and is nimbler and more efficient in making decisions. Butch Nobles (Chair), Gene Owens, Althea Jerome, Mac Forsyth, and Steve Ramp are on the Tornado Commission. Charles Dennis tracks income and expenses.

The Commission immediately opened a checking account at BancorpSouth and a checking/investment account with Woodbury Financial (Mary Cromartie's firm).

On February 18, Guide One sent us a preliminary Statement of Loss (SOL) - a 56-page report detailing the damage sustained in each room of the church. Butch Nobles painstakingly reviewed this document and has worked with the insurer's senior adjuster and construction consultant to refine and correct the SOL, which will govern how much the insurance company pays us under the policy. A revised SOL was received on March 5, and we are continuing to update and expand the SOL to make sure we are getting full and fair coverage.

During the week of March 4-8, the insurance company sent an independent contents coordinator, Tom Krudy, to inventory and assess damage to our contents. Much of the contents are stored in the warehouse or at people's homes. Mr. Krudy tries to look at everything that was damaged and include it in his report.

Our insurance policy allows us to collect for damage to our contents in the McCaa, Jones House, and the sanctuary building. We are continuing to refine and update the damage to our contents. If you are keeping wet books or other items from the church at your church, please notify Richard Potin of this ASAP. We need to account for everything that was hurt by the storm.

On Sunday, March 10, the Tornado Commission met and approved paying itemized expenses associated with protecting the building, protecting the organ, and debris removal. The Commission also recommended that the Session enter into a relationship with architect Larry Albert to repair and restore the sanctuary and bell tower, and to work with the Architectural Steering Committee to propose how we might reconfigure our existing space and upgrade and expand our entry and fellowship hall. The Session approved the recommendations of the Commission regarding:

- Working with Larry Albert & Associates on the sanctuary, bell tower, and to consult with the Architectural Steering Committee on potential future expansion plans.
- Asking Robin Roberts to pursue an SBA loan (the deadline for applying is April 15, 2013) and a loan from the Presbyterian Church (USA) Loan Program. Both of these offer financing on very attractive terms.
- Asking Josh Brooks (a contractor from Savannah, GA and Wes Brooks' brother) to review the Statement of Loss to compare the replacement costs being proposed by the insurance company.
- Demolishing and removing the three out-buildings which are a total loss. The asbestos must first be removed from the Wright House.
- Making a report to the congregation to keep everyone informed of the progress we are making.
- Inviting members of the Architectural Steering Committee to meet with the Tornado Commission so everyone is on the same page looking at options for configuring the space in the existing building and considering expansion possibilities.

MONEY:

It might help you to think of this as four pots of money: 1) insurance money; 2) the Building Fund (which existed before the Tornado and is supported by pledges and donations); 3) the Westminster Relief Fund (donations given directly to the BancorpSouth relief account and online giving); and 4) other gifts we receive from time to time.

We have also received \$892,000 so far from our insurer - \$392,000 for the Jones, McCaa, and Wright Houses and \$500,000 as an advance on sanctuary repairs. This should give us adequate funds to repair the sanctuary.

We now have in excess of \$86,000 in our Relief Fund, thanks to several major gifts [\$10,000 from Westminster Presbyterian Church of Gulfport, MS, \$10,000 from the Presbytery of South Alabama, \$9,000 from the Meistersingers' Benefit Concert, \$5,000 from the Presbytery of Mississippi (PDA)], and many smaller gifts from churches and individuals across the United States.

We hope this fund will grow over time. Please encourage those who ask "how can we help" to go to our website and click on online giving or send a contribution to the Relief Fund at BancorpSouth in our behalf.

PRIORITIES:

Our top priorities are securing the building, settling the insurance claim, and restoring the sanctuary and bell tower. This is a very time-consuming process involving many aspects and experts. Butch Nobles is our lead consultant and negotiator on this project. We are deeply grateful for his leadership and expertise.

By mid-April, the Tornado Commission plans to have:

- A plan for repairing the roof of the sanctuary and replacing the windows
- Approval from the City of Hattiesburg (Codes Department) to repair the sanctuary
- Architectural recommendations for removing and replacing the damage to the 2nd floor
- A fair settlement from the insurance company for structural damage and contents
- The out-buildings demolished and removed
- The grounds cleaned up and looking more presentable
- A preliminary budget for renovating/rebuilding our existing structure.

PLANS TO UPGRADE AND EXPAND OUR CHURCH:

Under our Long-Range Plan (adopted August 2010), we were exploring ways to expand our facilities. One week before the Tornado (February 3), the Session reconstituted the Architectural Steering Committee (ASC) and directed it to develop plans for upgrading and expanding our facilities. The plans unveiled in November 2012, showing a new fellowship hall addition, are no longer operative.

The silver lining in all of this is that the damage caused by the tornado gives us several options for expansion that didn't exist before the tornado (e.g., reconfiguring our existing fellowship/educational space and adding space where the columbarium used to be on level ground, which should prove less costly than expanding towards the Jones House).

While the Tornado Commission is dealing with the sanctuary and the insurance company, the ASC will be working with the architect to develop a vision for reconfiguring our existing space upstairs (classrooms) and how the existing space downstairs can be utilized with a better entrance and the possibility of building a more functional fellowship hall.

It is important to get architectural guidance on these questions early on so that decisions affecting the existing building are coordinated with plans to upgrade and expand our facilities. We will be working with Larry Albert, who designed the modernization of Parkway Heights and is known for his work with historical restoration and preservation. He is very excited about working with us. He may consult with Donnie McCleskey, who was working with the ASC before the tornado.

There are no plans at this point. We will keep the congregation informed as this process unfolds. When Larry Albert, the Tornado Commission, the ASC, and the Session develop preliminary plans, we will present them and seek input from the congregation. Right now, everything is in flux, and we need your patience and understanding.

We are investigating whether we might qualify for some favorable loan programs which will help us when it comes to paying for expansions and upgrades. The insurance policy also provides some help with this (to comply with electrical and building codes).

TIMELINE:

When can we expect to be back in our building? I'd love to say a year, but realistically, we're probably talking 18 months to two years. When we get squared away with the insurance company, the architect, and figure out how much we can afford to borrow, we'll be ready to get started.

The damage was extensive. The cost to repair our building will be enormous. We need to do it right. We are not simply repairing the roof and damaged structure. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and we want to be smart about what we do so it serves future generations and enhances our ability to do ministry for the next 50 years.

A DESTRUCTIVE TORNADO AND THE RECOVERY THAT FOLLOWED
by David Arnold

Some years have passed since Westminster Presbyterian Church was struck by the February 10, 2013, Tornado. Many new members have joined and sadly, others have moved away or passed away. Memories of the two eventful years that followed have faded. Fortunately, members of the staff and the session included thoughtful writers, dedicated to keeping members informed through the printed Westminster Standard newsletters. Through them a detailed story of the recovery can be gleaned. Much provided by them follows.

The four photographs that hang in the hallway of the church's new wing barely touch on the devastation that struck the Westminster Presbyterian Church and northern Hattiesburg on the fateful afternoon. Vivid stories have been told of its pathway as the vicious storm moved from west to east parallel to Hardy Street. At the University campus it crossed to the north side and continued eastward along Pearl and Fourth Street before crossing the river and entering Petal. One vivid story remains imbedded in many minds about the two strangers who were driving west on Pearl Street and abandoned their two vehicles and huddled in the depression outside the church's basement doorway. There they watched as roof timbers and bricks of the educational building were blown to the street and crushed their vehicles.

The church's schedule had been full on that Sunday. In addition to the Sunday school classes and worship service, the congregation left at noon under heavy clouds and wind. There was also a Session meeting that followed and a Meistersinger concert at 3:00 pm. While the Meistersinger choir members gathered at 2 p.m., dark skies became darker. The concert ended at 4:15 and the audience hurried away, clearing the building by 4:30. Thirty minutes later the F-4 tornado tore through along its path through Hattiesburg striking local businesses, USM, Westminster and residential neighborhoods.

The congregation had left the church at noon under clouds and wind. The Elders and Building committee met immediately following the morning service to review and discuss an architect's proposed plans that include closing the ally way behind the Educational Building to extend the building across vacant land between the Jones house and 24th Street. The Sessional meeting was long, the discussion heavy, the results, indecisive. For some, the plans for an enlarged, modern kitchen and fellowship hall as well as additional classrooms, and the necessity for closing the alley to the parking locations, created concern.

The fifty-nine-year-old church had gone through hard times, but none had been as difficult as the two years its members were about to face. Its property had grown from one small corner lot and house at the corner of Pearl and 25th Streets in 1954 to encompass half of the city block between 25th and 24th Streets. For the first three years, worship

services were held at Woodley Elementary School, and the little house was used for the church and pastor's office, and for evening services and activities. The Educational Building along the Pearl Street side of the property was the first section of the church's building constructed in 1956. The little house was torn down three years later to make way for construction of the large Gothic sanctuary and Bell Tower. Later in the 1960s the home of the Jones sisters at the corner of Pearl and 24th Streets was donated to the church. It was renovated and first used for youth classes and activity but was presently housing the offices of the South Mississippi Presbytery and the Sharecare ministry of the church.

The McCaa house on a lot facing 25th Street beyond the original parking lot had been purchased and used for a time for the Presbytery office before being turned over the Director of Education for youth and college activities. The church's last acquisition had been the purchase of two lots and houses on 24th Street.

The Wright House had been converted to house volunteer workers following Hurricane Katrina and later used for other visiting groups before being turned over to the Christian Women's Job Core for its use. The other was in poor condition, demolished and the lot cleared and grassed over.

The Session meeting on the afternoon of the tornado closed after two hours that fateful afternoon to allow the building to be utilized for the 3 pm concert of the Meistersingers. Youth programs were scheduled to begin at 5:30 pm. Instead, the worst tornado to ever strike Hattiesburg arrived shortly after 4:30 p.m. and all future scheduled plans were off.

Quickly people were scurrying throughout the devastated streets, over downed trees, power lines and debris to discover and view damages. By early Monday morning, church members gathered to assess and begin the difficult and dangerous recovery work. Among the first neighbors to arrive and offer help were men from the Muslim Center a half block east. Their help was welcomed. Eddie Rester, the young pastor of Parkway Heights UMC hurried to meet with Pastor Steve Ramp and graciously offer his church's help. They quickly worked out with his officers to schedule time and space for our church to hold services, Sunday School classrooms for Westminster and provided a makeshift office for our Director of Education and invited Westminster members to join the church for fellowship, meals and joint activities. Gene Owens offered space in his nearby building on Hardy Street to house the church's office. The community's Breadbasket Closet had been housed since its formation in the belltower room of Westminster's second floor. Whatever could be salvaged was quickly moved to a basement room at University Baptist Church for the duration. The 38th Avenue Baptist Church cleared an adjacent house and made it available for the Christian Women's Job Core to move in and use.

Many other churches and individuals responded with offers of voluntary help and monetary assistance. One 200-year-old Presbyterian church from a rural upstate New York Community sent their minister who led a service and brought a significant check and a lovely, framed poster sharing the good wishes of their congregation. They had suffered a fire that destroyed their historic building. They did recover and asked that when Westminster too recovered, it passed the poster to another church suffering need. Westminster was able to do so four years later when Pastor Steve Ramp and an Elder visited the Wetumpka Alabama Presbyterian Church that had been badly damaged by a tornado and spoke and delivered a similar check along with the poster and a suggestion that they, in turn, pass it along when possible.

Early on Monday Morning a host of the church's members turned out to begin salvaging contents of the church. Workmen were needed to cover the torn roof openings with tarpaulins; water had covered the floors of the second floor, stairway and sanctuary. The next day, in a driving rain, the organ was dismantled, and wet furniture and soggy books were set out to dry. Three pods placed in the parking lot were quickly filled with office and kitchen items.

Also, on Tuesday morning, more than 100 Cursillo friends from Presbyterian churches in Pascagoula, Ocean Springs, Gautier, Long Beach, Handsboro, Bay Saint Louis, Vicksburg and Jackson arrived to help us remove debris and haul wet contents to the pods.

By the end of the first week, the exposed parts of the organ was professionally removed to storage. Miraculously, the pipes of the upper chambers and above the Chancel area were not damaged by water or wind and remained covered in place. David and Susan Fich who serviced and cared for our old and new organs for years, repaired the wind chests and created new frameworks, and its damaged pipes were dismantled and moved to a local climate-controlled storage building

where repairs could begin, and replacement parts ordered. Pews and furnishings were soon dismantled from the sanctuary by the North Carolina original manufacturer and hauled away for refurbishment.

Surely the Lord must have known a few years earlier when he guided the church's Search Committee to select and recommend that Dr. Steve Ramp be called as pastor. Who could have envisioned how needed he would become with his valuable financial and legal experience as contracts; construction loans and a new mortgage were to be negotiated. He was truly the right man in the right position for the recovery that lay ahead.

We opened the Westminster Relief Fund with help of Mary Clare Royals and rented a spacious 10,000 square foot warehouse of a client of Robert Cummings and began moving things from the pods to our new warehouse. Richard Potin, David Arnold Chuck Brown and others set to work cleaning and organizing the warehouse.

All remaining salvageable furniture and fixtures were moved there within ten days of the tornado. In weeks that followed, Men of the Church moved the furniture ministry's supplies from five rental lockers to the warehouse also: saving rental costs for the pods and four rental lockers being used for the furniture ministry. That ministry of the church bounced back more needed than ever as needy residents also hurt by the tornado sought help.

A new architectural plan was soon underway that included the restoration and remodeling of the sanctuary, fellowship hall, kitchen new offices and parlor. Larry Albert & Associates worked closely through the entire project with Butch Noble and his construction company on the project. A construction loan was negotiated with a permanent loan soon followed. Butch Nobles was asked to oversee reconstruction of the original buildings and the construction of the new wing that would house a large modern kitchen and fellowship hall, church offices and restrooms as well space to house the Breadbasket program and a dedicated conference room.

The stained-glass windows of the original sanctuary were removed by experts from Birmingham and taken to the studio of a glass artist to be restored. The educational building's second floor and roof had received the worst damage and water staining.

On Saturday, thanks to Pastor Dwayne Higgason of Grace Temple church and Mitch Williams, leader of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, 100 student athletes and coaches came to help remove debris from the church, buildings and grounds. There were fifteen large trees downed and on roofs that had to be removed. Much planning and groundwork was necessary during the first year before a building permit could be granted by the city. In applying for it, the session wisely included the entire half block and two neighboring lots purchased, into one permit issued for church purposes.

Westminster's congregation had its first Wednesday night with Parkway's congregation for an Ash Wednesday service, just two days after the tornado. Sunday, Feb 17 was the first time for Westminster to hold its morning worship service at 9:30 at Parkway before exchanging places and moving into their classrooms to hold Sunday school at eleven. Following that the congregation walked across the street into the barren sanctuary of Westminster; stood together in a circle on bare floor and had a most meaningful brief service of worship.

The Lords guidance a few years earlier when the church was struggling with divisive issues, guided the church to call Steve Ramp to lead the church. Who could have imagined that a man who had left a successful legal career to enter the ministry would come and become such a needed and inspirational leader in the trying time to come. Steve's positive spirit and guidance were pivotal in the recovery efforts. His March 13 letter to the congregation that follows shows that.

The abbreviated Issue of the Westminster Standard newsletter mailed to the congregation on March 13 carried news of recovery in progress. Steve Ramp filled one page:

Our friends at Parkway Heights United Methodist Church have taken us in. We went to their Ash Wednesday service which was very moving, and we use their sanctuary on Wednesday evenings at 6 pm and Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m. They have a lovely facility, and our Sunday School Classes will meet at 11:00 am while their members are in worship. We are very happy to be their guests, and they are treating us like family. This is a great blessing! As members of both churches

changed places between services, we grew to enjoy becoming better acquainted and sharing coffee and fellowship. That joyful fellowship has continued over the years as we often joined for special services and events.

Kay Saulter is working at Owens Business Machines, 2108 Hardy Street. Getting copies made is not a problem. Kay works 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday. If you need to drop something off for her, feel free to leave items at the front desk. Gene Owens' staff is friendly and helpful. Tommy has an office at Parkway Heights. I am mobile (Silverado truck and cell phone work for me).

Our much-loved Kilgen Organ: The day after the storm we dismantled and protected the pipes. Our organ builders, David and Susan Finch, believe the organ will be fine after some repairs. Miraculously, the roof over the upper chambers kept wind and rain at bay.

Out buildings: The McCaa House (college and youth ministries), the Jones house (Presbytery Office and Sharecare) and the Wright House (Christian Women's Job Corp) were destroyed by wind and pine trees. They will be demolished when the asbestos in the Wright House is abated. This is a big loss for us but fully covered by insurance.

We were previously concerned with our lack of parking. This won't be a problem now! After the removal of the three buildings, we will have plenty of room. We have insurance with a good company and a good agent. However, the devastation was horrific and estimates on the repair costs and portions of the main building that can be saved are still being determined. Before the tornado, we had plans to expand our facilities. Our building fund will now become a re-building fund!

The Session appointed a Commission to assess the damage and how to move forward. The Commission members include Althea Jerome, Gene Owens, Mac Forsyth, Steve Ramp and Butch Nobles, Chair. The commission is appointed for 90 days. The Commission's job is only to get us to the point where we can begin to think longer-term. The Architectural Steering Committee and the Session will help in the rebuilding plans.

When we get our building situation squared away, we will turn our attention and energies toward the community. There are hundreds of uninsured and underserved people in Hattiesburg who will need help for the next 3+ years. Several of our members helped establish a Volunteer Center in Hattiesburg, housed under R3DM which will welcome groups coming to re-roof and restore homes.

Even under the dire conditions, there were reasons to be thankful. Several churches offered to let us hold services in their buildings, including Parkway heights and 38th Avenue Baptist. University Baptist made space available in their basement to house the food storage of the Breadbasket program. Men from the Islamic Center on 25th Avenue helped remove items from the church and helped clean. About fifty Pentecost members and ten University Baptist members showed up to help clear Charlie Ramp's house. Hundreds from the coast came to our aid on Tuesday. Westminster Church in Gulfport graciously sent us \$10,000. Wiggins Presbyterian Church of Wiggins, with 38 members, sent us \$2,500.

On Saturday, February 16, over 160 Fellowship of Christian Athletes from around the Pine Belt helped clean up the property. The Meistersingers offered to sing an encore performance as a benefit concert for the Westminster Building Fund that was performed at Westminster just one hour before the storm came through. There have been many other blessings and many more surely to come. We are thankful to God for all He does and will do as we seek Him and follow His lead!

Our insurance adjustor needs to complete an inventory of such contents and damages. But following the tornado, several members took papers, books, paintings, rugs and other items home with them for safekeeping or to dry them out. Adequate room is now available for all the items in our storage warehouse facility on east Third Street. Please email Richard Potin with a list of what may be held by members, and he will make arrangements for their pickup. We need to account for everything that was hurt by the storm. Our sexton, Ray Robinson, will spend his time each week at PARKWAY. He will remain our employee, but he will help there with tasks they need completed. This will help Ray and Parkway.

Parkway is looking for some of our members to help drive golf carts in the parking lot. Sharecare was formerly housed in the Jones House. It will now operate from the homes of Bob Buckner and Tom McKegey and hold its First Thursdays Luncheon at Parkway room 303 where the New Beginnings third Monday luncheons will be held. Over the past few weeks, there have been quite a few articles published about Westminster and events surrounding the storm in the Hattiesburg American and on TV stations WDAM and WLOX. The Men of the Church resumed their second Saturday breakfasts on March, holding them at Shoney's Restaurant.

The newsletter gave the joyful report that the church had been able to pay off the \$750,000 construction loan from Bancorp South, thus saving \$40,000 in future interest. Payment of pledges were on schedule, and the secondary Small Business Association loan of \$284,000 mortgage payments could be covered by incoming pledges and insurance payments.

The April issue of The Standard continued to report gifts and give thanks for support. Perry L. Clouston, the widow of the artist who designed the stained -glass sanctuary window, gave funds for its reconstruction. Additional major gifts reported include \$10,000 from the Presbytery of South Alabama, \$9,000 from the Meistersingers benefit concert, \$5,000 from the Presbytery of South Mississippi. Robert Cummings helped negotiate for the church to lease a 10,000 square foot warehouse from one of his clients. Gene Owens was thanked for providing a very nice office for Kay Salter to work. Mary Clare Royals and Debbie Hudson were thanked for help in opening the Westminster Relief Fund at BancorpSouth. Richard Potin, David Arnold and Chuck Brown were thanked for their efforts in organizing the warehouse. Attendance for services has held up and even grown. The March luncheon of the New Beginnings group of older adults had the greatest attendance since its inception.

RECONSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS

New Beginnings monthly older adult luncheons, so appropriately named, continued to be held each month on Parkway Heights third floor. The Baptist Student Union on the USM campus offered their hall and kitchen for a bevy of Sunday lunches, Easter brunches, egg hunts, fish fries and other special occasions over the intervening two years. Space for other special services and activities were made available by the Episcopal Church of the Ascension and Westminster continued worship services and activities with Parkway.

Although progress seemed hard to see, much preparation planning and organizing was going on. Steve's monthly newsletter columns changed from, "From the Pastor's Desk" to "From the pastor's Dashboard"- and a second column regarding construction kept the congregation updated on progress. A capitol campaign was quickly set up and \$1.3 million was amazingly raised by December. Based on this a bank loan for \$700,000 was approved for reconstruction. Exterior repairs to preserve the damaged building were quickly approved and underway while plans for interior renovations and new plans for the new wing were developed and approved almost a year after the tornado.

Even under these unusual circumstances the membership stood strong and even grew. Programs in place continued, youth programs grew, two youth missions to Nicaragua and Puerto Rico were carried out, Men's breakfasts were moved to Shoney's Restaurant, and of course the Presbyterian Women carried on even more faithfully with their activities and duties. Even during the time of great need, the congregation and session continued to extend its ministry of help to Presbytery and local causes. The newsletters were filled with letters of support and thanks from agencies and individuals. Breadbasket, the Furniture Ministry and Sharecare grew as needs within the community had grown.

During the two-year reconstruction period that followed, the second floor was redesigned to accommodate a choir room, a youth director's office and expanded classrooms for children, youth and young adults. A larger, more modern elevator was also installed. The lower floor was reconfigured to include an expanded foyer, three adult classrooms and large kindergarten and nursery rooms. New all-electric heating and cooling and modern lighting were added throughout the new wing and educational building. With the alleyway blocked from the south, an enlarged parking lot was added between the church and 24th Street.

Where two other houses were destroyed, the church purchased two additional lots at the corner of Pearl Street and 24th Street to maintain and assure the neighborhood integrity and provide sites for future church use.

HOME ONCE MORE

Althea Jerome summarized what many in the congregation had experienced: “As construction work was completed, nearly two years after the tornado, church members were eager to return to worship in the sanctuary, and to begin to use the new spaces in the expanded building. More committees were needed to make decisions about furnishings the building and to decide what items from storage would be used in the renovated building. Many among Presbyterian Women membership time, efforts and financial support with the refurbishing. The church also needed new technology and Wi-Fi installations. It is remarkable that these new challenges and decisions were managed entirely by church members who contributed their knowledge, skills and expertise to finish the work. The right people were in place at the right time; including people who had the legal and business expertise to request insurance reimbursement and to establish a 30-year Small Business Association loan to cover part of the cost of the new construction. It is easy to see that God’s presence was with our church all along.”

A celebration and rededication service for the original restored educational building and sanctuary was held on February 8, 2015, at 3:30 p.m., two years, short of two days, after the tornado struck.

The mighty Kilgin Organ was fully restored as were the benches, carpeting and furnishings of the sanctuary. New Bibles and 240 copies of the new Presbyterian Hymnbook were in place. The March newsletter listed the contributors of the hymnbooks and persons for whom they were dedicated.

In good Scottish fashion, following a prelude by Bagpipes, the minister requested permission to enter and led the processional choir entry. There were several speakers including the mayor, Johnny L. Dupree. In the dedication period the keys were dedicated and delivered to the Clerk of Session prior to a recessional led by pipers and a first reception in Montague Hall for one of the largest gatherings ever held in the church.

Martha Ann Hogrefe expressed thoughts of many well, in her words. “Thanks be to God that at the moment of the crisis brought by the tornado, all the people our congregation needed to enable us to meet the challenges we faced were in place so that we could continue our witness in this community.

The issue of the Westminster Church Newsletter mailed February 2 was normal enough, its nine pages described an upcoming schedule that was noted for February 10, Sunday School at and worship service at 11 am. The deacons would meet at 12:15 and the Session at 1:15 to review proposed building plans. The Meistersingers would perform at 3 pm and the youth would meet at 6 pm. An Ash Wednesday service would be held following the Family night meal. On Thursday, Cursillo members would meet for lunch and worship at noon and the Youth, that had been collecting donations in the McCaa House for a garage sale, would hold their sale at the 4th Street Community Center Friday and Saturday. These and typical activities would be held throughout February. Among the notices, photos and articles it was reported that the Westminster Academy began its spring semester with several new students, and the Suzuki program was growing. The next big goal was to re-establish the Hattiesburg Children’s Chorus.

The New Beginnings luncheon was scheduled for February 18, 2013. Perhaps prophetically, it was reported that the children’s Rotation Sunday School would be studying about Joseph in Egypt and their Memory verse was Genesis 50:20, “You planned to harm me. But God planned it for good”. It was impossible to predict the intrusion that would occur while the church was vacant February 10 between 5 pm and the cancelation of the 6 pm youth activities.

THE REPLACED COLUMBARIUM

Westminster’s columbarium had been created with prayers and preparation and was first dedicated on May 11, 2008, outside of the southeast wall of the original educational building. Although the original columbarium was heavily damaged by fallen trees it survived the tornado. As plans evolved for reconstruction and the addition of the new wing of

the building in that direction, it became necessary to remove it and its garden and outdoor chapel area for later restoration beside the planned new parking lot.

Families with deceased members interned in the columbarium were invited to remove the remains for safe care until the new columbarium could be built and dedicated.

Members and friends who had interned containers of ashes of loved ones were asked to remove and retain them until a new columbarium could be built. Memories of a saying of one of those interned came to mind by a few close friends. She had once told of how her husband would often save broken things, thinking they might be repairable. Bettye Arnold once said that he might even put her ashes on the mantle with that in mind. True to her prediction, her ashes were taken home and placed on that mantle until they could be interned in the new columbarium.

Only six internments had been made before the tornado struck, but almost all the spaces had been chosen and committed for by members. It was recognized at its dedication that a much larger columbarium would be needed in the future and space for additional sections provided. It had been recognized at its inception and dedication that “Christians had a long history of burying their dead close to their places of worship. Doing so connects us to the past and reminds us that we are earth ashes and dust, but also and always, a part of the communion of saints. Death does not end love or life, for by his death and resurrection, Jesus overcame death for himself and for all people.” It was anticipated that spaces would be available for members of the church, their families and friends for only a maintenance fee.

Below is a list of the members, their family members and friends interned in the first columbarium and interned before the Tornado struck:

Michael Laiche	December 6, 1978—April 19, 2007
Charles Dana Short	February 26, 1928—Oct 15, 2007
Bettye Cecile Lusk Arnold	March 24, 1936—March 17, 2011
Wayne Ramp	June 10, 1921—March 18, 2011
Paul Houston Gaudet	March 14, 1961—March 10, 2013
Judith Ann Harrell	February 12, 1921—June 30, 2013

Internments For Two Deaths After May 2016

Kay Saulter	May 9, 1959—August 2, 2014
Thomas James McKegney	November 11, 1949—January 8, 2015

A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE TORNADO AND THE RECONSTRUCTION

BY Althea Jerome

According to the 2013 Church calendar The Sunday calendar was full on February 10th, 2013. In addition to Sunday school classes and a worship service, there was also a Session meeting and a Meistersinger concert at 3:00. The afternoon became stormy. While Meistersinger choir members had gathered at 2:00, dark skies became darker, and very few people arrived early for the concert.

During the session meeting on that Sunday, there was discussion about increasing the size of the church building. This was a recurring topic at session meetings for months, because our congregation had nearly outgrown the church's original fellowship hall. At this particular meeting, an architect's rendering for an addition to the building was examined and discussed.

Session members had a lot of questions. They expressed differing ideas about the best way to expand the church building. Pastor and Session Moderator Steve Ramp asked the Session about paying off the balance of a bank loan that was used to purchase and install the pipe organ from First Baptist Church in 2009. Session members agreed that it was a good idea to close out a loan prior to taking on new debt for a church building expansion. The proposal was approved unanimously.

THE CONCERT AND THE STORM:

Following the Session meeting, Meistersinger members began arriving for the concert. Eventually, the audience arrived, and the concert took place.

The conductor decided to postpone the start of the concert for 15 minutes to accommodate anyone whose trip to the church might be delayed because of the bad weather. The concert concluded at about 4:15, and the church was empty about 4:30 p.m.

Thirty minutes later an F-4 tornado tore through west Hattiesburg along Highway 98, striking local businesses, USM, Westminster, residential neighborhoods of Hattiesburg and areas of Petal Deliberations,

Originally, the Westminster youth group was scheduled for a meeting at 5:30 p.m. That meeting never took place because of the severe weather. In February, it's dark by late afternoon. The tornado tore through the campus of USM and hit Westminster about 5:15. Word of the tornado's devastation spread slowly through members of the congregation and the community because of damage to trees, downed powerlines, and chaos

caused by the storm's intensity. Sometime after 6:00 p.m. a church member discovered that Westminster had been in the path of the tornado, and the church was damaged.

LIVES SPARED:

During the most intense moments of the storm, there were people driving along Pearl Street on the north side of the sanctuary. Miraculously, two drivers abandoned their vehicles and sought safety close to the church building. Although their cars were damaged by the tornado, their quick actions allowed them to remain safe while the worst of the storm passed.

February 11, 2013, Westminster members gathered at the church property on Monday to assess damage and to begin salvaging what could be preserved. The first order of business was to dismantle and protect the organ pipes in what was now an exposed sanctuary. Storm winds broke windows on the south side of the building, allowing rain and debris to blow into the open space.

Other areas of the church needed to be cleared out, especially the stairway to the second floor, which was blocked with debris. Furniture and items that could be salvaged were stored in "pods" that were rented, then stored on the church parking lot.

The Dean of the School of Music at William Carey University sent a truck to pick up the slightly damaged grand piano from the sanctuary. It remained in storage at WCU until the church was rebuilt. Music from the choral library (stored in a small room north of the chancel) was stored in large plastic tubs.

Stained glass windows were damaged, along with the roof and windows on the north and south sides of the sanctuary. Throughout the day, church members worked to secure the building, notify insurance carriers, and store salvaged property. A group of men from the nearby Muslim Center came to help move furniture and clear debris and damaged items out of the building.

All the while, Steve Ramp and members of the Session were contemplating how our church would function without the use of its building. There was an outpouring of sympathy and offers of assistance from people in the community. A long day of damage assessment and hard work ended with a sense that God would provide for us.

NEXT STEPS:

In the days following the tornado, Parkway Heights United Methodist Church issued an invitation for our church members to use spaces in their building for worship and other activities. The congregations of Parkway and Westminster combined for an Ash Wednesday service, just two days after the tornado.

The following Sunday, Westminster held its first worship service at 9:30 a.m. at Parkway. The congregation then reconvened for a brief prayer service in the sanctuary at Westminster which had been emptied of furnishings and some debris. For the next two years, Westminster was housed at Parkway. The hospitality and accommodation were exactly what we needed while our church building was repaired.

EXPANDING THE BUILDING

In 2013 no one would have guessed that it would take two years for our church to return to our building. One aspect of the delay was related to the church's desire to enlarge the building. True to form, a committee was formed to work with a local architect to plan for an expansion to the south of the original building. Generating the new plan took considerable time, yet, unlike a previous plan submitted by a different architect, the new plan was enthusiastically embraced.

As construction work was completed, nearly two years after the tornado, church members were eager to return to worship services in the sanctuary, and to begin to use the new spaces in the expanded building. More committees were needed to make decisions about furnishing the building and to decide what items from storage would be used in the renovated building.

The church also needed new technology and Wi-Fi installations. It is remarkable that these new challenges and decisions were managed entirely by church members who contributed their knowledge, skills and expertise to finish the work. The right people were in place at the right time; including people who had the legal and business expertise to request insurance reimbursement and to establish a 30-year SBA loan to cover part of the cost of the new construction.

Church members decorated cotton prayer flags to brighten the hall alongside the baby nursery and preschool rooms.

Looking back, it's easy to see that God's presence was with our church all along. We held worship services and Sunday school every week after the tornado. Parkway generously provided space for choir rehearsals, PW meetings, Session meetings and youth group activity.

The insurance carrier worked closely with the committee overseeing the repair of the sanctuary, its stained glass, the pews and the organ. A church member provided office space and equipment for our church secretary to use. Another church member who had a commercial contracting business oversaw the new construction and its connection to the original building.

While no one would say the project was "easy," it felt like we were blessed by God throughout the process of rebuilding.

"... God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." 2 Corinthians 9:8

WESTMINSTER MEMORIES

by Martha Ann Hogrefe

What challenging days we faced as we looked at the devastation of our church after the tornado in 2013 and wondered just where to begin! Water was covering the floor in the former fellowship hall, the stairs were badly damaged, the sanctuary roof was open to the sunlight in places, pews were damaged and unsafe to sit in because of the debris and glass. The damage was visible everywhere - no part of the building was untouched. It seemed to me that we faced two major challenges as a congregation without a physical home: How do we stay together as a church family, and how do we rebuild the church building to meet our congregation's needs?

The first challenge was met when we accepted the generous and loving offer of Parkway Heights United Methodist Church to use their beautiful, newly enlarged building. Their generosity enabled us to continue to worship as a church family and to gather for other various activities that were important to us in a location that was close to our own campus. One particular moment during these early days of recovery stands out.

After one gathering at Parkway, we all went across the street to our parking lot and entered the church to see how things were going. We gathered in the sanctuary that was still in shambles, circled the room, held hands and repeated the Lord's Prayer. That was a very moving moment and was helpful in keeping us together and focused on God's Providence during those days of uncertainty.

The second challenge was met by a marvelous team of experts who knew how to deal with the insurance companies, the contractors, the architects, the construction workers needed to rebuild the damaged building and to build the much-needed addition. People who come to mind in this regard are our pastor Steve Ramp whose training in the law was invaluable, Butch Nobles who was an experienced contractor, Mac Forsyth who as a session member made sure our insurance policy was up to date, and the many church leaders on the Session and Diaconate who worked tirelessly to make sure the new building met our needs.

I am grateful that the concerns of the various groups in the church were considered as the new spaces were allocated for the programs vital to our worship and service. As a longtime choir member, I remember in particular the discussion surrounding the creation of a choir room.

Our church had never had a place for the choir to meet to rehearse and to store robes and music. That Westminster had for so many years such a vibrant music offering each Sunday was a testament to the dedication of the leaders of this important part of our worship as a church.

As I remember the many needs of those days, I think of Esther 4:14, and give thanks that the Lord provided all the resources we needed to rebuild. Esther is asked at a moment of crisis "...who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Thanks be to God that at the moment of the crisis brought by the tornado, all the people our congregation needed to enable us to meet the challenges we faced were in place so that we could continue our witness in this community and beyond.

MEMORIES OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE TORNADO

BY Dutchie Bryant

After learning about the tornado that hit Hattiesburg February 10, 2013, many people went to Westminster (our church) to look. After many tears were shed, we began our clean-up— many people worked on that. Some were not members.

Our minister Rev Steve Ramp let the way, long and hard days ahead. His legal background helped in so many ways—we all have one goal in mind—build our church back.

We were invited by many churches to worship there. Rev Ramp suggested that we worship at Parkway Heights Methodist because of their location. We did and had a special time there for worship and Sunday School every week for two years.

A church member, Butch Nobles, was a building contractor and the task was given to him. His work pleased everyone and soon we had a new building to worship in. We are so proud of our new place to worship, and we thank God every day for his many blessings to us. We know God is faithful to his people.

Franklin and Dutchie have been members since 1961. They still remain members.

MISSION PROGRAMS OF WESTMINSTER THROUGH THE YEARS OF RECONSTRUCTION

By Karen and Eric Reidenbach

While the tornado of 2013 did much damage to Westminster Presbyterian Church. It failed to diminish the church's mission appetite. In fact, many opportunities presented themselves. Westminster sent work teams to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to help restore neighborhoods ravaged by unprecedented storm waters.

Perhaps one of the more salient opportunities was closer to home – the flooding in Crosby, Mississippi. Flood waters damaged and destroyed a significant portion of the small rural community located near McComb, Mississippi. Crosby is a poor community even in times of abundance and their help in restoring and rebuilding damaged homes was sorely needed. For eight weeks teams from Westminster traveled to Crosby to muck out homes, rip out damaged interiors, replace electrical circuits and replace drywall.

Westminster's team was composed of Dean and Mary Cromartie, Steve Ramp, Dave Daves, Butch Nobles, Ray Stiengraber, Dan Davis, Robert Lochhead, David Arnold and Eric Reidenbach. Their efforts were supported by a "casserole team" of Westminster women who baked and froze many, many casseroles and meals to be shared by not only our team, but by other teams that came from as far away as Michigan. Helping in this effort was Parkway Heights United Methodist Church that loaned us their van for transportation of workers and tools and supplied, on occasions, a couple of workers.

During the two years that we were worshipping at PHUMC, their staff made sure to give us space for collection and storage of Christmas gifts for our friends at Goswell Regional Center so that we could continue this important decades-old tradition.

The Breadbasket program's storage space in the second floor tower room was flooded, but University Baptist Church, quickly made room move remaining supplies and operate from their facility for the duration. Volunteers from the member churches readily made adjustments to continue food deliveries to families in need.

ASSISTANCE AFTER THE TORNADO FROM MEMBERS

By Geraldine "Geri" Jones

Brooklyn, my great-grandson and I had just gotten home from church at Westminster when we heard the forecast of a tornado heading our way. His mother called to ask if we could bring her some rice. So off we went hoping to make it back home before the tornado hit. Within five minutes after we got home, we could hear the roar of the wind picking up. We got in the closet and within seconds the storm had passed.

A tree had fallen through the roof on my bed. Rain was coming in on my bed and through windows everywhere in the house. Because the tornado had hit the church mostly everyone was there helping out.

Cindy Nobles, Judy Haydel and Jacob Suttle came to help me pack up everything to take to storage. Stella Fair let me stay with her until I got an apartment. After about six weeks, I moved into a really nice apartment. It was then that a lot of my church family came to help me get moved into my new home. They were spearheaded by Steve Ramp, Richard Potin, Wally Gregg, and many other members of Westminster. I am blessed to have a church family that cares for me and my family.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE YOUTH PROGRAMS DISPLACEMENT

BY Jacob Suttle

At approximately 5:00 PM on February 10, 2013, an EF-4 tornado touched down in Hattiesburg, MS, and ravaged much of the community. This day was a monumental day for Westminster Presbyterian Church, as most of the church was destroyed.

While there were no bodily injuries sustained on church grounds during the tornado, the congregation was deeply afflicted by the storm's aftermath, and Westminster Presbyterian's youth group was no exception. Before the tornado, the layout of the church was very different.

Today, Westminster has multiple rooms on the second floor designated for youth and children activities. Westminster before the tornado, however, lacked the space inside of the church for the youth to hold their activities; so, instead, youth ministry was conducted inside of a house called, "The Jones' House." The youth group preferred this arrangement because it gave us our own isolated space where we could be as loud and as boisterous as we desired, without having to worry about disturbing other members of the congregation.

Like most of the church itself, the "Jones' House" was destroyed by the tornado. Parkway Heights graciously opened their doors to Westminster's congregation and allowed the congregation to worship there. Parkway Heights also offered a designated space for Westminster's youth group as well.

Transitional phases can be difficult, and as young teenagers mourning the loss of the church we grew up in and loved, this transitional phase was especially challenging. After some time had passed, however, we realized the reality of the situation really wasn't so bad.

The youth group was still able to meet on Wednesdays and Sundays, and we were still able to go on mission trips, and we still held events throughout the calendar year. Also, the youth facilities at Parkway Heights were excellent, and we had a great amount of fun exploring the church.

After a while I realized that the only thing that had changed was that we had to move across the street to Parkway Heights temporarily, which really was nothing to complain about. Our youth director at the time, Amy Ruff, helped us to recognize that, even though the church's physical structure was destroyed, the church itself was still intact because our congregation still had somewhere to gather, worship, create fellowship, and spread God's love.

Amy's guidance, Parkway Height's generosity, and our close bond as a youth group were critical factors in guiding us through those uncertain times. Roughly two years later, the construction of the Westminster Presbyterian Church we know today was completed. My youth group was thrilled to be back on our home campus, and I am pleased to have witnessed multiple generations of youth enjoying the same space we did all of these years later.

THE BROKEN STAINED-GLASS WINDOW WAS TURNED INTO SYMBOLS OF RESTORATION

by Eric Graham

Westminster Presbyterian Church History Stained-Glass Crosses On Sunday, February 10, 2013, a tornado devastated our beloved church building. My wife, Ginny, was the head deacon for the month of February and had just arrived back in Hattiesburg after a trip to Memphis when the tornado hit our town. Once it was safe, we drove to check on the church building and found it heavily damaged. We, along with the Haydels, who had also come to check on the building, secured what we could and called Steve Ramp, our pastor at the time, to report the state of things.

The following day, we arrived at the church early, along with many of the church members, to begin to clean up and salvage what we could. The main focus at this point was our beautiful pipe organ and laying out the pipes on the pews to remove debris from inside them.

Several of the panels from the stained-glass windows were broken and had shattered on the sanctuary floor. I began to gather those broken pieces in a box. From there the idea grew to make those glass shards into something that could be a keepsake from this terrible event, a symbol of the beginning of our recovery. Ash Wednesday was that following Wednesday. Our neighbor church, Parkway Heights UMC, invited us to join them for their Ash Wednesday service.

I knew it would be an emotional time for our church members, and particularly for my wife and her family as they had been members of Westminster since 1961. My wife's parents, Wally and Mary Dayne Gregg, were married at

Westminster in 1969. She and her brother were baptized at Westminster. My wife and I were married there in 1997, and our three boys were all baptized there.

Needless to say, our church means a lot to us, and it was emotional for us all to think about not being able to worship there anymore for the foreseeable future. I spent the days between Sunday and Wednesday crafting a pair of cross shaped earrings using a mold I made out of wire, dental acrylic, and the shards from the stained-glass windows, and finished them just in time to give them to my wife as we drove to that Ash Wednesday service. I wanted her to have a piece of Westminster with her for this first service outside of our church building.

That night, my wife posted a picture of the earrings on social media along with the story of their origin, and the post was a catalyst for what was to come. So many requests for a piece of the stained-glass jewelry started pouring in. I began making a list of orders and began creating different molds for both earrings and pendants for necklaces.

I did make these new molds different from the original pair, as I wanted the pair for my wife to be a one-of-a-kind set. I even eventually made some larger crosses that could be hung on a wall. I would work on these during my lunch hour at work or after hours and on weekends.

All of the proceeds from these stained-glass crosses were donated back to the church to aid in the recovery efforts. In total, over 100 crosses were made and sold, raising around \$10,000 for the church's tornado relief fund.

TOMMY'S STORY

by Tommy Suttle

Monday morning, February 11, 2013 was a life changing moment for the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Our church had been destroyed by a tornado the night before, and in the midst of trying to clean out the building to salvage what we could - a lingering question hung in the air: Where will we worship? Where will we continue our Christian fellowship?

James 1:2-4 says: *Brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.* Someone once said that life is 100% of what happens to us and 90% of life is how we react to it.

Not being discouraged and receiving a wonderful invitation from our across the street neighbors at Parkway Heights United Methodist Church to freely share their space with them, the Family Ministry Team consisting of Ginny Graham, Mary Clare Royals, Judy Haydel, Amy Ruff, Cindy Nobles, Tabitha Raggio, and Tommy Suttle met almost exactly a month from the day of the tornado to make a game plan.

Our first act as a congregation post-storm was joining PHUMC in their sanctuary for a joint Ash Wednesday service - a tradition that endures to this day. With the encouragement of such acceptance, corporate worship, and feeling of belonging, the following is the opening statement from the minutes of the Family Ministry Team's meeting from March 24, 2013:

The Family Ministry Team met on Wednesday April 17, 2013 in the Fireside Room at Parkway Heights UMC. Members in attendance were Tommy Suttle (chair), Mary Clare Royals, Amy Ruff, Cindy Nobles, Mary Nobles, Judy Haydel and Ginny Graham. The FMT believes that it is imperative that the life of WPC continues to push forward during the summer and the months to follow while we wait to move home. We want our people to meet with continuity to maintain their identity as a congregation. The following is a list of regularly occurring activities and a few brand-new items to add to the calendar. The list / minutes will need to be reviewed and approved by the Session.

In a sense, when we are confronted with a difficult obstacle such as displacement by a storm, it is easy to panic and over plan and rely on selfishness based on our own hunches about what will or won't happen next. Through this process of waiting, we realized that we didn't have to figure it all out for ourselves; we were only asked to take the next faithful

step - one after the other. Proverbs 3:6-6 - *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him, and God will make your paths straight!*

The congregation was able to maintain its worship and fellowship schedule throughout the 98 weeks of displacement. We worshipped in the Methodist's sanctuary at 9:30 instead of 10:30 and moved Sunday school to after worship. Sunday school attendance increased! Fellowship time between worship and Sunday school was shared in the foyer with members of PHUMC and new relationships were formed.

Rather than seeing programs die and fade away, WPC saw new things sprout and grow. The Tuesday Brown Bag Bible study was created during our time away and still meets every Tuesday of the week. Wednesday night dinners and programs continued as we shared meals with our neighbors and were granted meeting spaces for study after dinner.

We had a joint Vacation Bible School with PHUMC that summer, and our youth group was able to maintain their weekly meetings in space provided next door. The Older Adult ministry continued to thrive. The monthly New Beginnings luncheon and program remained uninterrupted as the group met in a large classroom on the third floor of PHUMC. Lunch was shipped in and carried upstairs for each meeting.

The Seekers class, consisting mainly of our younger family members continued to go strong with regular outings, Sunday lunches, and study and fellowship opportunities. The Thursday morning Men's Breakfast was established during this period of time and it is still going strong today. The Baptist Student Union lent us space for Sundays when we had large activities planned, such as our annual Fish Fry, Red, Hot, and Blue, Easter Brunch, and Rally Day.

Romans 8:26 says *the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words.* This was certainly true for our situation back in 2013; we knew something needed to be prayed for, but the overwhelming nature of the tragedy was at times consuming. Thanks be to God, for the Spirit's guidance as we navigated through the troubled waters. Yes, we eventually moved back home into a spectacular new space, but our true growth was experienced in the time away as God continued to mold and shape our lives as his children and ambassadors.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND WORDS OF THE BUILDER WHO REBUILT THE BUILDING

by Butch Nobles

The photographs below summarize the rebuilding of Westminster Presbyterian Church; the Congregation gathered inside our cold, heavily damaged Sanctuary the Sunday after the tornado, and the Congregation in our restored Sanctuary on Christmas Eve, 2015. It has been said adversity does not form character; it reveals it. That is what the Congregation of Westminster Presbyterian proved that day in February. They "Rejoice in hope, patient in tribulation, persevere in prayer."

Throughout the ordeal, we were all blessed beyond measure. The Sanctuary was occupied just hours before the storm. The building's architecture protected the lives of two strangers. We suffered grief, but once the building was deemed structurally safe, members donned their raincoats and gloves and salvaged the 2,000 plus organ pipes. This selfless commitment continued for two years with a single purpose. That servant leadership continues today.

Cindy and I were blessed to be a part of this. Our heartfelt thank you to Steve, the Session, the Diaconate, the Committees, Parkway Heights, and each member of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

OUR CONGREGATION'S STORY OF FAITH

In response to continuing interest in Westminster's recovery from the damage caused by the tornado which swept through south Mississippi on February 10, 2013, the Session authorized an ad hoc steering committee to gather and publish information from members and friends.

Letters were sent to all members inviting them to participate in the gathering of the history of this challenging period. Their replies constitute the material contained in this document.

The steering committee of volunteers offers this "Story of Faith" with the prayer that it reflects Westminster correctly as a Body of Christ. The submissions repeated a common theme – "God will guide us and be with us as we face this challenge."

Though it became impossible to divide material by topic, the following were covered:

- Community response
- Mission activities
- Youth activities
- Reconstruction of the Church
- Worship, Spiritual Nurturing, and Care of the Membership

More could be gathered; however, the committee feels the document is adequate for those who desire to learn how this Body of Christ reacted to the loss of the Church Building, Columbarium, and auxiliary houses.

With gratitude,

Steering Committee Members:

David Arnold
Iris Easterling
Mary Dayne Gregg
Sharon Potin
Karen Reidenbach

Special appreciation to Martha Davis, Church Administrator