We Covenant Still
To Be The Church
Dear Westminster members and friends,

Since being founded in 1857, Westminster has seen its share of challenges. Over the years, Psalm 46 has reminded us:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.”

The year through which we have just passed was “mountain-shaking.” It began with a global pandemic and also unveiled the pervasive racism in America. The killing in our city by police of an unarmed African American man named George Floyd on May 25 awakened us once again to the reality of deep-seated racism in our land. The pandemic further exposed systemic injustice.

Church documents from the last century make no mention of how Westminster responded to the 1918 pandemic, but they do speak of Westminster’s involvement in local Civil Rights work 50 years ago. This Annual Report tells the 2020 story of our church. It leaves a record for those who will follow us 50 or 100 years from now. What would we want them to know about how Westminster lived through 2020?

The first thing we did after Covid hit was to suspend everything. On March 13, in an emergency meeting, the elders voted to move all church activity into an online-only format. The staff team and lay leaders quickly pivoted for what we thought would be two weeks. When we realized that the health crisis would close the building for a longer period, we declared on our website: While apart, we covenant still to be the church. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. That statement was our way of expressing the hope of the psalmist: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

With that confidence we set about to be the church in the midst of Covid-induced isolation. To do so, we learned to use technology in new ways. Our tech team members are the behind the scenes heroes of 2020. They helped us to be an online-only church. We became adept at livestreaming worship. We figured out how to meet and teach by Zoom. We pre-recorded music and other parts of the service. We had guest preachers and teachers from across the country in what we called A Year of Listening. Our children participated in “Stay Camp” – an online version of Day Camp. Youth ministry moved to a digital format. We provided pastoral care over the phone and other platforms. We reached out and kept connected.

This Annual Report tells that story. Since March 2020 our congregation has not gathered in person for a single church activity. Except for a few brief outdoor encounters of a handful of church members, we have not seen one another. And yet, we have still been the church.

We praised God, prayed for forgiveness, and received God’s grace week after week. We read and interpreted scripture every Sunday. We taught the faith to our children and youth. We deepened spiritual growth of adults through study and small groups. We hired new staff we have yet to meet in person and said farewell to others. We re-committed ourselves to the long, hard work of becoming an anti-racist congregation. Post-Covid, this will remain our focus, joining others to build a future where all people enjoy their full humanity. We made difficult decisions, supported partners, baptized, elected, ordained, and gave thanks to God for those who died— all through the use of technology.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

I am grateful for the leaders and staff members of Westminster who led us through these days of distance to still be the church in 2020. Thanks be to God.

Grace and peace,

Tim
“That day of Pentecost, and in our time, the church begins by hearing the good news, community begins with listening to what makes it possible. Every relationship starts that way. It may be the most important gift we can give another.”

—Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen

Community Begins with Listening

October 11, 2020
WHILE APART, WE COVENANT STILL TO BE THE CHURCH.
We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

In 2020, we offered new ways to gather and foster community. We responded to the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic and we continued to address the resurfaced realities of systemic racism. Both of which challenged us to ask ourselves, what exactly does it mean to be the church?

...Worshipping together

For the first two months of 2020, we held 10:30 am worship in the sanctuary and Gathered at Five in Westminster Hall. But when the pandemic began in mid-March, we quickly adjusted to the technology needed for a season of separation.

We were already livestreaming worship, but we increased our production value thanks to our outstanding tech team and the modern space provided thanks to the Open Doors Open Futures campaign. We transformed Westminster Hall into “sets” for each service and used videos to include more people in each service. We also began to broadcast on KMSP (Fox 9), expanding our audience to thousands more in the region.

Music and the Arts started the year with performances by Elkina Piano Duo and Border CrossSing as part of the Performing Arts Series. However, performances scheduled for the spring had to be canceled.

Westminster Gallery hosted an indoor Lenten exhibition as well as window exhibitions using the Westminster Hall windows that face Nicollet Mall. During the month of July, Westminster’s music program hosted an educational series called, “Hearing Soul: A Guided Overview of African/African American Choral Traditions.”

Silence & Song Wednesday worship services were held throughout the fall and featured Interim Organist Kenneth Vigne improvising on the piano, Artist-in-Residence Joe Davis performing spoken word, and Eve Schulte dancing.
Caring for one another

Congregational Care worked hard this past year to continue the ministries of the church in a different way. This year caring for one another could be heard in the phone calls officers and member volunteers made regularly to our homebound members and others in need of support. Many members and volunteers also have been writing cards and emails to one another to stay in touch.

The Westminster Deacon Board made a commitment to call on members and express love and connection. As of January, the deacons had connected on the phone with 284 households and had sent cards to another 115 households. In the fall, they distributed 24 kindness kits, encouraging members to connect with one another through activities passed safely from household to household.

The Meal Ministry prepared 85 meals for nine recipients in 2020, and the Prayer Shawl ministry continued knitting shawls, praying over them, and mailing them to those in need. The community continued to pray collectively through the Prayer Chain as well as the “Our Community in Prayer” emails each week. Finally, the Magnet Senior Center continued its partnership with Minneapolis Central Library, offering seniors in the area organized walks outside when the weather permitted and online meetings in the colder months. The Center also organized a successful coat drive in the fall and “Tablets for Seniors” drive in December.

“The love that builds community makes itself known as we care for one another, as we feed the hungry, as we visit the sick, as we advocate for the poor, as we welcome the stranger, as we work to change systems that deny the fullness of anyone’s humanity. That kind of love leads to justice.”

— Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen

Community Built on Love, November 8, 2020
...Loving, encouraging, and supporting one another

Families, Youth, and Children’s traditional Day Camp held in the summer turned into Stay Camp in 2020. Nearly 60 children and youth in three time zones gathered each morning for a camp in their own homes, all centered around the theme of Building Beloved Community. They received care packages ahead of time filled with crafts and activities, a devotional booklet, their camp t-shirt, snacks for each day, and even a bundle of chalk for writing positive messages in their neighborhood.

The traditional, out-of-state Senior High Mission Trip was transformed into a week of serving locally in mid-July. The group sorted food donations at the Open Door Food Pantry, weeded and learned about native plants and grasses at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, and spent time virtually learning about affordable housing, food deserts, and white privilege.

FYC fall programming returned, but almost entirely online. The Fall curriculum focused on the intersection between faith formation and social justice, equity, and cultural intelligence: Building the Beloved Community. With scriptural guidance, families examined their own cultural identity, and were encouraged to read and learn together, to see those around them with new eyes, and to form new understandings and new relationships, growing together in a season of change, renewal, and hope.

Care packages from the youth to college and graduate students for finals

Zoom gatherings for Family Education Hour on Sunday mornings

60 Care packages from the youth to college and graduate students for finals

30 children and youth in the Zoom Christmas pageant

23 pieces of art made by children for Advent and Christmas

15 Zoom gatherings for Family Education Hour on Sunday mornings

Clockwise from top (this page): Youth during their Senior High Mission Trip; message to graduating seniors from Session Clerk Vincent Thomas. Clockwise from top (opposite page): Prayer during a Session meeting; youth serving during their Senior High Mission Trip; communion at home.
...Acting on the vision of the beloved community

Due to pandemic restrictions our opportunities to serve our neighbors were limited. Even so, members found ways to serve by partnering with other congregations to prepare to-go meals the fourth Sundays of the month, making and donating masks to the Dignity Center, assisting at Groveland Food Shelf, befriending Magnet Senior Center participants, and donating essential household items for Tubman, African Immigrant Community Services and the residents of Great River Landing. In place of the annual holiday gathering with the residents of Nicollet Square we sent them gift cards and masks.

We continued to be in solidarity with our global neighbors. While we could not travel to renew relationships, through technology we gained insight into our Cuban partners’ daily lives under the pandemic. We provided equipment and maintenance for the clean water systems we support in seven communities in Cuba. We connected with our partners in Bethlehem through technology, joining Christmas worship at Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church and watching thought-provoking films by Dar Al-Kalima University students. We assisted with needed building repairs at our partner church in Cameroon, supported their ministry to internally displaced persons, and joined them in lamenting intensifying violence.

After the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, Westminster members responded by joining peaceful protests, participating in anti-racism training, and by displaying our “No Justice, No Peace” signs.

“Learning along the way is choosing to hold onto multiple perspectives, sometimes in conflict with each other. It is embracing that a compassionate God has not created humanity to face pain and suffering alone.”

— Rev. Dr. Meghan Gage-Finn

Learning on the Way about Humanity, July 12, 2020
Clockwise (this page): Westminster sign in remembrance of George Floyd; protest in Minneapolis against racial injustice; Minneapolis Interfaith Relief Fund grantee; fire destruction in Minneapolis; and George Floyd Memorial. Left to right (opposite page) Adair Mosely of Pillsbury United Communities speaking during a Social Justice Forum; youth serving during their Senior High Mission Trip.
With COVID-19 preventing nearly all in-person gatherings for most of 2020, welcoming one another looked different. New Member classes continued online and Westminster’s online worship introduced our Minneapolis church to others across the country and around the world.

Our annual Coming Together Sunday became Coming Together Week, with activities spread across five days to help allow people to participate safely. Families, Youth, and Children launched the events with a materials pick-up day at the church and the annual picnic turned into small picnics hosted at parks around the Twin Cities. During the week, clergy welcomed members to church during a drive-thru event with music and an art installation.

Westminster’s ministries to college-aged members and young adults shifted as a result of the pandemic as well. WestConnect met together outside whenever possible and switched to Zoom as the weather turned cold.

“We are one community with many voices, and in order to sing all the parts we need all the voices.”

—Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen

*One Community, Many Voices*, October 18, 2020
...Sharing the good news of the gospel

Adult Education quickly shifted in-person classes to online, and continued offering programming through the summer in 2020—something new for Westminster. Highlights from 2020 included Adult Education’s “Big Questions for a Changing Church” summer series and the fall theme of “Reckoning with Privilege: Where Christ Leads the Church When the World is Disrupted.” Social Justice Forum returned in the fall in an entirely online format and focused on the theme of “Wade in the Water: Becoming Anti-Racist,” tackling topics such as voting, health, the environment, and immigration, all from the perspective of racial justice.

Ministries such as WOW Wednesday Bible study, New Old Adventure, small groups, and the Town Hall Forum all continued, helping members deepen their faith and share it more broadly within the community. In addition, Westminster created something new—mini-pilgrimages, designed to encourage deeper engagement through art, environment, and literature.

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**Big Questions for a Changing Church**
summer series and fall programming

16 guests representing 17 different institutions from 12 different states
...Giving generously

Westminster members and friends gave generously in 2020, a year when many experienced their own personal financial challenges. In reflection of a challenging year, giver numbers declined slightly, but the amount contributed increased slightly compared to 2019. At the same time, there was an outpouring of one-time gifts in December, more than doubling what was expected. Through the church’s Emergency Assistance Fund and in the Minneapolis Interfaith Relief Fund and food shelf programs, our congregation raised $207,500 to help Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities.

Westminster also received four Legacy Gifts from departed donors who, with an eye to the future, had made a planned gift to help sustain their beloved community for generations to come.
“Jesus said, ‘Where your treasure is, there is your heart also’ – meaning that our deepest commitments are naturally where we invest our time and resources and energy. That’s why we never try to protect people from their own generosity: we don’t want to keep them from pursuing their heart’s desire. We give because we get it about the purpose of church: to love God and love God’s people, to serve God and serve God’s people.”

— Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen

Committed to Community
November 15, 2020
WE ARE STILL THE CHURCH.

As we begin 2021 and look ahead to one day returning to the building, we continue to learn from this time in Covid. We reflect on what it means to be the church, inside and outside a building. How will this time apart inform who we are in the future? And how can we continue to be the church in new ways?

This page: During Staff Retreat in August, staff and clergy pretended they were chipmunks during an Improv Comedy exercise. Opposite page: Westminster Bells.
Thank you to Tom Northenscold, Mike Levad, Sarah Brouwer, Alanna Simone Tyler, and Matt Lewellyn-Otten for the images used throughout this publication.