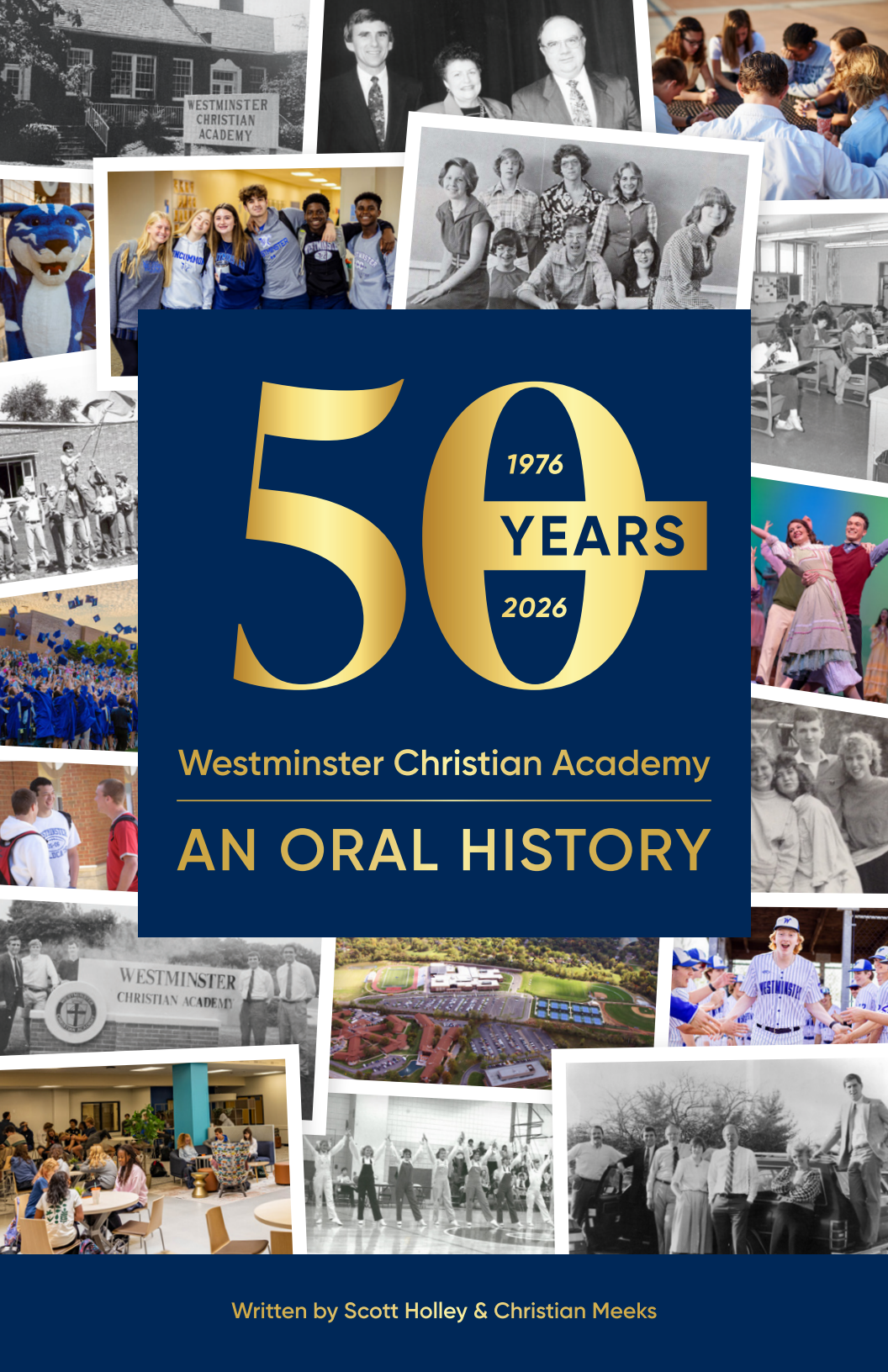


50 YEARS

1976

2026

Westminster Christian Academy

AN ORAL HISTORY

Written by Scott Holley & Christian Meeks

Westminster Christian Academy

AN ORAL HISTORY

This book is an oral history of Westminster Christian Academy. It combines quotes from those involved in the school's history, including faculty, staff, board members, alumni, and community members.

Copyright © 2026 Westminster Christian Academy.
All rights reserved.

info@wcastl.org

Edited by Christian Meeks and Emma Moylan
Cover Art and Design by Amy Roff
Photography from Westminster Christian Academy and Mike Rohlfing

First Edition 2026



To Westminster's pioneers—the men and women whose vision, faith, prayers, and courage guided them as they dreamed, planned, and trusted God so that generations of Westminster graduates could one day live to serve the God who loves them so well.

CONTENTS

Foreword		1
Acknowledgments		3
Chapter 1:	An Improbable Idea	6
Chapter 2:	Finding a New Home	19
Chapter 3:	Soaring to New Heights	28
Chapter 4:	A Culture of Service and Leadership	35
Chapter 5:	School Pride	48
Chapter 6:	For Such a Time as This	62
Chapter 7:	A City on the Hill	83
Chapter 8:	Adapting to the New Environment	91
Chapter 9:	A Steadfast Focus on Christ	109
Chapter 10:	Reaching Higher	126
Chapter 11:	A Global Epidemic	145
Chapter 12:	Disruptive Innovation	162
Chapter 13:	Belong. Believe. Become.	192
Afterword		211

FOREWORD

The first page of the first yearbook from the first year of Westminster Christian Academy offered a perspective celebrating the unlikely journey that the founding families traveled both before and throughout the 1976–1977 school year:

> *In the beginning Westminster Christian Academy was only a thought ... a dream. In 1976, thanks to the diligence in work and the faith of a few teachers and parents, this dream became a reality as Westminster opened its first successful year with seventy-two students. Everyone—teachers, parents, and students—throughout the many stages of planning, organizing, building, and finally blossoming, had a strong faith in God, and He opened many closed doors. These people toiled for the glory of God and a firm Christian education.*

Fifty years later, the fruit of that dream can be seen in the lives of the thousands of students who have graduated from Westminster and benefited from the sacrifices and vision of those founding families. The story of Westminster Christian Academy is a tale of a small group of men and women who trusted in God and who, despite limited resources and little experience in launching a school, were able to lay a foundation that has impacted the St. Louis community and the world beyond in ways they could scarcely have imagined. It is a tale of God's faithfulness in leading this school through times of difficulty and times of blessing and His constant provision and guidance throughout the past five decades.

The story that is told in the pages that follow is a celebration of that faithfulness from the earliest days when the idea of a Christian secondary school in the St. Louis area was no more than an unlikely fantasy shared by a handful of visionaries to Westminster's 50th school year. Because the first generation of Westminster's leaders has largely passed from the scene, it is important to remember both the foundation they laid and the blessings that flowed from their dependence on God and His goodness to them. The tale told below is a celebration of Westminster's early years. Though

the story of WCA continues to be written each day that students walk into their classrooms, the words that follow are meant to record the school's journey from an improbable dream to a life-changing reality as hundreds of teenagers hear and experience the story of God's goodness and His love for them day after day and year after year.

A founding board member, Dr. Joe Hall, remarked on Westminster's 25th anniversary, "The founders committed their own children to this small, weak school of some sixty students and meager financial means, trusting the promises of their covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. God surely did not fail them, and He has not failed through this quarter century." Nor has He failed the teachers, staff, administrators, and board members in the quarter century since, and all that follows is intended to make that truth abundantly clear. This, then, is the story of God's goodness to Westminster Christian Academy throughout its journey from little more than a fanciful dream to the school's 50th anniversary, as told through the words of those who were and are a part of God's story.

— Scott Holley

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This oral history was made possible by the following individuals: Scott Holley, Author; Christian Meeks '15, Author and Editor; Dr. Barrett Mosbacker, Head of School; Todd Fuller, Head of Finance & Operations; Shannon Kekhaev, Director of Development Operations; Jennifer Sengpiel, Head of Enrollment & Marketing; Amy Roff, Graphic Designer; and Mike Rohlfing '05, Photographer.

Some of the information in this text was gathered by Jim Drexler and published in a booklet celebrating Westminster's 25th anniversary. Han Kim and Shelley Milligan recorded the interviews with Arlen Dykstra, Florence Lewis, and John Prentis to celebrate Westminster's 40th anniversary. Mike Rohlfing recorded the interviews with Sherry Blough, Dr. Andrew Shaw, and Kent Kehr to celebrate Westminster's 50th anniversary. Their dedication and collaboration have played a key role in bringing this project to fruition.

SOURCES QUOTED IN THIS TEXT

Sherry Blough: Art Teacher, Counselor (1976–2011)

Hans Deutschmann: Bible, History, Spanish, and German Teacher (1976–1980)

Bobby Duck: Founding Board Member, Treasurer (1976–1983)

Nolan Vander Ark: Founding Head of School (1976–1977)

Evelyn Downs: Westminster's Second Head of School (1977–1981)

Dr. Andrew Shaw: Science Department Chair, US Science Teacher (1977–present)

Florence Lewis: Bible, Latin, and French Teacher, Admissions Director, Queen of Spirit (1979–2010)

Sara Drexler: Bible & Geography Teacher, Director of Faith in Action (1981–2004)

Arlen Dykstra: Former Board Member, Westminster's Third Head of School (1981–1984)

Jim Drexler: Bible Teacher, Assistant Head of School (1983–2004)

Betsy Tyvoll: Choral Music Teacher (1983–1990)

Jim Marsh: Westminster's Fourth Head of School, Head of School Emeritus (1985–2013)

Tim Hall '80: Alumnus, Science Teacher, Dean of Students (1986–present)

Kent Kehr '78: Alumnus, Business Manager, Tech Director, Swim Coach (1987–2024)

Kathy Eichelberger: Choral Music, Special Services Teacher, Director of Fine Arts (1990–2022)

Peggy Johnson: Public Relations Director, Head of Enrollment (1997–2020)

Dr. Dani Butler: ESL Teacher, Director of International Students and Global Partnerships, Head of Student Development (1999–present)

Todd Fuller: Business Manager, US Business Teacher, Head of Finance & Operations (1999–present)

Han Kim: Director of Audio/Visual, US Business & Communications Teacher (2000–present)

Cory Snyder: Science Teacher, Football Coach, Registrar, Athletic Director (2001–present)

Chris Pederson: US Special Services, Football Coach, 11th/12th Grade Principal, Director of Special Services (2003–present)

Chris Knerr: US History Department Chair, US History & English Teacher (2004–present)

Allen Schwamb: Music Teacher, Director, Performing Arts Department Chair (2004–present)

Jim Sefrit: Former Board Member, Head of Upper School (2004–2015)

Aaron Layton: MS Special Services, Director of Diversity, Coordinator for Minority Community Development & Inclusion, MS Bible & US History Teacher (2008–present)

Dan Burke '01: US English Teacher, English Department Chair, 11th/12th Grade Principal (2009–present)

Jim Butz: Drama Teacher, Director (2011–present)

Micah Gall: US English Teacher, English Department Chair, Head of Academic Development (2011–present)

Mike Decker: MS Physical Education Teacher, MS & US STEM Teacher, Director of STEM (2013–present)

Amy Roff: Senior Graphic Designer (2016–present)

Meghan Goessling '00: Human Resources Director (2017–present)

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: Head of School (2017–present)

Mike Rohlfing '05: Director of Marketing & Communications (2019–present)

Jennifer Sengpiel: Head of Enrollment & Marketing (2020–present)

Shannon Kekhaev: Director of Development Operations (2022–present)

Randy Massot '79: Alumnus

John Hancock '12: Alumnus

Anna Kuiper '14: Alumna

Parker Gelber '18: Alumnus

Bob Denckhoff: Former Board Member

Joan Kehr: Former Parent

Dr. George Knight: A leading voice in the establishment of Westminster

Jack Kramer: Former Board Member

John Prentis: Former Board Member

Dr. Robert Reymond: Founding Board Member

Keith Shahan: Former Head of John Burroughs and President of ISACS

Ken Toenjes: President of Associated General Contractors in St. Louis

Charles Waldron: Former Board Member, Project Manager for the Town & Country Campus

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ONE

AN IMPROBABLE IDEA



1976–77 Board of Directors

When he moved to St. Louis to accept a position at Covenant Seminary in 1970, Dr. George Knight became a driving force behind the dream of opening a Christian high school in the St. Louis area. Because he had extensive experience in pioneering efforts in support of Christian secondary education, including helping to open a new Christian high school in the Philadelphia area, Dr. Knight recognized the void that existed in St. Louis at the time and recruited other members of the Covenant Seminary faculty, like Dr. Robert Reymond and Dr. Joe Hall, to join in the effort. Though at the time, many Christian elementary schools in the area met the needs of children through 6th grade, parents had no real options beyond that if they sought an academically rigorous education rooted in a Reformed Christian worldview for their teenagers.

Tim Hall: My dad [Dr. Joe Hall] had already been involved in starting what is now Twin Oaks School, which came from Covenant School, which came from Glen Ridge Christian School. My dad was involved in that effort because there were no non-parochial Christian high schools then. There were Lutheran and Catholic grade schools, but they were looking to establish a parent-run Christian school that would meet the needs of Christian parents from a broader range of Protestant churches. That school [Covenant] grew and went through 6th grade, and those board members said we needed a Christian high school and middle school that students of these schools could feed into.

Dr. Robert Reymond: The most significant "defining issue" in the early years of WCA was whether the school would be for covenant children of Christian families or a prep school for high achievers. Some original board members desired the latter, but a majority prevailed for the former view. Thank God!

Bobby Duck: What if someone told you they were going to start a Christian high school? But then, they added, "We have no money, no church to partner with, no major financial backers, no facility, and not a sufficient number of students." Your first reaction might be, "Did you fall on your head? Are you living in the real world?" As ridiculous as this may sound, that is exactly what the WCA founding board members were facing in late 1974–75. But despite such scarcity, the one thing we *did* have was a burning desire to start a Christian high school that would be God-honoring, theologically Reformed, and academically excellent. When we surveyed the St. Louis Christian high school landscape and could not find one that met these criteria, we became convinced that it was God's will for us to start WCA and that He would provide. After all, doesn't He *own the cattle on a thousand hills* (Psalm 50:10)?

Though attempts to generate sufficient buy-in among Christian families proved a slow, laborious process, the initial leadership of what became Westminster Christian Academy was driven by the desire to see a Christian secondary school gain a foothold in the community so that children of Christian families could receive a solid education rooted in scriptural truth.

Tim Hall: The Bible calls Christian parents to raise their children in the fear of the Lord and nurture them in every aspect of the Lord.

> That certainly reflects [the founders'] desire to have their kids grow up in the church, be nurtured, and worship God in Sunday school and youth activities to help students develop a full biblical world and life view. The goal would be that Christian education would help them understand also the way the Bible helps us to understand English, history, science, and math as a part of the shaping of their biblical worldview that would enable them to become active agents of God's work in the culture in bringing about restoration and renewal and shalom.

Dr. Knight and others approached the board of Covenant Christian School about partnering with them to launch a high school, but that approach was rebuffed. Nonetheless, under Dr. Knight's leadership, conversations about the possibility of a Christian secondary school continued, though moving the project forward proved slow going at first.

> John Prentis: "Sunday school is just fine, but I really don't see the need for five more days of it." That was my reaction when Dr. George Knight first spoke to me of his dream of a Christian secondary school for St. Louis in 1973. I was really surprised when a group of parents decided to go ahead and open a Christian secondary school in the fall of 1976.

> Dr. George Knight: Some families were hesitant or opposed at first. We ran into something of a logjam. Several families were willing to be involved if ample students were available, but until enough people committed, there wasn't a core group large enough for most families.

To gauge parental interest in joining the new school, Dr. Knight and his team sent a survey to every family that had expressed even the slightest interest in sending their son or daughter to Westminster. They discovered that their attempts to stir up enthusiasm for the school had piqued the interest of at least some families.

> Bobby Duck: Early on, the board held a meeting at Covenant Church on Ballas Road for parents who were interested in starting a Christian high school. One of the main topics was what to name the school. There were two nominations: Covenant Christian Academy and Westminster Christian Academy. WCA was selected, and Dr. Knight suggested Psalm 111:10 to be the school's theme verse: *The fear of*

the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

Joan Kehr: As soon as I heard about the idea, I latched on to it and started praying. I thought, *Let's start soon enough that they [her two sons] can be part of it.*

Heartened by the response, the group behind this effort established a formal board of directors in January 1975 and began to explore ways to make their dream a reality.

Bobby Duck: Dr. George Knight recruited most of the founding board members and also served as the first WCA board president. During the eighteen-month planning stage, most board meetings were on Saturday mornings—some of them at Dr. Knight's house—and it was not uncommon for them to last four or five hours. The board determined that the school would start the next fall (1976), even if we only had five students. It can't be overstated: Most of the founding board members sacrificed their time and money to start WCA. We were determined to "launch" WCA because we were convinced that God wanted the Christian high school. But there was a small problem: we had no building.

When a decline in enrollment at Missouri Baptist College (now Missouri Baptist University) drove that school to look for alternative sources of revenue, the college was open to conversations with a group of parents representing Westminster about housing the new middle and high school in space freed up by the downturn in enrollment. To the delight of these Westminster families, Missouri Baptist agreed to lease classroom space and science labs and allow Westminster students to use the college's library, gymnasium, and cafeteria. In addition, juniors and seniors could enroll in college courses as part of the agreement. With that, the dream of opening Westminster Christian Academy began to take shape.

Dr. George Knight: All at once, we seemed to have everything dropped in our laps.

Bobby Duck: At that time, Dr. Arlen Dykstra was on the faculty of Missouri Baptist College. He was able to secure a building on their campus to rent to WCA at a very attractive rate.

Seventy-two students joined the new Westminster Christian Academy on September 7, 1976, when the school opened its doors to a faculty of two full-time and seven part-time teachers. The first-year tuition was $850. Shortly after that first day, Dr. Knight expressed his vision for Westminster in an interview with the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*:

> *The objective of the school is to provide a sound academic and spiritual framework for our students. We think that the Christian faith gives students the perspective that is necessary for a well-rounded education. We think that Westminster Academy offers a unique combination of several factors, including our strong emphasis on parental involvement, a non-sectarian Christian commitment, and our location in West County.*

Bobby Duck: We started with multiple grades in one class and expanded the school as the number of students increased. The first graduating class of 1977 had one student.

Recruiting faculty in the early years was far more informal for some prospective teachers than it later became as the school grew in size and sophistication. For instance, while serving as a missionary in Nigeria, Nolan Vander Ark was contacted by representatives from Westminster about becoming the first head of school.

> Nolan Vander Ark: One day, I received a message on the mission radio in Nigeria saying that the mission headquarters, which was 260 miles away, had gotten a call for me from St. Louis. At that time, the nearest phone was about sixty-five miles away over rough terrain. To make a long story short, I drove the 260 miles back to the base just to make the call to St. Louis. A couple of months later, I came here. We believe the Lord had His hand in there somewhere to work things out.

Agreeing to take the job, Vander Ark became WCA's first school head at a $15,000 annual salary. Longtime science teacher and department chair Dr. Andrew Shaw joined the faculty in Westminster's second year.

> Dr. Andrew Shaw: I got a phone call out of the blue from three gentlemen who were seminary professors, board members, and

> founders of the school. They said they were representing this brand-new Christian school in St. Louis, a city I had never been to, and they had just finished their first year and were looking for a science teacher. They told me a little about it, and fifteen minutes later, I said, "I'll come. I'll be glad to sign a contract. I'll accept the position." Ever since then, the school has gone through great pains to increase the degree of interrogation and difficulty of becoming a teacher here. But I got in on a fifteen-minute phone conversation. I never once had to show them whether I could teach. They took all of that for granted by God's grace. My wife and I rented a U-Haul, packed up our belongings that summer, and moved to St. Louis sight unseen to begin teaching the second year at Westminster Christian Academy.

Such informality in the hiring process was not always the case, however. Sherry Blough's experience in her interview to become WCA's first art teacher was quite different.

> Sherry Blough: I remember Dr. Knight calling me, saying, "We need to interview you," and "Make sure that you have a testimony." Little did I know that Dr. Knight, who was the president of the school board, three or four other seminary professors who were part of the board, and a couple of businessmen would all show up to interview me. My interview with Dr. Knight and the board was two hours long, and you would have thought I was up for ordination. They were very thorough.

Westminster's first students had little sense that they would be part of making history by helping to lay the foundation for what was to come.

> Tim Hall: I knew some kids who would be in my class, and there was a sense of pioneering adventure. We had these pre-school class get-togethers at Dr. Knight's and his family's home to get acquainted before school started. These were opportunities for kids to get to know who their classmates were going to be. So, by the time school started, it felt comfortable. It did not feel weird or strange. It was just the next step in my life, in my education. I think the fact that my dad was so deeply involved in it and talked about what was developing, there was just a background buzz in my head that provided some context, which provided a smoother transition.

Kent Kehr: My mom had a great relationship with Dr. Knight. He was basically the founder of Westminster—the original man behind the idea. I actually knew him at church, Central Presbyterian. George came to Mom and said, "We are starting a Christian school, and I know you have two kids." I think it was more about quantity rather than quality. If you know the Kehr twins, that might be true; you get two for one. Mom was entirely on board with this thing. She is a spiritual warrior, and she prayed constantly for us. I think this is one of those things where she said, "I think God is moving us in that direction." So what we did was Mom talked to us and talked to Dad, and we pulled Dad along. I don't know if I can say I enjoyed Ladue High School at the time, but it was OK. There was no depth to it. I didn't see God present in any relationship at school. Mom said, "Hey, boys, this is an opportunity we can't pass up. I think God is telling us to move in that direction." That summer of '76, we decided to make ourselves available to Westminster, and that's how it started.

The seventy-two students who made up the initial classes for the brand-new Westminster Christian Academy walked into a situation that was still in flux. The school's size meant that students' options were limited, unpredictable, and subject to change.

Kent Kehr: To be honest with you, nobody knew how things would go at that time. Every day was new. Processes were new. Systems weren't in place. I remember the first day we walked on campus, and there was a schedule for me, but then they said we didn't have teachers for this or that, so they completely redid the schedule four times. It was a scramble.

Tim Hall: So many teachers were part-time, just at school for an hour or two, and many were students at Covenant Seminary. There was very limited scheduling, so I couldn't choose between multiple hours of science or math.

Kent Kehr: They offered German, and the teacher was Hans Deutschmann—the perfect name. You can't get any better than that. Hans Deutschmann would not be there for the first two weeks of that class. So Mrs. [Shirley] Reymond stepped in. Mrs. Reymond was married to Dr. [Robert] Reymond, the head of Covenant Seminary. Unfortunately, she had no idea how to do German, so she spun up

> records for us to listen to, and I sat in the first class. I'm going, "Man, this might be a big swing and a miss" because we had 9th graders, we had 10th graders, maybe twenty of us … and I'm sitting there with freshmen. I didn't know anybody, and everybody was coming from different directions. Then Mrs. Reymond spun this record—the same record for two weeks, every day. I came out of it with one phrase: *Ich habe eine Kopfschmerzen.* I have a headache.

Nonetheless, the facilities at Missouri Baptist surpassed the students' expectations.

> Kent Kehr: The college campus—Missouri Baptist—was fantastic. The facilities were amazing. We [Kent and his twin brother Chris] entered as juniors and mingled with college students, so I don't think we gave up anything as far as the actual building itself and the resources available. We didn't give anything up. In the first week, I thought, *This is an amazing building.* I was unsure of the teachers, and I thought, *I might have made a mistake.* That was the first week. In the second week, God showed me in amazing ways that this might have been the best decision of my life because that second week just tracked what God would do in my life.

> Tim Hall: We had access to Missouri Baptist's facilities. Our home games were played in their gym. Our labs were college labs. In some ways, it sounds like, "Gee, you're meeting in unused rooms on a college campus that are not high school rooms. Man, that must have been a downer." But I didn't know any better, and they seemed like good resources and facilities for me. We could go to lunch at the [college grill], so that was nice.

One plus for the first group of students at Westminster was the small enrollment, which helped to create a sense of camaraderie and a pioneering spirit.

> Tim Hall: I could have been a naïve 9th grader then, but I don't remember an undercurrent of "Man, I don't want to be here" at all. I think there was generally a good spirit among the kids who were there. We got along well, but when you have seventy or so kids in all the grades in the first days of the school, and your lockers are not separated by grade but are alphabetical, you've got 7th and 8th graders

and seniors hanging around the hallway. Everybody knew everybody. That's part of what contributed to a culture of comfort and a good spirit. My earliest memories are of sitting in classes with the same group of students because our classes were really small. I was basically with the same students all day, so you got to know your classmates really well in that kind of scenario. Everybody knew each other, and there was sort of a pioneering, "We're all in this together" mentality that made it much less institutional and much more of a family.

Randy Massot: That school was a family to me. I can appreciate God's sovereignty now in leading me there. Looking back, I can really appreciate the teachers. Even though I did then, I really see their impact even more now.

Kent Kehr: The first week I'm out there during basketball practice, I get elbowed by [another player] in the eye. I've got a cut under my eye, and I'm bleeding. The difference between Ladue and Westminster was that I had this cut, and when I walked through the hallway, everybody at Westminster stood up and came out because they had heard I had gotten hurt. The whole school, all seventy-two, was in the hallway watching me. I got set, went to the hospital, got stitches, returned, walked in, and felt like a conquering hero. Everyone asked me how I was. Am I going to be OK? Can you see? Is your eye OK? If I had still been at Ladue, I just would have been a guy in a corner who was bloody and had a black eye. Here, the care, understanding, connections, and just wondering about and caring about the other students were a big deal.

Arlen Dykstra, an early board member and later the head of school, and Hans Deutschmann, one of the school's first teachers, remember the same dynamic.

Arlen Dykstra: When we start a small school, we always say that we love the spirit of family. A small school is intimate, and you can have the spirit of family. Being a new school, we were all in this together—parents, the board, faculty, and students.

Hans Deutschmann: We were doing something new as a Christian organization, and that lent us an identity. This is different. This is new. This isn't just another private school; it's definitely Christian. That was unique and pulled us together as a staff and student body.

> The kids came from parents who wanted them to have that kind of education, so osmosis from home helped build a sense of shared identity. I always sensed from the students that they were excited to be there. I had a great experience with the kids that I taught. I felt like there was a neat rapport between teachers and students. We all knew we were at the forefront of something new, and I felt a sense of energy that encouraged me. It was wonderful to be part of something so intentional in seeking to serve the Lord from a biblical perspective. It was really neat. We had kids over to our house, and I felt a great bond existed between staff and students. I had a great relationship with the students, and I felt that was pretty common across the board.

Sherry Blough uniquely experienced that family atmosphere every time she arrived to begin her part-time workday as an art teacher.

> Sherry Blough: I would pull up in front of that long classroom building at Missouri Baptist College, and the kids would open the windows and say, "She's here. She's here." And some of them would come out and help me carry in supplies because there was no storage for the art supplies. It was all in my car, and I shared a room with the gym teacher and all his equipment. All they had were art, music, PE, and all their core classes. So I can see why they were happy to see me.

Another plus was that the first students helped establish the school's identity.

> Kent Kehr: I was an influencer—the first influencer at Westminster. They gathered us in this room, and a couple of board members and teachers said, "You guys are going to decide school colors, school mascot, and the name of the school newspaper." The school colors came about because I was cheap. I had a letter jacket from Ladue that I had gotten because I played water polo there, and I didn't want to buy another one. Chris [Kent's twin brother] was with me because of the twin thing. There were nine of us in there. I just needed three more. I talked Teri [Breshears] into it, maybe Bitsy [Walker], and the good news is that we didn't go with some of the strong colors that were big in the '70s. Green and yellow came up. Yech! Purple and gold. Yech! I talked those two people into it, and boom—we have blue and white.

Tim Hall: I remember being involved in those conversations in those early days. I remember hashing out whether we were going to be the Knights, the Eagles, or the Wildcats.

Perhaps the most significant benefit for students at the Missouri Baptist campus was the relationships they developed with their teachers, despite the fact that many of the faculty taught only one or two classes a day for Westminster.

Tim Hall: I had a couple of teachers in those four years who I remain connected with today after all these years. Some of them were double-timing it, so to speak, because they were really invested in their studies at Covenant Seminary. One of our teachers, Hans Deutschmann, who taught history and German, had our German class over to his trailer for dinner—the whole class. And the whole class may have been six or eight kids. These teachers had opportunities because of the size of the school in the early days, which is hard to imagine today. One of my teachers was also my youth group leader, so I had many points of contact with him in and out of school. The relatively small size of the classes and the school also contributed to an engagement on the part of the teachers in getting to know us and sharing their lives with us. Those teachers modeled for me in how they lived their lives, their passion for what they were teaching, and their ability to teach what they were teaching from a biblical worldview, which profoundly shaped my worldview and my own life.

Kent Kehr: John Boles, my music director at the time, would teach us a song, but then we connected with him after school. We'd talk to him, walk with him, and live life with him. I remember him pounding on the keyboard of the piano, and the piano just raging up and down as he was playing a Christian song, and this elevated me from thinking this is just a basic music piece to this is a piece that introduces the gospel to everyone who is listening to it. Hans Deutschmann was amazing. He was the most wonderful, kind, compassionate person I had ever met, and he opened his life to those in that class. That's what it was all about. I realized after three weeks that this is a life-on-life school. God used these teachers to introduce care, compassion, and concern. It was just amazing to see the transformation. After three weeks, I realized that I was developing spiritually. Maybe academics might have been a bit of a miss in terms

> of what I could have gotten at Ladue, but as far as character—godly character—the fruit, the development there was absolutely amazing because of the teachers and students.

From the dedication written by students in the 1977 yearbook, *Foundation*:

> *We thank the many people who were with us in support and prayer all the way. We also thank the teachers, who, with much sacrifice of their time, make the dream of Christian education become a reality and who continue to make Westminster Christian Academy become the hope of a bright new tomorrow in Christ.*

It was not just the teachers who inspired Westminster's first students; their parents did as well.

> Tim Hall: Those early families had to have great buy-in—a brand-new school meeting in rented facilities on a college campus. Compared to the facilities and opportunities their kids might have had at the local public school or another private school, there had to be a common pioneering spirit among them and a commitment to what the school was about.

The importance of Christian education began attracting more students as their parents recognized the benefits of partnering with Westminster to instill a keen sense of Christian consciousness in their children.

> Florence Lewis: One day, while thinking about school options for our children, I was deeply convicted by the verse in the Gospel of Matthew that says, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." I had a sense that God was going to provide for the needs of my children, and this was a decision about seeking first His kingdom on their behalf.

After one year, Nolan Vander Ark left Westminster, and Evelyn Downs became the school's second head. She made training the faculty in the unique priorities of Christian education a major focus.

> Sherry Blough: Evelyn Downs was very organized and knew a lot about Christian education. I didn't, and I wasn't the only teacher who didn't, so she also took that on. She invited me to a Christian school conference in the South with her, and I sat there under the teaching of a pastor-teacher named [Gerard] Van Groningen. I took furious notes because I didn't understand the meaning and the depth of Christian education. It was not totally new to me, but as he talked about how critical it was for our children to have a world and life view, I just ate it up. Evelyn got excited about this, and she took everybody to one of those conferences over the years.

The school's small size meant that the faculty members had to wear many hats and quickly learn the ins and outs of jobs they had never tackled in such a rapidly developing setting.

> Sherry Blough: When Dr. Knight asked me to take the job, I said, "You know, I'm a guidance counselor, and I have a master's in school counseling." And he said, "Well, we're going to need one of those someday, too." I worked part-time at Westminster until my twins went to school full-time, and then I was splitting art teacher and guidance counselor roles. I came into guidance counseling in a Christian school pretty green. I felt lost because I was new to Missouri and Christian schools. I just thought I needed help. I called the Missouri Association of School Counselors and asked who in the St. Louis area knew what they were doing. I needed a mentor. I got the name Bonnie Wallace from Ladue High School and called her. She turned out to be an amazing friend and mentor. She not only loaded me with all kinds of materials and books about college admissions and forms and advice, but it was also a very special relationship.

TWO

FINDING A NEW HOME



Manchester Road Building

After two years at Missouri Baptist, it became clear that due to the growing enrollment of the college and Westminster—more than one hundred students by year two—it was time for WCA to find a new home as the college and Westminster increasingly competed for space.

> Evelyn Downs: We would go to the gym, and someone would be using it. Things were, at times, confusing and limiting.
>
> Dr. George Knight: In a polite but clear way, they let us know that one of us would have to move, and it wouldn't be them.

With Missouri Baptist no longer a possibility, Westminster's leaders began to explore other options. After looking at several potential sites, the board

decided that the vacant Des Peres Elementary School in the Kirkwood School District offered the best solution. A 27,000-square-foot building with sixteen classrooms on more than five acres, the facility seemed well-suited to serve WCA for years to come. An architect hired by the board to assess its suitability declared that the Des Peres school would meet Westminster's needs "for the next thirty years."

Told that the sale price might go as high as $500,000, WCA's Parent Association voted 73–4 to authorize the board to submit a bid for the school. As the day approached when the bids were to be submitted in a public forum, the school's leaders saw further evidence of God's hand at work.

> John Prentis: When we bought the grammar school over on Manchester Road, it seemed almost impossible to do that. We didn't have any money. We had to borrow most of the money and weren't sure we could even do that. There was a fellow who wanted to buy the property, and I guess the Lord moved in his life, and he said, "I'm not going to bid against you Christians." He wasn't a Christian. He said, "I'm not going to stand in your way. If this is important to you, you do it."

> Bobby Duck: WCA resided at Missouri Baptist College for two years, and then a facility in Des Peres became available. A group of board members went to the auction where the building was being sold and opened the bidding at $200,000. There was a man there who bid $210,000, but God intervened when the man's wife punched him, saying, "They are a bunch of Christians. Stop bidding!" and he stopped.

Westminster's bid of $217,000 was accepted on November 21, 1977, and the school moved into the former Des Peres Elementary School the following school year.

> Dr. Andrew Shaw: We moved into the elementary school and had more space. I remember that in order to get that facility—I don't recall the actual cost, though it was hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Because the former Des Peres Elementary School was in poor shape, the Westminster community took an "all hands on deck" approach to preparing the building for the coming school year.

Tim Hall: It was a school that hadn't been used for some time. It had been vacant, and my recollection as we walked into the building for the first time was, "Wow, this is going to take a lot of work to get ready to open up as a school." I also remember that, as part of those workdays that were hosted for Westminster families to come and work, there were a lot of people who showed up to help out. It wasn't a small number. It wasn't just the early board members and their families. Many people were showing up to clean, paint, organize those facilities, and move stuff in—desks and books put in the right rooms—in those early days.

Arlen Dykstra: We cleaned the place, we had workdays, but it was a fellowship. We didn't have the dollars to pay for much, so you might be in a board meeting early in the morning and cleaning the floors in the afternoon. If something needed to be done, we did it, and we were blessed because we had a nice network of parents who were, fortunately, not all doctors, attorneys, or insurance salesmen. We had some plumbers and some electricians. I remember standing up at a parents' meeting and bragging that we had a plumber willing to work a hundred hours just as a contribution to the school. We actually had two plumbers in the school. The story is that each plumber turned to the other and said, "I hope he is talking about you." That's the kind of commitment we had, and we really needed skilled craftsmen. We needed people who knew how to fix things. And we got them.

Bobby Duck: I cannot overemphasize the amount of "sweat equity" that the parents and board members invested in this newly purchased facility. Hours and hours and hours of work were freely given.

Though the science labs and other facilities at Missouri Baptist had been well equipped, Westminster had to scramble to come up with the necessary equipment for the Des Peres campus.

Dr. Andrew Shaw: I recall we picked up a bunch of old, very high-end microscopes from WashU Medical School. We picked up a lot of dissection equipment and other tools from Logan College of Chiropractic from their anatomy dissection, including a cadaver. We inherited a bunch of equipment from an inventor who died, who lived in St. Charles. All kinds of weird stuff. He was trying to make holographic projections using ordinary lenses. We just made do.

We still had a full-fledged lab program. It's not like today when we do elaborate experiments and get an exquisite result using modern technology. But we could still do an awful lot of lab activity. That was part of my job to ensure our students had a full-fledged lab experience at school.

Whatever the limitations of the Des Peres campus, Westminster at last had its own space and could begin to forge its own identity.

Sherry Blough: I remember going over there and thinking this would be like we had died and gone to heaven because it had many classrooms, and the space would be ours. We could do what we wanted to. We could put a lab in. We could have an art room. I had a huge art room. I loved it. Across from the art room was an office with one little window that turned out to be the counseling room. There was room for every teacher, even a part-time teacher, to have a room. I remember Florence Lewis going into her room and saying, "Can I have this room just for French?" And we were very happy to tell her she could. It was just a sweet group of people. There was camaraderie with this group and a real sense of unity in purpose, what we were for, and what we were trying to accomplish. I really enjoyed that campus.

Arlen Dykstra became Westminster's third head of school in 1981.

John Prentis: Arlen Dykstra was on the board, and we needed to do something, and he was available. He, probably more than anyone, was responsible for making Westminster a real school.

Arlen Dykstra: They were in between headmasters, and I was able to be part of that from '81 to '84. I took a leave of absence from Missouri Baptist University, and during that time, two events were really important in the school's history. One was relocation; we moved from an old public school at Manchester and Lindeman to Ladue. We thought we had arrived. We had arrived. During those three years, we also became accredited through an independent school group called the Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS), the accrediting agency for independent

private schools in the Midwest. I pushed hard for that. I probably had a few detractors, but I knew it was the right thing. The watching world understands accreditations. The other thing it did for our kids was allow them to participate in the Missouri State High School Activities Association (MSHSAA). That revolutionized the school.

Despite the limitations of the Des Peres facility and its small budget, Dykstra's leadership heavily emphasized the focus on preparing students to impact the world for Jesus Christ.

Arlen Dykstra: The idea of developing a Christian world and life view is subtle in a way. We never saw ourselves as a Bible school, but we always took the approach with these kids that everyone has a worldview. When you are younger, you are trying to sort all this out. One of the things we did was that when we recruited faculty, they needed to understand what a Christian world and life view was all about. It didn't matter what discipline you were talking about. We saw Jesus Christ as the touchstone of everything. We saw everything through the lens of a believer. That didn't mean we had all the answers. Sometimes, we told the kids, "The best thing we are going to be able to do is to ask the right questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? Are there any absolutes? How do you explain some really nasty life circumstances?" Through that, we encouraged our kids to think seriously that there is a God who loves us and has a plan for our lives. You can be a scholar and an evangelical Christian. It was a subtle approach, and a good part of it was hiring the right faculty.

With that in mind, Dykstra saw his job as laying a foundation for the future by hiring the best teachers possible to convey the importance of that Christian world and life view on a daily basis.

Arlen Dykstra: The most important thing administrators do is recruit faculty. We need to get that right, and our decisions will either be the decision that our students will thrive from or they will suffer from. The kids will remember their teachers far more than the administrators. Our job is to put the very best people in the classroom for the kids.

Two of Arlen Dykstra's key hires were Sara and Jim Drexler, who joined the Westminster community in the fall of 1981 and would play significant roles in the school's formative years. Sara was a teacher and the initial leader of the Faith in Action and leadership programs. Jim was first a maintenance worker while still in seminary, then a teacher, and finally an administrator.

> Sara Drexler: In 1981, I knew that we were moving from Washington, DC, where Jim was doing an internship, to St. Louis for him to go to seminary. I went to interview at Westminster because my brother Mark lived across the street on Lindeman. He said, "It's a great school; I've been watching it. It's a start-up, and you need to apply there," because I had already been teaching in DC. Arlen, Joe Hall, and somebody else interviewed me and gave me the job on the spot. I taught geography, which was fine, and I taught 7th grade math—a terrible idea on Arlen's part.
>
> Jim Drexler: I cleaned the buildings after school, and during the winter, I took care of snow removal. I remember the winter of '81–'82. Florida boy comes to Missouri, and part of my job is snow removal. We had two feet of snow—a real blizzard. One of the things I used was a Ford tractor with a blade on it. Going back and forth so many times, I burned the transmission out, trying to move snow. We finally had to get a front-end loader. I did all of that. By my third year of seminary, the school was growing, and Arlen caught me one day and said they would hire some more teachers and would need somebody who could do a little bit of history and Bible. History was my double major at Covenant [College], and I was working on my MDiv. So I really backed into education. I finished seminary and started teaching in the fall of '84 and never looked back.

Westminster continued to grow so quickly that the thirty-year prediction for the life of the Des Peres building proved wildly short-sighted. One hundred and thirty-eight students attended WCA during the first year in the new facility; within four years, enrollment nearly doubled to 265. Realizing that such growth would soon create untenable overcrowding, the board began to explore other options.

The Crystal Lake Golf Course on Bopp Road in Des Peres had recently gone bankrupt, and a developer had turned most of the land from selling that property into high-end homes. Led by board member Jack

Kramer, a capital campaign raised $1 million to purchase twenty acres of undeveloped land there to build a new school, and a Westminster parent drew up architectural plans to present to the city of Des Peres for approval. However, Des Peres' Planning and Zoning Commission rejected Westminster's efforts.

> Jack Kramer: In retrospect, we were a little embarrassed. Who really thought we could build on this property after we scraped together just enough to buy the land?

With the limitations imposed by the Des Peres campus becoming increasingly apparent, the Westminster board began to explore other options. The Special School District had purchased the former West Ladue Junior High building on Ladue Road, and initial conversations with that district made it clear that the property might soon become available.

> John Prentis: When we bought the Ladue Road property, that was worked out because a couple of us knew people from the Special School District. One of us knew a board member, and I knew the attorney for the Special School District. The whole thing seemed unlikely, but we talked to them and discovered they might be interested in selling that. That was the Lord working in advance and preparing the way for their hearts to be ready to talk about it.

Westminster purchased the Ladue Road campus in the summer of 1982 for $3 million with a $2.5 million bank loan.

> John Prentis: This was a really big jump. We didn't know how we were going to afford that. It occurred to me that there was a guy around town who was a Christian and might be very helpful, Paul Akin. He was on the board of First National Bank of St. Louis. I knew the manager there, and we went down and asked if they would lend us this money. They hemmed and hawed and finally said OK. "If you will guarantee it, we'll do it." The Lord provided. He gave us direction and made it possible for things to happen.

This "big jump" motivated several board members to step up in significant ways to make the purchase possible.

Arlen Dykstra: There was a period when we moved from Manchester Road to Ladue Road, and we were going to have a cash crunch problem. Many of us committed, and some took out a second mortgage on their home. This is no longer academic. This is my house. It worked out well, but that's how committed we were to the school.

Bobby Duck: We had bought the building, but had no money to pay for it. Our cash reserves were zero. So, five of us board members agreed to pledge the equity in our homes for collateral so that the bank (used by Laclede Steel) would lend the money to us. Paul Akin was one of the five people, and I am convinced that his being the president of Laclede Steel gave the bank the confidence it needed to loan WCA the money.

Sherry Blough: What I recall from the move from Des Peres to the Ladue campus was, again, that incredible sense that we will never outgrow this place. Well, the Lord knew better, didn't He? I was very impressed that the board was so determined to get that facility for Westminster Christian Academy that they mortgaged their homes to make the loan happen, and the Lord opened the door. He just made it possible. And again, there was a sense that this could only have happened if the Lord was in charge of the move.

Once again, help arrived from unlikely sources, as the school's limited resources meant it relied on unexpected generosity.

John Prentis: When we moved into the school over on Ladue Road, I got a call from a guy I knew who was the business manager over at Country Day (now MICDS), and he said, "We are buying all kinds of new desks, and we have about twenty rooms of old desks we don't know what to do with. You want some?" There were friends in strange places.

Like the move from Missouri Baptist to Des Peres, the move to the new Ladue Road facility generated great excitement within the community and the faculty alike.

Sherry Blough: The move itself was a lot of fun. I mean, we all pitched in. Everybody did as much as they could. Of course, we had movers move desks and things, but we set up new classrooms, figuring out

where people would be housed throughout the building. It was like Christmas. The facilities at the new campus were more than amazing, considering where we came from, and especially the fact that we could have an art room that was an art room before we got there, and not just a gym, but a gym with a stage where we could have performances. We had a lunchroom that was big enough that we could get everybody in at once.

Jim Drexler: I remember that summer we rented a bunch of U-Hauls and did the whole move from the Manchester Road campus by ourselves. It was several long, hot days of moving desks, furniture, and everything else over to Ladue Road. When we moved, I thought, *My goodness! This is an endless property—building and property. There is no way we are ever going to need this space. This is unbelievable.* It just seemed ridiculously big and daunting. We are never going to fill this space. That was my honest feeling initially. This is too much. It was a good vision, obviously, in terms of how things worked out.

THREE

SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS



"Soaring to New Heights" Campaign Kickoff, October 1988

From the first, Arlen Dykstra knew his time at Westminster would be short-lived.

> Arlen Dykstra: I had an opportunity from '81 to '84 to take a leave of absence from MoBap. We desperately needed a headmaster, and I knew that was something I was supposed to do. I also knew when it was time to return to Missouri Baptist. I was truly blessed to have that opportunity to make a difference in the lives of covenant kids and their families. It was enjoyable. At times, it was also miserable, but I knew that what we were doing was so important that, to this very day, I have never lost the fire in my belly.

With Arlen Dykstra's decision to return to Missouri Baptist, the board launched a search to find his replacement. Larry Birchler served as the

interim head of school during the 1984–1985 school year while Westminster awaited Dykstra's successor and led a very young faculty who looked to Birchler for stability and guidance.

> Sara Drexler: Larry was always a man of few words, which served him and us very well. He didn't fly off the cuff; he was even-keeled and cheerful. He was serious about school, and it surprised all of us that a man could have so much passion for the Scriptures combined with so much joy. He led from what he knew about schooling, the Scriptures, and kids. He took the job because someone had to, and he really stepped up.

Jim Marsh's candidacy stemmed from his relationship with Rich Van Gilst, who had worked under Marsh at Fort Lauderdale Christian School before moving to St. Louis.

> Jim Marsh: Early in the school year 1984–1985, I got a call from Rich Van Gilst in September. Rich had been on the staff as a teacher and baseball coach, where I was principal, so I knew Rich from our time in Fort Lauderdale. He had come here for the '84–'85 school year. It was his first year at Westminster. He called me in September and said the school was looking for a new head of school. The head of school at Westminster had moved on to MoBap, and they had formed a search committee. He asked if it would be OK if he gave them my name. This was a time when we had been there for eight years, and I felt that God was calling us, perhaps to another community and position in a Christian school. So I was at least open enough to say, "Sure."

Marsh, who grew up in New Jersey, went to college in Michigan, and worked in Florida, knew little about St. Louis and even less about Westminster when the search began.

> Jim Marsh: I didn't know anyone in St. Louis other than Rich. That was it. I had never been to St. Louis. To be frank, I had to get an atlas to look at to see exactly where it was. I was an East Coast guy. The only thing I knew about St. Louis was that I had been a soccer player in high school and college in the '60s. SLU was a phenomenal soccer team every year. Final Fours every year. So I knew St. Louis only by virtue of its reputation because of SLU and its soccer coach.

An initial phone call with board member Jack Kramer piqued Marsh's interest.

> Jim Marsh: I remember the call I received from Jack Kramer, who asked me many questions about my experience. At the end, I said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I knew Westminster was in its ninth or tenth year at the time and asked, "What are you looking for in your new head of school? What are the qualities and experiences you hope for?" He answered, "We have this big building with lots of room, and we've got to fill it with kids." That was his answer. That, of course, was in reference to the fact that we were only two years into the Ladue Road campus with only two hundred students in a building that could accommodate six hundred students. There were lots of financial issues. So, that kind of intrigued me. So often, Christian schools were limited by their campus and facilities, especially back then. I knew enough now about this campus in St. Louis from the brochure that they sent and the pictures they sent that it seemed like they had a lot of vision, even in terms of purchasing this campus, a great big building with thirty acres, a swimming pool, and gym—the whole nine yards. It intrigued me. They had the facility, and they needed to fill it up. I was curious what that might look like.

After traveling to Missouri to interview in January 1985, Marsh returned to Florida, stirred by the potential Westminster seemed to offer.

> Jim Marsh: I remember getting on the flight to return to Fort Lauderdale, and I was excited about the opportunity. When I got home, Jackie [his wife] asked me why I was so excited about this move to St. Louis. I said I have this sense that this community is really serious about establishing Westminster as a Christian school first and foremost, but they are also really committed to quality, to not allowing Christianity to be an excuse for mediocrity. This was something different. This is not just a Christian school, but an excellent Christian school.

During that initial visit, Tom Kelly, the board member chairing the search committee, received an important phone call from one of Jim Marsh's references.

> Sara Drexler: I remember when Jim Marsh was visiting on campus. Tom Kelly was in the office, and I was in there too. He said we were

hosting a person of interest to us, and he took a call in Sherry Blough's office about Jim and shut the door. It was a reference for Jim, and when Tom came out, he said, "Well, that's interesting. That was a very good call." The guy he talked to said, "If you are looking for a headmaster, you need to get off the phone and hire the man." I'll never forget that. Tom's eyes were twinkling, and he was kind of shocked.

After returning to St. Louis for a second round of interviews, Marsh was offered the job and decided to accept it.

Jim Marsh: I felt excited about it; the challenge was exciting, but also, I knew this was a big step of faith. I was an East Coast guy who had never been to St. Louis. I was young, in my late thirties, and had only a short time as a head of school. I came from a Christian Reformed background, and this was PCA [Presbyterian Church of America]. I didn't know a lot about all of that. I knew I was taking a risk. It was a big step of faith.

One of the first obstacles Jim Marsh confronted in his initial months at Westminster was navigating the school's budget crunch. To help finance the debt on the Ladue campus, each enrolling family was asked to participate in the Westminster Shares program, which required families to loan the school money that would be returned when their last child graduated from WCA. Many families sacrificed in other ways to keep the school afloat when the budget was tight.

Todd Fuller: Westminster Shares was a $3,000 loan that families had to put down when they started at Westminster. They had to give the school $3,000 as a non-interest-bearing loan on top of tuition, and the school held that loan as cash. When the family was leaving the school, they could get the cash back or donate it. "I'm giving you this money, and you are going to hold it for eight, ten, twelve years?" Even giving up the interest they could be earning was a big thing. It's amazing the commitment of the early families. The board members pledged their houses as collateral. I've heard stories that board members used to mow the grass here. The experience with anything that's fledgling. You're all in. You don't come here for the bells and whistles. You're all in.

Despite the Shares program, finances were a significant burden in the early years, especially because Westminster was spending $200,000 annually in interest on the $2.5 million loan taken out in 1982 to purchase West Ladue Junior High. Meeting that challenge became Jim Marsh's major issue when he first came to the school.

> Jim Marsh: One surprise was that I asked for the budget when I got here, and it was a single page handwritten—nothing. That surprised me. And then what surprised me was that we were really in trouble financially. To get the building, the Westminster Shares program generated $500,000 toward our $3,000,000 loan, and we were going into debt every year. I remember I had to go with the finance committee and meet with the banker. I could tell we were not in a great position with the bankers, so you're going with hat in hand. I could see that it didn't look good. I could see that financially, there were some big issues that had to be addressed.
>
> Dr. Andrew Shaw: I remember a time when we had real financial issues. They were never unable to pay the teachers, but there were times when they couldn't provide a cost-of-living increase. Teacher pay, in general, is, in many places, not always great, but there were times when it really required a lot of trust in the Lord that the Lord would meet our financial needs to pay our teachers enough to live on. I have some interesting stories about putting food on the table in the early years of the school. I am very grateful to Tim Hall and Jeff Dare, who, when we had an auto mechanics class in the early years of the school, were able to keep my Ford Pinto station wagon running. Not every teacher would let two 10th graders take their car's engine apart to keep it running!

With Westminster's financial state in jeopardy, the board decided to combine the school's 10th anniversary with WCA's first major fundraising banquet. The Mothers Club took the lead in organizing the event. Two alumni spoke, and Jay Kesler, the president of Taylor University, was invited to be the featured speaker. The event went smoothly—until the very end.

> Jim Marsh: At the time, the fundraising practice was to have envelopes on each table, and everyone at the end was encouraged to write a check and put it in the envelope. Afterward, everybody went into the cafeteria and talked, and I did that as well. After that, when

things thinned out, I went into the gym to get the envelopes with the checks, but when I walked in, I saw that all the tables had been stripped down. I asked the caterers, "You know the envelopes on the table? What happened to the envelopes?" Nobody knew. Obviously, no one had thought about picking those up afterward, including the head of school. They were all plastic tablecloths, so they had bundled and thrown them in the dumpster. Everybody had left. My career was flashing in front of me. I am in my second year, and this is our first big-time fundraising effort. The head of school has lost all of the checks. Jim and Sara Drexler lived in an apartment at the school at the time, so I told Jim, "I need your help. I think all of the checks from this event are in the dumpster."

Jim Drexler: We still had our suits on, and Jim Marsh came over and asked if we had picked up the envelopes. We said, "What envelopes?" He said, "I can't find them." We were in a growing panic mode. We looked, looked, looked. It was clear at some point we needed to check the dumpster, so I was out inside the dumpster in the dark pulling apart tablecloths, and in God's providence, I found the envelopes. I kept going back to see if I missed one—cash, checks, deeds to property.

Jim Marsh: We jumped in the dumpster and took out all of these tablecloths, and we brought them all into the cafeteria and spent until two in the morning sorting through every one of those tablecloths, finding all the envelopes, and taking them out. Some of them were dripping with salad dressing. We laid out the checks. One of them was for $10,000. We hoped and prayed that we had them all, let them dry out, and took them to the office on Monday. I swore Jim and Sara to secrecy, and I never told a soul about that until the 20th anniversary, when I made a presentation and confessed.

Jim Drexler: Jim was very gracious. He paid for the dry-cleaning bill for all my clothes because it was a formal event. We got all of the envelopes out, but we never told anyone because he said they'd know we were idiots. That was our secret.

Since the board had budgeted for an enrollment of 457 students for the 1987–1988 school year, the unexpected departure of 40 students who chose not to reenroll left the school with only 439 students, leading to a $363,899

gap between income and expenses. At that time, tuition comprised only 69 percent of the budget, so Westminster was highly dependent on gifts from the school community to balance the books. Faced with these budgetary concerns, the board began considering drastic options to put Westminster on a more solid financial footing.

> Jim Marsh: Within the first three years, we were going belly up. We were only covering 60-some percent of expenses with any hard cash. The rest of it was borrowing money and fundraising, which was very limited. Larry White [the board president] suggested that perhaps we had bitten off more than we could chew, so he wanted to look at options. One of them was selling that campus and downsizing, so we met with developers in Clayton to see what the possibilities were, and interestingly enough, we walked through West County Tech. That was pretty new then, but it hadn't taken off, and Larry thought that was a possibility. None of that worked out, so we started moving forward with our initiatives and raising money. Enrollment increased, and we started to get our heads above water.

The road to financial solvency began with the $7.5 million *Soaring to New Heights* campaign, which kicked off with a school-wide ceremony in the fall of 1988. Jim Marsh and board member Bob Denckhoff reflected on the campaign's purpose at that event.

> Jim Marsh: We want to be affordable. We don't want to price ourselves out of WCA, and we want to build on our staff and programs, not take away from them. So we have to get rid of this noose around our necks.
>
> Bob Denckhoff: There isn't any failing because there isn't any timing on it. We don't know when God will touch people's hearts to help support WCA. We're trusting God for everything because it's His school, His kids, and He's called a few folks like us to walk through the world and touch some lives. He knows what is going to happen, so we'll trust Him.

The *Soaring to New Heights* campaign allowed the school to pay off the loan on the Ladue campus by 1993, a milestone celebrated by a formal mortgage burning on March 25.

FOUR

A CULTURE OF SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP



Chapel band led by Sandra McCracken '95

With a greater sense of financial stability, the board developed the school's first strategic plan, which enabled WCA's leadership to look toward the future with greater clarity and allowed the faculty to consider new ways to further the school's mission.

> Jim Marsh: We got a process in place and got some of the right people on the right committees, and out of that, we developed some strategies, goals, and direction for growth and finances. Then, there was an anonymous gift of $500,000 to start an endowment, which still exists to this day. It hasn't grown much, but it started back then. The board members were very much involved in fulfilling the goals,

whether it was increasing enrollment, growing finances, or improving the program by providing more opportunities. I felt like, OK, now we've got a plan. There were just so many God things along the way that made it possible.

I hired Kent [Kehr] as the business manager, which greatly helped. Florence [Lewis] got more involved in admissions, and she was great in that role, and there was a team of people internally. There was Scott Holley, Betsy Tyvoll, and Jim and Sara Drexler, who had vision, ideas, and passion for growing the school. Scott, Betsy, and Sara originated the idea for Faith in Action. When I came, they had the idea already formulated and came to me to execute it, which we did. It took some effort. There was controversy about it, but we did it.

The Faith in Action program, which currently requires seniors to serve the community each Thursday morning throughout the school year, began as an optional program in the fall of 1987. Students left school at the end of fourth period each Wednesday to serve in elementary schools, senior citizens' centers, hospitals, animal shelters, and other similar agencies as part of the school's mission to instill in its graduates a passion "to discover and embrace a biblical view of the world and integrate that view into every area of life." Following initial conversations about possibly developing a service requirement as part of WCA's curriculum, Jim Marsh called Sara Drexler into his office and charged her with fleshing out the program.

Sara Drexler: Jim said, "I want you to meet with who you need to meet with and go where you need to go. We need a great program." You don't get to do something that lasts very often. It's amazing. Here was his leadership and our teamwork [in creating a service program from scratch], which was a privilege not many twenty-something teachers get to do. I remember sitting with Scott Holley and Betsy Tyvoll, and our concerns were that the teachers wouldn't buy in and that losing class time would be an issue. Some teachers were always counting the minutes! We knew it had to be a crackerjack idea, or we would get resistance.

The first thing I did was to meet with Brother Ken Luecke at De Smet because he had a really good program called Men for Others. He demonstrated so much kindness and compassion by sharing the idea because he believed in it so much. It was an anointed moment

because he shared so freely, and at the end of the time, he scooted this thick manual across the table and said, "Use any of this and leave any of it. We don't care. It is so important. Just do it." I did just that. I stayed in touch with him consistently, and he picked up the phone every time I called. Our service program at Westminster was deeply rooted in someone else's service to us.

Because the program was so successful, it became mandatory by its second year. Sara Drexler became Faith in Action's first coordinator and explained its purpose in an interview with WCA's school newspaper as the program kicked off:

> *The purpose is to teach students that belonging to Jesus Christ will make a difference on this earth. Servanthood is a crucial part of God's kingdom force. Our purpose as Christians on this earth is to further God's kingdom. I hope this project will give confidence to kids to know they can make an impact in this way.*
>
> *It's important that seniors ask themselves throughout the year, "What does my faith compel me to do?" I want them to answer, "My faith says I have to do something." No matter what these kids do with their lives or turn out to be in twenty years, I want them to know that they have to use the faith that they have learned and do something with it, whatever kind of lifestyle they might lead. I want them to learn a habit of Christian service—a mindset that makes ministry to others a top priority.*

That goal has been met time and again throughout the history of the Faith in Action program.

> Jim Drexler: All the stories we have heard over the years, like Meredith (Heintz) Wiggers, who is still the head of Promise Christian Academy. I was on the phone with Meredith and asked her to tell me about Promise. "Why are you doing that?" Without hesitation, she said she worked in one of the special needs schools for her senior Faith in Action project, and that was what planted the seed, and now she is heading up Promise Academy.

Over the years, community service has become an increasingly important part of the school's culture and identity.

Sherry Blough: Westminster Christian Academy's focus on service began with Sara Drexler, who realized that, along with the leadership team of the school, we need to help our students understand that they need to serve every day in every way throughout their lives and not just be focused on themselves. So, how can we do that? And out of that came this wonderful service program. It started with Senior Service, where seniors would go into the community and serve once a week. Then, it trickled down to other grades. To this day, this school is known for students who know how to serve.

Even though the early years of Jim Marsh's tenure were difficult, he was encouraged by the energy many on the faculty brought. He gained confidence in the school's future by seeing repeated evidence of God's hand at work at Westminster.

Jim Marsh: When I first came, Larry Birchler was the assistant head of school, Sherry Blough was the guidance counselor, and Florence Lewis was part-time admissions. So, that was the beginning of the administrative team. We didn't have a business manager or development director. It was very lean. Larry was incredibly loyal to the school and, to me personally, a really loyal trooper. Florence Lewis was phenomenal—the biggest heart ever. Sherry Blough—totally committed to the school. They all played a significant role.

Growing the faculty in those early days was evidence of God's work. Having people like Scott Holley and Betsy Tyvoll, the Drexlers, Andy Shaw, and, soon after that, Tim Hall. There were really some strong teachers, but not only teachers, but teacher leaders who were really committed. I feel like God really blessed Westminster with some great people who made a big, big difference. God brought the right people. It was like He put that group together—the de facto administrative team. Those were the people who had ideas and passion and were willing to engage in idea formation, follow through, and carry the ideas out. I looked to that group of people, whether they had a leadership title or not, and they were basically what I viewed as my leadership team.

That kind of passion also extended to many other faculty members.

Jim Marsh: We used to get the whole faculty in one classroom, and ideas would come up, and there was all kinds of energy. Not only having the ideas but also the willingness to execute them and push things forward. Within the first five years, I became more confident that internally within the schoolhouse, there was a leadership core committed to the school and its mission and vision that wanted it to be something special. I felt like I had that team inside the schoolhouse. We started to build the business side of things with the business manager [Kent Kehr] and Florence, and we started to grow. We started to see an uptick in enrollment, which was also encouraging. It was then that I started to think we were going to make it.

That increasing stability led to a reshuffling of roles internally.

Jim Drexler: For whatever reason, Jim Marsh started to give me administrative work. The first thing was to start a summer program—camps, classes, etcetera. I started doing that, which evolved into being a part-time upper school principal and, later, a full-time upper school principal. I've used this line before—Jim Marsh hates it when I say it, but I say it over and over again: Anything I have done well in education is because of Jesus and Jim Marsh. I am not equating Jim Marsh with Jesus, but I am just giving credit where credit is due. Jim Marsh played an indispensable role in our lives and in getting me into administration.

Sara Drexler received another mandate for a new program following Westminster's first leadership retreat in the fall of 1986.

Sara Drexler: We went on the first retreat in '86, and the fact that the school leaders were there made all the difference. I was a facilitator, but it didn't matter if I was there. It mattered that the teachers and administrators, whom the kids deemed school leaders, would spend two nights with them. That meant something. It's unbelievable that we went for two full days and nights. The leadership retreat launched the whole program because it brought people together. We sang, we learned, we played.

A key factor was that Florence [Lewis] would come and talk about all the new students—not all the new freshmen or all the new 7th graders, but there weren't that many new kids in the other grades, so she would say, "Who could know we would get a girl from New

> Jersey?" and everybody would *ooh* and *aah*. She would tell the kids what some of the new kids' gifts were, and the kids would go nuts. When they went back to school, they were so excited to welcome the new kids. How great was that? Florence was so effective and popular. What a great addition to the school. She brought so much class and so much fun. That's when Jim Marsh told me to put legs on that retreat. It moved on from there to doing regular meetings during the school year. Jim's biggest word ever was "ownership." Let the kids own everything they possibly can in a meaningful way so they realize, "Oh! I just did that." That's where that all came from.

Giving the students ownership led to a significant change in the culture of Chapel.

> Sara Drexler: Our kids got together at a mid-year retreat at Covenant Church, and we brainstormed what was going well and what was going badly. They said we have to do something about Chapel music. Nobody liked it. They said there is a freshman girl who is really good at the keyboard. The kids got excited and said we should do this. Maybe even have a whole band! Jim [Drexler] was there as the upper school principal, and he said we should do it. Jim pulled that together because he was doing Chapel at the time. He made sure the names the kids brought up were those he followed through on. That freshman girl led Chapel for the next three years; the rest is history.

That "freshman girl" was Sandra McCracken '95, a Grammy-nominated and Dove Award-winning vocalist who has recorded nineteen albums and writes a regular column for *Christianity Today*.

A cornerstone of the leadership program, then and now, is instilling a sense of service to their classmates who seek to lead the student body on any level.

> Sara Drexler: That was the big idea. Always look for what makes it sweet for others so that there is a sense of community. My input to them constantly was, "Is this good for other people?" For student leaders at Westminster, the culture was that you had to think about your responsibility that year, and that responsibility was always about other people. Leadership is for the student body, their unity, and their joy.

Another new initiative that bubbled up following the success of the *Soaring to New Heights* campaign was introducing a program for students with learning issues. Because Westminster lacked the staff or support programs to assist students with unique learning styles, the school could not serve all the children of Christian parents, even though doing so was part of WCA's stated mission.

> Sherry Blough: The Learning Center came about because we started accepting students with special needs, and everyone was confused about how to serve them. We desired to take every child a family has. If you have children with and without exceptional abilities, we would like both to have a Christian education. So we decided to accept some children who challenged our teachers. And along the way, I went to Jim Marsh and said, "This isn't fair to these students or our teachers." They're not prepared for this, and the students' needs are just not being met. Could I find someone to come in at least part-time, and we'll pull those children out and see if we can help meet their needs or fill in some gaps?

> Jim Marsh: How can we be selective if we were to be a covenantal Christian school? We have to do everything we can to provide Christ-centered, quality education for all kids in a family, regardless of whether they have physical or learning differences. What we were doing was saying yes to some and no to others. Sherry Blough and I had a big heart for this issue. We had a really nice family, and we said no to their son because we didn't feel we had a program to support him. They asked me out to lunch, and the mother just wept. She said, "Jim, where can we send our son? Where are we going to go? Where can our son get an education like you have at Westminster?" I remember I had no answer for her, and it really bothered me. Thankfully, that boy eventually graduated from Westminster.

Jim Sefrit, who at the time was an assistant principal at Parkway North High School, served on the board as the discussion about meeting the needs of students with different learning styles began to surface.

> Jim Sefrit: I'll never forget one board meeting in the library, and one of the topics being discussed was kids who had learning difficulties. We have always said that we don't just accept students; we accept families. We want to love and support families. We had more and

more kids coming here with learning difficulties. Their older siblings didn't, but what would we do to support these kids? There was no way financially we could afford to start much of a program to support them. As we talked about it, I said, "Listen, gentlemen, we support families, and that is a great thing, but if we don't support these kids who are coming in with these learning difficulties, and we can't do something for them, Monday morning they are going to be on my doorstep at the public school, and we are going to say, 'Come on in,' and we are going to work with those kids. Having said that, what are we going to do with those kids?" That was a question nobody had an answer for.

Jim Marsh: We launched the program, and the first year was an abysmal failure. Sherry and I were the champions. It was controversial; the board wasn't all the way on board. They were afraid we would become *the* learning center school. We didn't really have the right people. We had parent meetings and upset people desperate for us to help them, but we didn't have qualified teachers. Sherry and I decided to abandon the program and put it on pause until we found the right teachers. That's what we did. That was a God thing because He brought Kate Vonder Bruegge from Parkway and a new teacher, Susan Schmersahl. They were both tremendous. We felt God led us to the right people to build this program. We hired them to build the program, and they did just that. They won the respect of the faculty, the community, and the parents, allowing the program to burgeon. We did earn a reputation that if you had a kid with learning differences, Westminster was *the* school in St. Louis that would work with them.

Sherry Blough: Along came the opportunity to hire a real expert, which made all the difference. Kate Vonder Bruegge came into the program, and she had wonderful skills with kids and knew how to work with children with special needs. She also knew how to help teachers. We had to hire someone for middle school, and that turned out to be Susan Schmersahl. They worked together really well, and the program flew once we got the right people on board. Over the years, it has become a flagship program for this school and an absolute necessity in this community. Students are thriving, and it's also attracting more students to this school.

When Kate Vonder Bruegge left WCA after several years, another strong leader came on board.

> Sherry Blough: I used to send students to Lucy Erdman for extensive testing; she had a big, healthy testing business, but I think it outgrew Lucy. She came to the Ladue campus one day and said, "I would like to work here. I am going to sell the business. How do I do this?" The timing was perfect because Kate was moving on. Lucy was a blessing for many years. She knew her stuff.

Another way in which Westminster began to focus on fulfilling its mission in a more biblically centered way began to take root in the mid-1990s.

> Jim Marsh: Scott Holley was copying something on the copy machine, and I was waiting, and for some reason, we were talking about diversity. He made the statement, "I don't want my kids to go to an all-white school." This was before his kids were at Westminster. It stuck with me. This was important to him. It was important to me. It meant a lot to me. There are certain conversations you have that are going to change things. I knew this was going to be controversial. I knew this would be a big issue to tackle, but the fact that he said it meant a lot to me. It gave me that little boost, saying, "OK, maybe you're on the right track with this."
>
> That was when 3 percent of our kids were students of color. That led to one of our earliest strategic plans to increase diversity by 1 percent a year for five years. That started that ball rolling. It was slow at first, but we reached 8 percent after three years. That evolved more and more over time. Once we reached 8 percent, the next strategic plan focused on becoming even more diverse.
>
> Why did we want to become more diverse? To reflect the whole kingdom of God—people of every tribe, nation, and tongue. That became our calling card, part of our vision for the future. Now, 25 percent of our students are students of color. That's pretty significant in terms of how Westminster has evolved.

With a vision for a more diverse student body, Dr. Dani Butler, who was teaching English as a second language (ESL) at Westminster at

the time, considered the possibility of implementing an international students program.

> Dr. Dani Butler: I was a student in seminary in 1998 when I got a call from Sherry Blough. She asked if I could work one or two hours a day at Westminster to teach ESL because they had two students who had been accepted with no English background, and it was really challenging without any provided resources. I started part-time in the fall of '99 and quickly fell in love with teaching these students. At the time, there was one student from Korea and another from Japan in my ESL class. As I got to know them, I built a close relationship with them. I started dreaming that I could grow this program by actively recruiting more international students. I proposed the idea to Florence Lewis that I would like to have an opportunity to recruit students from Korea and other countries to expand the program. She loved the idea, and so did Jim Marsh. So then, I started working in the admissions department for Florence Lewis.

Work on the new international students program began with the hopes of launching in the 2001–2002 school year.

> Dr. Dani Butler: I started to work, recruiting for the international program, but then 9/11 happened, and everything came to a sudden stop. No student visas were issued for nearly a full year because the terrorists involved in the attacks had entered the country on student visas. As a result, the whole process was put on hold, and we weren't able to bring in new international students. It was a real challenge for us. I was so passionate about building this program, and suddenly, we were facing this major obstacle. But deep down, I didn't feel as though God was saying no. I believed that if we were aligned with our mission and God's kingdom work, it would eventually happen. I just had to learn to overcome unexpected challenges along the way. And that's exactly what happened. In 2002, we officially became a government-approved school authorized to enroll full-time international students. By 2011, we expanded to a total of thirty-three students from all over the world.

One of the hallmarks of Jim Marsh's leadership was his continual search for new ways to better serve the students' needs and empower the faculty to do so.

> Sherry Blough: Jim was sorting out the next steps to determine the school's identity and how the school should move forward. He called a meeting with the whole administrative team—Jim Drexler, Steve Hall, Larry Birchler, Florence Lewis, and me. We sat at a table downstairs, and Jim said, "All right, I need you guys to really help me with something. I feel like we are missing something. We need a really big vision for the future. We need a sense of who we are, who we want to be, and how we will get there." We could see he was excited and went on about this for a while. Then he looked around and said, "What do you think? Where do we start? What are you willing to do to contribute?"
>
> Nobody said a word. We all looked at him like he had his head on crooked because none of us had ever done anything like that. We didn't know what he wanted. We knew he was looking for something beyond what we were thinking, but we didn't quite get it. Nobody said anything. It was awkward. Jim said, "OK, here's what we're going to do. I just need to get this out and on paper, and then I'll bring it back to you and talk some more." Talk about inspiration and flow. He must have sat down and stayed up all night, or at least worked on it for days. In a very short time, he poured this all out on paper. I couldn't believe what he came up with. It was masterful work, and we were all blown away when he presented it. It was amazing. He said we needed to focus on academics more than we were. That was part of it.
>
> We needed to help students learn how to learn and have plans that helped the school get there in terms of nurturing leadership in the faculty. Until Jim got there, everything was top-down. Everybody was kind of on an island. How do we empower our faculty, and how do we give input to them without having a top-down effect in the future? That was his vision.

The vision of faculty empowerment did not take long to bear fruit. The most academically significant innovation that occurred shortly thereafter was spurred by graduate work that Tim and Steve Hall were pursuing as they sought a master's degree at Covenant College. As they considered the need for a marriage between curriculum development, classroom practice,

and educational philosophy, they realized that Westminster suffered from a lack of cohesion between those three spheres and approached Jim Marsh to discuss the problem.

> Tim Hall: As Steve and I thought about creating our curricula at WCA in light of what we'd learned in our master's program, we realized that what we were designing and creating at Westminster was not being informed or shaped by our mission statement or educational objectives. So we met with Jim Marsh to suggest that we gather a group of teachers to meet together to create a WCA Philosophy of Education that would be shaped by the school's mission and the educational objectives arising from it, but that would be much more practical and informative for our curriculum work, both on a comprehensive scale and also in daily planning.

In keeping with that request and as an offshoot of Marsh's desire both to encourage faculty leadership and increased curricular vigor, Tim Hall led a team of six additional faculty members—Tim Baldwin, Jim Drexler, Steve Hall, Scott Holley, Eddie Jones, and Sue Tameling—in a weeklong study and discussion of how the mission and vision of Westminster should shape its approach to teaching, its approach to curriculum, and its community approach. Out of that work came the Westminster Philosophy of Curriculum, which, since being introduced to the faculty in the fall of 1997, has shaped everything in the school, from how teachers think about their course objectives to how they design their curriculum and deliver it. In addition, it affected the design of the 1999 building expansion at Ladue Road and later the Town & Country campus. But the Philosophy of Curriculum has done even more than that.

Innovations such as the neighborhood concept, the Philosophy of Pedagogy, the Westminster Way of Teaching, the Center for Teaching and Learning, new teacher induction, professional learning communities, essential questions, and Westminster University are all offshoots of the work begun in the summer of 1997. All were initiated and established by members of the faculty. A separate committee of teachers, chaired by Scott Vonder Bruegge, met the following year to evaluate the appropriateness of Westminster's daily schedule in light of the tenets of the Philosophy of Curriculum. Their recommendations provided the framework for the schedule, combining a blend of block and seven-period days, which is still in use in modified form today.

Jim Drexler: Tim Hall led that process. It had a big impact internally when we were able to go through that Philosophy of Curriculum, and that whole process kept being improved, modified, and added to. Arguing and plowing through that was a rich time, but the problem was that most teachers had not had that experience, so it didn't immediately inspire them as much as we hoped. But that work continues, and it has expanded and become a cornerstone of the school. That comes back to hiring good teachers, who then get trained in the idea that this is our perspective on teaching and learning. I still think it was a highlight to be involved in that. The proof is in the pudding. We did that work twenty-five or thirty years ago, and it is still a fundamental document for WCA.

FIVE

SCHOOL PRIDE



Spirit Week, 1990

Without a doubt, one of the annual highlights of the Westminster calendar is Spirit Week, an event originally called Wildcat Pride Week that pits each class against the others in a five-day display of creativity, competition, noise, and community spirit. The origins of this event began in the fall of 1989 when two teachers approached Jim Marsh with an idea to spice up the long winter months with a bit of fun.

> Florence Lewis: Sue Tameling [at the time a PE teacher and coach] was from Michigan, and she told me one day about a Spirit Week at a school she used to be at. I thought, *We need that here. We can do that.*
>
> Jim Marsh: I'll never forget it. Florence [Lewis] was constantly coming to my office with ideas. She was great that way. She asked

to meet with me and Sue Tameling. Florence introduced Sue's great idea from her high school, Unity Christian in Grand Rapids. Sue described what it would be, and Florence thought it was a great idea. I didn't have a clue what it was going to look like. They were very enthusiastic, and I trusted Florence for sure. Sue had enthusiasm for the idea, and Florence had the chutzpah to make it happen and get the community behind it. So I said, "Let's go for it," and that's what they did. Out of it grew what we know today.

From the first Spirit Week held February 5–9, 1990, the students threw themselves into the competition frenzy, and the entire community rallied around it.

Jim Marsh: It was intensely competitive, which it still is today. I remember right from the get-go, it was intense. There were always issues with the judges. "This isn't fair. It's rigged for the seniors." All of that; always controversy. It amazed me how parents got involved right away. This became a big deal immediately. They wanted to be part of it. I wasn't getting calls about the Bible curriculum. I was getting calls about judging for the hallway contest. There were teachers who got behind it and those who hated it. It took a lot of work to bring people along. It's disruptive and all of that. One thing I enjoyed about it, too, was on Friday night when we had the basketball game; I loved it for our kids [on the team] because it filled the gym. There was one time back in the early '90s when there was standing room only for a basketball game.

Sherry Blough: It grew and grew and grew over the years in very exciting ways, showing the talent of the students. Not just artistically but also in dancing, singing, and performing. It brings out the talents of students who normally we'd never, ever see.

Florence Lewis: You live and breathe when someone says, "My daughter grew more during Spirit Week than at any other time of the year." That was amazing to me—working together, creativity, planning, and finding new leaders in the class who would take things on.

For years, Kent Kehr was the official scorekeeper of the event and remembers how intensely serious his role became.

Kent Kehr: Is it a big deal? It's huge. I was with Florence in those first fifteen or twenty years, and I was doing the math for the points behind it, and everybody was sure I was somehow fixing it. It is never fixed. It's not fixed. Those first twenty years, we sweated not where the points ended up, but that we were doing the math right. I came on board because, one year, they announced the wrong champion. So Florence panicked. She and I stayed up late at night trying to make sure all the points were added up correctly to make sure we got all the points in. We did it right. We would sweat bullets coming to Friday when we would announce scores and put it out so everyone could see it.

Over the years, Spirit Week has evolved into a more polished production than in the beginning.

Jim Marsh: It's much more of a production. Back then, it was more teacher- and class-oriented. That's what teachers hated because they were expected to help their class. Now, it's grown into a much more parent-run thing. Costumes and sophistication now. It was much more elementary back then in terms of what Lip Sync would look like or even what the hall decorations would look like.

Florence Lewis: It bloomed and blossomed fast, and we had floats, hall decorations, and costumes. For hall decorations, the first year, everybody had the same theme; it was all blue and white. Then we started to have themes of colors or holidays, that kind of thing.

The impact of Spirit Week extends beyond one week in late January and even beyond the student body itself.

Jim Marsh: Parental involvement is something I didn't expect. [Spirit Week] has become the thing. I know for my own family—that's what they return for. Then we were getting something going, but who knew it would grow into something thirty years later that you have to have wristbands to get in? We have two gyms full of people, and we still have overflow. It has grown so big that people say, "Don't mess with Spirit Week."

Kent Kehr: Is Spirit Week a big deal? Let me tell you how much of a big deal it is. I have four kids. They all went through Westminster.

> We're five years out from my youngest being out of college, and if I mention Spirit Week, there are fifteen minutes of "You did this, you did that, we should have won this, we were better at Boys' Poms." Then, all of a sudden, the videos start coming out. Yeah, it's a big deal. The kids love it. I love it. I love what they do. It's amazing that they can put together a lip sync in two weeks. How do they do it? I have no idea. If our family is any indication, yes, it's huge. And it's not rigged. Never has been. Never will be.

Another highlight of the Westminster calendar is the annual musical production, which allows dozens of students to display their God-given gifts both on stage and behind the scenes. The driving force behind the musical's first seven years was Betsy Tyvoll, who came to WCA in the fall of 1983. Because she had grown up in a musical family, she approached Arlen Dykstra with the idea and quickly won his approval for the school's first major production to be held on the gymnasium stage in the spring of 1984.

> Betsy Tyvoll: Arlen Dykstra was the principal. I had grown up with musicals. My family played musical albums; my dad loved them, so I knew all the songs and all the stories. I also produced *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* as a kid. I thought it would be a good production for a first musical. It was a smaller cast, an ensemble, and it just so happened that year, I had at least ten very gifted actors and actresses among the student body eager to start acting on the stage. There were so many of them that we double-cast it. That was a really fun time. We were all breaking ground. For most of the kids, it was their first musical, and mine, at Westminster. It was this weird thing that we were doing.

The production was wildly successful and played to sellout crowds each night. Tyvoll, exhausted from creating a whole new production from scratch, was eager for a break as the curtain came down on Saturday night. That was not to be.

> Betsy Tyvoll: I remember thinking, after going through all the work, *Good, let's do this maybe every other year.* But Arlen Dykstra came up to me backstage when it was barely over and said, "Betsy, that was great. Let's do *The Music Man* next year." That's kind of a leap, don't you think? But that was it. Every year, we did a musical. It was a lot of work. It can get very expensive; ask Jim Marsh. Every fall, I

would have to bring the budget in to see him, and he would say OK and crawl under his desk. I told him he had to quit talking about computers and basketball. Now let's do a show. I didn't know how to cut corners. I didn't tell him that.

That production of *The Music Man* became one of Tyvoll's favorites because of a unique solution to a casting problem created by the show's demands.

Betsy Tyvoll: The opening scene in *The Music Man* is a very complicated rap. Meredith Willson didn't have the word for it, but it was a rap—a bunch of men on a train. We were all overwhelmed by the show. It was big, and we wondered what nine guys we could get because this had to be rehearsed a lot, and we already had a big cast of students. Somebody said, "Why don't we get the teachers?" So, nine wonderful teachers stepped up. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, we rehearsed that over and over. The teachers marched around the room over and over to get the rap in sync. They brought the house down. We didn't even need to do the rest of the show. The guys were hilarious. Everybody loved it.

The final show she directed was special for Tyvoll because of the underlying Christian themes it presented.

Betsy Tyvoll: I loved *The King and I* because it was about a Christian missionary who goes overseas to teach the king's children, and in the process, she helps to turn around the whole institution of slavery by having an effect on the prince, who eventually became king. That was during the 1860s in Siam. That's a true story. That was a great thing to talk to kids about: missions and the power of Jesus in one person to affect a whole society. I liked using the musical to interact with kids and talk about serious issues, whether it was a show like this or *Fiddler on the Roof*, which deals with prejudice and love for family.

Tyvoll's work laid the foundation for a program that would impact the lives of hundreds of students involved in theatre productions in the following years. Her successor, Kathy Eichelberger, was the first to continue that tradition.

Kathy Eichelberger: When I came in, there was already a really robust program because of Betsy Tyvoll and her work. I always wanted the arts program at Westminster to be one of the strongest parts of the

school because the arts were so important to me when I was young. Putting on a show is about teamwork, imagination, and creativity. Magic occurs when students pull together to create props, scenery, publicity, costumes, and singing and dancing. It is magical to see kids work with each other so well to create something for the community to enjoy. We had productions at the Ladue campus with ninety kids participating, so it was quite a big event for the school. It was a great thing for the kids to be involved in—life-changing for some—and a great promotion for the Christian school community. Because they were done with excellence, musicals brought people into the school for the first time, so it was a great PR tool as well.

Those who have followed in Tyvoll and Eichelberger's footsteps have witnessed the same kind of magic.

Jim Butz: You are in this environment. You are thrown together. You are persevering together. You are working long hours, you do this product, the audience loves it, and you get this great feeling of achievement. That's what I see with kids here. I see a program where we have a huge spectrum of talent. Some are very, very talented; some may go on to make a living at this; some kids are just looking for a place to belong, and they are looking for something bigger than themselves to be part of a group that is working together. They do that and do something difficult with other people, setting a pattern for their life. I've seen it work wonders in so many kids. Kids who don't have their voice and are terrified to stand up in front of a group of people and string together two sentences suddenly become articulate, eloquent, and confident with a head on their shoulders. I have seen that now for fifteen years, and it is a passion to this day.

Allen Schwamb: One of the really cool things about a musical is that it involves so many of the students' different talents—talents of kids who wouldn't be in other kinds of shows but can be in the musical because maybe they don't speak or sing well, but they move very well. We need dancers. I am always talking to kids who are involved in Spirit Week. They'll say, "I've never sung before!" It doesn't matter. Come check us out because we need dancers, too. It doesn't matter what you can do. In a musical, we can find a place for it. Dancers, singers, actors, and visual artists who want to get involved in set making or making digital backgrounds to be projected. There are so many ways to get involved.

Another of Kathy Eichelberger's responsibilities was to build the middle school choral music program, which was in its infancy when she was hired.

> Kathy Eichelberger: There was not as much attention given to the middle schoolers, and we were trying to grow a middle school program then. When I started in 1990, we only had sixty kids in the 7th grade. Much of my job was spent with those middle schoolers, developing them into better musicians and feeding them into the high school program. We grew from one choir in the high school to two: The women's choir plus a mixed ensemble and a before-school group. It continues to be a robust program that kids want to be a part of and grow into lifelong singers in churches and other areas where they can use their musical skills.

According to those who have helped cultivate the arts at Westminster, the role of an excellent arts program at a Christian school should not be taken for granted.

> Jim Butz: God is *the* great playwright, author, and storyteller. We are in the midst of a story. We are not in the midst of a series of random, disconnected events. There is a beginning, there is a middle, and there is an end. We are drawn to stories for that reason, even if we don't know it. It's how we make sense of our sensate experience in this seemingly chaotic world. There is order to this world. There has to be order to storytelling, or they don't make sense. There is a deep theological reason. We are storytellers because God is writing a story, and He has chosen to communicate through the Bible, not just through dictates but through a narrative. That is so essential to the Christian life. Through stories, we encounter worldviews. We are drawn to that, to have that collective experience. We have been drawn to that for millennia. Sitting in a room, sitting in an amphitheater, sitting in a theater watching the drama unfold, identifying with what is going on, and coming away with this collective, cathartic experience. There is something deeply human about that experience.

> Kathy Eichelberger: It's a way for kids to express themselves and use their skills for the glory of God. That's number one. Number two is that we are created in the image of God, and we have an innate ability to create, so it's important to do it well and with excellence.

Allen Schwamb: We immerse ourselves in art all the time. We listen to music and watch videos constantly, so the arts are a massive part of our lives. They are often in the background, and we don't think about it, but clearly, they are something we value. That means that they should be part of our worship lives as well. We only get to have excellent art if we have students participating in the arts at this level—in high school, to the next level, to the next level. That doesn't mean anybody can become a professional, but if you value art enough, you will give it some time and want it to be more than mediocre. If you want to give your best gifts to God, it requires some cultivation, and that's what we try to do: cultivate the gifts these students have.

From the very first, athletics have been an important part of the Westminster experience for many students.

Sherry Blough: One of the early things we saw a need for was more than just a PE class for students; there was also the need for team programs where the kids could play soccer or basketball. So, the board went back to Covenant Seminary to look for people who could coach or teach. I remember Don Beebe in particular because he endeared himself to the students. He was a tough basketball coach, and I remember the games being very exciting. But he had a purpose in mind when he worked with his young men. He wanted them to live godly lives and be athletes, and he had a tremendous impact on them and the foundation of sports.

Tim Hall: Athletic events were a big deal to a relatively small community, I'd say. The percentage of kids who played soccer or basketball was high compared to today, but sports got off the ground immediately, which continues to be a big deal. We had soccer and basketball, and that first year, we had softball in the spring. By my senior year, we had the first baseball team and volleyball and cheerleading for the girls, so the number of sports has increased dramatically. Maybe the percentage involved hasn't changed that dramatically, but it sure felt like I was playing basketball with the same kids I was playing soccer with.

For the first seven years of its existence, Westminster competed in an association of small Christian schools. It was not until 1983 that the Wildcats joined the Missouri State High School Activities Association (MSHSAA) and began to play other private and public schools, first as an independent and then as a member of the Great Overland Trails Conference and then the Tri-County Six Conference. Adjusting to the stiffer competition posed by those schools proved a challenge, and the lack of facilities did as well.

> Cory Snyder: We were the school you wanted to schedule for homecoming because our athletic program didn't have a lot of prowess, didn't have a lot of success—not many district titles. I started here in 2001, and I remember Jim Marsh walking me around campus and talking about his vision for a football stadium. Back then, it was just a hill of grass on which people sat. We had a tower constructed of piping and a wooden platform that people sat on. There was a vision there, but it hadn't been implemented yet.

The 1987 boys cross-country team won the school's first district title; the girls volleyball team had some near misses, the girls cross-country team began to have success, and the 1998 boys basketball team lost a district final in overtime to the eventual state champions. However, most Westminster teams struggled to break through. Westminster completed a major expansion in 1999, allowing it to build a foundation of success. Finally, Melissa Millar won WCA's first individual state championship in the 300 intermediate hurdles in 2000. That same year, Westminster hosted a district final girls basketball game in its new gym between Villa Duchesne and Visitation Academy that motivated Jim Marsh to take a serious look at how to improve Westminster's sports program.

> Jim Marsh: Both schools had very good teams, and the game was phenomenal. Our gym was packed with people, and the energy was electric. It was great—district tournament basketball is just how you would want it to be. I remember driving home from that game thinking, *Our kids deserve to have that kind of experience. We're not competing for district championships.* We were seeded last. We need to get better. We have the facilities now. Our kids needed to be part of an athletic program that would give them those kinds of experiences and memories. That's what started it.

During the 2001–2002 school year, the school hired a consultant to review WCA's athletic program and suggest changes to help it flourish. Out of that process came the decision to form a committee of coaches, parents, and athletes to write what would become the Ten Pillars, a series of principles meant to provide a philosophical foundation for Westminster's approach to athletics.

TEN PILLARS

1: Honor Jesus Christ in all things.
The most important measure of our success.

2: Christian character defines who we are.
God-honoring behavior, good sportsmanship, and avoiding drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are required.

3: Good grades and conduct lead the way
Successful athletes must be successful students.

4: "We" before "me."
What is best for the team always comes first.

5: We will run the race to win.
Competing at the highest possible level is the goal.

6: We are in this together.
Student-athletes, coaches, and parents are all on the same page.

7: Commitments are paramount.
Showing up and honoring your word is the norm.

8: We will grow and improve in and out of season.
Getting better demands hard work.

9: Supporting other players and teams is expected.
We all share Wildcat pride.

10: Positive attitudes will influence outcomes
Passion, enthusiasm, and energy will drive us.

Jim Marsh: The Ten Pillars define the culture of what we want our athletic program to be, not just goals, but things that define the ethos of what it means to be an athlete and a coach. Certainly, we wanted to focus on what makes us distinctive as a Christian school: "Honor Jesus Christ in all things." That's number one. That's on the top of the list, but some pillars are about how you are expected to represent Westminster as a student-athlete. We solidified the ten and used the Ten Pillars to launch the new and improved Westminster athletic program. With the new Town & Country campus, we put them up on the wall in the arena and in the swimming pool. That was very intentional. We discussed being reminded that this is who we are every time you walk into the arena and look up at the wall. This is what it means to be a part of the Westminster athletic program.

Cory Snyder: It was God's timing for me to come to Westminster in 2001–2002. I have seen the fruits of this in my fifteen years as a coach and my last five years as the athletic director. Back in the early 2000s, "We will run the race to win," "We will grow and improve in and out of season," and "Commitments are paramount" were the emphasis of what coaches grabbed from that, whereas now we have established those pretty well, and we can go back and cycle up to the top—"Christian character defines who we are," "Honor Jesus Christ in all things," and even "Good grades and conduct lead the way," so it ebbs and flows depending on where the school is at the time. It's important for organizations and departments, like the athletic department, to have a culture. Leadership determines culture, and culture drives behavior, and behavior drives results. The culture for us is the Ten Pillars. That focus on culture and behavior has made Westminster a place that athletes want to attend. We've won state championships, had four Missouri Gatorade players of the year, and had a high school Heisman winner, but those are all the result of the things above them—the behavior and the culture.

Since the efforts to upgrade the school's athletic program began, accentuated by its entry into the highly competitive Metro Conference in 2012, Westminster has had uncommon success in league and state competitions. Since that first cross-country district championship in 1987, WCA has won ninety-seven more through the beginning of 2026. The boys golf team won the school's first state championship in 2010, and in the years since, Westminster has gone on to finish first in sixteen more

state competitions, including two Wickenheiser Cups in ice hockey, and competed in a total of sixty-seven Final Fours.

Following Melissa Millar's individual state championship in 2000, thirty-two more Wildcat athletes have won individual state championships through the 2025–26 school year, with ten winning multiple titles during their Westminster careers. Not only that, but four Westminster athletes—Jacob Turner and Jake Matheny in baseball, Kirsten Davis in soccer, and Daniel Everett in track and field—were named the Missouri Gatorade Player of the Year, an award given to the outstanding athlete in the state in each sport. In 2015, Zach Hughes won the Wendy's High School Heisman, an award given to one male and one female every year nationally for athletic, academic, and leadership excellence, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has named Westminster the metro area's outstanding small school athletic program four times.

A fruit of the desire to "Honor Jesus Christ in all things" manifests itself in the small moments between athlete and coach. The longtime boys and girls swim coach, Kent Kehr, recognized that priority while working alongside his assistant coach, Marjan Kempen.

> Kent Kehr: The coaching position is where I have seen God work most through me, but I've also seen Him work through some of the other great coaches at the school, Marjan being the other coach on the swim team. I sat back and said, "Here I am coaching forty to fifty high school swimmers, and I don't feel like I have the qualities or resources to do it." Then Marjan comes along and helps, and I see that God is using us in a way that changes these athletes' lives. Yes, you're instructing them in swimming. You're instructing them in competition. But the difference between what I am doing and what I saw as an athlete at Ladue is the character building. It's the three-minute conversation after they swim, after an emotional situation, whether they've failed or succeeded, or maybe they just broke up with their boyfriend and need to have a conversation. I've seen Marjan do it, and I've tried to do it, too, where you're introducing the idea that God loves them. Their identity is wrapped up in Him, and to get past this, let's talk about what Jesus is doing in your life.

That ethos has been recognized by those with whom WCA competes on multiple occasions, both before and after the codification of the Ten

Pillars. Following a boys junior varsity soccer game against Prep South High School in the fall of 1987, athletic director Terry Johnson received this letter from the Prep South coach:

Mr. Johnson,

I would like to take the time to tell you how impressed I was by the conduct of both your B soccer team and its coach, Mr. Tim Baldwin, on Tuesday, September 22. In an age when sportsmanship and Christian values seem to be the exception rather than the rule, this group proved that there will always be a place in sports for first-class behavior.

The game was relatively physical, but whenever one of our players would go down, one of Westminster's players was right there to lend a helping hand. There was one play in particular that best exemplifies the team's priorities. One of Westminster's forwards committed a rather blatant foul against our goalkeeper. I suspect it was done out of frustration rather than vindictiveness. The foul resulted in an official caution by the referee.

Immediately after the incident, Coach Baldwin came over to our bench and apologized to the team. We were both impressed and a little dumb-founded. Many coaches would have either pretended that nothing much had happened or even protested the call. This display of class and sportsmanship was not lost on our players. After the game, the young man involved in the incident went out of his way to apologize to me.

I really don't know much about your school, but I can see where it gets its name. You can be proud of the way that the players and coach represented your program. I wish all of our opponents displayed such class. Even though Westminster lost the game, they won our respect and admiration, which, of course, is more important.

Headmaster Jim Marsh received a similar letter from Willard High School's boys basketball coach after Willard beat Westminster in a state semifinal game at Mizzou Arena in Columbia, Missouri, in 2005.

Dear Mr. Marsh,

I have felt compelled to write to you concerning your boys basketball team and coaches ever since the Final Four weekend in Columbia. As a highly

competitive coach, as well as a man of faith, I cannot begin to tell you how impressed I was with your team and coaching staff. The Christ-like character they exhibited that weekend was unreal. What a witness they were for our Lord. The players played at an extremely competitive level yet always showed class while Coach [Eric] Bain and his staff were very gracious and complimentary of our team, even in defeat. Even the fans we came in contact with were so much the same manner. It is truly a reflection of your parents, administration, and school on how an athletic program can put Christ first and still be successful at the highest level.

I've often wondered since that weekend why we had to lose in the finals and if just maybe the good Lord "allowed" it to happen for a reason. Maybe that reason was to show how one should handle such adversity at such a time, and on a stage of that magnitude. I can only hope that myself, my assistants, and my players were half as Christ-like in our handling of such an enormous disappointment as losing the state championship in overtime as you guys were in your semifinal loss.

God really used Westminster Christian Academy in a mighty way that Final Four weekend, and as bad as it hurts not to come away with first place, your school, coaches, players, and fans achieved an even greater prize than a state championship. You brought, at an unbelievably high level, glory and praise to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in an athletic setting like I've never seen before. Congratulations on an outstanding season, and thank you so much for your unmatched witness and example. May God continue to bless Westminster Christian Academy in all its endeavors.

SIX

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS



Construction begins at the Ladue Campus, 1998

A major change in the 1990s was the increasing delineation between the middle and upper school programs, initiated by a casual conversation at a conference for St. Louis area educators.

> Sherry Blough: When we moved to the Ladue campus, we had a junior high and a high school, which were mixed with all kinds of shared space. We got along like that for a number of years, but then the head of Rossman School talked to me at an open house program, and she said, "Sherry, I think you should take a look at improving your junior high and maybe even trying to move to a middle school model."
>
> I went to Jim Marsh and told him about that conversation, and he looked at me and said, "Will you take it on? I don't know who else has

the time or interest." I said, "Sure, but I don't have the time, energy, or knowledge I need either. I'm going in green again. Yet I know we need somebody to do this." He said, "We'll give you what you need." I said I needed to educate the teachers so they become the experts.

Blough organized a team of teachers to attend a conference in Seattle to learn more about the uniqueness of the middle school model.

> Sherry Blough: Jim sent me, Steve Hall, and two other teachers, and we just soaked it up. It was such a fun conference. We learned so much, and we came back excited. I remember that on the airplane home, we were all seated across from each other and brainstormed the whole way home. We needed to do this. We needed to separate our high school from our middle school kids. They don't need high school role models. They need to be kids in 7th and 8th grade, learning at their level and enjoying being 7th and 8th graders in middle school.

Upon returning from the conference, Blough's team sent the 7th and 8th grade teachers to visit area middle school programs to learn how best to implement this new model.

> Sherry Blough: They went out for a whole morning and visited middle schools, and they had questions that they had to look at while there, specific to what they taught and how that school structured things. They came back and, as we used to say, "Brought back the gold." We got a whiteboard, and we just started writing things down. What did you learn? What did you pick up? What are the things that we need to do now? What are the things that can wait? It was an afternoon of brainstorming, and honestly, that's what it took. They had enough wind in their wings from that point to take it and go.

> Jim Marsh: That was a faculty-generated idea to distinguish the middle school from the high school with its separate program. The team went to a school in Washington, where they had a middle school conference and came back with their recommendations, which eventually led to many of the concepts of separating the middle school from the upper school that exist today. They needed their own leader, and Steve Hall became the middle school principal, and Jim Drexler became the high school leader. That's how both of them grew into their roles.

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that Westminster's growing reputation among St. Louis private schools had begun to attract more and more families interested in a Christian education for their children, and enrollment exceeded five hundred for the first time in 1994. WCA became the first Christian school accredited by ISACS during Arlen Dykstra's tenure and was named a Blue Ribbon School during the 1990–1991 school year by the US Department of Education. Jim Marsh said the federal recognition "shows how far we've come in fifteen years. We're very excited about that award because it shows that a Christian education and an excellent education can coexist." Given the higher profile the school had gained and the increased interest in the school within the community, it became clear that the Ladue Road building no longer met the school's needs, and plans to expand the facilities began to coalesce.

> Jim Marsh: By that time, we had grown. The sports program had become an important part of the school, and we had boosted enrollment to serve a broader community. We just started to add programming and gained some traction to attract a more significant student body in terms of enrollment. What happened was that we were getting to the point where we were turning closets into offices and all kinds of things, like girls locker rooms into band rooms. Every nook and cranny was being used. We were approaching six hundred students. We had to close enrollment in certain grades. Seventh grade for sure, and 9th grade. So what was happening was that a family would come to us with three kids, and we'd have room for two and no room for one. We wanted to add some programs, add football and wrestling, and expand the science program, and all of that. A big part of it, too, was just the identity. We were known as the old West Ladue Middle School for a long time. That's how people would refer to us. So a big part of the plan was to make this our school—Westminster Christian Academy. The need to grow and the demand for growth prompted the expansion. Then, we pulled in some program and facility expansions.

However, getting approval from the city of Creve Coeur to add to the building did not come easily.

> Jim Marsh: It took forever for Creve Coeur to agree to the expansion—three years. I went to city council meetings for three

years. Finally, we brought our appeal to court, and the judge ruled in our favor. Neighbors objected to traffic noise: "We consider Ladue Road to be our country lane." Every month, I would hear this whole litany of people who would share war stories of high school drivers.

With permission from the city finally in hand, the board agreed to pursue the expansion by launching yet another capital campaign, *Carry the Light*, even though Westminster had only recently gotten out of debt.

Jim Marsh: We hired consultants to do a feasibility study, and they came back and said that we could raise $4 million—we should plan for a $4 million campaign. Then we got the architect's plans, which determined it would take more than that. So, we set the project at $6 million. It ended up costing $9 million. But that's what we did. We used the same philosophy we used for the Town & Country campus—to do everything we believed was necessary to provide for a growing school community and build our programs, the science labs, and all of that. So that's what we did.

Upgrading the science facilities was an important by-product of that expansion.

Dr. Andrew Shaw: When we expanded the campus on Ladue Road, part of that expansion included making more room for science labs. It was a lot of fun to try to design that space, allocate it, and then put equipment in that space and play a role in the floor plan of those spaces. We had these skylights that went across the hallway between our rooms in the upper school. That was a beautiful, well-lit area that was a cheerful place to be.

Dr. Shaw was not the only faculty member the administration asked to help imagine how the school expansion might change life at Westminster.

Sara Drexler: When we got ready for the Ladue expansion and all the new space, we had teams that were asked to discuss time and space, where the whole idea was that we have a new schedule and space, and we have to be effective with it. Jim challenged us to go for it. Dream big and come back to me. What a good idea to make us responsible for what we will do with such a gift. That was his attitude. Empowerment was his number one thing.

The *Carry the Light* campaign garnered $8.8 million in gifts to the school and created space for up to eight hundred students in a 150,000-square-foot building. By the time the Ladue Road expansion was completed in the fall of 1999, the school had added a colonnaded main entryway, a commons area, locker rooms, a gymnasium, a weight room, offices for both the middle and upper schools, offices for a dean of students and dean of academics, a wing for new science labs and classrooms, and a two-story wing that provided six more classrooms on each level. All of the new space had a dramatic effect on Westminster in many ways.

> Jim Marsh: It changed our identity. We were now *Westminster Christian Academy*. We started to look more like a traditional high school. The academic program grew, and the athletic program grew. That helped enrollment grow as well. We did a couple of things, such as the academic support program, and became much more focused on diversity. Those programs started to grow the school as well. Our reputation became stronger. We had credibility in the late '90s. We were a Blue Ribbon school recipient in the '90s. Our place in the ISACS community became more respected. We started to be able to compete with larger schools. The reputation, the culture, and the respect all pushed things forward.

When Jim Drexler left to take a position at Covenant College in the early 2000s, coupled with the report of a team of outside consultants hired to evaluate Westminster's administrative structure, a new administrative team was put in place. Jim Sefrit, who had sent his two children to WCA, had recently retired after serving as an assistant principal at Parkway North High School. Jim Marsh, who needed to replace Drexler, reached out to Sefrit.

> Jim Marsh: We didn't have time to search, and no one was in the wings ready to step into the role, so I was going to do it. I contacted Jim and asked him to be the interim for one year. He said he would, and then he stayed for ten years.

> Jim Sefrit: I had retired not long before that—or thought I had retired—and I came home one day, and there was a message on the answering machine from Jim Marsh, and he said, "We are going to make some changes in our upper school administration. I'd like to have lunch with you and see if there are some ways you might help us out." We had coffee together at Starbucks, and he said, "My prayer

is that you won't say no before this conversation is over." I said, "What do you want?" He said, "I want you to become the head of the upper school, and I want you to help me run the school if you'll just come for one year." I said, "I don't even know what to say." I was just shocked. I told him I needed to talk it over with Sue [his wife], and we needed to pray about it. He said, "Just do one year, and then we'll be able to do a search, and then we'll find your replacement." This was March or April, which is not a good time to find someone since most people are already under contract. Sue and I talked and prayed about it and felt we needed to do this. We wanted to do this. I called him and told him I was in.

Jim Marsh: During that time, the administrative team grew. We had an A-team and an expanded A-team, which included the business side of things. Once Jim Sefrit started as the upper school principal, Steve Hall led the middle school, Scott Holley was the academic dean, and Tim Hall was the dean of students.

Under Sefrit's direction, Westminster's academic program began to take on a layer of even greater professionalism.

Jim Sefrit: The relationship that Jim and I had, as well as Scott, Steve, and Tim, was one of trust. We didn't have to feel each other out. Everybody trusted one another and respected one another. The attitude was, "Yeah, make that happen." We started talking about things that were becoming somewhat well-known in a new and innovative curriculum, like professional learning communities. A lot of people didn't even know what that meant. One of the things Scott and I talked about was how we could do something like that when we have one geometry teacher and one algebra teacher. So we decided instead of one person teaching five sections of algebra and another teaching five sections of geometry, let's have one person teach two, and another teach three. Now we can have two people working together. That was the start.

The most satisfaction I had was seeing how the additions, improvements, and changes we put in over a series of years affected kids' education. I have always believed that as an administrator, my main job is facilitating what teachers do in the classroom, but I also knew I was not completely separated from that. I wanted to

help change and improve their learning and their opportunities. We started doing Summer Seminar [initiated and led by Chris Knerr] and additional things in the science department, like the STEM program and Project Lead the Way, and insisted that teachers talk to each other within and between departments. All those things impacted and improved many aspects of the curriculum, making it a better place for the kids. They were better prepared to go out to engage the world and change it for Jesus Christ.

Though the 1999 additions proved to be a blessing, it quickly became clear that all of the new space would not be a long-term solution, especially since enrollment had already grown to more than eight hundred by 2002. Thus, a whole new space crunch was created, forcing the school to close enrollment for three different grade levels.

Jim Marsh: Once we moved in in 1999, we took off. We grew like crazy—sixty, seventy students a year. It was obvious that the expansion was not going to be the solution. We started to at least explore with Creve Coeur what the possibilities would be. At one point, we had architectural drawings of expanding past the expansion that we had completed in 1999. Creve Coeur made it clear they would not approve any more growth on our campus. We were done. There was talk that at some point, we might need to think about a satellite campus, or we would have to shut down enrollment, so we would have waiting lists. That's hard to do if you're a covenantal school.

Peggy Johnson: When we built the expansion, it was supposed to get us to eight hundred students. Well, that first year, we were already up to 840. We had already gone beyond the expansion! That was when Jim [Marsh] and the board said this wasn't going to work. We couldn't stay at Ladue Road.

Though the 1999 expansion enhanced the school's facilities and programs, God was already stirring the hearts of some in the community to think beyond the Ladue campus.

Dr. Andrew Shaw: Years ago, when Westminster was at the Ladue campus, and I lived just west of this present campus, just across 141, I would go for bike rides with my boys. One time, I was on a bike ride with my middle son, Mark, and we just happened to ride over toward

> West County Tech. I remember recognizing that it wasn't being used very much. I remembered our need for space, pulling up beside the wall of the old gym on the east side and stopping my bike. I think I put my hand on the wall and prayed that maybe this could be a place that Westminster could consider buying sometime to give us more space. I don't know how long before we obtained the property, but it wasn't too many years. I know our church rented this facility for a while when we were expanding our campus at Chesterfield Presbyterian Church. We worshiped in here and had these big spaces, and I thought this would be a cool campus if we could ever get it. It had airplane hangars, fuselages, a helicopter inside, and everything.

Another individual who saw the potential of the West County Tech campus was Dan Stegmann, a parent of two Westminster students and a businessman well-versed in the St. Louis real estate market.

> Jim Marsh: Along came Dan Stegmann. Because of his development background and being in the circle in St. Louis, he discovered that the Special School District was likely to put the West County Tech building up for sale because it had never gained traction. It was underused. He came to talk to me and some board members and said this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We would never get a chance to purchase a property on Highway 40, which divides the whole St. Louis region from north to south. Studies said that by a certain time, the demographic center would be closer to Chesterfield Valley. The highway department was doing a lot of work on 141 to provide this north-south corridor as well. For all those reasons, Dan said it was just too good to be true. It was too good an opportunity to pass on it.

Intrigued by the possibility of buying a forty-acre campus with a 220,000-square-foot building but wary of taking on another gigantic project so soon after completing the Ladue Road expansion, the board established a commission of five men to explore the possibility and return a recommendation to the full board.

> Jim Marsh: We had just finished the campaign and developing Ladue Road, and here we were discussing purchasing this behemoth of a building in Town & Country. So the board appointed a committee of five—Dan, Charles Waldron, Joe Schluchter, Larry Collett, and me. They commissioned us to pursue the opportunity to the point where

we had a recommendation to the board to forget about it or buy it. I remember taking a tour with Dan and others, and I walked into a big arm of the campus. There were two airplanes and a helicopter; another was a huge plumbing area. It took an unbelievable imagination to even think how this could be a traditional Christian secondary school. You would have to have a wild imagination.

After considering the pros and cons of acquiring West County Tech, the exploratory subcommittee recommended that Westminster submit a bid for the property.

Jim Marsh: We met about every week at Schneithorst restaurant—the Gang of Five, Joe Schluchter called us—and it got to the point where it became more of a possibility. Thinking through the opportunity, not knowing what we would do with it, but at least if we could purchase the property, it would provide an option for Westminster moving forward. So, after more than a year of our meetings and meetings with the Special School District, we got to the point where the committee was recommending to the board that we put in a bid. They had set a date for accepting bids. I was really ambivalent. This seemed crazy to me, to be honest.

In a unanimous vote at its December 2002 meeting, the board agreed to submit a formal bid on the Town & Country property. Despite competing against two more well-established entities with far deeper pockets—Maryville University and the Parkway School District—Westminster was ultimately awarded the West County property in early 2003.

Todd Fuller: What I recall is that the property is out here. It's a dream property, and the board decides to put in a bid. We put in a bid, and two other entities competed for it: Maryville and Parkway. They came back to all three of us and said you all need to sharpen your pencils. It was a sealed bid, and when they opened them, they didn't like any of them. So they came back, and Dan Stegmann and that group were leading it, but Dan, especially, said, "Here's our new bid."

Jim Marsh: I remember I was in my living room, Charles was in LA, and Dan was in Atlanta, and we got on a conference call to decide

what the amount would be. Dan said it will have to be between $14 and $15 million. So Charles wanted to go $14. Dan wanted to go $15. I said, "Let's split the difference and make it $14.25 million." We didn't have any money. Not one dime to buy it, and I honestly didn't know how to pray because I knew if they accepted it, it would be a monumental chore, and if they didn't, it would be OK. We'd move ahead on Ladue Road.

Todd Fuller: We went back with the next bid—again, sealed bids—and tied with one of the other entities. Ours was not contingent upon anything, and the other had contingencies, so they took us.

Jim Marsh: They accepted it. Parkway and Maryville bid on it, too. I think a lot of people were shocked when we got it. $14,250,000.

With a massive loan from Cass Bank, Westminster had to find creative ways to generate revenue to satisfy the bank's payment schedule.

Todd Fuller: Now, what are we going to do? Cass was an incredible partner throughout this. No bank in its right mind would do this. How are you going to turn this into revenue? Someday, we will move there, and it doesn't make sense, but they loaned us the money. So we scrambled to find tenants who could pay rent. The Special School District leased back some space, and we had some other groups working with adults with learning differences. Promise Christian Academy met here, and at one time, we had three churches meeting here. We had a Chinese church and the Anglican church. The Crossing Church rented space for their youth group. We had people renting space because they needed a big garage space to work on the car they were building. Someone else even rented one of the giant work areas to remodel a sailboat. It was just a hodgepodge of things. It was like this whole side business we were running at the school.

While Westminster now owned a massive building on forty acres of prime real estate, no one—not the administration, not the board, not the Gang of Five—knew exactly what to do with it.

Jim Marsh: We thought, OK, we have forty acres, but it's only ten more acres than we had on Ladue Road, and it's really not going to

allow us to grow very much, especially if we want to add the kind of athletic facilities and parking that we want.

From the time West County Tech was purchased in 2003 until the final plan for that property solidified, several proposals were considered, including a joint venture with Covenant College.

Jim Marsh: One of the rabbit trails we went down was Covenant College establishing a satellite campus in St. Louis. The idea was that with Central Presbyterian Church having Centreat and Westminster having the forty-acre West County Tech property, and to the east, where there are office buildings now—that was bare ground at that time—altogether, that would be over one hundred acres. The thought was to have the center of that property be facilities like a gymnasium or two, a theater, a cafeteria, and a dance studio. The college and Westminster could use some of those things in the middle. Then, the Covenant campus would be to the west, and Westminster would be to the east.

That idea fizzled, so the next option was to split the middle school from the upper school onto two separate campuses with plans to divide the schools for the 2004–2005 school year.

Jim Marsh: We got together with our architect to discuss the possibilities and decided it would be best to hang on to both campuses and temporarily have the middle school at Town & Country. The upper school would remain on Ladue Road. Then, we would develop the Town & Country campus on forty acres, but it would only be grades 9–12. We would keep the Ladue campus for just middle school. People talked about adding an elementary school to it, and Promise [Christian Academy] wanted to be part of it, so there were all kinds of ideas banging around at the same time—enough to make your head spin. Nobody liked the two-campus concept. Everybody hated it because they wanted everybody to be on the same campus.

Todd Fuller: We actually had some designs where we were going to have the middle school here [at the Town & Country campus], but also have some of our tenants stay. I remember talking about restroom access and things like that. I am sure there are some

drawings somewhere in a box because we had this giant building, and the idea wasn't to knock it all down but to figure out how we could turn this into classrooms and make it work within the footprint of the building.

Peggy Johnson: The plan was to put the high school in West County and keep the middle school in Ladue. I had two offices: one at West County and one at Ladue. No one wanted to do this, though. They couldn't get the capital campaign off the ground.

Plans to split the school reached a critical decision point as the building committee met with the architect who had drawn up designs for using the West County Tech building.

Jim Marsh: We had a meeting in my office with members of the building committee, and the architect presented it all. We had to decide whether or not we would move ahead with getting permits and starting a campaign. I clearly remember Charles [Waldron] looking at me and saying, "OK, Jim, are we ready for this?" I knew at that point that whatever I answered, this was what we were going to do, and I just felt compelled, convicted—I trust it was the Holy Spirit leading me—and I said, "No, I don't think we are." And that was it. We put that one aside.

But putting that plan aside meant that the leadership of Westminster had no clear sense of how best to use the Town & Country property. Because it contained only ten more acres than the Ladue campus, the ability to create a school with all of the desired amenities—from classrooms to theaters to gymnasiums to athletic fields to a swimming pool to parking—necessary to sustain a first-class program seemed constrained by the space limitations of the forty acres.

To solve that problem, Westminster approached the leadership at Central Presbyterian Church about purchasing the thirty-acre Centreat property immediately west of the West County Tech campus. However, the church went in another direction.

Todd Fuller: We had talked with Central about buying it, but they weren't just going to give it to us. They had a price—I think it was $7.25 million or something like that—but we didn't have that kind

of money because we still owed on purchasing the West County Tech property. Then Centreat sold. Gundaker bought it, and the door closed. People complain about Town & Country not allowing stadium lights, but they did help us in a big way. Gundaker needed smaller lot sizes to make their plans work financially, and the city told them no. This is a zoned suburban estate, and the lot sizes must be this. So Gundaker had that as a contingency in their purchase—they could get out of the contract if they couldn't get the city to agree to smaller lot sizes. So, all of a sudden, it came back on the market. We sat there watching, thinking, *What may God be doing?*

The answer to that question unexpectedly became more apparent in the summer of 2007.

Jim Marsh: Zach Clark [Westminster's director of advancement at the time] and I met with [a potential donor] and his two sons at our invitation in my office to ask them for a $100,000 gift, a substantial gift, to fund financial aid. But during that meeting, I had an aerial view of the property in my office, and it showed the thirty acres—this big, remarkable property—that Central owned: Centreat. It filled out a perfect seventy-acre plot like it was meant to be. He was looking at it and said to me, "Why are you going to split the middle school from the high school?" I gave him the whole story about why the forty acres weren't enough, and he said, "What if Westminster had the Centreat property? Would you move the entire campus to Town & Country?" I said that had always been the dream, but we had basically given up on it. And he said, "I'm just thinking out loud, but what if we purchased Centreat from Central and then gave it to Westminster?" I said that would be a wonderful idea. What that did was give us the entire property. That meeting was in June, and in October, he purchased that property for $7.2 million and gave it to Westminster, but the caveat was that they wanted a hockey rink on the campus. So, we scrapped all the other plans and started planning a 7–12 campus with a hockey rink.

Todd Fuller: Technically, what happened is that they gave us the money to pay Central, but in effect, they bought it and gave it to us. That was huge. All of a sudden, this is one of those points where obviously we have been chasing after this debt ever since we got here, and there are times you look at it from a financial standpoint

and say, "Was that really the right thing to do? Did we play our cards right?" But I look at moments like that and say, "Do we really want to be on the other side of God? OK, God, you're directing this, and we will be faithful and take these steps."

Plans for the hockey rink did not pan out due to financial reasons and opposition from Town & Country. Furthermore, the economic crisis that began in the fall of 2008 only complicated the decisions facing Westminster's options on how to move forward. With two properties, massive debt, and no clear plan, the school leadership struggled to discern God's direction for the school. The *For Such a Time as This* fundraising campaign, which had launched in June 2007 to help fund the purchase and construction of the new school, was put on hold in January 2009 because of the severe financial downturn that had rocked the country only months before.

Charles Waldron: The economy was failing. We rolled the plan up and said the plan can't go forward.

But the gift of the Centreat property had begun to shift the equation, and when the Ladue School District broached the possibility of repurchasing the Ladue property from WCA, plans for the new campus began to accelerate once more.

Jim Marsh: We had put everything on hold. We had talked to the superintendent of Ladue about the possibility of buying the Ladue campus, but then she left, and the economic downturn put everything on hold. In November 2009, nothing was going on. The economy was in the tubes, and nothing much was happening with Ladue, but in November, the Ladue School District had a board meeting, and they were making a decision about whether they would build their new early childhood center. They had some property on Clayton Road that they were going to use, and somehow, at that meeting, the concept came up: What about the Westminster property? What if we purchase that and build the early childhood center there, use the athletic facilities, and take off some of the enrollment stress they had at that time? They had a vote of the school board and decided to pursue the purchase.

In order to purchase the Ladue campus, the Ladue School District had to seek approval of a $32 million bond issue in April 2010, which was not certain given the economic uncertainties at that time.

> Todd Fuller: There were three potential buyers. The Ladue School District, the city of Creve Coeur, which was interested in turning it into a rec center, and Gundaker, again. Only one of those three could give us our highest and best price because they wouldn't have to do much to it. Gundaker would have had to demo the whole thing, so they had to build that into their price. Even the city wouldn't have used a lot of it. There would have been a lot of renovation costs. But the Ladue School District had to put a bond on the ballot to do this. In that election cycle, I am unsure if any bonds passed in the St. Louis area, except for that one. When I think about where God showed us we were taking the right steps, it was that. That bond had no business passing. Nothing else was passing. The economy had turned, and people were gun-shy. Why would Ladue want it? They didn't need it. I think this was a visionary thing for them. But it passed.

> Jim Marsh: Ladue got their assessor to complete a study to value the property and returned with an offer of $18 million. That wasn't our assessment; it was theirs. It was miraculous. So, we sold it with the idea that we would rent the campus from them for three years while we developed the Town & Country campus. That's what happened. But we had burned the bridges; there was no going back anymore. So, we had huge decisions to make once we sold that property. We had to move.

After the sale of the Ladue campus closed in the summer of 2010, this new cash enabled Westminster's leadership to begin seriously considering how the renovated West County Tech building could enhance the school's mission and serve the student body well. The same architect who had drawn up the plans for the additions to the Ladue campus was hired to complete the plans for Town & Country.

Three design priorities mattered most as the plans coalesced for the new campus. The first was the desire to create a campus that would enhance the student body's sense of community.

> Jim Marsh: We were going to be a big school. We had already established the neighborhood concept on Ladue Road. There was

a fear of being bigger, and we wanted to do everything possible to make a big school into a smaller school. The whole issue of community had a lot to do with creating the commons—the spaces we have for each grade.

The second was to design a building that would enable the school to adapt to the changing nature of education rather than lock it into a facility that might become outdated over time.

Jim Marsh: Flexibility was another priority, recognizing that times would change. Technology was just getting going. We wanted to be flexible enough to make changes. The Hub is a great example. The first design for the library had all built-in shelving and walls, and we scrapped that with the idea that who knows what a library will be fifteen years from now? Let's just make it a big space and use mobile shelving with no walls. We can also use other means of furniture to separate things, which we did. Nothing is built-in in our classrooms. We have shelving and space for desks, which can be moved out. That was our goal—flexibility.

The third priority was to build a facility that would meet the needs of students for years to come.

Jim Marsh: Permanence was our third goal. We wanted it to be a facility that would stand the test of time and not need to be changed much because we were going to invest a lot of money initially into the project. Another priority was to have everything that was available to students on Ladue Road be available here, and more. That had a lot to do with the pool being part of the project. Very few Christian schools have their own pools.

Once those philosophical decisions were made, the work to design the building's actual layout began in earnest.

Jim Marsh: We formed committees—science, fine arts, athletics, classrooms, big areas like the cafeteria, the offices. There were teachers on each one of those committees. Teachers were really involved in that. There was a lot of faculty input. I bit my lip a number of times, saying, "OK, we'll do this." But I felt like when we moved in, there was a lot of ownership of the spaces.

Kathy Eichelberger: When we started dreaming of plans for a theatre, we visited a lot of schools like DeSmet and SLUH to see their layouts and decided that a six-hundred-seat theatre would be a good size for us. Plus, we wanted to add green rooms and a set design shop that would really move things forward.

Dr. Andrew Shaw: I grew up doing architecture. I always wondered why God made me so interested in floor plans and drawings. I have put that to use in a number of ways now. I had a lot of input on the floor plan here. I also remember going to the office and looking at the floor plan early on, saying, "You don't have anywhere near enough science rooms here. We need more rooms." They agreed with me, fortunately.

Jim Sefrit: Charles Waldron was running the whole thing, and I was meeting with him, Jim Marsh, and the construction people in the idea stage. What are some of the things we need to think about? We had leaders in different areas responsible for bringing initial ideas to the architect. I met with the counselors, the Learning Center people, the upper school people, and the athletic people, asking what we needed. What do we want to be able to do? What will enable you to do your job more easily and better? We wrote educational specifications for athletics and academics. I worked with Alan Miller [Westminster's athletic director at the time] to present those plans to the architect. We went back and forth with the architect three or four times before we said, OK, let's build it.

The overall cost of the new Town & Country campus was $70 million—$20 million for the land and $50 million for construction. Keeping the 320,000-square-foot project on budget fell to Charles Waldron, who became Westminster's liaison with Brinkmann Construction, the same firm that had completed the 1999 expansion project on the Ladue campus.

Jim Marsh: It got all priced out, and it had to be $50 million and not a penny more to meet all the requirements of our loans. Charles Waldron was phenomenal as the project manager representing Westminster. His mandate was to keep it at $50 million or less, which he did. That is unheard of when it comes to building projects because it almost always goes up. Every time something was unexpected and cost more, he had to figure out how to make it work.

Fundraising was necessary to satisfy the bank's requirements and underwrite construction. It was a never-ending process that required dozens of coffees, town halls, and private meetings with individual donors.

> Jim Marsh: It was a lot of pressure because we had borrowed $35 million, and there were some covenants with the bank where we had to raise a certain amount of money in gifts and pledges by a specific date to continue moving the construction forward. We went on this far-flung campaign to raise gifts and pledges to honor those covenants and give the banks confidence to give us the money to complete the project.

At times, it seemed impossible to fulfill the deadlines to meet those bank covenants as fundraising sometimes lagged, yet the vision of the project's leaders kept the plan moving forward.

> Todd Fuller: There was talk of cost cuts in the plans for this building. We were not going to do the third gym, we were not going to do the pool, and we were going to build the Theatre as a shell. Jim pressed us and said, "If we don't do them now, we'll never do them." I think he's right. When you are chasing debt, you will never be able to. Can you imagine the school without a pool or a Theatre? I remember many times, especially when we moved here, thinking, *Wow, Jim, my faith wasn't that big. I wouldn't have had the guts to do that.* Jim was a visionary. I think I have more appreciation for him now that I realize he had a lot to lose. He surrounded himself with the right people. Larry Collett—I walk away from any conversation with him, humbled by my lack of faith and amazed at his. He is such a strong Christian guy and a visionary. There's no hesitation with him. If I were to guess, Joe [Schluchter] and Larry were probably the faith visionaries, Dan [Stegmann] and Charles [Waldron] were the practical guys who knew how to get things done, and Jim knew the right voices to listen to at different times.

Their faith was rewarded in surprising ways on more than one occasion.

> Jim Marsh: We had to raise $12.5 million by a specific date in September. Construction had begun in May, and the building was already beginning to take shape. It was within a week before the drop-dead date to continue construction and have $12.5 million in

gifts and pledges by the end of September. With one week to go, we were short $1.6 million. We had picked all the low-hanging fruit, so with one week left, knowing that if we didn't hit the target, we would have to shut down the construction, and who knows what we would do from there?

Larry Collett invited me to go with him to a Cardinals game against the Cubs at Wrigley Field on a Saturday. We got on the plane and were sitting there, and I told Larry, our banker, that we were $1.6 million short and were only a week away, and it didn't look like we were going to make it. We are going to have to close the construction. I am trying to lay it out and bare my soul to our banker about the reality of where we are. In typical Larry Collett fashion, he turns to me and says, "You can't stop construction." I'm thinking, *Yeah.* He says, "You've got a week." That was that. End of conversation.

On Monday morning, we always had a devotion. Steve Stipanovich, who was working in development at the time, and Zach [Clark] and I got together for prayer and put our plan together for the week. Of course, we were talking about the $1.6 million, and Steve opened the Bible to the account in Exodus when Moses led the people to the Red Sea, and at the same time, the Egyptian army was converging on the people of Israel. The people of Israel are up in arms. Why bring us out here to die? Here's Moses with the Red Sea at his back, saying the Lord will provide. Trust in the Lord. Steve focused on the next verse, which basically says that God said to Moses, "Moses, what are you waiting for? Move forward." It was the part of the story that made me think, "What was Moses thinking?" You can't stop construction. Move forward. So we took that as encouragement. On Tuesday, someone came forward with a $1.8 million pledge. I remember we got together and just praised and laughed and shook our heads, and it was shocking. There were so many God things along the way that made all of this available.

The school experienced another series of "God things" as Westminster faced a January payment to the banks that seemed out of reach due to lagging donations and pledges. Jim Marsh and Zach Clark had been attending fundraising coffees at people's homes or other venues for months. Marsh was frustrated when Clark asked him to speak about giving at an alumni volleyball and basketball reunion over Christmas break. In his view,

these twenty-somethings had no money, and asking them to give would be a waste of time and another evening away from home. Reluctantly, he agreed to go.

> Jim Marsh: One mother had sent her three kids to Westminster. She was a single mom who was really committed to Christian schooling and loved having her kids here. During that whole fundraising period, we did two or three fundraising gatherings a week in people's homes or wherever possible. Zach and I were focused on meeting those deadlines and satisfying the loan covenants from Cass and a couple of other banks. During Christmas break, there was an alumni event—basketball and volleyball. Zach came up with the idea of going and making a presentation at the end of that event. I said to him, "That's stupid. These are all young alums. How in the world are they going to give any money?" I was tired of these events, and at this point, my attitude was, "Really, one more?" I was downright aggravated. I dutifully went and made the presentation to a bunch of young twenty-somethings who were there to play volleyball and basketball and had to listen to my speech.
>
> But this mom was in the audience because she had come to watch her kids. At the end, she came up and wanted to talk to us. She said Westminster had been so important to her kids that she had come into some money—her father had passed away—and she would like to pledge $100,000. It was her way of saying thank you to Westminster for providing financial aid that enabled her kids to graduate from Westminster. A gift of $100,000! I felt very small and very humbled that this gracious, single mom gave us such a big, big gift. That meant more to me than a lot of gifts.

Even with that mother's generous gift, Westminster faced the looming year-end deadline with no realistic sense of being able to meet the bank's requirements by the first of the year.

> Todd Fuller: The way our loan was structured was that we would raise X amount, and they would loan us so much. We'd raise a little bit more, and they would give us more. I think the amount might have been $15 or $20 million to get the whole loan—the whole $35 million. We couldn't get that last piece released. We weren't getting the donations; they had kind of trailed off. I remember it was around

Christmas, and Charles [Waldron] and I felt we couldn't do something to dishonor God. We weren't sure we could pay the contractors past December 31, so Brinkmann [the construction firm] took us to lunch at Annie Gunn's, and we just told them they needed to have a plan to wind down the construction because we didn't want them working here if we couldn't pay them. We didn't want to stress them like that. We talked through it, and they came up with a plan.

December 31 came, and we were not there. Whatever day we returned to school, I remember Zach Clark coming in and saying, "We got it." It was a big pledge—a seven-figure pledge. It was the amount we needed. The sale of the campus to Ladue was a miracle, the Centreat gift was a miracle, and getting this money that enabled us to move forward with the project was a miracle.

SEVEN

A CITY ON THE HILL



Town & Country campus construction, 2010

During the *For Such a Time as This* campaign, 436 families pledged a total of $25,591,758.96, which enabled Westminster to move aggressively ahead with the construction of the new campus. Another of the unexpected miracles of the Town & Country story was that, because the economy had not yet fully bounced back from 2008's financial crisis, little construction was going on in the St. Louis region at the time. The Westminster redevelopment was the largest building project in the St. Louis area throughout 2010–2011. Because area contractors had so little work in a slow economy, they offered Westminster their most skilled, experienced workers.

> Todd Fuller: None of the contractors had any other projects happening. We had supervisors working on the project as workers, so we had everybody's A-crew because there was nothing else for them to do.

Ken Toenjes, president of Associated General Contractors in St. Louis: To gain an edge in winning the business, many contractors' project managers got their toolboxes back out and went back out in the field. You had some folks with tremendous experience on the job.

Westminster's project attracted the attention of other educators as well.

Keith Shahan, former head of John Burroughs and then the head of ISACS: The new Westminster is by far the largest recent construction project among the group's 230 member schools. What Westminster Christian has done is extraordinary in these times. I can't think of another school that has risen so quickly.

By the end of the 2010–2011 school year, with work nearing completion at the new campus in Town & Country, many among the faculty and staff were eagerly waiting to move into their new home.

Todd Fuller: By the end, we were bursting at the seams. Most teachers shared a classroom with other teachers, but the big thing was on the operations side: The parking. And we had already expanded the parking lot. When I got to Westminster, it was just in front of the building and wrapped around the back. We expanded that to come all the way full circle around the building. We added spots, but because of growing enrollment, we were stretched thin. There was a church across the street from us, actually a Christian Science church, that we had a good relationship with, and they let us park over there for large events. Eventually, we needed to park there every day. What happened was that each employee got one athletic season where they could park on campus—either the fall, the winter, or the spring season. We had numbered spots, too, so if someone pulled in, you knew they were in your spot, and we could track down and figure out what was happening. The rest of us, the other two-thirds of the year, had to park across the street and cross Ladue Road before and after school.

Dan Burke: Ann Heyse actually broke her arm one winter while walking across the street to her car. The building itself meant that most of us shared classrooms, and at first, that was a little weird for me, because I always had another teacher in the room while I was teaching, and I was not sure how comfortable I was with that. But I actually

got comfortable with it pretty quickly. Oftentimes, I would end up going to the teacher's lounge to work, and it was filled with other "exiles," and that's how I ended up making friends with a lot of people I'm still close with. For all of the inconveniences of that campus, those inconveniences pushed people into shared spaces where they developed relationships with others, including students. There was an informality to the place that was a little bit lost when we first moved here. It was very much, as Lizzie Vogel and I often say, like the small hardware store before it became the big-box hardware store.

Aaron Layton: When I think about the Ladue campus, I remember the low ceilings and how tight everything felt. It was an older building, and when classes changed, there just was not much space to move. By the time I got there, I think the school was pushing close to a thousand students, and that building simply was not designed for that many people. In the middle school hallways, when the bell rang, there was not a lot of movement at all. It was nothing like [the Town & Country] campus, where you can really spread out and move around. It honestly felt more like it had originally been designed as an elementary school.

The lack of classroom space was especially challenging for teachers across the school, in every department.

Dr. Dani Butler: When I first started at Westminster, we really didn't have an ESL classroom. The new expansion had just been completed, but within a year or two, we were already full. There just wasn't any extra space in the building. We ended up turning a small closet in the library, behind Marty Peters's office, into our ESL classroom. It only fit four students at a time. My brother, Han [Kim], joined the Westminster staff a year after I did, and he didn't have an office either. He had converted a closet in the 9th grade hallway into his office. That was the A/V room. Many staff back then were working out of closets.

Han Kim: I remember avoiding going out to the hallways when the bell rang. I'd wait till the passing period was over, and then I'd go out because otherwise you were shoulder to shoulder, literally fighting other people for space. You couldn't even have your hands up. Teachers were having to teach in three or four different classrooms

because there weren't enough rooms around. My office was in a broom closet. It was a storage unit with a couple of desks and all the A/V equipment. I remember having a meeting a few years later with the A/V club, which was exploding. Just like any other part of the building, we had around eighteen kids and no place to meet. We were meeting during lunch, and all the other classrooms were filled. So, we crammed into my office, and I remember the kids were sitting hunched down like we were playing hide-and-seek.

Dan Burke: None of us had office space, and none of us had a quiet place to work during our planning periods as we do now. Your choice was either to stay in a classroom where teaching was happening, and not everyone was comfortable having someone observe them every day, or to go to a teacher's lounge. There was one right there at the T, and I spent time in there one hour with Howard Warren and Ken Boesch, another hour with Warren Smith and Chris Knerr, and a bunch of others.

Aside from the lack of classroom space, the Ladue campus building itself created numerous issues.

Todd Fuller: I remember the air conditioners breaking a lot. It was an old building. It had a boiler, and in the old section of the building, we had radiators on the wall and maybe some window air conditioners. I'm not even sure every room was air-conditioned. I do remember one time, the AC went down, and we didn't know when it was going to be back up. So, I went to Home Depot and bought every box fan they had in stock and went up and down the 9th grade hallway—this long hallway—and we plugged them into the walls to try and push air around. Another time, the power went out, and we were pretty confident the power was going to come back eventually. We had enough windows, and so we decided to press forward with school. But we couldn't even make it to lunch. All the ladies in the business office went down and started an assembly line of making peanut butter sandwiches, while I continued to run back and forth to Jimmy John's. I told them to make as many sandwiches as they could. I'd pick them up, drive back, drop them off, go back to Jimmy John's, grab another box full of sandwiches, just trying to feed the eight hundred kids we had on campus that day.

Han Kim: Alumni will remember the old gymnasium well. It wasn't even air-conditioned, so we would sweat through Chapel. We dreaded spring and fall because it was so hot. We brought in three or four construction-sized fans, and they were incredibly loud. To compensate, we had to turn the sound system up even higher just to overpower the noise of the fans. We would sometimes have students pass out because St. Louis summers are so hot and humid. We kept all the doors open, hoping air-conditioning from the other side of the building would make its way in, but it really didn't. It was an interesting time. Students had to stay hydrated, and teachers were constantly watching to make sure no one was fainting in the middle of Chapel. And that was all on top of the equipment and lighting. It was a lot for the kids to endure.

Chris Pederson, who began working in the special services department at Westminster in 2003, was especially excited about the improved athletic facilities of the new campus.

Chris Pederson: We did not have the football facilities then that we have here now, and part of that was actually appealing to me when I first came on. It felt like the program was just beginning, like it was being launched, and there was a real sense of newness to the experience. We had a field, which was great, but we did not even have bleachers. We just had the hill. The coaches' press box, if you want to call it that, was scaffolding. Over a few years, you just kept thinking, *I hope we can upgrade this someday.* So when you ask what the move [to Town & Country] was like, my overall feeling was excitement.

By July of 2011, work on the new Town & Country campus was nearly complete, though work was still being done to ensure the grounds would be ready for fall athletics.

Jim Marsh: It was in July of 2011. They were doing the final touches to the site, the building, and everything else. One of the last things they did was to sod the fields to the west, the baseball/softball field, where they now play lacrosse and field hockey, and all of that. And so at the time they were doing that, U2 had a concert at Busch Stadium during the All-Star Week. On Sunday, the last home game before All-Star Week, right after the game at Busch Stadium, they removed all the sod to prepare for the concert. I think it was on a Friday night. Our

landscape architect found out that [Busch Stadium] was doing that, and he made an arrangement with the Cardinals and Busch Stadium to have them load up the sod when they took it off on flatbed trailers, drive down Highway 40 to our new campus, and they had a big crew take it off the trailers and sod a big part of the fields to the west. I don't know how many people really know this connection between U2, the St. Louis Cardinals, and Westminster's new campus.

After nine years of fundraising, planning, and, most of all, praying, the Town & Country campus opened its doors for the first day of school on August 22, 2011. To those used to the limitations imposed by the facilities at the Ladue campus, the initial impression of what this new building could mean was thrilling to students and faculty alike.

Anna Kuiper '14 (a sophomore at the time) was quoted in the September 20, 2011, issue of *The Roar*, the school newspaper: *My first thoughts when I saw the new campus were, "Wow, we're blessed and spoiled." I love all the facilities—the basketball courts, the football field, everything! It's so nice.*

John Hancock '12 (a senior at the time) was quoted in the same issue: *My first thought was, "I wish I could spend more than a year here."*

Jim Butz: I was impressed, and I was excited. Not only do we have a great mainstage Theatre with six hundred seats and a beautiful proscenium space, but we also have dressing rooms, a green room, a scene shop, a costume closet, and a black box theater. That's a lot of space devoted to theatre. I was super excited about the potential.

Allen Schwamb: I was blown away. I helped design some of the spaces. They asked me, for example, what I would want in a new choir room, so I was able to speak to that, but you don't really understand what it will mean until you see it. It was so different from what we had before. It was a huge, massive upgrade.

Cory Snyder: The move to the Town & Country campus signaled to the greater St. Louis community that Westminster was serious about sports in how we built our facilities and took time and intentionality to construct fields and venues. I think about the football stadium we have now compared to what we had at the Ladue campus. We can

host playoff games with the clock, the seating, and the press box, and are able to practice on the turf and have girls lacrosse play there in the spring. We have home and visitor locker rooms in the fieldhouse and a place to store football, lacrosse, and soccer equipment. The soccer field probably has the nicest natural grass surface in the St. Louis area in terms of high schools. Those things signaled to families who wouldn't have considered Westminster an option that now we *were* an option.

Jim Sefrit: My first thought was, *How nice it is to have some room.* The whole place was like looking at a new home. This is gorgeous. This is our new reality. We've got it. God's been good to us. Now, what are we going to do with it?

Sherry Blough: Jim [Marsh] said we were going to build a wonderful school on that hill so all of St. Louis will see it, but it's going to be a nice Chevy, not a Cadillac. It turned out to be a Cadillac. We still laugh about it, Jim and I.

Jim Marsh: It was such an amazing God thing—the whole story of how we got to Town & Country, this property, and the whole Centreat story. And the story of building this building in one year in the middle of the economic downturn. It was like a miracle because you couldn't plan any of it. It was so against the flow of where everything was going in the world at the time. And here we were. That first day, it's hard to describe. What a blessing. What a joy to see all those kids walking from the parking lot or from the carpool line to the Grand Entry and going to class. I purposefully had my office, the head of school's office, where it is now, with lots of windows on both sides. You can see the parking lot and the entranceway. I used to love just watching the kids come in the morning. I was just grateful. Just full of gratitude, recognizing that this was God's plan, and to be a part of it and see it unfold was a privilege. It was overwhelming. I still have that feeling to this day. When I drive up on this campus and go through those trees, I still have this same feeling of incredible gratitude and joy at what God did. Just how monumental this project was and how He used His people and blessed us in such an unbelievable way. I felt overwhelmed with that feeling. To this day, when I go to a play or a musical in the Theatre … We had nothing like that at Ladue Road. Just to see a hundred kids involved in a

production. What a phenomenal blessing it is to so many kids. Allen [Schwamb] always has this event where he brings the choirs from Covenant, Central, and Twin Oaks, and they have a workshop in the afternoon and then have a big concert. I was there and had that feeling that there were all those grandkids up on the stage in that beautiful Theatre. I took a photo of it, texted it to Charles [Waldron], and said, "Thanks for all you did. This is such a blessing to see this." That's how I felt, and that feeling persists.

EIGHT

ADAPTING TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT



Classes begin at the new Town & Country campus, 2011

The opening of the new Town & Country campus marked a major advancement in Westminster Christian Academy's facilities, including the addition of expanded athletic fields, improved parking, and enhanced academic spaces. Teachers, in particular, no longer had to utilize closet space for offices or classrooms.

> Chris Knerr: The best comparison I can think of between the old campus and the new campus is this: The old campus was like a 1998 minivan with crumbs everywhere, chipped paint, and a few dents, while the new campus is like a brand-new Honda Odyssey. What was great about the old campus was exactly that. It had crumbs in it, if you

know what I mean. There was not a highly organized or standardized approach to everything. Relationships were looser and more informal in a good way. The biggest challenge at the old campus was really just the facilities. I had a window air conditioner that ran from August to mid-November because the rooms were so hot.

The new campus also included state-of-the-art theatre spaces, which were a significant change for Westminster's fine arts program.

Han Kim: We had a gymnasium that we all called the old gym. It was a multipurpose space, kind of like the Arena here, but even more than that. We met there for Chapel, hosted plays and musicals, and held concerts. One side of the gym functioned as an auditorium with a stage, but there were very limited lights and no sound system. We had to bring everything in—speakers, tripods, all of it. It was a completely portable system that we had to set up and tear down every time.

The first production on the new Theatre's main stage was *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Westminster's newly hired theatre director, Jim Butz.

Jim Butz: I was hired, having had no prior experience teaching high school, or really teaching at all. I chose *Romeo and Juliet* before I had even met any of the students, not knowing if it would be a good fit for who we had, and I chose it purely because of my own familiarity with the play. I had read it many times and had played Romeo twice, once in high school and once in a professional production. I thought, *I'll start there*. It's a basic, well-known story. In reality, it's an incredibly difficult play to take on. We didn't have any kind of production team infrastructure. I was utterly panicked. It was basically, "Here, you're doing this in the main theater. Here are the dates. Make it happen." I didn't know how to schedule auditions. I didn't know how to recruit students. I literally made flyers, stood in the Grand Entry, and begged kids to audition. Thankfully, through the classes I was teaching and the relationships I had started to build, a good number of students showed up, and we got the show cast.

With casting done for the first production at the new campus, the focus then turned to figuring out everything else to produce a show people would pay to see.

Jim Butz: I realized there was no one to do costumes. No one to gather props. No one to build a set. I was in a constant state of panic. I went to every local professional theater I could find to borrow or rent costumes. I didn't know how to fit people. I don't know how to sew. I gathered piles of costumes that might work, brought them all in, and had students try things on. If it was close enough, it was good enough. Clothes were strewn everywhere. Also, I didn't have a set, so I went to a painting company and rented scaffolding, the kind used to paint high walls. I rented a truck, picked it up myself, brought it here, and assembled it without really knowing what I was doing. It was not safe, and it definitely wasn't meant to be used as a set. Then I realized it was all bright silver, so I covered the entire thing by hand with black electrical tape, which I also had to remove after the show.

Despite the complications, *Romeo and Juliet* successfully opened on Friday, November 18, 2011.

Jim Butz: God really provided along the way. A very kind guy, John, was a painter for the Muny and somehow connected to Westminster. He built us four Gothic pillars to serve as the set. Another parent, Mary Yousef, stepped in when she saw I was drowning and helped gather things like boots for the boys, which are surprisingly hard to find. We didn't have microphones, so the show was done entirely without mics. It's the only main stage production I've done in fifteen years without microphones. I also didn't realize I needed to make a program until the very last minute. I suddenly thought, *Oh my gosh, I have to create a program for this.* There were so many details I didn't know. I did hire a fight choreographer, Mike Monzy, a local professional I knew, to help with the sword fighting. The production turned out pretty well, I think. It was all scissors, tape, and sheer determination.

As with any major transition, the move to Town & Country brought a period of adjustment, not just for the fine arts program, but for the community as a whole. One of the most significant changes was the addition of a standardized dress code for all students.

Tim Hall: Adopting the standardized dress was a big transition. I think Mr. Marsh wisely recognized that this was an opportunity where it wasn't going to be a surprise to students and families that there were

going to be some changes because so much changed all at once—location, climate, culture, all those things. And the change in dress code came out of long discussions amongst a lot of people. We had struggled so much with the dress code that existed before.

An email sent to parents that first school year gave a brief overview of the reasoning for the change:

> *At the beginning of the 2011–12 school year, Westminster Christian Academy established a Standardized Dress Program that is simple, affordable, distinctive, sustainable and cross-culturally appealing, available online through Lands' End. We believe the Lands' End School program that has been established for the Westminster community effectively enhances the teaching/learning environment.*

While there were clear reasons for Westminster's adoption of a standardized dress code, it was only one of several changes associated with the transition from the Ladue campus to Town & Country that led many, particularly among the faculty, to sense a broader cultural shift within the school.

> Dan Burke: At first, I remember thinking, *what problem are we actually trying to solve [with the new standardized dress]?* The girls were able to wear skirts without leggings, but they did not really know how to wear skirts, so in some ways it was worse than it had been at the other campus. I think the new dress code was another thing that made the place feel like it was losing some of its heritage, its cultural identity as a school. It started to feel much more like a typical private school.

> Micah Gall: My first year of teaching here was the first year of the dress code, and there were definitely student complaints. I had both seniors and freshmen, and they grumbled about it throughout the year. But after a couple of years, I would ask seniors what they actually preferred, and many of them said they liked the dress code because it made life simpler. They did not have to wake up and decide what they were going to wear. Still, it was part of that broader feeling that we were projecting an image that might have been different from who we had been before.

Mike Decker did not attend Westminster as a student but spent much of his childhood with Westminster families and has fond memories of the school before joining the faculty in 2013.

> Mike Decker: Growing up, I actually spent a lot of time around this community and got to see it from a distance, and I really loved the old campus and the sense of community there. Coming into this campus, my initial reaction was just awe at the beauty of the place. It felt like, "Wow, this is like a college campus." But coming in as someone new, I definitely heard from people who felt this was a very different experience. And so there was definitely a cultural shift, whatever you want to call it, where it felt like we went from a smaller, mom-and-pop type of school to something much more cutting-edge.

One of the major contributing factors to this shift was the sheer size of the building.

> Dr. Dani Butler: One of the strengths of our community has always been that it feels like a family. At our Ladue campus, the strong sense of community was a big part of our identity. When we moved [to Town & Country], it felt like we lost some of that. Suddenly, everyone was spread out, and the easy, everyday interactions of someone just stopping by to talk started to disappear in such a large space. At times, it felt isolating. It took a conscious and significant effort to step out and talk to one another.

> Todd Fuller: We moved into the new place, and it is so big, and it feels great. But we quickly realized that we had lost something. At the old campus, we were always bumping into each other. That seemed like a hassle at the time, but that also created a sense of community. We get here, and you could go a week without seeing people that you would run into every day [at the old campus] just because they're in a different part of the building. We kind of had to survive at the old campus. We moved away from that because we could, and also because with this new building, there were lots of new opportunities. There was certainly growth in the fine arts programs, and the robotics program started up pretty quickly. There were a lot of things happening. Everyone had space for clubs, too. They had ideas, and they wanted to run with them. But what we found was that people were

stretched pretty thin. There was a term I remember starting to hear, maybe in our second year, when some teachers referred to this campus as WestMonster because it felt like it was sucking up all their time all day. Not in a bad way, but it was still sucking the life out of you.

Dan Burke: That first year felt like a big sorting period, like everyone was trying to figure out, "OK, where are my people?" We gained the convenience of having our own office spaces, but what we gained in convenience, we initially lost in the warmth of relationships. We still had teachers' lounges, but they just were not filled with people. People tend to take the path of least resistance, so many stayed in their own spaces. There was a real sense of loss at first.

Aaron Layton: One of the biggest things people mourned when we moved was how close everyone was. The tightness of the space meant people were closer relationally. Faculty offices were right next to each other. Middle school teachers were all together, mostly in one hallway, with a small turn where the science rooms were. Even the maintenance staff had their office right in the middle school hallway. That closeness created a real sense of togetherness. It had a very distinct feel. Moving to this campus was hard for a lot of people because there was a real sense of loss. I often think of it like moving from a neighborhood of connected brownstones into a suburb with big lawns and lots of space between houses. There was a social cost to that. Now, I can go weeks without seeing some upper school colleagues, whereas on the old campus, that just did not happen. You saw people regularly. It was a very different dynamic.

With the significantly larger space, there also came the added challenge of figuring out the interior design of the new building.

Peggy Johnson: The routine at the new campus was different, and there were people who were scared. The most scared, I think, were the teachers. It changed all the routines. Carpool, lunch, and how kids passed in the hall. We moved to a uniform. So much change all at one time. I was also part of the committee that was doing the internal design. We had seven years between the time we broke ground and when we moved in. At the Ladue campus—some of the parts of the building, because it was old—we never said there were any restrictions. There was one teacher, Susie Pike, who had all

the McDonald's toys on the walls and shelves. There had to be five thousand toys. The kids loved it. But one of the things the committee had said was we weren't going to do that [at the new campus]. Part of the reasoning was that you had to be able to transition. Think of it like a college campus where teachers don't own their own space. The idea was to make it all similar so we could exchange spaces if needed. I was put in charge of becoming the "police officer" of classroom decor.

Todd Fuller: To use the house analogy, coming to this campus in 2011, it was like we moved into a new, big house that is a lot bigger than our old one. We had to try to figure out what furniture we were going to move here. Each teacher labeled the things they wanted in their rooms, and I remember Jim Marsh going through and taking stickers off things, saying, "That's not going ... we're throwing that away ... that's not new house worthy." And obviously, we bought a lot of new furniture too. But you come in here, and everything is new and clean and nice, and it's a little bit also like having a new car. Nobody eats in the new car. Jim Marsh put out a little booklet on decorating guidelines for your classroom. Basically, teachers were not allowed to put a nail in the wall. They couldn't do anything because he didn't want anything to mess up the "new car."

Dan Burke: When we actually moved here and settled into our rooms, there were a lot of strict parameters about how we were supposed to decorate them and what was allowed. From the very beginning, it was clear that the culture was shifting into what felt like a more corporate place.

Looking back, Jim Marsh regards the interior decoration directive as one of the poorest decisions of his career, but also as an important lesson to learn from. To this day, when speaking with other heads of school, Marsh impresses upon them the importance of faculty culture.

Jim Marsh: I made a lot of decisions in my career, but [the booklet] was one of the worst. Everything was brand new, the entire 320,000-square-foot building, and I just wanted to keep it pristine and make sure we were going to really take good care of it. I was afraid of teachers going in and starting to hammer things into the wall and putting up their own pictures. We had purchased pretty much all new furniture throughout the whole campus as well. I met with Bill

Hughes, who was a Westminster parent and a board member at the time, and his design company, and I told him that we were looking to try to get some uniformity in giving a tool to teachers that would help them understand what we really wanted them to do—what our expectations would be for how they decorate their classrooms. So it was a little booklet. And the teachers hated it. Looking back, I was over the top with that one. I misread how important the faculty culture was. Faculty culture is really important, I truly believe that, and I violated it in this case. The teacher's classroom is their domain, their home. [Middle school English and Bible teacher] Ken Wolfe is a classic example. His classroom is like a museum. My grandkids have had him, and they loved going into that room. It's a manifestation of who he is and how he teaches, and that's really important. I wanted to institutionalize [the campus], and that really violated what would be important to the faculty culture. To this day, when other heads of schools ask me to give a presentation, they ask, "What did you learn?" I learned that there is a disruption in terms of the community that the teachers, especially, miss.

While there were numerous growing pains with regard to the move to the Town & Country campus, the blessings of the new space were very clear.

Chris Knerr: The biggest challenge of moving to the new campus was that suddenly, we were bigger. We had two lunch periods. We had this brand-new Honda Odyssey that required more attention. At the same time, it is a beautiful facility, and it is easy to take it for granted. You walk into a public school with cinder block walls and then walk in here and realize how good we have it. Over time, we figured things out. We went back to one lunch. We found ways to become close again as a faculty. We still love the old campus, those of us who remember it, but once we settled in, it became clear that we have it really good here.

Todd Fuller: We had plenty of space. We had more meeting rooms than we knew what to do with. Obviously, we had several classrooms that we just used for storage because we didn't need them yet. It was just big. It was nice and new. The Theatre was amazing. We never had anything like that. There was an overwhelming sense of, "Wow. We've arrived. Look at this great place."

Micah Gall: It was amazing for me. From the moment I stepped on campus, I thought, *I want to spend my career here*. That was because of the mission and vision, but also because of the people. I remember that first day vividly, feeling nervous but also excited. I remember getting to 3 p.m., having made it through all five classes, and feeling incredibly excited that I had done it. Then the realization hit me: I had to do this 170 more times that year. I remember thinking, *What does that mean? What does that look like?* But I was surrounded by tremendous support, and I made it through. I figured out the routine and the rhythm, and it was a very exciting time.

I heard a lot of talk about how things were not quite what they used to be, but it was not overwhelmingly negative. It was more a sense of lament and nostalgia that things had changed a little, which I think is the case in any transition. It became a topic of conversation for several years, but underneath that, there was still, by and large, among the faculty, a sense of gratitude for the situation we had come to be in.

Dr. Dani Butler: By the third year here, we really began to understand why God brought us to this place. We finally had the ability to house our own theatre productions multiple times a year, using both our Black Box and the main Theatre. We were able to host postseason games here, on our campus, and our students truly enjoyed using our athletic facilities. At the same time, our robotics program took off right after we moved here. I saw many local organizations using our space throughout the year. That turned out to be a great community-building opportunity in the area. Our name began showing up in new ways to reach people beyond our usual circles.

The theatre program has seen tremendous growth since the first year on the new campus, putting on several productions each year.

Jim Butz: [In 2012,] I was hired full-time. I learned from my mistakes, prepared more intentionally, and directed two plays that year: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the main stage and *Twelve Angry Men* in the Black Box. Again, another parent stepped forward. Paul Avery offered to help build sets, and he did. Those early years were very entrepreneurial. There was a long leash, but you had to make everything happen yourself. The biggest change over the last fifteen

years has been infrastructure. We've added systems. We've added people. We have more hands on deck than ever before, especially over the last five years.

Evidence of the quality of the arts program at Westminster can be seen in the number of times the school's musical productions have been recipients of St. Louis High School Musical Theater Awards. Since 2017, the first year that these awards were presented, WCA's musical productions have been named Outstanding Musical four times, for *Fiddler on the Roof* (2017), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (2019), *Godspell* (2020), and *Cinderella* (2022). In addition, the productions *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *The Music Man* (2024) won for Outstanding Ensemble, *The Wiz* won for Best Direction (2018), and Westminster students won for Outstanding Actor (Michael Lee for *Godspell*), Outstanding Actress (Ava Berutti for *Cinderella*), and Outstanding Supporting Actress (Natalie Brown for *Fiddler on the Roof*). In total, Westminster's theatre program has received fifty-eight St. Louis High School Musical Theater Awards nominations with fifteen total wins.

An added blessing of the Town & Country campus is its central location in the Greater St. Louis area. Located off Highway 40, Westminster began to make a bigger name for itself in the community.

Peggy Johnson: Working through difficult situations, I saw God at work throughout WCA. The whole idea of moving from Ladue to Town & Country, the timing of that, how God's hand was on that. When we broke ground, no one was building in St. Louis. In some ways, I felt like we were Noah building the ark, waiting for this big rush of people coming to our school. Everyone was looking at us, saying things were moving the other direction. But God was telling us to build, that He would send people our way. And they did come. We became a school that people recognized because of our location. When I was meeting families, people asked if we were just starting, and I told them, "No. We started in 1976." Repositioning Westminster, drawing in from different suburbs, really helped.

Dr. Dani Butler: Because the location is so central, we started to get a lot of parents from the west, like Wentzville, St. Charles, and St. Peter's, all the way to South County and North County. The enrollment just blew up right after we moved in. In Student Life, we now host the St. Louis Special Olympics twice a year, which we

could have never been able to do at the Ladue campus. The Special School District is able to use our campus for free, and our students volunteer for an entire day. It's truly a blessing. Also, Joy FM hosts their summer concert in our Theatre. There is always something happening, even on weekends. The campus brings so much life and energy to our community.

While enrollment had grown tremendously at the Ladue campus, it only continued to grow thanks to the new campus.

Peggy Johnson: When we got here [to the new campus], we had been at 880. Now, we were close to a thousand. That was crazy, crazy busy. Unbelievably busy.

At the end of the 2012–2013 school year, Jim Marsh announced that he would be stepping down from his role as head of school and would be retiring.

Jim Marsh: It wasn't really my intention to retire. My wife had health issues that were a factor. I was also doing other things, such as directing the Van Lunen Center, which is an executive management training program for heads of Christian schools. So I had some issues outside of school. I felt at the time, with all of that and after completing the big project [of moving to Town & Country], that it was a good time to step away. I really felt that God led me to do that, and I never regretted that. It wasn't that I was in a hurry. I wasn't. I loved being the head of school and being in this new campus. It was great, but it was time.

Tim Hall: Mr. Marsh had told us, the leadership team, that he was thinking about retiring. His wife was not doing well, so none of us were surprised. And we were grateful that he was prioritizing a really important time caring for her.

Todd Fuller: Jim Marsh's retirement wasn't a surprise. He had been the head of school for over twenty years. This was kind of his last big thing he wanted to accomplish. He got us into the building, got things settled, and got the school up and running. So this wasn't a surprise, but that's a big transition for a school that hadn't had a new

leader in as long as anyone could remember. I mean, a generation of students had come through, and all they'd known was Jim Marsh as the head of school.

Chris Pederson: I felt grateful and thankful that we had been brought to a new place. I understood that this move represented one of the major efforts of [Jim Marsh's] career. At the same time, I felt sad that he was stepping back, but I also understood why. It had been a huge undertaking. From my own experience in 2003–2004, especially that first year, it felt like we were still trying to establish ourselves as a school and figure out our identity. Being here, that identity felt clearer. So I understood the timing, and I was thankful.

Dr. Dani Butler: It was a bit of a shock when Jim announced that he was retiring. Knowing him, though, I realized this was a decision he had likely considered carefully for a long time. But, honestly, we were concerned. Our beloved leader was stepping away, and there was a sense of loss and uncertainty. Who could possibly follow in his footsteps? Who could lead with the same heart, vision, and integrity that Jim embodied every single day?

In 2013, the board began the search for the next head of school and hired a firm to find and present the most qualified candidates for the search committee.

Chris Knerr: I think anytime you replace someone like Jim Marsh, you are in a really tough spot. He was so beloved, and people were deeply accustomed to his leadership style. Moving on from that, there was almost an immediate sense of, "I don't want this guy here anyway," simply because Jim meant so much to so many people.

Aaron Layton: One of the only nights I remember not sleeping at all was the night Jim Marsh announced that he was retiring. That never happens to me, which is why it stood out so clearly. When I found out he was retiring, my heart sank. My stomach sank. I was not happy. I remember that feeling vividly, whether it was the first time he announced it or when I first heard it. I could not stop thinking about it, and I did not sleep at all that night. I even told my wife, as this does not happen to me. I think, in hindsight, part of it was discernment. I do not want to sound overly spiritual, but I think my spirit sensed that the next season was going to be very different. Finding someone

who did not have to be Jim Marsh, but who understood what Jim understood about where the Lord was taking Westminster, was going to be incredibly rare. I was not optimistic. I knew that was a lot to ask of any one person.

Todd Fuller: The school hired a search firm, and I remember at the time—I think it was Scott Holley who joked—it doesn't really matter who we hire next, because, how do you follow Jim Marsh? It's kind of like, how do you follow Dean Smith at North Carolina? There just needs to be a guy. A guy comes in, fills the seat, and then the community will adjust. But that was a really hard spot to be in. We might have joked that way, but we hoped that the next head would be here for a long time.

Despite the circumstances and uncertainty surrounding the next head of school, the search committee narrowed down the candidates and identified Dr. Tom Stoner as the best fit for Westminster. Dr. Stoner officially took over as head of school on July 8, 2013, ahead of Westminster's third year at the Town & Country campus.

Aaron Layton: When Tom came in, one thing that stood out to me was that he was ambitious. I think he genuinely wanted to do a good job and was excited about the opportunity.

Dr. Dani Butler: Tom came in full of ambition, ready to take Westminster to the next chapter. But I think he was moving a little too fast, and the community was just not ready. We were still processing Jim's leaving, and we weren't ready to let go of what we had built with Jim. Even though Jim was our head of school, it never felt like it was his vision or his school alone. It was our school. Westminster has always been our community, our shared vision and passion. I don't think Tom fully realized just how much emotional ownership we all had, how deeply invested we were.

Peggy Johnson: To be honest, whoever came in after Jim [Marsh] was going to have a hard time. No matter who it is, those are just very tough shoes to fill. The school was already so established, and Tom wanted to make his mark with some big changes that were hard for many to take.

One of the biggest challenges for Dr. Stoner was stepping into leading a school as big as Westminster.

> Tim Hall: I think anybody who came in [after Jim Marsh] was going to face the challenge of, "Well, this isn't the same guy." And it's not necessarily a bad thing. But there are some learning curves to follow for whoever it is to come in and lead, to get to know the community and the culture, and be wise about knowing what to keep and what to change. It was a big transition for us, and it was a big transition for him too, because he hadn't been at a school this size before. I think it was tough for both ends.

> Todd Fuller: Tom came to the school—he was from the Midwest—but he came from a school out East. It was a much smaller school. So he came to Westminster, and it was just very different. Everything is bigger here. There are more students, more complicating factors, and that's how things started with the new head of school. I think Tom is a great guy, but when you're following a longtime leader, the community is going to be a little suspicious. Who is this guy? What are these new ideas? We're used to doing things Jim's way. And then, to complicate matters, it was a new board and a new building. Tom probably came in with a mandate from the board to change things. They wanted to make their mark on the history of the school. I remember he came in, and he had ideas he wanted to make administrative changes. One person who left pretty early on was [middle school principal] Steve Hall. He had been a longtime part of the community, but it was just that Tom had a different vision of how things would be. Tom came from a smaller school where he had some relational capital, and that school was more nimble. Here, he comes into a larger school where he doesn't have that relational capital, and we're also pretty set in our ways. I've always used the analogy that it's like trying to turn a battleship the way you would turn a speedboat.

> Dr. Dani Butler: Jim Marsh's leadership team left for various reasons—Scott Holley and Jim Sefrit had retired, Steve Hall left, and others stayed on in different positions—so Tom hired an all-new senior leadership team. For many of us, all those leaders we had worked with for so long were gone, and we didn't know what was going to happen next.

Dan Burke: Tom Stoner came in, and he listened to people and gathered a lot of information, especially about who were seen as strong players in the school and who were considered weaker links. He ended up starting to chip away and making calls that I felt the previous administration may have wanted to make, but hadn't. The problem was that he did it so rashly and so quickly that it caused a lot of distrust and fear to build around him.

Chris Knerr: I think it took a while for Tom's leadership style to fully take effect, but by around the second year, it felt like a very different school. People were leaving, or being moved on, and I think some of the administrators at the time were not very experienced, and that showed. As that continued, a lot of faculty felt unsettled. There were so many changes happening, and they were happening very quickly.

Changes were quickly made throughout the school to facilitate the administration's key initiatives to take Westminster to what they perceived to be the next level in terms of academic success. One of these primary initiatives was to make Westminster a more academically excellent school to compete with other college preparatory programs in St. Louis.

Dr. Dani Butler: Tom really pushed for academic excellence. He spoke a lot about pushing toward becoming elite and collegiate. That was his vision. It wasn't necessarily wrong, but I think he had a different vision than who we were. He wanted to make faster changes and started with a top-down approach. Because Jim's [Marsh] practice was always grassroots, bottom-up, it was difficult for our staff to adjust to a completely different leadership style.

Tim Hall: I remember there being conversations about pushing Westminster to the next level of becoming more elite, more collegiate. [Dr. Stoner] had a certain drive, and I think it ruffled feathers across the board because we had been so intentional about creating a part of our school that was for kids who had real challenges. In keeping with the vision or the mission statement, we're here to enroll families, not students. And that means we need to be able, with God helping us, to meet the needs of a wide range of academic abilities. I think one of the biggest concerns I heard expressed in those three years was the growing gap in communication between the head of school and the teachers. Part of

it is personality. Jim Marsh had relationships with every teacher in the building. That was another example of what was so tough.

Chris Knerr: When you start thinking about becoming a prep school, there are certain expectations from parents. There is pressure around where their kids are going to get into college, and that puts pressure on teachers to award grades that may not always be fully earned. That dynamic becomes part of the system. You start comparing yourself to places like John Burroughs or MICDS, and suddenly, school starts to look a certain way. That variable becomes a higher priority than it probably should be. It changes the culture.

Dan Burke: I think one thing that threatened a lot of the old guard was that they [the people in charge] were not just tweaking who we were; they were changing who we were. One of the biggest visuals of that was the decision to have us all wear robes to graduation. People felt strongly that this was not who we were. We are not a classical school. We have always been a school that aims for excellence but is down-to-earth in its culture. Traditionally, men wore shirts, ties, and jackets to graduation, and that felt like it fit who we were.

While there was a growing disconnect between the faculty and the administration, Dr. Stoner made a significant effort to grow the fine arts program at Westminster.

Jim Butz: The thing I appreciated about Dr. Stoner is that there's often a cliché in our culture, and maybe in schools in general, that sports are highly revered and the arts are seen as nice but kind of an unnecessary appendage. It's good to have them, but you could take them or leave them, while sports are where it's at. And there's some truth to that, and that's fine. The popularity of sports is well known, and theater can be a hard sell. Dr. Stoner, though, was the first administrator I worked with who was really an arts-first person. I think his natural interests and predilection leaned toward the arts. I think he was in a choir. I think he went to the theater. I think he appreciated orchestral music. He had a genuine, organic love for the arts and real enthusiasm for them. Selfishly, that meant he shone a lot of light and encouragement on the arts program. But more than that, it wasn't just talk. It was a sincere passion to see the program grow and flourish. Any arts educator is going to appreciate that, of course.

> When an administrator is genuinely pro-arts, and you're working in that department, that's going to be nice. I felt he was very genuine with me and a real encourager.

Under Dr. Stoner's leadership, Student Life also saw worthwhile changes and growth.

> Todd Fuller: One of the things, specifically, that Tom did that I thought was a really good thing had to do with the Christmas banquet. I think it came from the fact that Tom had kids in the school, so he saw the school in a different way than maybe the rest of us did at the end. Back in the day, the seating and table assignments at the Christmas banquet were a really big deal, and there was a lot of drama around who was going to be at your table because the tables only had eight or ten seats. There was a lot of angst. I think Tom watched his daughter go through that and said, "This is ridiculous. We're doing away with assigned seats, and it's just going to be open." And I thought that was a real positive change.
>
> Something else Tom did that I think was good was really championing the Blue Crew. We had had the Blue Crew previously, but he really became its champion. I remember one year, he bought the entire student body T-shirts to try to generate school spirit. He was very big on school spirit. He made a point of trying to go to every athletic team's practice. He really was trying to become involved in the student body, which I think is a great thing. He just didn't have the connection with the teachers in the same way. That was tough.

To improve that connection with teachers, the administration looked to establish grade-level principals to serve as intermediaries between the head of school and his leadership team and the faculty.

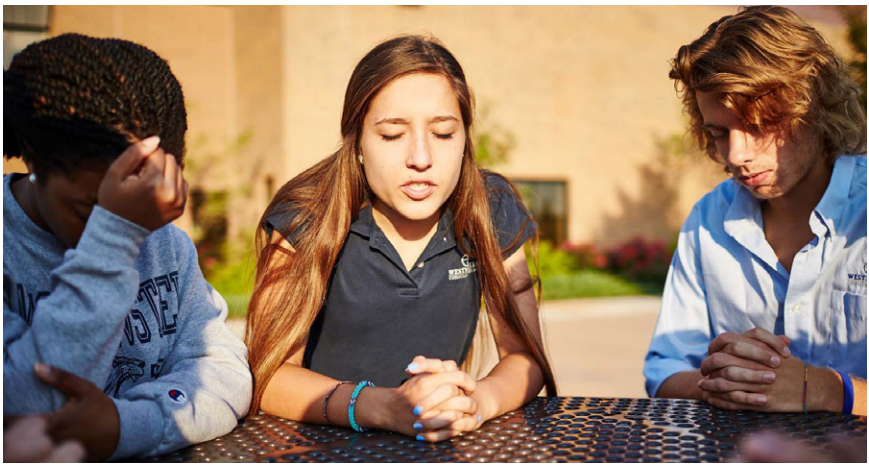
> Todd Fuller: The administration recognized that there was a disconnect between the senior leadership team and the rest of the school. One thing that came to my mind was, back when I would sit in the administrative team meetings under Jim Marsh, I would look around, and there was Jim, Jim Sefrit, Tim Hall, and Steve Hall, and I was the least experienced in the room. And I've been at the school for a decade, and I had this realization during an administrative meeting with Tom, and I looked around at the people at the table,

and I had as many years at Westminster as the rest of the group had combined. I remember feeling that it probably wasn't a good thing. There was not a lot of institutional knowledge sitting in the room, and if it's all relying on me, that's challenging.

Tim Hall: The establishment of principals was an outgrowth of an accreditation process that we went through during Dr. Stoner's years here. It was time for the ISACS (Independent Schools Association of the Central States) accreditation team to visit, and we had to do a lot of self-study, and the idea of establishing principals came out of that study. ISACS grabbed it and said, "Yeah, this looks like a really good idea." Heather (Marsee) Roth was the middle school principal. She was one of us. Mallory Rohlfing, 9th and 10th grade principal, was one of us. Chris Pederson, 11th and 12th grade principal, was one of us. There was a dramatically improved sense amongst the teachers that, "Hey, there is an administrator who really is listening to me, who is communicating to me." Heather, Mallory, and Chris were from among the faculty, and I think there was a much more encouraging sense that we had representatives to represent us, to communicate to the administration, but we also have one of us who can communicate to us, whom we trust and work with. I think that's only been strengthened since then.

NINE

A STEADFAST FOCUS ON CHRIST



Westminster students pray together on the Plaza

By the end of the 2015–2016 school year, Dr. Stoner had stepped down as head of school, but the announcement of grade-level principals was widely met with positive feedback.

> Dan Burke: I think there was a general feeling that this was a good move, but initially, people were skeptical. There were questions like, why do I need another principal, and why do we need more administrators in the building? At the same time, Chris Pederson built a lot of culture in the upper school, and Mallory Rohlfing had a lot of clout with many of the sophomore and freshman teachers. Heather Roth did a great job building a strong middle school culture. In the

end, I think the model worked. The structure provided accountability in places where it had been lacking.

Micah Gall: The principal positions were a great move. It just came a little too late. The principals were hired while [Tom] was still here, but the structure was actually implemented the year he left, when they formally stepped into their roles. Those positions were created during a time of turmoil. They were intended to support faculty and staff morale, and I think they pretty quickly did that. Faculty and staff felt like they finally had someone at the administrative level who was listening. Even the physical proximity mattered. The way this building is laid out, administrators are not naturally close to where teachers spend most of their time. Creating those principal roles helped bridge that gap, and I think that, in itself, was a meaningful and helpful change.

Chris Knerr: I really like the grade-level principals because now there is someone you can go to directly. For a long time, Jim Sefrit, Tim Hall, and Scott Holley were essentially running the school, and that is a lot for three people. Honestly, I do not know how they did it. Now there are layers.

For Chris Pederson, the path to becoming the 11th and 12th grade principal actually began a few years prior.

Chris Pederson: It was around '13 or '14 when Jim Marsh brought together a small cohort of people in the building who had been identified as potential leaders. I received a letter saying, "You have been identified as someone who could be a leader in the building. Would you be willing to meet with Jim Marsh for a few weeks to learn more about this?" Looking back, I think part of that was an effort to rebuild or strengthen relational connections, especially at the administrative level. As that took shape, it felt like a strategy to bring some of that administrative connection down to the teacher level. I started praying about where the Lord might be leading me if some kind of administrative role were to open up.

Then the grade-level principal position opened up, and I was offered the role. Around the same time, Cory [Snyder] took a job at Francis Howell, which meant there was also a need for a head football

coach. So there was this moment where those two conversations collided. For one season, I tried to do both. It was actually an exciting time. I was working closely with Mallory Rohlfing, Deana Vandegriff, and Heather Roth, and while I had known them before, these were new and energizing conversations about teaching and learning at Westminster. I was excited. I knew there was a lot of distrust in the community, but there was also a deep optimism rooted in the belief that, at its heart, this is a good community with good intentions.

Following Dr. Stoner's tenure as head of school, the board determined that Westminster's greatest need was stability. To provide that continuity, the decision was made not to appoint a permanent head of school immediately, but instead to rely on interim leadership while seeking God's guidance for the right long-term fit. During this season, the board invited Scott Holley, Todd Fuller, and Tim Hall to jointly serve as interim heads of school.

Tim Hall: I got a call from a board member who described the scenario that was developing. They knew that Dr. Stoner was resigning. Being the head of school here at Westminster is daunting. The board member who spoke to me quickly said, "We envision assembling a team. Would you be willing to serve potentially with these two others?" I said that would be something I would certainly consider. I don't remember how the pieces fell into place, but I remember a strong sense that these were guys I respected enormously. The board chose very carefully based on experience, skill level, expertise, and interest. At first, we didn't know what our roles were. The board didn't say, "You do this, you do this, you do that." They basically said, "This is our team, and between the three of you, you can do it all." I have a vivid memory of going across the road to the building across the way. We were offered space to meet there, and the three of us sat down and looked at each other and started asking, How are we going to do this? Who is going to do what? And we started considering the various areas of responsibility and worked through who would be best suited to do the various parts.

Todd Fuller: Tom left, and the board was trying to figure out, "How do we do what we do regarding interim leadership?" I remember Mike Ottsen, who was the board president at the time, took me to lunch. He just wanted my perspective. I said, "Tim Hall. Tim Hall is

your guy. He's been here a long time. He has just a calming presence. A kind of pastoral presence." And I walked away from that lunch thinking that was the deal. I was really pleased if that would be the route the board would go. I don't remember how they approached us a few days later, whether it was individually or in a room at one time, but the idea surfaced that maybe there should be three of us—Tim, Scott Holley, and I. Tim is great, but he didn't understand anything about the business side of the school. He'd been a longtime teacher, but he was really involved in Student Life. He was the dean of students at the time, and that was the lane he lived in most of the time. So when the board presented this, I think we all thought that, yeah, this could work. We all knew each other. We'd worked together for over a decade, and we liked each other. It was great. I remember right away the three of us actually met off-site because it hadn't been announced yet. We sat down and came up with a game plan. We had a pretty easy job because the main thing the board told us was to try to get the ball back. To improve the morale amongst the faculty. That was basically it. We weren't going to be making big changes. We weren't challenged to do anything. We just had to hold the ship for a little bit. We had to manage things through this transition. We met, and we got along really well.

Having these three men serve as interim heads of school brought much-needed stability, comfort, and relief for the faculty and staff.

Chris Knerr: I think about that interim year a lot. I remember the lunch we had at the end of the school year. It took three hours because so many people were leaving and saying goodbye to close friends. I remember leaving that lunch just sobbing. When we got the announcement, and I saw Scott Holley step in and say, "I'm going to help," that was huge. Scott has such a deep love for this place, and he is incredibly competent. At that point, we knew the three decision-makers had so much history with the faculty, and there was a deep level of trust. We knew things were going to be OK. Still, everyone was exhausted. Disillusioned is not quite the right word, but we were wiped out. Completely wiped out. Having those guys come back gave us confidence that we were on the right track.

Han Kim: We were comforted by having familiar faces in leadership, and that helped a lot. There were so many people who had been hurt

by the whole process, and we really needed to move into a season of healing. Those leaders were the right people for that moment. At the same time, we knew it was temporary, so there was still a sense of uncertainty. We were not sure how the board was going to handle everything. The school board labored over that season, and a lot of credit is due to them for the prayer, care, and diligence they put into trying to heal the community and the leadership, and to help teachers buy into what they were trying to do. It was a hard time for all of us, but we also knew it was temporary and that things were going to get better.

Micah Gall: Between the three of them, none had prior experience as a head of school, but when you combined their skill sets and their individual giftings, it worked pretty well, in my opinion. So I think it was a combination of that confidence in who they were and, honestly, the fact that people were just ready. After a season of trouble and turmoil, the community was ready to embrace peacetime, for lack of a better word.

Aaron Layton: What needed to happen, especially for the faculty, and I think for parents as well, was comfort. We needed stability. Having the three-headed leadership model was a brilliant thing because it is a huge job to step into all at once. But that stability could only come from people who were respected, who had been part of the community for a long time, who loved Westminster, and who had deep roots here. We trusted them, and we trusted their motives. We knew they wanted what was best for the school. Having Todd Fuller, Scott Holley, and Tim Hall step into that role was incredibly refreshing. We prayed a lot for them, knowing how big the task was, and we were deeply grateful for their willingness to step in. We were ready to work with them because they were part of us.

Peggy Johnson: The three heads of school were talented men in their own right, but they weren't heads of school. They did a good job, but they were all looking at their own particular areas. It was very difficult. It was difficult for admissions as well. How do you go and promote a school when you don't have a head, and you don't have a real strong vision? We were caught in this turmoil, but they did the best they could do.

Dan Burke: When those three guys came back, Todd [Fuller] was already here, but when Scott [Holley] came back, I felt this overwhelming sense of relief, like, OK, the adults are back. The kids can play again. That is really how it felt. At that time, I was teaching freshmen and had three babies. My house was full of tiny children. I was honestly not paying much attention to Westminster beyond doing my job, going home, and living life. But I know it was an incredibly hard year for Tim Hall, Todd, and Scott, especially as they dealt with a lot of tension.

At the start of the 2016–2017 school year, Westminster's three heads of school assumed leadership amid a complex cultural and political climate across the United States. That fall, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem, sparking a nationwide conversation about free speech, respect, and patriotism. As the debate unfolded across the country—with some viewing the gesture as a peaceful protest and others as disrespectful to the flag and military—our students wrestled with what it meant for them, our school, and our community.

Todd Fuller: I remember that the year started off, and I was just laughing and thinking that if this had happened under Tom Stoner, it would have sunk him, and if this happened under a brand-new head of school, what a hard way to start. It was like we were the backup quarterback. The expectations are really low when the backup quarterback goes in. So it was OK if we didn't handle it perfectly, because people didn't expect a lot out of us. We got through it, and I think again, we leaned on the relational capital we had with our community. People trusted us. They may not have agreed with everything we did, but they knew we were trying. They knew we loved Westminster, and we were trying our best to get through that time.

Tim Hall: That was a really remarkable part of that experience. The three of us went through it together, but I was running point. I had stepped out of the room for a moment, and when I came back, the other two had made me the spokesperson of the team. It wasn't quite like that, but it's what it felt like. So, I was running point in conversations among athletes, coaches, and parents, but very much with the support of Scott and Todd and also Aaron Layton, who was an incredible blessing and could really help us shape our thinking,

our approach, our responses, and our engagement with all those parts of our school. I spent a lot of time connecting with Christian schools like Westminster, and I asked them, "Are you guys facing this? How are you anticipating facing this? If not, how are you reacting, or how are you going to react?" And that was incredibly informative and instructive. And we went to Jim Marsh, the three of us, and said, "Here's what we're facing. What wisdom do you have?" I remember him distinctly saying, "You know what, I've never experienced anything like this." But with his incredible wisdom, expertise, and experience, he was able to provide a lot of great counsel to help us through. It kind of passed on in the culture around us, and diminished as the year went on, but in the fall, it was very hard.

The conversations happening around the country impacted many families, including within Westminster's community, but rather than push the issues aside, the three heads of school decided to face them directly, engaging administrators, teachers, students, and the broader community together as a community of believers.

Tim Hall: Being a Christian community, it's a requirement that at least one parent of each student have a clear testimony of faith in Christ. There are certain tenets that we all understand in the Bible, God's truth, and while there are certain things about which we can disagree, there are things we have to agree on. And when you have a foundation like that amongst all of us, that's an enormously important starting point for the difficult conversations that we had. We're all image bearers. We all have value from the Lord. It was a hard year, but I learned a lot. Some things I really needed to learn. And I think that was common amongst us.

Aaron Layton: That was the hardest season of my time here. It was incredibly hard for the whole community. Honestly, I do not know how we made it through. I do not know how Scott, Tim, and Todd survived it. We were just coming out of the instability of the Stoner era and walked straight into the 2016 situation that affected the entire country. Scott, Tim, and Todd were the ones ultimately making the decisions, though I was part of all those conversations as well. They decided that we were going to handle the situation through discussion and dialogue. We knew it was going to be hard, but I am deeply thankful for Scott Holley's thoughtful and forward-thinking

leadership in that moment. He had the wisdom to say, "Wait a minute. Let's slow down."

Having deep, meaningful conversations played an integral part in how Westminster handled the tension in the community.

Chris Pederson: In the fall of 2016, culturally, we were already wrestling with how to respond to the broader culture and how to engage it biblically. There was, and still is, a lot of racial tension in the country. I stepped into what was already a loaded moment, not in a negative sense, but in the sense that a lot was happening in the culture, especially in athletic culture, and I did not fully foresee how it would impact us. One of the biggest takeaways for me was that the season became less about wins and losses and more about shepherding the young men on the team, the staff, and even the broader community. We were learning how to navigate big differences of opinion while remaining united in Christ. It was stressful. When I read the book of Acts now and think about the early church, I can see echoes of that kind of tension, though obviously the stakes were very different. Still, it exposed a lot about what we truly believe about Jesus and how we live together in community.

Mike Decker: I give a tremendous amount of credit to Chris Pederson during that season. He became a true father figure for our football team. He set aside preconceived notions, even personal concerns, and fully embraced the mindset of, "These are my boys. These are my kids. I love them, and we're going to walk through this together." There were some incredibly healthy moments in the locker room. We would lock the doors and let everyone speak freely: "This is how I feel." Every person in that room had space to share. It was eye-opening. People viewed things very differently, and I realized that there were perspectives I hadn't considered. Others had experiences I didn't understand. When you sit together and really listen, you start to realize that there's much more going on beneath the surface.

Chris Knerr: I think a lot of people assume that Christian community means talking about God all the time, and that really could not be further from the truth. Those things were not always spoken about explicitly, but I think what mattered more was the relationships. I taught in public schools, and it is very rare to see the kind of relationships

teachers have here. You do not get those relationships without a shared commitment. For us, that shared commitment is our faith, and I think it shows in how we relate to one another, both as faculty and with students. What grounded us was the mission. Whether or not you could quote the mission statement word for word, every teacher had signed onto it. When you walk into a classroom, that is what you are there to do. I think that is one of the great things about teaching here. You have your curriculum, but you also have something deeper to connect it to. Even when you are distracted or hurt by things happening around you, once you shut that classroom door or sit down to lunch with colleagues, that outside noise fades away. In a way, that is a gift.

For Aaron Layton, as Westminster's director of diversity, it was especially meaningful that Westminster did not shy away from having difficult conversations but continued to embrace the biblical vision of diversity grounded in Scripture.

Aaron Layton: We reminded people again and again that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. I remember Scott [Holley] calling me into his office one morning and telling me he had received forty emails overnight, many of them angry and directed at me, accusing me of stirring things up because of my role. Even then, we stayed unified. When meeting with upset parents, board members, and others, the message stayed consistent: We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are going to talk through this. We kept returning to Scripture—1 Corinthians 12 and Revelation 7:9.

There was one week when I was in so many meetings that I did not attend any of my classes. I had a substitute every day. We met from 8 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon, nonstop, and then continued with evening meetings as well. At one point, I counted nearly forty hours of meetings in a single week. It was exhausting. But it was the right way to handle it. We were determined not to let division take root. We kept saying, "You are my brother. You are my sister. We can talk through this." Those forums created space for real conversations, bringing White and Black families together, and those conversations mattered.

It was difficult all around. But because of the trajectory the Lord already had Westminster on, toward becoming a more diverse

community, something like this was bound to happen eventually. We went through it. You have to go through it. Many organizations avoid those moments by shutting things down, but then you never move past them. That approach also sends a message to minority students and families. What many parents ultimately said was that they respected the fact that Westminster chose to talk and work through it. Even if they disagreed with aspects of it, they saw that we did not cave, and we did not shut it down. We stayed at the table and worked through it together.

Having a biblical framework of diversity was incredibly important for our community, going back to the conversation Jim Marsh and Scott Holley had by the copier years prior.

Jim Marsh: It was a long-term goal to increase the diversity at Westminster through our strategic plan. Racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, learning issues, all of that. We made a commitment to grow our diversity, especially our African American population. That was important to me, and when that started to fray, that became a big part of who we became as a school. During my twenty-eight years, the focus on establishing and growing the academic support program and also becoming more diverse—those two initiatives, I felt, changed Westminster. They were a significant part of its growth. So when all of this came about, that was difficult.

I was still doing the chain gang at that time during football games, and we had a really good team that year. And I remember I saw these three huge young men who were the right tackle, Minsok Lee from Korea; the right guard, Robert Davis, a white kid from a wealthy family in Chesterfield; and the center, Justin Creighton, an African American kid from Ferguson. And the huddle broke, and they lined up together. Korea, Chesterfield, Ferguson. And with football, they worked together on the offensive line. And I knew just from talking to the three of them, they did a lot together in terms of supporting each other. I just thought, *This is a beautiful picture*. I still talk about it. That's what I hoped and prayed Westminster would be. That kids would have an opportunity to be on a team, get to know each other, understand their backgrounds, and reflect the kingdom of God on earth. So for me, when [the three heads of school] came to me to ask for advice, the counsel that I gave was that if they could work

this out via the coaches and kids, they would make this a learning opportunity for all of them. [Chris Pederson] was in the middle of that. I know he worked hard to try to do just that, to make it work, to work this out in a Christian community in a way that would both honor biblical principles and who we are as a school.

Despite disagreements and many difficult conversations, God remained faithful to Westminster and to its commitment to honoring Scripture and the biblical vision for a united body of Christ.

Aaron Layton: One of the greatest things that came out of all of this was that it gave our community an opportunity it had never really had before: a chance to learn from one another on a community-wide level. Any relationship worth its salt goes through moments of serious conflict, moments that can really test it. But when you work through those moments together, the relationship grows stronger and deeper. That is what happened at Westminster. On the other side of that season, we gained understanding as a community, and we became more intentional about diversity. From that point on, we really began to see growth in our minority student population. We were able to say to families, "Yes, this was hard, but look at how it was handled." The knee-jerk reaction to shut it down was not what Westminster did. Westminster chose to talk through it because minority students are valued members of this community. That message resonated, and it spread. Minority families were able to talk to one another and say, "Yeah, it was rough, but this is how the school handled it."

In January 2017, the board began prompting administrative changes to further improve communication and trust among the faculty and staff. This included the hiring of a full-time human resources director.

Meghan Goessling: I started in January of 2017, in the middle of the year of the three heads of school, and I learned a lot when I came in. At the time, Amy [Turner] was the HR manager and controller, and the plan was for her to hire someone who could focus on HR full-time. She would train that person and then retire at some point, roughly a year and a half later. In her HR manager role, Amy handled

onboarding, getting employees enrolled in benefits, and some employee discipline meetings. She did what she could with the capacity she had, but there were several pieces that either weren't getting done or were being handled inconsistently. For example, each department managed its own hiring process. There was no formal application system. Departments would accept résumés through email, conduct their own interviews, and then essentially inform HR that they were hiring a particular person. In many ways, whatever worked best for each department is simply what happened.

Generally, my role was to bring consistency to the HR side of things. That included hiring and interviews, clarifying what our processes were, what documents people were signing, and what they were going through when they were hired. I streamlined the application process and standardized hiring so that everything came through the hiring manager. We would work together, and I would oversee the entire process. In addition, I was tasked with writing job descriptions for every position in the building. I met with every staff member—except for teachers, since they share a general job description—and worked with each person to create a clear job description. Many of these simply didn't exist, or were very loosely defined, and in some cases hadn't been written or updated in ten or fifteen years. I also streamlined the exit process for employees who were leaving by implementing formal exit interviews, which had not been happening before. The board specifically wanted exit interviews conducted, with summaries of those interviews presented to them periodically. They never wanted to be in a position where they didn't understand what was happening in the school or why people were leaving.

With a clear and consolidated HR department, it was important for the school to continue the search for the next permanent head of school. Knowing that the three heads of school would only serve on an interim basis, the search committee worked diligently and with much prayerful consideration to find the best candidate for the position.

Todd Fuller: The last time we looked for a head of school, we used a search firm, and that was expensive. As we were entering that interim year, I went to the board along with Peggy Johnson and said, "I think we can do this ourselves." I didn't think we needed to use a search firm. We used one last time, and it didn't work out, so why would we

spend that kind of money again? I told them to give us a shot. We had the literature that the search firm had used, which was basically a pitch sheet on the opportunity profile. So Peggy and I sat down, and we drafted a new pitch, and we thought Jim Marsh knew a lot of people. We could get the word out, and so the board agreed. The three of us, as an interim team, agreed that we would serve a second year if need be. We wanted to do this right. We wanted to get the right person. That first year was finishing up, and it didn't look like there were any viable candidates. We were prepared to come on for a second year, and then, out of the blue, came Barrett Mosbacker.

Peggy Johnson: I was on the search committee, and we were looking for someone who was seasoned. After the past few years, we needed someone who could manage a school the size of our institution. Barrett [Mosbacker] had all the right things. He had a seminary degree. He understood technology. We needed someone to come and settle the place. We needed someone who could be a leader.

At that time, Dr. Mosbacker was serving as the head of school of Briarwood Christian School in Birmingham, Alabama, when Jim Marsh suggested his name to the search committee.

Jim Marsh: I suggested Barrett's name to the search committee because I felt that the next leader of Westminster would need to be someone who was really experienced and had led a large school. Barrett was, at the time, the head of Briarwood, which is a very large Christian school. So to have that kind of experience but to really understand and embrace the reformed heritage of Westminster, what that means, how you integrate it, how you communicate it, I knew Barrett was top of the line when it comes to that. He has a seminary degree. Briarwood is a PCA church school. He knew who we were, and that was his philosophy. I knew Barrett would quickly earn the community's respect, especially from the legacy families who would be looking for that kind of leadership.

For Dr. Mosbacker, his first experience at Westminster was on the Ladue campus when Jim Marsh invited him to be a guest speaker.

Jim Marsh: I had connected with Barrett previously through conferences and just in general in the Christian school world. We

were both part of a small group of Christian school heads that someone had put together. He was trying to provide leadership for the growth of his school, so we met occasionally. Barrett is a frontrunner in the whole technology world and integrating technology into education. Because of that, in my work at the Van Lunen Center, I had asked Barrett to come and do a review of our technology program at Westminster.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I had known Jim Marsh for twenty, twenty-five years prior to coming to Westminster. In fact, Jim and I served together with Christian Schools International a long time ago. And so I was quite aware of Westminster at that time. I was actually invited once to come and evaluate the technology program at Westminster and to provide some recommendations and a proposal, which I did. [This was when Westminster was] at the other campus. I remember how packed it was. It was pretty full as a campus as well. And I just remember the general warmth of the community and the school as I was interacting with staff and asking questions and observing.

Believing Dr. Mosbacker to be the best fit as Westminster's next permanent head of school, Marsh reached out to see if Dr. Mosbacker would be interested in the position.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I was at Briarwood, in Birmingham, when Jim called me one day out of the blue, asking me if I might be interested in coming to Westminster. I just recall being in my car, pulling into my driveway one afternoon after school. The phone rings. I saw that it was Jim [Marsh], so I answered the phone, and we had some pleasantries. And then Jim says, "Hey, Barrett, would you consider the possibility of coming to Westminster?" And I told him I was flattered and honored that I'd be asked, but I was happy where I was. But I made the mistake of saying I would pray about it. And if I tell someone I'm going to pray about something, I want to do it, because I want to be truthful. If I say I'm going to pray, I am.

While his initial reaction was to turn the opportunity down, Dr. Mosbacker felt the Lord calling him to consider it more fully.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I recall sitting on my back porch a day later and thinking, *Oh, I need to pray about this.* So I remember praying

something to the effect of, "Lord, I told Jim I'd pray about this, and I'm pretty sure you don't want me to go to St. Louis, but I'm praying about it." So that's sort of how that got started. And then my wife and I talked about it more over the next several months and concluded that maybe the Lord would have me come, or at least explore the possibility of coming to Westminster. So I called Jim back and said, "Jim, you know, after praying about it, I've reconsidered it. I don't know that this is what the Lord would have me do, but I wanted to come and talk." And so that's kind of how that got started.

We came in for several interviews—"we" meaning me and my wife—and we had multiple interviews with both individuals as well as smaller groups of the board and the search committee itself. We had a tour of the school with Peggy Johnson. It was a process of them looking at us and talking to me, and me exploring in more detail the school, what the needs were, and whether or not I thought, in God's providence, I might be a good fit.

Part of the process to see whether Dr. Mosbacker was truly a good fit for head of school was to meet with the faculty.

Aaron Layton: I remember the very first meeting, and it really stood out to me. They selected about thirty faculty members to meet with Barrett when he first arrived, and we gathered in the Black Box. It was an open opportunity to ask him questions. He knew which department each of us represented. Barrett does his research. My question to him was about diversity. I asked what his thoughts were on having a diverse student population and how important that was to him. Barrett was incredibly transparent. He thanked me for asking and said, honestly, that the school he was coming from was not diverse at all. He said, "I don't know how to change that. It's something we've been aware of, but I don't know how to move it." That humility stood out immediately. He went on to say that he had noticed the diversity at Westminster and that, among Christian schools nationwide, what was happening here was almost unheard of, especially given our location. At that time, we were around 18 percent students of color. He said their school was probably 1 percent or less, and he was genuinely excited to learn what Westminster was doing, because he wanted to understand how that kind of diversity had been cultivated.

Mike Decker: When Barrett came in, I think there was a lot of hesitation. People were very much in a wait-and-see posture. I remember he was brought in for what felt like a pre-visit. Almost like, "We're not even hiring you yet, but we're going to put you in front of the faculty and staff and let them ask questions." I remember thinking, *if I were in his position, this is brutal*. There was definitely some residual tension in the room, and yet Barrett responded with grace over and over again. Then one teacher asked him, "If you were a shape, what shape would you be?" Barrett said he would be a triangle but also a sponge. Solid and stable, but able to absorb things and let them pass through. I remember thinking, *I don't even know how he pulled that off*. That was the first moment for me where I thought, *This guy seems genuinely kind, authentic, and thoughtful.*

Dr. Dani Butler: My first impression of Barrett was that he was wise and seasoned. We felt like he could handle challenges, and after the three years we had with the previous administration, and then the interim year, we needed someone who was very experienced.

Following the interview process, the board approached Dr. Mosbacker and offered him the position of Westminster's next head of school. After prayerful consideration, he and his wife concluded that this was where the Lord wanted them, and he accepted the offer.

Tim Hall: My first connection with Barrett came long before he ever visited Westminster. We were students together in the Master of Education program at Covenant College in 1991, 1992. Barrett was in my brother's [Steve] cohort or class in the year ahead of me, and because Steve was a part of that class and got to know the guys in his class, I'd sit and have lunch with them, too. So I got to know Barrett a little bit there, and I interacted with him through the expertise that he brought us related to technology. Barrett is very different from Jim Marsh, which was evident, but not in bad ways. They just have different personalities. I can't say I was shocked when the board came to us and said, "This is kind of a surprise development, but we've hired Barrett Mosbacker." There weren't a lot of other people in the Christian school arena who were a better fit in terms of their world and life view, their foundational beliefs, in terms of their experience, and the trustworthiness he had developed with those communities—the schools, the staff, the parents that he had worked with prior to coming to Westminster.

The search committee was busy trying to find a good candidate, and as that developed in the late spring of that year, we [the three heads of school] were already thinking ahead about the things we would have to address, consider, change, or implement. When we were told that Barrett would become the next head of school, there was a sense both of "Oh, man, here's somebody else new to Westminster who doesn't know our culture" and "To what extent is there a possibility that this is going to be like the previous administration?" At the same time, I could relax now because someone else is the fall guy, if you will. The buck would stop with somebody other than the three of us.

TEN

REACHING HIGHER



Head of School Dr. Barrett Mosbacker speaks at IGNite, 2017

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker officially took over as head of school in June 2017, and he made it clear that he was not planning on making immediate changes.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I definitely don't come in and just start changing things right now, unless the building's on fire. Now, there can be circumstances where, yes, you have to make some decisive decisions, but for the most part, that's not the prudent way to proceed. Actually, what I told the board was that I would begin this process, especially the first one hundred days, by "listen, learn, love," and then to lead, kind of in that order. And I thought that was very particularly important. It's very important for a leader going into any new situation to really seek first to understand before being understood, and to really assess the situation before making any

drastic decisions, again, unless the house is on fire. And so I spent most of my time in meetings.

The first thing Dr. Mosbacker did as head of school was to meet with the faculty and staff and absorb as much about the school as possible.

Dr. Dani Butler: When Barrett first became head of school, there was a lot of uncertainty, but we felt somewhat at ease with him because his presence is very godly, wise, and approachable. While we did not know him well, and we weren't sure where he could bring us, there was a sense that the school was stable.

Todd Fuller: What made Barrett different was two things. One, he wasn't following Jim Marsh. That's probably the biggest thing. We were now a number of years away from our longtime leader, and so he wasn't always going to be in Jim's shadow. I think that was very helpful. And the second is that Barrett was a seasoned leader. He came in with a sort of grandfatherly approach while truly being an executive administrator.

Aaron Layton: What serves Barrett well is that he is deeply kingdom-minded. The foundation for everything he does is directly rooted in Scripture, not tangentially. He sees this work as biblical. And because of that, he has empowered me in very tangible ways. Whenever he was preparing communication to minority families or addressing an issue that affected minority students but was going out to the whole community, he would always send it to me first. He would say, "Hey, brother, can you read this over? I don't want to offend anyone. I want to make sure this is right." That kind of humility makes all the difference.

Chris Pederson: There is always work to be done. Regardless of leadership transitions at that level, it always comes back to recognizing that there is work in front of us. Along with that, there has been a sense of optimism and hope. I really appreciated the effort to simplify what can be a very complicated space. There are always multiple issues, new challenges, and emerging concerns, whatever they may be in a given season. What stood out to me was Barrett's ability to cut through that and say, "We are going to do Westminster as best we can do Westminster. We are going to lean into our culture, especially how we treat one another in this building." You still hear that emphasis today.

> Dan Burke: Barrett listens well, and then he gets down to business and tries to bring people together to problem-solve. He is gentle with people. He immediately focused on collaboration. I remember right away he was saying, "We are going to form a committee on this, we are going to get creative, and we are going to find a way to build positive morale again." That was when they started doing things like the Veterans Day events, and then he started the We CARE initiative, which was meant to communicate care for all people in our community and to train teachers to have conversations that reflected that care. He was very intentional, almost programmatic, about rebuilding a positive culture and responding thoughtfully to those issues.

It was important for Dr. Mosbacker, from the very beginning, to establish trust between himself, the faculty and staff, and the Westminster community.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: Building trust is not easy. One thing is to be as authentic as possible. You're not trying to pretend to be something you're not. You move slowly, unless, again, the building is on fire. Take your time. Don't make decisions autocratically. Ultimately, I have to make decisions, but I want to do that having received a lot of input. If someone looks at me and says, "No, Dr. Mosbacker, that's just crazy," then I probably shouldn't do it. Or if I'm having lunch with Jim [Marsh] and he says, "I don't think I would do that," well, that's probably not a good idea. I think that's part of it. Another part of it is, by God's grace, attempting to be very focused on being prayerful and directly focused in the decision-making. I will say that one of the things I started with was that people weren't praying. I don't mean to imply that they weren't praying at all, but I'd walk into meetings, and they didn't necessarily automatically start with prayer, whether it was one-on-one, with two people, or a larger meeting. So I made that a constant where any meeting I have will always start with prayer. The third thing is if you function with integrity, even if you make decisions that are controversial and some people do not like and disagree with, if you're operating from a place, to the best of your ability, that's prayerful. You're making a hard decision, but you're doing it with integrity, and what you say is the truth, even though you can't just share all the information that some people would like to have. I think that begins, over time, to build that trust. I think overall that has happened, but it did take a while.

At the community level, one of the things that people were concerned about, because of some cultural and community things that had occurred the previous year, was a sense of whether Westminster was a school that still loved the country and things of that nature. So I decided in my first year, certainly by the second year, to do two simple things: We started a Veterans Day program, and then on Memorial Day, we had little flags planted all through the campus. And just those two small things communicated that, no, we do love our country. We do appreciate our country.

Chris Pederson: A consistent theme in [Barrett's] leadership has been a commitment to doing the righteous and difficult thing, even when there is a temptation to take an easier path. There has been a steady focus on the belief that if we are healthy internally, then we will be healthier in our relationships with students and parents as well. That means being spiritually disciplined and grounded so that we can truly love and serve our kids and our community. I have really appreciated that approach. It was helpful then, and it continues to be helpful now.

Chris Knerr: Transitioning to Barrett, slowly but surely, things began to stabilize. Barrett is not like Jim in the sense that he is going to visit every classroom and meet every teacher in that way, but he is extremely competent. He brings structure. He maintains vision. He is clear about what needs to be done and about the people he has chosen to do it. I have realized over time that part of the challenge for people like me, who have been here a long time, is that our expectations are always measured against Jim Marsh. When you get Barrett, you get a very different kind of leader. I actually told him, "Barrett, you're kind of like a really good hockey referee." A great referee is barely noticed. They let the game be played. The players largely police themselves. Then, when a difficult call needs to be made, that's when the referee steps in. That feels fair to me. There is clarity about the job, about expectations, and people are trusted to do their work. If something is not getting done, the structure is there, through grade-level principals and leadership, to address it. The structure works. So when I look at where we were under the previous administration and where we are now, it honestly feels like a miracle.

To further build trust and communication between himself and the school, Dr. Mosbacker looked to establish an experienced senior leadership team.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: One of the things I realized pretty quickly was that the total breadth of the organization was far too wide. There was some confusion about who reported to whom. Communication was difficult. Who made decisions? As I looked at that, I realized that we had some really sharp people on the senior team, but also that there probably needed to be a few changes to that team, expanding it a little, but also reorganizing the way things were structured in terms of personnel responsibilities. I jotted down my own ideas based upon a lot of conversations I had and looking at the information, looking at the current organizational chart. I also hired an outside independent consultant who was a specialist in organizational design to come in and take an independent look at the school. I took some of what was in his report, some of what I had, sort of combined those together, and the result was reorganizing different departments and divisions of the school, as well as making a few changes on the senior team. When I presented my new organizational plan, a new structure, to the board, in order to show the current plan, it took an easel with five large flip charts to show the breadth of the organization. And I had it down to one flip chart. So that was more linear, a little more vertical, a little easier to comprehend and understand.

The senior leadership team consisted of Dr. Mosbacker, Todd Fuller, Peggy Johnson, and Scott Holley, though Holley informed Dr. Mosbacker that he would be stepping down from his position as head of academics. By the end of the 2017–2018 school year, a new head of academics was needed.

Micah Gall: Becoming the head of academic development was something I did not think I would ever be interested in. But as the process played out, I became more and more interested through conversations with various people. Barrett was in his first year on campus, so Scott Holley agreed to serve for one year as head of academics while we found his replacement. Barrett opened up the application process to people both outside and inside the building and slowly narrowed it down to the finalists. Those of us who were part of that final group went through a very rigorous process that included speaking before the faculty, and that included a Q&A with the faculty that was open to everyone. We had to stand up there, present our vision, and then answer questions. He also solicited survey feedback. He followed the same process for the athletic director position as well.

In order for the administration to serve the entire school, Dr. Mosbacker believed it was important to elevate the athletic director and head of student development positions to the senior leadership team.

> Dr. Dani Butler: At the end of 2017, Barrett asked me to join the new senior leadership team. When I started in my role at the end of spring 2018, he shared with me many of his plans and vision. He wanted to bring a different leadership approach, while restoring what we had lost and stabilizing the community. Peggy Johnson and Todd Fuller were already there, and then Cory Snyder, Micah Gall, and I joined the team.

> Cory Snyder: At the time, I was coaching at Francis Howell, and we were playing our rival, Zumwalt West, at their place in the regular season, kind of mid-season. Chris Pederson came over that week to help me out because I had lost a coach. Chris was going to sit in the box and scout for me as it was a big game. During the pregame warm-up, he said to me, "You know, we're looking for an athletic director." I was like, "Yeah, that's great," but I was focused on football. And then he said, "You should really think about applying for it." And I went, "Wait, wait. We're having this conversation right now?" I hadn't really thought about it. I think I knew they were looking to hire an athletic director, but I hadn't seriously considered it. At that moment, I was at Howell and really thought I'd be there for a number of years. But even when I left Westminster, I had told some faculty that it was hard to leave and that I didn't feel like my time at Westminster was done. I just needed to do something else. That conversation planted the seed. I finished out the season, had more conversations with my family and some close friends, and decided to apply.

With the senior leadership team established, the administration began looking for ways to improve the quality of programming across every department.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: We had a great team. We had wonderful, fantastic leaders. They were incredibly intelligent, very godly, and very committed to what the school was doing. And so once the team was reorganized and stuff, I didn't have any great concerns about those sorts of things at all. I really trusted them to do their jobs. I don't want to micromanage them. But at the same time, my main concern was to reinforce several things within the school

generally, but also with the senior team. Specifically, that was reaffirming our commitment to biblical truth, reaffirming our commitment to our mission and our vision, talking about the always-present danger of any institution to mission drift. In fact, I believe the first book I had the team read was called *Mission Drift*, and I thought that was really very important. Our focus was on putting an equal emphasis on both the spiritual development of students as well as academic development. And I'd say the other thing was a commitment to what I like to call these immutable principles—biblical truth, the mission, vision, etcetera—but with that innovative spirit. How can we add value to the school while we're being faithful to these things? Make the school more innovative and more relevant for modern students?

Micah Gall: We each had our own silo that we were overseeing. I was in charge of teachers and curriculum, but those first couple of years, it really took time to form as a team and to see where things fit, where the overlap was, where you were going to run into tension, and how to work through that tension. So even though that was not explicitly in the job description, I think largely the first few years were about that.

Dr. Dani Butler: We felt supported and encouraged. Barrett gave us complete freedom to restore and improve what we had. At the time, we had a reputation for being overly strict, with too many rules and not enough freedom for students. According to surveys, students weren't happy, and our retention was low. Barrett tasked me with bringing joy back to students. Cory [Snyder] had the same mission regarding our athletes. Our goal was simple: We wanted kids to genuinely want to be part of our community. I was very much motivated by the task.

Cory Snyder: We had been through a lot of leadership changes, not just with the head of school and the leadership team, but also within the athletics department. There were maybe three or four athletic directors in about two years, including interims. So, I felt there was an opportunity to provide stability and to improve some of the processes we were using to create a sense of confidence. There's stable leadership. People know what they're doing. The experience is better. Communication with coaches, how we register for sports, and

things like that were a big focus for the first couple of years. It was really about providing a framework and stability after what had been a pretty tumultuous era.

One of the most significant changes made to improve student retention and morale was in regard to Carnival.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: The only thing I could take credit for was criticizing what existed. Dr. Butler gets all the credit. Susie Brown, Ashley Woodall, and their whole team get credit for creating a magnificent, wonderful program. So it's a little embarrassing. But the truth is, I'm walking out of the Grand Entry, and we had what was called Carnival at the time, and it was a series of fold-up tables sitting around in the Grand Entry with people selling merchandise and some different things. And if it was geared toward any age group, it was just elementary school kids, and there weren't a whole lot of people there. I don't remember my exact words to Dani, but something to the effect of, "Dani, this is kind of boring." I didn't really have to say a whole lot more, and I didn't necessarily give a specific directive, but being who she is, she took that, and she ran with it. And she and her team have developed a fabulous program.

Dr. Dani Butler: The first year Barrett was at Westminster, back in 2017, he came to Carnival and told me it was boring. Few people showed up, and there was little excitement. The event was just a handful of tables, mostly selling games, bags, candies, and soup. The energy was flat and underwhelming. He tasked me with making it a better community-building event. I discovered that Carnival had rides in the past—something we couldn't continue at the Ladue campus because of the city of Ladue's restrictions. That gave me an idea. We brought in a ride company, which brought back the fun and excitement for our students and families. I also extended the event to two days, Friday and Saturday. Without Friday night football, Carnival had always been a Saturday-only event, but extending it to Friday allowed us to have a fuller community experience. One controversial change was that no adult-run vendors were allowed; only Westminster students and clubs could run them. Everyone participated in bringing Carnival to life. Finally, we aligned the weekend with homecoming, giving alumni a chance to return and celebrate. Today, our Homecoming Carnival weekend is a

community-wide tradition that thousands of students, families, and alumni look forward to every year.

Student council had been established at Westminster for many years, but by 2019, its responsibilities were rather limited.

Dr. Dani Butler: We relaunched the student council in 2019 with a new approach. Before, it was a student leadership team selected by adults that essentially ran Spirit Week and other events. The students had a strong desire to have their voice at the table, so we restored STUCO to what it had once been before it was discontinued in the '90s. We recreated a full campaign, with elections for each class to select their president, vice president, and officers.

Providing more opportunities for students to advocate for themselves also meant expanding college counseling.

Dr. Dani Butler: When I looked at all of the surveys, it became clear that our college counseling ranked consistently lowest among student programs. The reason was simple. We just didn't have enough staff to give students the individualized attention and support they deserved. In 2019, we decided to completely revamp the program with individualized service. Along with hiring additional staff, we also launched the individualized four-year academic plan (I4AP) beginning with our 8th graders and parents. The plan gives students and parents a clear academic road map to follow throughout high school, helping them prepare strategically for college admissions. Now, each student has touchpoints with their college counselors throughout the school year.

As Student Life's programs were expanded and improved, the student ambassadors program, led by the admissions department, also saw significant changes.

Peggy Johnson: As head of enrollment, I revised things and made the ambassador program a leadership position. Before, there were maybe fifty to sixty students. Anybody could do it. But I wanted them to be trained to represent the school. That was one of my favorite things. I was in the office all the time, and I didn't have the opportunity to see the kids. I really felt like I was part of the school.

In the athletics department, several additions and changes were made to improve communication and stability for coaches and players.

> Cory Snyder: We implemented an evolving, more standardized process. It's not really an evaluation process, but more of an end-of-season conversation. "Hey, let's talk about your program and what we can do to make it better." We also set expectations around how coaches should communicate with parents, such as weekly emails, and what kinds of information should be included. I think we've gotten pretty good at that. We created a more streamlined way to collect documents and help coaches navigate who is ready to practice and who isn't at the beginning of each season. That process has evolved over the last eight years, but the goal has always been clarity and consistency. We also implemented more of a focus on the Ten Pillars, making sure they are talked about weekly and visibly present. We started having parents come in for a sports kickoff meeting in August, but it's been about clearly communicating our expectations and standards. The attendance policy was another piece, just things like that. We created the Wildcat Update newsletter and focused on being really communicative overall. These things might not seem like they directly impacted students on a daily basis, but they help create the culture we were aiming for and provide a sense of structure and consistency.

Along with improvements made to Student Life, Dr. Mosbacker and the administration focused on how technology was being utilized in and out of the classroom.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I actually have a bit of a love-hate relationship with technology. I believe that technology, like everything else, is a providential gift of God. He enables us to create these tools. And so, in that sense, it is a blessing of God's providence. Our challenge with any technology, it doesn't matter what it is, is to use it well and not to use it for bad purposes, or not to allow it to distract us from things that are very important. So I like technology because it enables us to do things that we could never do otherwise. We literally have, by and large, the world's knowledge in our pockets. That is an amazing, amazing thing. We can communicate instantly with virtually anyone in the world. We can have video conference calls with experts, such as an author or a scientist. We have all of

this capability. We can produce and communicate and create things that otherwise would've required a professional organization or a high-paid professional to accomplish. There are all of these possible advantages, but then they can also be addictive, and they can be highly distracting. And that's the challenging part.

For Micah Gall and Dan Burke, approaching the use of technology in education was incredibly important.

> Micah Gall: Dan [Burke] and I teamed up to write a paper, which ended up being thirty-some pages, on technology in the classroom in general, but it also proposed what Westminster's approach should be. I remember a conversation with Tim Hall, who really encouraged us to do it in light of the new head of school coming in, so that there would be some foundation from which to work. I did it with the support of those three heads of school. We worked hard on it, and I had it ready for Barrett on his first day on campus. I went and delivered it to him right outside the welcome desk. I remember that vividly. The whole paper was largely about why we should probably consider not having a one-to-one iPad program. His response to me, without even knowing what it was yet, was, "Hey, can you send me a digital copy? I do everything on the iPad." I knew immediately that the battle was lost, but I still sent it to him, and he did read it respectfully. We have had lots of good conversations in the nine years since he has been here.
>
> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: Micah and Dan sent me this paper, and I asked for it in digital form because I wanted to read it on my iPad. And I actually read it very quickly, I think maybe within a day, and then I responded back to them, acknowledging all the problems, but also reassuring them that there was a way to do technology better. Not perfectly, but better. And that was the beginning of when I developed what was called the Technology Enhancement Plan, which moved us toward school-owned devices, controlled devices, and that sort of thing. So yes, that was one of the first things I was confronted with upon getting here, among some other things I had to deal with.

Part of the new Technology Enhancement Plan included updated guidelines for the one-to-one iPad program and for personal devices.

Dan Burke: [Barrett] tackled many of the problems we were having around technology, especially our one-to-one iPad program. That had become very problematic because students were bringing their own devices, which were personalized and full of distractions. He began working to solve the technology issue, and while I would say he greatly mitigated many of the problems, the technology challenge has never fully gone away.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: The iPads were here before I got here. What was different was that even though there were some standards in place in terms of devices, it was a "bring your own device" approach. So there was virtually no control of the devices or filtering or anything of that nature. It was problematic from that perspective, but also very distracting and probably not all that academically helpful, by and large. I'd say the biggest change I made was to implement the iPad program, which the school owns, manages, and tries to control those devices. So that, to the extent possible, you gain the advantages of what technology could do for students academically. After all, students are knowledge workers, and technology is a knowledge worker's tool. We need to train them with that. We need to help them form a biblical perspective on the use of technology. They're going to use it for the rest of their lives. But at the same time, it poses challenges. It's easy to become distracted. And there's only so much we can do to limit it. We can reduce the distraction, but we're never going to completely eliminate it. And that's a challenge. But that's not all bad either, because at the end of the day, this has to be a matter of not technological control, but self-control. As students get older, as they move off into college, that's not going to be in place for them. They're going to have to police themselves. And so we want them to learn the discipline of staying focused and not allowing that device to take away that focus and distract them. It's great, and it's messy.

Micah Gall: When I first got here, we just had MacBook carts, and there was no filter and no management. It was just the Wild, Wild West. We went from that to, through a process I was not part of, a decision that we wanted to be an iPad school and that our students would have iPads. But even before that, I think it was a bring-your-own Apple device model. It did not have to be an iPad; it could be a laptop, but it had to be an Apple device. So we ended up with every kid having a different device, and nothing was being managed. It was

just full of terrible distractions. That is what eventually led us to do the one-to-one iPad program. The difference that Barrett brought was that the iPads are school-owned, school-operated, and managed to the extent that is possible.

Our cell phone policy is very simple: See it, hear it, take it. Students are not allowed to have their phones during the school day. For middle school, that means from 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. For upper school, it is from 7:55 a.m. to 3 p.m., with the exception of lunch. The reason we allow phones at lunch is that we have an open campus, and we realistically cannot monitor phone use during that time since students have a lot of freedom. The policy is strictly enforced, with no exceptions. The rationale behind making the policy this strict came down to two main factors. The first was the level of distraction that all schools have experienced. While many schools are doing similar things now, we were ahead of the curve on this issue. The second reason was community.

Gall often reminds students that the cell phone policy is not one of discipline but there to build community.

Micah Gall: I tell students at the beginning of the year that there are roughly ninety hours of passing period time over the course of a school year. During those times, I walk the halls and see students looking each other in the eye, talking, and spending time together. Before or after school, especially in the upper school, students often have their heads down and are glued to their phones. This policy creates intentional space for students to build more meaningful relationships, in addition to addressing the primary goal of eliminating distractions in the classroom.

Perhaps one of the most unique incidents regarding cell phones at Westminster took place in 2023.

Micah Gall: It was the seniors' last day, and the seniors were gathering early in the parking lot. I showed up early just to help monitor things. I got here around 6 a.m., somewhere in that range. There was a line of students waiting to take their pictures at the entrance, near the end of the drive by the big Westminster sign. The line of students extended into the drive, so I slowly veered around them and went over the

grass. I knew I was going over the grass, but I didn't realize that, in the process, I ran over two students' cell phones and crushed them. It's pretty ironic that it was me, the person responsible for enforcing the cell phone policy, who literally crushed two student cell phones with my truck. It became quite a story and even changed the phrase, as my mug now suggests, to "see it, hear it, crush it." The students were convinced I did it on purpose. I absolutely did not. They belonged to two of the sweetest girls, students who had never violated the cell phone policy before. Westminster paid for the replacements.

Improvements to the various programs and departments at Westminster extended beyond the classroom. Changes were also made to the way faculty and staff were hired.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: With the previous administration, the head of school wasn't involved in the hiring process. When I first came on staff, before I'd even arrived at the office, I'd gotten a phone call from someone from the senior team who said, "Welcome to St. Louis and Dr. Mosbacker, I think we have a problem." Apparently, someone had been hired for a particular position, and there was a group that was very supportive of this hire, and there was a group that absolutely was not supportive of this hire. The group that was not supportive had done some social media vetting, which the school had not been doing up to that point, and found some things that were problematic. They shared that with me, and I had to come to the conclusion that, yeah, that's a problem. No, we can't have this person, even though we issued the contract the day before. I remember calling the new board president; I'm brand new, and said, "We have a problem. Here's what's going on. I need to make this change," which I did. I realized that the hiring process was not all that it probably should be, and so I implemented several changes, one of which was thorough social media vetting. They were already doing background checks, but they weren't doing this sort of social media vetting, which I thought was very important.

Meghan Goessling: [The hiring process] moved from every department essentially doing their own thing, and then coming to HR just for paperwork, to a formal application and a structured interview

process. That process can be several steps long, especially for teachers. Candidates begin with an initial prescreening, followed by a formal interview that includes a teaching demonstration. They come in and teach a class, and we gather scorecards, have conversations, and take notes after each interview. That way, everything is documented, from how the interview went to why we did or did not hire a particular candidate, and the reasoning behind those decisions. From there, we check professional references, a pastor reference, and conduct a social media review, which had never been part of our process before. We also complete fingerprint background checks and ensure all required steps are fully completed.

Dr. Mosbacker also made sure that the head of school would be more directly involved in the hiring process.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: The other change I made is that no one is hired—I don't care whether they're cutting the grass or they're going to be a member of the senior team—that I have not interviewed. Now, my focus on the interviews, unless it's my senior team, is not necessarily to ascertain their competence for that particular position. I view that as the responsibility of the senior team to make those decisions. What I want to make absolutely certain of is that I have every reason to believe they actually are a believer, that they understand the mission of the school, that they're committed to the mission of the school, and that they will contribute positively to the community and not become a distraction to it. That's really my focus: More cultural and mission fit. I leave it to the senior team to say, "This is the right person to accomplish this job."

Westminster has always looked to hire world-class Christian educators, and in order to do so, changes were also made to the hiring timeline.

> Micah Gall: The process used to be that we collected faculty intention forms in early January. Based on those, we would post open positions and begin the interview process, with the goal of wrapping up hiring by around spring break. It often went past that, but that was the ideal timeline. In recent years, we have adjusted that approach because of the teacher shortage and the increased competition for strong candidates. Now we post positions year-round and conduct interviews throughout the year, even before we know for certain

that we will have an opening. For example, say we interview a Bible applicant we really liked. If we end up having a Bible opening in January, once we know for sure, we will be ready to make an offer immediately rather than waiting until March. This approach allows us to stay ahead of the competition, quite frankly, as many schools are trying to hire the same teachers.

To ensure the right teachers who align with the school's culture and mission, Dr. Mosbacker also began requiring everyone to sign a Community Life Statement.

Meghan Goessling: There were a number of documents that were updated, revised, and added to our onboarding process. As a result, when someone is onboarded now, there is a clear set of items they are required to review and sign as they come on. That includes the handbook, along with the Christian marriage and gender statement, which are now fully integrated into that process. The Community Life Statement was also added for staff. Previously, we were having parents sign it, but staff were not signing it annually, so that was addressed and incorporated. Since then, we have continued to add policies to the handbook, one of which is our conflict-resolution process and procedure. This was an important step because it clearly outlines what happens when someone has a conflict, whether with the head of school, a direct supervisor, or another individual.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: We have a Community Life Statement for everyone, including parents, to sign. Essentially, the Community Life Statement is meant to make sure that, as much as possible, we're aligned on the most important fundamentals and core values of the school. It's only a one-page document. It has some Scriptures, and it gives a couple of examples under each of these major categories. It helps to align everyone to what the expectations are for behavior. But also, because everyone signs it, when we run into a difficulty where someone is egregiously violating the Community Life Statement, I will call them into the office, and we'll have a conversation. And I may point out, "You know what? You signed a Community Life Statement." I think that's important.

At the end of the 2018–2019 school year, Westminster announced that the Faith in Action program, which began in 1987, would be expanding.

Dr. Dani Butler: Bringing joy back to students was my priority in the early years of this role. For several years, we worked hard to rebuild and bring our community back to life. We reintroduced homecoming and expanded Spirit Week into something much larger. We even began live streaming to provide a sense of connection to the alumni community. Competition and activity participation reached record levels among students. We also introduced different community events to celebrate and engage together. But to be honest, that was never the end goal. Our deeper vision has always been students' spiritual formation and growth. We first needed to rebuild the sense of community. Students needed to feel like "This is my home, this is the place I want to come back to." After years of building that culture, it was time to accomplish our end goal. How do we bring the gospel into students' everyday lives in a real and meaningful way? How do we help them see faith is not something you only hear about, but something you live? That's where Faith in Action really started to evolve. It was a senior capstone service project, but we felt strongly that service shouldn't start at the very end of the journey; rather, it should be something to grow from the very beginning. So we expanded it. Now it starts in 7th grade, and students complete their service houses each year for the entire six years at Westminster.

With the expanded Faith in Action program, including students in all grades, Student Life now brings various service projects to Westminster throughout the school year.

Dr. Dani Butler: We started with two Special Olympic events, including all 9th and 10th grades. We brought the 1,000 Bibles Drive to send a thousand Bibles to the Philippines. In the spring, we work with Feed the Need, where our students go and serve all day. All of those things let us bring the faith into action for all six years. Not only individually, but we serve as a community. Many of our athletic teams offer different service projects to volunteer together. Faith in Action is one part of the next phase of spiritual formation. We created worship night events, where students can worship together to start the school year. In 2025, we brought back Spiritual Emphasis Day for the first time on this campus, and we currently have 170 students in discipleship small groups. Westminster is not just a place for fun; it is a place to grow in Christ.

As many of Westminster's preexisting programs and organizations grew and improved, the school continued to seek out new innovations and applications in and out of the classroom.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: There's a small passage in the book of Acts regarding the life of David. It's one sentence, and it essentially says, "David, when he served the purposes of God in his generation, fell asleep," or was put to rest with his fathers. The point being that God calls us to serve in our time, in our place. And so the opportunity and the challenge that we have is not to create a warmed-over 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s education and transport it into 2025. The objective is to remain faithful to your core, which is biblical truth. To our mission and our vision. We remain faithful to that, but innovate in such a way that all the programs you develop are relevant to what students need today, and what modern students are going to need for their future. We can think of even just the impact right now of artificial intelligence, right? That's something we've got to be aware of, and we've got to figure out how best to leverage it while ameliorating the downsides of technology like that.

One new and innovative idea was to bring experiential learning programs through Academies to Westminster.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I picked up the idea of the Academies from a Christian school in Las Vegas, of all places, which had some Academies. I had gone and visited and was very impressed with what they had. I got some information about it, and I thought this is something maybe we can implement here at Westminster.
>
> Todd Fuller: When Barrett came in, he had some ideas, and he had come from a successful, large school, so he came with a vision of things he wanted to see at Westminster that he thought would be beneficial. He was also connected to a lot of people, and he knew about Faith Lutheran, a school out in Las Vegas. He was really interested in looking at the academies there, so Barrett, Micah, and I went out to Nevada to see the school and what they were doing. It was pretty amazing. They had a Law Academy and an Audio Visual / Film Production Academy. They also had some things on the business side of things. They just had a lot of opportunities. We looked at that and thought, *We're not that far away.* Han Kim was

already doing amazing work with his students, and we had some things percolating on the business side. But this would give all of that a cohesive structure.

Micah Gall: It was such a funny juxtaposition. Barrett, the Midwestern head of school, was the perfect fit, and then this other guy fit perfectly with the ethos of Las Vegas. As a Christian school leader, it was hilarious. He was a really friendly guy. He asked us, "Hey, do you guys want to get into a club tonight on this rooftop?" And we said, "I don't think that's us."

ELEVEN

A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC



Westminster reopened in the fall of 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic

Following the trip to Las Vegas, the hope was to bring the idea of Academies to Westminster. Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic put everything on hold for the foreseeable future.

> Mike Rohlfing: The beginning of 2020 felt very normal. We had Spirit Week in January. We had *Godspell*, the spring musical, which technically ran in the winter, and it was one of the best shows they've ever done. It was just incredible. And then, we left for spring break and never came back. There was a lot of, "Hey, we're going to take a week and see if everything calms down," or "We'll take the next couple of weeks and see what happens." It was just this constant attempt to stay on top of things and communicate clearly. At that point, though, we were all at home, confused,

trying to make sense of everything, and focused on keeping our families safe.

Todd Fuller: Looking back on COVID, you really see God's providence and His hand through this, in that we had started that year transitioning to school-owned iPads. The teachers were all issued an iPad at the beginning of the school year, and then we got news of COVID. We shut down early before spring break that year, and we were going to have some training on how we might have to do school. The iPad was instrumental because it could do all those things that we needed for recording lessons, broadcasting your screen, and using Notability, which is basically like writing on a whiteboard. These devices set us up for success.

Micah Gall: Every school was dealing with COVID. It felt chaotic and uncertain, and it was incredibly stressful and difficult. There is something about going through a crisis knowing that virtually every other school in the country is facing the same thing that changes the experience slightly. There was a sense of camaraderie with other educational institutions, even as we navigated our own challenges. We went through what everyone else did. We left for spring break in 2020, COVID hit, and we shut down for the remainder of the school year. Classes moved online for that final quarter.

Jennifer Sengpiel, who joined the staff in the spring of 2020 to take over as head of enrollment for Peggy Johnson, remembers starting at Westminster just as everything shut down.

Jennifer Sengpiel: Naïveté is a gift, because if I had known what the next year was going to be, whew, I probably would have said, "I'm the wrong person. I don't have enough institutional knowledge for this part of your history." We were all locked down from March until the end of school, and nobody was in the office. It was a scary time. It was really scary. The lockdowns, not leaving your house; I remember wiping off my mail and leaving things outside. I had to get to know my team remotely. It was all over Zoom, and it was really hard. I observed a lot. Peggy was running everything, so I really kind of came alongside her and shadowed the admissions part. I stepped in more on the marketing side, just because that's what I knew. Thank goodness for her.

Because of the lockdowns at the end of the 2019–2020 school year, graduation was moved to August of 2020.

> Dan Burke: I still vividly remember May of 2020, when the social distancing restrictions were lifted, and senior families were allowed to reunite outdoors on the plaza. Everyone was so elated to see each other, though disappointed it wasn't during graduation. I remember all the talk about the potential for a ceremony outdoors in August. Wouldn't everyone bake in the summer sun? Wouldn't it feel anticlimactic? But it didn't. The day was unusually cool, clear, and beautiful. The outdoor setting didn't feel like a compromise, but something natural we should have considered all along. Actually, we've held graduation outside ever since as long as the weather permits. What stayed with me most, though, was watching these students, who had missed out on so many rites of passage they had long looked forward to, come together to celebrate their accomplishments and their time together at Westminster. After everything the circumstances of the year had asked of them, it was wonderful to see them, their parents, their teachers, and everyone else enjoying that moment together.

In the summer of 2020, the school administrators also needed to figure out what the plan would be for the following school year—whether Westminster would reopen for the fall or continue with virtual-only classes.

> Todd Fuller: It was a healthy debate. You had a lot of perspectives in the room. We all cared about keeping kids safe, but the science was mixed. I think it's still unclear how dangerous it is for teenage students in good health. So, we decided we were going to be good citizens and follow whatever the government told us to do, with the desire to do what's best for our kids as we saw fit. We're not medical professionals, but we talked to a lot of them and felt we could move forward if given the opportunity and in a safe way for our students and for our employees. Obviously, there were conflicting messages. You had the county administrators shutting everything down and the state officials saying, no, we could be open. When there's a conflict, we decided we would pick which one we would listen to if there wasn't a consensus. So, we opened.

> Jim Marsh: I thought it was great that we stayed open [during COVID], but I can't tell you how many times I thought, *Boy, I'm glad*

I'm not the head of school! I thought [Barrett] and the school handled it really well. I think it was a big issue, and it wasn't easy to do in St. Louis County, but he kept it open.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I still remember to this day the very first official conversation I had with a medical expert about COVID. And at the time, this individual was for the county, if I'm not mistaken, and said, "Well, I don't think you really have to worry about it. It's not airborne; it's only if you get it on surfaces and stuff like that." Well, that changed very, very quickly. There were different stages of challenge. Initially, COVID was brand new. It sounded very dangerous. There was a lot that was unknown, and a lot of the science was changing rapidly. When you're responsible for 970 students, faculty, and staff, and secondarily, kind of who they interact with, like most schools all over the country and most organizations, we felt it was very important to err on the side of caution rather than the other way around. During the spring, like most organizations, we shut down. We went online, and the good news for Westminster was that we had already implemented a full one-to-one iPad program. We had a lot of the technology in place. So even though that online experience wasn't ideal, we were providentially equipped to handle that. That was the good news. But then, as things moved along during the course of the summer, we began to reassess this in terms of what we should do. We decided to take a kind of an interim step. We moved from being closed to being back on campus, which we thought was vital both for the social and mental health of our students as well as academic health and quality. We decided to come back on campus, but we wanted to be very strict about it.

With the decision made to reopen in the fall for the 2020–2021 school year, it then became a matter of figuring out the best, safest way to do so to protect the students, faculty, staff, and their families.

Micah Gall: Because we live and work in a community, there were many differing opinions, not only among parents and students, but also among faculty and staff. The range of perspectives was wide. There was also a range of opinions within the senior leadership team. I personally leaned toward the position that we probably should not open, and in hindsight, I was wrong. Looking back, I am grateful for Barrett's leadership and for the others on the SLT who advocated for

the course we ultimately took, which was reopening on a modified schedule. Once that decision was made, we became very creative. I was heavily involved in shaping what that reopening would look like. I believe we became a model within the county, and perhaps even beyond it, for being among the most cautious and restrictive schools in the state while still remaining open. We were one of the only, if not the only, schools at our level that were open every single day for every student. While other schools adopted alternating schedules or hybrid models, we remained open daily. Families were given a choice. Some students chose to stay home, and we provided iPads in classrooms with Zoom access to support them. By and large, however, our students wanted to be here. I believe that experience ultimately strengthened our community.

Jennifer Sengpiel: Everyone started coming back once we decided to open and go against the grain compared to what the county was doing. We had established policies and procedures, contact tracing, and were working with the Department of Health and [school nurse] Amy Kendrick. There were just a lot of things we had to figure out.

Cory Snyder: People probably don't realize this, but within the schoolhouse, athletics was the first group to return to campus after COVID. We started our strength and conditioning program in June, and our sports teams had workouts that summer. So we were navigating how to do that within the health guidance at the time—creating pods, social distancing, check-ins, temperature readings, all of those things. But we really were the first ones back on campus that summer, and I am thankful that our coaches were the ones to implement that return. There's a special, meaningful relationship between coaches and athletes, so it seems appropriate that our coaches were there to welcome students back. Our athletic office staff and trainer also spearheaded much of the work to develop and implement processes and procedures to stay compliant with a return to campus for athletics. A lot of people put in hours of work to make it a success, and that work continued into the school year.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: We did comply with local mandates about requiring masks. We had these shields, which, in retrospect, probably weren't helpful, but we had them on the desks. We did all those sorts of things. And part of the issue was not so much that we were

concerned about the students being a problem, because most young people dealt with it OK. The issue was, if they get COVID, and they pass it on to someone at their home who maybe has cancer, or to an older grandparent. We wanted to be particularly careful. But here was our struggle: The Scriptures are very clear that we're to obey the civil authority. And it doesn't say you obey the civil authority only when you agree. It says you obey the civil authority. And there are only two exceptions: If they command you to do something that God has forbidden, or they forbid you to do something that God has commanded. Short of that, we're to obey the civil authorities, whether we agree or disagree, no matter what party that comes from. It doesn't matter. It was important to us. We had a dilemma. We wanted to do what was best for our students. We felt like the mask mandates really were not best for our students and learning, and yet we had different government entities giving conflicting information. We had the county saying one thing, the attorney general saying something else. So it was kind of over the board. We worked through that with the board and concluded that because government agencies themselves were not in agreement and were sending different messages to us, we felt like that gave us the liberty to make the most prudent decision that we thought was best for the school and our students. That's what we did.

Aaron Layton: Barrett, in particular, has what I would call a righteous stubbornness, and that was exactly what was needed in that moment. He was very clear that we were not going to be baited into political dialogue. Our communication stayed focused and consistent. Every health authority was saying these measures were helpful, and that is where the conversation stopped. Even with schools around us doing very different things, Westminster's leadership stayed grounded.

Jim Butz: [COVID] was rough, and I think it was particularly rough on our department because theatre and improv require face-to-face communication. You can't really do scene work, monologues, or songs on Zoom, but we wanted to provide something, so we took on this film project called the *Spoon River Anthology*. I think maybe ten people saw it, and I kind of regret doing it. If there was a low point, that was probably it. *Spoon River Anthology* isn't even really a traditional narrative. It's a series of very dark poems by Edgar Lee Masters, and we were already in a dark time. Looking back, I think, *why did I choose this?* It's super heavy. It's all about mortality, regret,

despair, and really dark themes. At the time, we had three very strong film students, and I thought, *why don't we stage this play and then have them turn it into a film?* I thought it would be cool. It took forever. It took at least a hundred hours longer than I thought it would. It was a hot mess, but that said, those three film students learned a ton from the process. It was very stimulating for them in terms of growth, skills, and education. The actors got something out of it, too. But I didn't navigate that well. That year, I think the best thing that happened in the theatre was that Allen [Schwamb] took on *Guys and Dolls*, and that turned out pretty successful, even with some students performing in masks. But we got through it. We did things. We had a middle school play. We did *Spoon River*. We did *Guys and Dolls*. And a lot of schools weren't doing anything at all.

While many were grateful for Westminster choosing to reopen in the fall of 2020, there were still health and safety concerns.

Aaron Layton: I was really concerned early on, especially because there was so much discussion in the news about how COVID was affecting the African American community at a higher rate. That naturally created fear among our minority students and families. It could have gone badly, especially with all the tension around masks and safety protocols at the time. One thing Westminster did really well was making decisions that were not political but clearly rooted in safety. The decision to require masks, to use dividers, and to take precautions communicated something important. It told our minority families, especially those hearing that they were at higher risk, that the school was taking their safety seriously. That mattered. Another really positive step was offering an online option. I honestly thought we were going to take a hit in enrollment because of COVID. I remember thinking our numbers were going to drop. But if you look at the records, our numbers either stayed steady or even grew slightly. We were all really grateful for that, because we were bracing for a loss.

Along with the health guidelines, reopening for in-person classes also required changing the daily schedule.

Todd Fuller: We had a special schedule. We had shorter class days and no lunch, because we felt that would be a risky time to have people eating together. But we felt that was the best educational

experience for kids. We got through that year, and I think history will reflect well on our decision. Our kids did have a good educational experience that year, even with sports. We tried to get the kids back together as quickly as we could. What's key to the Westminster experience is the community. We felt like we needed to be together.

Micah Gall: We were not allowed to serve lunch, so we ended the day at 1:15 p.m. every day and then had an open campus until sports began in the afternoon. What we learned through that experience was that we could strip away much of the extra clutter in the schedule. We moved to forty-minute classes, which were still substantial, and our teachers did a good job learning how to fit what they needed to cover into that time. Honestly, our test scores stayed the same. We did not see any negative academic repercussions from the condensed schedule.

Dan Burke: For me, as a teacher, I was just thankful that we were in-person. I did not really care what kind of theatre we had to do, whether it was the dividers, which I honestly do not think did anything. I was more than happy to do that if it meant we could be here together. I actually enjoyed that year because of the lighter schedule. Ending at 1:15 meant we still had all the touchpoints with students, but there was finally time built into the day for people to breathe, get work done, and not have to take everything home. Students actually did very well, even on standardized testing.

Chris Knerr: Ironically, that year was maybe one of my best here. I think part of that was because we created a more casual environment, one that allowed people to relax a little. There was a different feel to it. At the same time, everyone was just so grateful to be back in the classroom. Students and teachers alike. I remember wearing a mask, but I do not remember it being that much of a distraction. What stands out most to me is how thankful we all were just to be together again. The way the school was run that year made a difference. Periods were shortened. The dress code was relaxed. It does not get talked about much, but we have said it before: Part of me wishes we could go back to that COVID year. The bond between teachers and students was incredibly strong because we were all in it together. The atmosphere that was created to get us through that season was really special. That is how I would describe it. It was a good year.

Mike Decker: I'm incredibly thankful we took the approach we did. The football field was an interesting situation. We literally had to spray the footballs with alcohol every time they were thrown. You could only throw to one person. Everyone had to wear gloves, and we wore masks out on the field. We had to get creative about how to keep guys engaged, so we did things like water balloon contests, who could throw the farthest water balloon, stuff like that. Silly things, but it kept them engaged.

As one of the only schools to open for class, Westminster actually saw a boost in enrollment despite diminishing numbers across the county.

Jennifer Sengpiel: The demographics of St. Louis County are diminishing. Even back [during COVID], we were really starting to see that we had become a flyover city. Businesses and economics are so critical to the success of any town, and when you have big companies headquartered in St. Louis, which we used to, and then they start leaving, things change. We became less of a port. Airlines left. It became too costly to be based here. What happens then is that economically, those companies are no longer creating jobs or money. So what the city does is raise the cost of living. And then your young families start leaving. That's still what's going on. Birth rates are declining because it's too expensive. It was this crazy tornado of activity. What happened during COVID was that Westminster didn't change. That's what you have to do to be sustainable. You have to know who you are and not waver. We knew who we were, we knew what we believed, and it didn't change. As a matter of fact, we leaned into it. COVID actually gave us a boom [in enrollment] because we were open when public schools were not.

There were a few different approaches to education when this all hit. One was, "We're done teaching anything new, and we're just going to tread water remotely." That meant students came out of the 2021 school year a year behind. Some schools said, "We're going to be remote, but we're still going to continue learning this academic year." Admirable. They tried it. And then a lot of private Christian schools and Catholic schools said, "Nope. We're going to keep our doors open. We think it's good for the mental health of our young people." We became a beacon on the hill. It gave us a platform for people to finally realize and say, "Oh, that's what Westminster believes." People

paused. And if you were one of the few schools that were open, and families started searching for schools that they may not have known before, they'd say, "Oh, you're open. Why? What are you doing differently? What do you believe?" We had so many more people, especially Christian families coming from public schools, say, "Wait a second, I've never even thought about this." They wanted to stay in their district. But the district was no longer a viable option for some of those families, and that helped us.

Todd Fuller: [Enrollment] exploded because parents saw what was happening in public schools and saw what their kids were actually learning, or not learning. I think that's one reason. We also saw an uptick because we opened, and those kids were basically at home for over a year. We didn't think that was good developmentally for the kids. Our whole program is based on the impact that a teacher or a coach has on their students and their players. That doesn't happen through an iPad screen. That's got to happen sitting in a room together, doing life together. That was a really important thing for us, and we tried to find a way to do that.

While Westminster did open the building for in-person classes, virtual classes were also taking place, giving families options to decide what was best for them.

Micah Gall: Faculty had to teach in person, and on top of that, they were also responsible for supporting students who were learning from home via Zoom. There were essentially two levels of instruction happening simultaneously, and those students learning remotely often needed additional help outside of normal class time because they were not as present. That was one layer of the challenge. On top of that, many teachers were also recording lessons because, in accordance with county guidelines, we had a significant number of students out sick. When a student was home sick and not attending in person or on Zoom, the question became how they would catch up on the content.

Mike Decker: The classroom side of things was terrifying at first, not because of medical reasons, but because I honestly believed it was going to erase teachers. I thought an iPad could just roll into a classroom and say, "Today we're doing this," and that would be

enough. When people started talking about virtual days, my first thought was, *Oh no. Snow days are gone.* That was the kid in me thinking, *We're never getting a snow day again.* More seriously, I truly believed teachers were going to be replaced. I thought you could just put an iPad on wheels and that would suffice. What I did not see coming was the relational piece. We are built for relationships. We're made in God's image. We need physical presence and human connection. That realization was huge.

As teachers had to adjust the way they taught to work with both in-person and virtual learners, they also had to learn various new digital tools, including Canvas, a learning management system that would integrate digital tools into the classroom, allowing teachers to post grades and assignments for easy student access.

Micah Gall: We made a decision that summer to do something that, in a vacuum, would have been unwise, but I believe was ultimately the right decision and has proven to be so. That decision was to adopt Canvas. We did provide Canvas training, but it was highly expedited. Normally, something like that would have been rolled out gradually over the course of a school year, with training happening behind the scenes before being introduced to students. Instead, we rolled it out very quickly. Teachers had access to self-paced training over the summer, but when we returned for teacher orientation, we were all gathered in the arena and essentially drinking from a fire hose as we learned how to use Canvas. That created a tremendous amount of stress for teachers. Again, I believe it was the right decision; it was simply the circumstances that forced the pace. Teachers were understandably not always pleased in the moment, but at this point, I do not think anyone would want to go back.

Aaron Layton: We put video lessons together and had to do a crash course with Canvas. One of the platforms that was especially helpful for us, particularly when I was teaching global studies at the time, was Edpuzzle. It allowed us to use video while embedding questions and quizzes directly into the lesson so students could engage as they watched. Edpuzzle was huge for us, but it was also a lot of extra work. It definitely was not ideal. Teachers had to be available almost the entire day, constantly responding to emails because students were working at different times.

Every department at Westminster was impacted by the pandemic.

Meghan Goessling: One of the unique things about what we were doing during COVID was that we had just signed a new contract with Paycor in February of 2020 to implement a brand-new HR, recruiting, and benefits system. It was a massive undertaking, and then COVID hit. Shelly [Johnson] and I suddenly found ourselves doing the entire implementation remotely. I was taking calls from my bedroom closet during implementation meetings, and I remember doing our first payroll while sitting out on my patio, literally double-checking and comparing almost every single employee's previous paycheck with their new one to make sure everything was correct. It was wild. It was stressful. There were moments when I genuinely didn't know if we were going to make it through, but we did. Some things took longer than planned. We implemented the payroll portion first, while the recruiting and benefits pieces were pushed back a bit because of the circumstances. On top of that, Paycor's own resources were slower during that time. But I also learned something important: I can do a huge portion of my job off-site if I have to. People still got paid. Systems still moved forward. And while teachers understandably didn't have much to do during that initial shutdown period, we were working constantly. It definitely wasn't a break for us. We were very, very busy.

Jennifer Sengpiel: One of the hardest parts for me was being brand new while everyone was wearing masks. I didn't really know what people looked like. Tim Muehleisen and I worked closely together on retention and different things like that, and we were always masked up. I remember seeing him for the first time without a mask a year in and thinking, *Oh, that's what you look like!* When you're covering your nose and mouth all the time, you just don't know. People said the same thing to me, like, "Oh my gosh, that's what you look like!" It was really hard. It was hard and great at the same time. It was hard because we had to stay six feet apart, and it was difficult to really get to know people when I didn't even know what they truly looked like. But it was also a deep-end start. When you start in trauma, which COVID was, you get close to people because you have to move so fast. Communications were happening every single day. Every day, things were changing. We had to keep track of numbers. We had to test the kids when they walked in the door. I was doing crisis communications

every single day. The communications team—Amy Roff, Mike Rohlfing, and I—got close really fast. So it was really hard, but I don't mind a deep-end start. I had to learn my job really, really fast.

Todd Fuller: One thing that happened [during COVID] was the bank approached us, saying the rates on our loan for this building had dropped. They told us that this would be a good time to refinance, to take advantage of the low rates. And so we started going through the process of that. It was probably the early winter months that we started to set things in place, and we closed on our refinancing the day before we left for spring break in 2020. Had we not closed then, it wouldn't have happened. The world shut down, and our creditworthiness would have changed. We really saw God's hand of Providence with them locking us in at a really low rate at the last possible moment before the world changed.

Though the 2020–2021 school year created significant challenges, Westminster was set up for success thanks to various technological innovations, such as the improved one-to-one iPad program and the addition of live streaming equipment.

Han Kim: I knew when we moved onto this campus that live streaming was starting to take off everywhere, and we were not ready for it. That actually gave the A/V Club a real sense of purpose. It pushed us to train, to get busy, and to learn how to support live events. Every week, we had to perform and create a video that was presentable, and that became great practice. It laid a strong foundation for other events like plays, musicals, concerts, graduations, and Spirit Week. At the time, not many people in the community were watching regularly, except for a few occasions each year when someone requested a video copy or wanted to tune in live. Then the Internet revolution really took hold, and HD video became available on phones. That was when the iPhone became more advanced and when 3G and 4G networks came online. Suddenly, watching video on your phone was possible, and it felt like a big shift. That was when I knew we needed to establish ourselves and really understand what we were doing with live streaming. Even though this was all happening at a high school level, with student camera operators, directors, and mixers handling the cuts, we were building real experience. At the time, we had no idea a storm like COVID was coming, but in

many ways, we were well prepared for something like that. When it happened, we were ready. It felt like being chefs who had already learned how to cook a lot of meals. It was an interesting time.

Having the option to record or even live stream events proved to be incredibly important in keeping the Westminster community together.

Cory Snyder: Obviously, all sports were gone. During that time, Greg Schoenberg, who was our strength and conditioning coach, put out videos three days a week with workouts that athletes could do at home. I had coaches who shared encouraging messages every week, videoed themselves, and we shared those with the athletes. We did a virtual signing day. We did virtual senior recognition ceremonies for each sport. We posted those things on social media and shared updates, just trying to navigate that season with kids who were isolated and not able to participate in sports.

Mike Rohlfing: In the spring of 2020, I remember texting [Spiritual Life director] David Ottolini and saying, "Should we make a Chapel video? It's Wednesday, and we're still technically in school, even though we're not in school." I also worked a lot with Cory [Snyder] on things like end-of-year athletic awards. We couldn't do any of those events in person, so I would come in and film with him a couple of times, or he would do Zoom interviews with athletes, and we'd put together short videos. We were just trying to do what we could to preserve some sense of normalcy and still do the things we usually did, even without being together.

With students back in the building and everyone forced to socially distance themselves and wear masks, it was crucial to find ways to keep everyone's spirits up and boost student and faculty morale.

Mike Rohlfing: Once we got through the summer and realized we were going to be back on campus, the conversation shifted to how we could still make school feel like school, and still make it fun, even with a shorter schedule, no lunch, kids behind dividers, and very limited activities. There just wasn't much the students could do.

One of the first ideas that came out of those conversations was the school talent show.

Mike Rohlfing: The talent show had been a tradition for years, and at some point, there was a discussion about whether we could still do some version of it, because it would be a fun way to bring the community together. Along with other things I was producing to ramp up the school year, I decided to produce an America's Got Talent–style episode featuring Westminster students. We called it "Showtime at the Academy." I held video auditions where students submitted recordings of whatever they planned to perform, as long as it was something they could do in one take. I told them we could shoot anywhere, off campus, outside, at the pool, wherever, because I would film them and then we'd produce a full show. We ended up with around seventeen or eighteen performers.

Because it didn't have to be on a stage in the Theatre, we were able to do things we never could before. I filmed a student waterskiing at Lake St. Louis, another juggling and unicycling in the plaza, performances on the tennis courts, and in the Theatre. All over. One student flew an RC plane on the soccer field, doing tricks and explaining the terminology. That never could have happened in a traditional talent show. We had a couple of student hosts, and in early November, we broadcast the show to every classroom. We also incorporated live elements. We would play prerecorded segments and then cut live to the Theatre. At the time, we didn't have wireless equipment, so we ran a giant cable down the hallway to nearby classrooms, pulled students out live, brought them into the Theatre, and had them play games for cash. It was a full live broadcast experience. We created a Google Form where students and teachers voted, and we required everyone to vote for their top three, which meant every performer received a meaningful number of votes. Everyone felt affirmed, and the performances were genuinely great. We announced the results live, handed out the big check, and it ended up being a really fun, high-morale event. There wasn't much else going on that year, so we were able to put a lot of energy into it, and I like to think it made a real difference.

Spirit Week, another cherished Westminster tradition, also posed a challenge. Normally held at the beginning of the spring semester, toward the end of January, the school administrators decided to move Spirit Week to later in the year when the warmer weather would allow them to host it outside.

Without Spirit Week in January of 2021, Mike Rohlfing came up with an alternative event to bring the students together.

> Mike Rohlfing: I remembered that in college, I ran the campus TV station at Calvin College for a couple of years, and we would put on a campus-wide rock, paper, scissors tournament. I don't know why that was the idea at the time, but we did it. So I thought about that and realized this would actually be a relatively easy thing to pull off safely. You can keep people six feet apart, put a big table between them, and have them sit across from each other. Everyone was on board right away. With help from STUCO and others, we put it together. We did the preliminaries in the Hub, and we held the finale in the Theatre, but only allowed a limited number of people because of the regulations. We brought in the finalists and broadcast the Rock, Paper, Scissors finale live from the Theatre to all the classrooms. Everyone got to watch it together, but separately. That was basically it. We also made the Indiana Jones–style video, but for these events, I'm always asking, "What's the next step? What's the next level of ridiculousness or fun?" It's not just about playing rock, paper, scissors. That by itself is pretty boring. So we created an entire storyline for the finale with a character called the Boulder, who takes over the show and steals the trophy. That was Stewart Geisz. Tyler Collison was the host. The idea was, yes, we're doing a rock, paper, scissors tournament, but how do we make it entertaining?

The Rock, Paper, Scissors tournament, affectionately dubbed RPS, was a resounding success and came back the following school year and then again during the 2023–2024 school year.

As for Spirit Week, the plan was to host the event outdoors early in the spring, but sicknesses pushed it back to May of 2021.

> Mike Rohlfing: We had to shut down school for a few days because too many people were sick. It was supposed to be one week, and then they ended up moving it a week or two later because of that. We still did dress-up days all five days, but we only did pep rallies outside on two of the days. We went outside on Thursday and Friday for Boys Poms and Lip Sync. It was very truncated. There weren't all these games like usual. We still had the shortened school day, so

> Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were just dress-up themes, and then Thursday and Friday, we went outside.

The shortened school day, though it affected Spirit Week, was widely received with positive feedback.

> Micah Gall: Students loved being done at 1:15 p.m. and having the freedom to move around. Not only that, but they were able to get their homework done before 3 p.m. and seek help from teachers when they needed it. Over time, through a long series of proposals, conversations, and processes, that experience has shaped our current schedule. We intentionally built in time where students have a bit more freedom, but also more opportunity to catch up on work, make up missed quizzes, and ask teachers for help. That is where Middle School Connect already existed, and it is also where Upper School Connect ultimately came from.

By the time health regulations and COVID restrictions were lifted in Missouri, the focus was on how to move forward into the next chapter at Westminster.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: One of the blessings of COVID was that it caused us to reexamine some basic assumptions. So what happened was, because we shortened the school day to avoid large crowds, and we ended at 1:15 p.m., it forced teachers to focus on just the essentials, which was healthy in its own way. During that experience, we realized kids were doing fine academically. The students loved it. Parents even liked it. There was a little bit less stress because they could get stuff done during the afternoon. It didn't all have to go into late evening. As a result of that, I got to thinking. I said, "Well, maybe there are some things we could do differently."

> Jennifer Sengpiel: I talk a lot about disruptive innovation, and there's a lot I love about it because, as somebody new, I was given permission to try new things. [During COVID] I couldn't do things the old way. I literally couldn't do it. That's what disruptive innovation is. You can't do things the way you used to, so you have permission to dream and do something different.

TWELVE

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION



Westminster's Coral Lab

The path to innovative changes at Westminster began with the school's daily academic schedule.

> Chris Knerr: Coming out of COVID, we learned some things. Ending the day earlier can be really nice. Having a longer lunch can be really nice. Because of that, the schedule changed in meaningful ways. We do not end the day at 1 p.m. anymore, because it is hard to market a school that ends early when competitors do not, but those lessons stuck. It created room for connection and for different kinds of experiences, like Connect and Westminster*YOU*. Those changes have stayed, and they have mattered. I am a firm believer that, while you cannot market a school around this, a student's attention span is about forty minutes. So, finding a healthy middle ground at forty-five

minutes, providing a longer lunch, and building in opportunities like extra classes or time to make up a test or get work done has been incredibly beneficial. I think the data backs that up. It slows the school day down in a good way. Westminster already assigns a lot of work. We are rigorous in terms of what we expect from students. Creating what is essentially a study hall for many kids, and then giving them time to be more social at lunch, lets them be human again.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I formed an innovation committee, and I gave them the chance to answer the question based on that experience. I wanted them to look at the schedule, look at everything we're doing, and ask "What if?" What can we do better? What can we do differently? I only had one requirement. I said, "The one thing I want you to do for sure is explore the possibility of starting some Academies." And from that came our Academies and a number of other changes, as well as changes in our schedule.

Micah Gall: Barrett had a vision that he wanted to offer these Academies, and Faith Lutheran [in Las Vegas] was a model for what that could look like. We adopted a lot of what they have, though we obviously modified it. Our academy program is not as large as theirs. Theirs is more fully built into their academic schedule. They have an eighth period. But we did use pieces of what they offer, and we used many of their programs as inspiration and ideas for brainstorming.

The Academies were officially introduced on June 17, 2021, as Westminster *YOU*, a new and innovative, hands-on experiential learning program.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: The Academies are really designed to be more experiential kinds of programs that enrich and supplement core academic programs, but don't replace those programs. So they're really meant to help students explore and experience things that they might not otherwise. They're all designed to reinforce and to enrich the core program.

Micah Gall: Westminster *YOU* is a program that students can take part in outside of the normal academic schedule, but it still takes place within the academic school day. It allows students to explore interests at a deeper level than they otherwise would be able to. When we began building the program, we came back to two guiding

principles. First, we wanted the experiences to be more experiential than the traditional curriculum. Second, we wanted them to be community-driven, serving as a blessing to the Westminster community or beyond in some way, shape, or form.

That first year, Westminster *YOU* consisted of two Academies for upper school students: Business and Law & Constitution. Aside from the Academies, Westminster *YOU* also introduced academic enrichment opportunities for students.

Micah Gall: There are two primary branches of the program. The first is the Academies, which are taken for academic credit. The second is the enrichments, which are not for academic credit but give students opportunities to explore big ideas or programs simply for the sake of exploration. In the enrichments, there is no homework and no academic credit, but students get to spend time with others who share common interests and explore ideas together.

These enrichment courses initially included an Apple certification course, Intro to Coding, the 10 Pillars of Leadership for athletes, Creative Writing, and Theatre Arts.

Jim Butz: They put out an APB asking for new ideas for Academies, and I immediately submitted a proposal for a Fine Arts Academy. Originally, I was thinking we would do deep dives into theatre history, set construction, maybe even produce a show, get everyone up to speed on technical theater, do cabarets, all of that. That was just way too much. We sometimes have over sixty students, and when you have that many kids, some only meeting once a week and others twice a week, the focus has to shift. We take whatever season is coming up and use it as the framework. Every student gets up in front of their peers and performs something. That might be a monologue or a song, even if it's unfinished or unpolished. The goal is simply to get on your feet and do something. As shows approach, we promote them through the academy. When students are preparing auditions, they work on their audition material during academy time or enrichment. They perform those auditions in front of the group before the official audition date and receive feedback. It's become a place of encouragement and skill-building. I've brought in guest teachers, choreographers, people from MoBap, and other industry

professionals to give lectures, lead workshops, or do improv sessions. It gives students a small taste of many different performance styles. In that sense, it's been successful. It's a little chaotic, or maybe very chaotic, but what's really special is seeing students who choose to be there. They aren't required to be. They could be somewhere else. They could be in Connect. Instead, you'll see a 7th grader get up and perform in front of peers ranging all the way up to 12th graders, singing a song or performing a monologue. That takes a tremendous amount of courage. It builds confidence and encouragement, and over time, it creates real strength in these students. The Fine Arts Academy has become a kind of community-building space.

Another idea presented to the administration was to add an oceanography enrichment course to Westminster *YOU*.

Mike Decker: The Academies offer these deeper learning experiences, but if we want a more accessible, lower-pressure version of learning to learn, there are enrichment classes. They would not carry grades. Instead, if a teacher was passionate about something, they could propose it. That is when I went to Micah with the idea for an ocean discovery program and said, "Is this the kind of thing you are talking about?" And he said, "This is exactly what we are talking about. In fact, will you present this to the larger group and show them what this could look like?" So pretty early on, even though it was ocean discovery and admittedly a little unusual, the school embraced it because it fit the vision: You are passionate about this, so teach what you are passionate about.

The concept for Ocean Discovery at Westminster initially began years earlier through a connection with another Christian school.

Mike Decker: [Former STEM director] Bryndyn Crutcher had built a relationship with Valley Christian, which is in San Jose, California, and has an applied science, math, and engineering program that is second to none in the world. It's fully inspiring, excellent, and clearly done for the Lord. We ended up trying to adapt one of their programs, which sent code to the International Space Station via a SpaceX rocket. One of the steps in that process was for us to tour their campus and receive training. While we were there, I mentioned my background in biology and my work in 2012 with green sea turtles in Maui. They

took us down to the basement of their facility, where they had their research and development area. They were working with MBARI, the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, and had the ability to plug into what was essentially a power strip located about a thousand feet below the ocean surface. What they were developing was an underwater ROV (remotely operated vehicle) program that could be driven by anyone in the world through that system. As part of that, one of their teachers said, "If we're already building these robots, why don't we remotely monitor things as well? What if we monitor coral reefs?" That idea led to the creation of a class called Reefs and Remote Monitoring.

During COVID, Valley Christian wanted to expand their oceanic program, and through conversation, they remembered my research background with green sea turtles. They reached out and said, "If you're interested, why don't you sit in on the course with the instructor, take notes like a student, and see how it goes? If it works out, you could teach another section." I sat through the course, and afterward, they asked what I thought. I said, "I'm in." It was really interesting because that course was taught in California to California students, who are very different from Missouri students. And not only that, it was not just kids from San Francisco. It was students from all over the state of California, ranging from San Jose all the way down to San Diego. That experience became my first real exposure to virtual teaching.

Decker's idea to create an ocean discovery enrichment course at Westminster started with that virtual course in California.

Mike Decker: It was a great experience, and I wanted Westminster students to have access to something similar. We asked [Valley Christian] if they would be willing to share their live stream cameras and resources, and during the first semester, we essentially followed their model. By the end of that semester, they provided us with remotely operated vehicles that we could drive in their pool. Our students here sat on their iPads and actually drove ROVs in a pool in San Jose. That alone felt like a huge win.

Ocean Discovery was first offered to middle school students, largely utilizing the curriculum from Valley Christian, but Decker was ready to look to grow the program further.

Mike Decker: The question became, "What is next?" And the next idea was, wouldn't it be cool if we could grow coral on campus? That was really how it started. Just the idea of having a tank of coral. I began researching the condition of coral reefs and why coral matters. The California group was on the Pacific side and was more focused on raising coral as part of a business model, growing high-value aquarium species to supplement the market. That was interesting, but for whatever reason, I started looking at the Atlantic side and focusing more on coral preservation and restoration. I reached out to probably five to ten different experts. The one who responded was Dr. David Vaughan from Plant a Million Corals [in Key West, Florida]. He said, "You're crazy, but I would love to talk to you about coral." He mentioned they were hosting a coral restoration workshop in a couple of weeks and invited me to come down. So I took professional development days, flew down, and spent about half a week learning from Dr. Vaughan about coral restoration practices. I kept saying, "We would love to get some coral up to Westminster," and multiple times the answer was no. Very clearly, "This is not going to happen." Looking back, I understand why. He was protecting his work. He was doing cutting-edge research and did not want additional complications. It was not that he saw me as a problem, but he saw the potential for added friction when he already had plenty to manage.

Over time, we built a relationship and a level of trust. He began to see that I was not trying to make this look easy or claim that we could do it without him. I was genuinely asking for guidance and support. That was when the switch happened. He realized that our students could actually contribute meaningful research and development, potentially saving him time and resources. If I could figure out how to obtain our own license, then it would remove some of the burden from him. That realization set us on the path of figuring out how to get our own license and move forward in a responsible, legitimate way.

To bring coral to Westminster, the first step had to be finding a place to put them. The answer came in the way of a frozen pipe.

Todd Fuller: During Christmas Break in 2022, I was at the Christmas Eve service at church, and my phone rang. I looked down, and it was Ben Collison. I remember thinking that Ben probably wasn't calling me to wish me a Merry Christmas, so I had better step out and take

the call. That was the winter when the temperatures were drastically lower than normal, and we had a pipe freeze and burst in the building. Thankfully, we had an employee up here, Sherry Buis, who was just doing some walking in the building for exercise and came across the water. Providentially, we were able to get it stopped before it got too bad, but the damage was done in the 7th grade hallway. We had to shut that hallway down and replace the carpeting and some of the drywall. There was a center classroom that had been used in the past for math and was currently being used for STEM. Mike Decker said, "Hey, if we have to redo the flooring in this room, can we put tile in?"

Mike Decker: As I was looking at the exposed space, I noticed pipes behind the wall, so I said, "It looks like we already have water and plumbing back here. Why don't we just leave it open, and maybe someday this could become a coral lab?" I ran that idea past Heather Roth, and she said, "Insurance has to patch the walls back up. We have to close it in." But instead of putting carpet back in, she suggested we install vinyl flooring so that if the space ever developed into something else, it would already be suitable. John Sarra picked out the flooring, which was installed, and the room was restored in that way.

The space for a potential coral lab was set up in the 7th grade hallway, but building a coral lab would be quite expensive and would also require specialized equipment, neither of which the STEM program had at the time.

Mike Decker: Around 2023, the robotics program had a very successful season with sponsorships. The school normally allocated a set amount of funding to Robotics each year, and the team came back and said, "We don't need that money this year." I asked whether that funding could be redirected toward another STEM initiative to help grow the program, and the answer was yes. I said, "I want to build a coral lab," and that is really where the conversation began. From there, it became a matter of figuring out how to do it. It ended up being about a two-year process before we actually had coral in the lab. We knew nothing about anything. Then, out of nowhere, Tim Hall said, "Hey, you know, I used to do saltwater tanks. We actually still make RODI water here at the school, and I used to work with a guy named Joe Faszl at SeaScapes Studio. If you reach out to him, he might be a good resource." And that literally became the connection.

> Since then, we have also been well supported through Plant a Million Corals, as well as the St. Louis Aquarium and Tim Piedemonte, who oversees the aquarium's life support systems and has helped bring many of Joe's ideas to life. Tim [Piedemonte] came in, looked at what we were doing, and said, "Yeah, this is good." So we have had a lot of oversight from people who are experienced in marine biology, people that God has just provided, and they are all right here. It is honestly insane to think about.

Building the coral lab was a lengthy process, but Decker's desire to bring Atlantic coral—as opposed to Pacific coral—would pose a unique challenge. Atlantic stony coral, which Mike was hoping to grow, is a federally protected species under the 2018 Florida Coral Rescue Act. As Westminster built the coral lab, only twenty-eight institutions across the globe had a license to store and maintain protected Atlantic coral genetic broodstock. These institutions include aquariums, universities, and zoos. A high school, particularly one in Missouri, obtaining a license was unheard of.

> Mike Decker: It started with me saying, "I want coral." OK, how do you get it? At first, the answer [from Dr. Vaughn] was, "You can use coral under my license." Then, government programs changed. Certain programs were shut down, and suddenly, we could no longer receive licensing through other entities. It was actually coral veterinarian [and College of the Florida Keys professor] Dr. Charles Gregory, who pointed me toward the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Dr. Gregory said, "These rescue corals are regulated by a different group. If you can frame what you are doing as scientific research, you may be able to receive corals that way." So, working with him and with Dr. Vaughn, we created a scientific research proposal, complete with a research topic, hypothesis, abstract, and supporting documentation. We submitted it to the state of Florida, and they responded favorably. They told us that what we were proposing, specifically for 3D scanning coral to digitally monitor growth rates, was something that had not been done before. As a result, our license is specifically for research and development and scientific research focused on 3D scanning of [Atlantic stony] coral. That is the next step we are walking into now, and once again, it is a clear example of God opening doors we never could have planned on our own.

With a special activities license (SAL) for scientific research approved by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the lab needed to be specifically designed to grow Atlantic coral.

> Mike Decker: A tremendous amount of planning and execution has gone into building a lab that really has never been done before. It is uniquely Florida. We do not allow anything Pacific or from any other region of the world into the lab. It is fully biosecure, from the bacteria to the algae to the sponges and everything in between. Everything comes directly from Florida waters, and we have been extremely intentional about that. Even the lighting in the lab has been carefully selected to replicate the light frequency of South Florida or Key West. Right now, our corals are doing better than the corals in Florida. The corals we have cloned from Florida stock, if placed side by side, are bigger, healthier, and stronger here. Praise God for that. We truly did not know whether Missouri water would be able to sustain them. We did not know if there would be too much of this mineral or not enough of that, or whether something unseen would prevent success. To see these corals now thriving here has been incredible.

The entire process of building the coral lab, obtaining an SAL, and actually bringing coral to Westminster is a testament to God's faithfulness.

> Mike Decker: There was a lot of planning, permitting, networking, and checking requirements to determine what this could realistically look like. Looking back, there were simply too many coincidences stacked on top of each other to be coincidences. This has very clearly been God working and structuring the whole thing, and He is doing some really incredible things. From the beginning, there were moments that felt unmistakable. For example, we needed a veterinarian to certify the lab and transport the coral. We scheduled the ribbon-cutting event months in advance, and the night before the event, we received final approval for [Dr. Gregory] to deliver the coral the next day. Watching how God went before us, organized the details, and reaffirmed the work in His perfect timing was incredible. It felt like Him saying, "Yes, this is what I want you to do."
>
> God provides, and I cannot say that enough. Hopefully, that is the message that comes out of this. As we look toward the future, we have to rely on God's provision and trust that He is at work. We

have to pay attention, keep our eyes open, and be ready for the opportunities He puts in front of us. Our hope is to continue growing them and eventually return them to Florida, where they can live out their life cycles, grow large and strong, and help rebuild reefs. That is the heart of this work. Restoration. It is exciting to do the research and to give students hands-on experience, but at the core, this is about helping restore something we have broken. As humans, we have not always done a great job of stewarding God's creation. This lab gives our students the opportunity to learn science deeply, to engage in real research, and to play an active role in restoration. That combination is what makes this so meaningful.

The STEM Academy did not stop at building a coral lab. Beginning in the 2025–2026 school year, Westminster also began offering both an aviation and a medical program to middle and high school students.

Mike Decker: When we began asking the question, "What is STEM at Westminster?" I saw it first and foremost as the passing on of knowledge, of an older generation passing information, skills, and wisdom to a younger generation. At the core of that is problem-solving. If we can teach students how to solve problems, or at least give them a clear problem-solving process, then they are equipped to solve almost any problem they encounter. Beyond that, the next essential piece is connecting students to industries and providing opportunities they would not typically have access to. I think that is one of the most distinguishing directions we are heading. In aviation, for example, we now have incredible people helping to develop that program. In medical, with leaders like Katie Bachman, that program may become one of the biggest things we do on campus.

From the very beginning, connecting students to industries and opening doors to otherwise inaccessible opportunities was central to the vision. As these programs develop, aviation is now part of the upper school, with the end goal of allowing students to explore advanced aviation and work toward achieving a private pilot license (PPL), a Part 107 commercial drone license, and additional ratings. The medical program we are developing is shaping up to be truly remarkable, giving students hands-on, bedside-style opportunities to work in medical or hospital-like settings that they would normally not experience until after graduation. That combination of service,

learning, and real-world impact is what these experiential learning programs are all about. Students will graduate with a Westminster diploma, but they will also leave with meaningful experiences, certifications, and connections.

Several years in, Westminster *YOU* has continued to thrive as the school continues to pursue new ways to grow and provide new opportunities for students.

Micah Gall: The program has been running for multiple years now, and one of its greatest strengths is that it is entirely by choice, which makes it organic. All of the enrichment offerings come from teacher proposals, meaning teachers are choosing to teach something they are genuinely interested in and might not otherwise have the opportunity to teach. Student participation is also completely optional. No one is forced to take part in these programs. Students who choose not to participate in Westminster *YOU* use that time in other ways. That time has evolved into what we now call Connect, but previously it was called Advisory. It gives students space to work on homework, get caught up, meet with teachers, and receive additional support as needed.

Innovation at Westminster has not been limited to the Academies and enrichments, either. For many years, Westminster has invited seniors to participate in Summer Seminars in which students spend several days outdoors.

Chris Knerr: The idea for Summer Seminars actually started with a friend of mine, Warren Smith. We were standing around on the old campus, what we used to call the salad bar area, just talking. I remember saying something like, "Wouldn't it be cool if ..." and over time we began to sketch the idea out. Originally, the thought was to go somewhere like Montana. I remember explaining the idea to Scott and saying, "We're going to drive through the night to get to Montana," and Scott just gave me that Scott Holley look and said, "No, no, you're not." Around that time, I had been on a mountain biking trip with a friend, and one of the best places we stopped was in South Dakota. I started looking into it more. It was a long drive, but still within range, and it had everything we were looking for. So I got Warren on board, then Larry Hughes, then Ann Heyse, and we ended up doing the first trip in 2005.

The vision for Summer Seminars was primarily centered on getting students outdoors to engage both the mind and the body.

> Chris Knerr: From the beginning, and still today, we focused on hiking, biking, and kayaking. But we also wanted to engage the life of the mind. We developed a curriculum that went along with South Dakota and fit its history and context. The idea was to live in community for ten days, camping in tents, and really stretch students. Some of them had never been in a tent before. We even had a few who had never ridden a bike. For us, it was about stepping into that space and seeing what would happen.
>
> I really hope that students come away with a genuine love for the outdoors. One of the best things I hear is a student saying, "I don't need my phone." That may not sound particularly spiritual on the surface, but it points to something deeper: reconnecting with reality, with creation, and with what is around them. Other students take things from the core experiences that give them a vision for their own lives. If the cores are the academic pieces, then this becomes something that shapes how they think about who they are and where they are going. Some students grow especially close to the counselors. Over the course of ten days, those counselors become more than faculty. The time and conversations shared are life-changing. I still receive emails from students who say that God really changed them through that program. They may not always use the language of "God changed my mind," but they describe it as a complete experience, something that truly shaped them.

The annual senior retreat was another opportunity for improvement following the pandemic, moving it from the end of the school year to the end of summer, to provide the senior class with an opportunity to grow together as a community and build stronger relationships ahead of their final year of high school.

> Dan Burke: There wasn't very good attendance at the end-of-year event, which was understandable. By that point, you already have graduation parties, and graduation itself is a time when the whole class is getting together anyway. There is just a lot going on in May that competes for people's time. Athletics are wrapping up, too. So there was very low attendance, and it felt like, if you're going to do it,

why not do it for everybody? Part of this came out of COVID. I went to Susie [Brown] and said, "I want to get this class together. They're hungry." The lockdown was fun for about two weeks, and then kids got depressed. They missed being together. They would drive up [to Westminster] and sit in big circles in their cars just to hang out and see each other's faces. I said, "I don't care if we have to wear masks or whatever, we're going." I wanted an opportunity to create a better senior retreat, one where we could go out and have fun with the kids and where the adults actually played with them. Playing games, doing hilarious skits, chasing them around with flashlights, throwing stuff at them, and just being together, but also worshiping with them, and then having time to visualize with them about what their senior year could be like. That it didn't have to be a year of just jumping through hoops, but could be a real opportunity to bond and to lead the culture of the whole school. That's what we did, and it went really well. The next year, it went even better. [For the class of 2026] I was able to hand it fully back to Student Life, where it belongs, and they did a wonderful job. All I did was go and speak. So that's why we did it, and I think it's worked pretty well.

One of the most interesting opportunities for Westminster students to receive hands-on experiential learning while in high school came in the form of a cup of coffee.

Todd Fuller: A lot of the best ideas at Westminster come from the grassroots efforts, from teachers who are there on the front lines who have an idea. One of the most amazing things is Summer Seminar and what Chris Knerr has built there. Another is all the things Han Kim has done [with A/V and in his classes]. There's certainly a place for administration to lead the charge in certain areas, but I think the best ideas have come from the faculty, because they're living there with students day to day. Pawprint Coffee is one of those things.

Pawprint Coffee originally began as a student project in Jonathan Horn's business class in 2017.

Parker Gelber '18: The idea for selling coffee came from Mr. Horn's goal of teaching business by having us actually start one. Prior to

> Pawprint, we worked with existing companies and helped them with digital marketing projects, but I think he ultimately decided it would be more impactful for us to build something from scratch. A coffee shop within the school felt like a natural fit. Students could take shifts running it, it benefited the school community, and we already knew there was demand since so many students were spending money at the bookstore on drinks and snacks.
>
> The original goal of Pawprint went beyond being just a class project. It was designed as a hands-on way for students to learn how a real business works, from marketing and sales to accounting and inventory management. For students interested in entrepreneurship, learning strictly from a textbook can be tough. Pawprint gave us a tangible, real-world way to actually apply what we were learning and see the results of our decisions.

The idea for a student-run coffee shop was inspiring, and Jonathan Horn looked to make it a more permanent program at Westminster.

> Todd Fuller: Jonathan Horn had this vision, and he wanted to move into the Hub and transform it into a coffeehouse. We told him we didn't know how this was going to go, so we were going to take small steps. We gave him some money, and we allowed him to use the concessions window in the Grand Entry and told him he could run the shop before and after school. So, Jonathan started the program. The first year or two, students focused only on selling coffee and on marketing. You have to start somewhere. [Jonathan] got the ball rolling on that.

Fuller began teaching in the business department in 2018 following a mid-year departure of a faculty member. Two years later, he began working more directly with Pawprint.

> Todd Fuller: The longer I've been here, the more my job has expanded, and moving into the classroom is one of the great things that has happened to me. During the interim year, I had to change some of my day-to-day responsibilities in order to have time to lead the school, and so I delegated some things and found ways to restructure my job. In December 2017, we found out that a teacher was leaving. I went to Scott Holley and said that I would be happy to

take a shot at teaching that accounting class. I knew that was one of the classes we were trying to fill, and I said I'd be happy to help if they needed me. Scott Vonder Bruegge gave me some tips, and thankfully, there was a nice curriculum already built, so I had something to go on. I stepped into the classroom that spring of 2018 and taught a class. I was probably never as nervous in my entire career as I was walking to class that first day because I didn't know what to expect. It was just something very different, but it was a really great experience. I came back at the end of that semester, went to Scott [Holley], and said, "I'd kind of like to do this again." I wanted to see what it would be like to not have to lesson plan every single night and figure out what I'm doing. Scott said they'd love to have me stay, so that started my move into the classroom, and I've been doing that ever since. It's a great part of my job. Perhaps one of the most rewarding things I do.

Having joined the business department to teach an accounting class, Fuller later joined Pawprint.

> Todd Fuller: I started seeing my accounting kids going into Pawprint, but they weren't keeping track of the finances. I asked what if I stepped in and started working with these kids to track the finances of this business? And that was about the same time that Brian Maloy was stepping in. He took over Pawprint, and we started working together. That first year, I would meet with the kids once a week, and we would go over some of their financial transactions, and I'd help them make some entries. The next year, I got a little more involved. Then, with the class of 2022, I started going to class every day. I was already teaching second hour, so I'd be up there anyway for first hour. The kids were great. They made the experience, and that was such a special group. That was the first year we were in what is now the esports room [for the classroom side of Pawprint], and that was also the first year we moved the coffee shop into the Hub. That's really when Pawprint hit its stride. We moved into the Hub because Pawprint had proven itself as a good educational experience, and we were renovating the Hub anyway. Everything came together at the right time.

Pawprint has continued to grow, thriving in the Hub, and has become one of Westminster's most popular programs for business students and coffee lovers alike.

Todd Fuller: In Pawprint now, it is a student-run business where the kids are divided into teams, and each team has responsibilities. There's an operations team that is responsible for the recipes, the menus, and the inventory. The finance team I work with really closely, and they're in charge of handling all the transactions, paying any bills, and they get credit cards, so they do some shopping. The HR team schedules their classmates to work in the business, and the marketing team does all the marketing campaigns and social media flyers. [In the 2025–26 school year] they've also launched a digital menu board. The community team is in charge of community events. Every year, it gets better because we're learning what the kids are capable of, and we learn how to teach it better. It's been a really rewarding experience for these students.

Parker Gelber '18: Hearing that Pawprint is still running is awesome. One of the most valuable parts for me was being there at the very beginning, trying ideas, making mistakes, and throwing everything at the wall to see what worked. I wish every student had the chance to experience that full entrepreneurial journey from day one. It's said that roughly 90 percent of start-ups fail within their first five years, so the fact that Pawprint is not only still around but continuing to grow says a lot about the foundation that was built and the way it's been carried forward.

Innovation at Westminster even goes beyond the classroom or summer trips, with recent changes made to enhance the admissions process as well.

Jennifer Sengpiel: All I want to do is tell the incredible stories of this place and be wildly articulate about who we are, what we believe, and why Westminster. If it meets you where you are, then great. Apply. Let's do this. Let's be in partnership together. The core of that is getting the story out. You have to amplify it. You have to meet people where they are, because a lot of people still don't know Westminster. South County doesn't really know Westminster. You go across the river into St. Charles, and Westminster is unknown. To me, that's an opportunity. Fundamentally, I had to do an audit and ask, where aren't we? The answer was a lot of places, especially digitally. Mike Rohlfing is a phenomenal storyteller and a gifted videographer. I told him, "If you need better equipment, let's do it. Let's tell our story. Let's capture it. Let's walk the halls.

> Let's get out of the office." That was really the shift. Storytelling and amplification. Digital marketing was critical to that. We also changed things on the admissions side. We stopped doing group tours and started doing one-on-one family tours, because families want to be known and seen. I didn't want them bounced around to different people internally. I wanted them to have one admissions partner, to tell their story once, to be known, helped, and connected. Their tour would be tailored to what they needed. And for students, especially rising 9th graders, if they're not feeling it, it's not happening. So connecting with their passions on a one-on-one tour, letting them help guide the experience, mattered.

Along with the one-on-one family tours, Westminster's annual Open House presented an opportunity to consider new ways to tell the story of Westminster to prospective families.

> Jennifer Sengpiel: COVID really helped with [rethinking Open House]. We had great team members, and I remember when I first started, Angie Lauer said, "I've always thought about doing an actual open house. They call it an open house, but could it be a legitimate open house?" During COVID, we did Open House, but we had to do two of them. One at 5 p.m. and one at 7:30 p.m. We had to spread people out in the Arena. They couldn't sit close together, and I said that I was not putting them in classrooms. It became exhibit, exhibit, exhibit, and that's how it was born. Since then, we've just amplified it and tried to keep outdoing ourselves.

Attendance at Open House during the 2020–2021 school year was around 120 people. In October 2025, nearly six hundred people attended.

Working alongside admissions, Westminster's communications team sought to bring new ideas to reach more families. One of the greatest examples was the redesign of the school's website.

> Mike Rohlfing: The first impression a lot of people are going to have of your school is your online presence. Because of that, it's really important for it to look nice, to be clear, to be consistent, and to be easy to navigate. It needs to tell a story quickly and make sure it gives

people the answers they're looking for, or at least points them to where those answers can be found.

Jennifer Sengpiel: The website we had was beautiful. They did a massive web update right before I started, and Amy Roff was heavily involved in that, and it was gorgeous. It was amazing. The problem, though, with web design, content strategy, and search engine optimization (SEO) is that it changes as fast as the algorithms do. If you're not tending to it on a regular basis, it quickly becomes obsolete. Once we got through [COVID], I started turning my attention to the website for a few reasons. First, it was a WordPress site, and I just didn't believe that was going to take us into the future. Second, our search feature wasn't working. Our calendar wasn't robust. Families were telling us there were things they desperately wanted that we just couldn't provide anymore. It had become antiquated. On top of that, fixing anything on the site was too expensive. The scrolling was too long, the animation started to feel outdated, and we simply weren't tending to it.

Your website is your window to the world, and we were really only talking to [prospective parents]. I've spent my whole career in professional services, and education is a professional service. We're not selling a shoe or a pair of glasses; we're transferring expertise and knowledge from a teacher to a student. That is a professional service. What does a website do? It's a platform to give that expertise away for free through thought leadership. As a school, we have so much expertise in this building. How does Christian education integrate biblical truth into every aspect of school life? What does it mean to raise a child in the digital age? I wanted us to write about all of that. We needed to be speaking to prospective families, current families, alumni, and employees. Our website needed to be a one-stop shop for thought leadership, resources, and enrollment growth. To me, that was a no-brainer. The way the site was constructed on WordPress just wouldn't allow us to do that, so we had to start over, and that's what we did with Finalsite.

In the summer of 2024, the communications team partnered with Finalsite to fully rebuild the school's website, incorporating updated information, photos, and best practices for the online world.

Mike Rohlfing: Partnering with an outside company to do that is always going to be challenging, because they only know so much about you. Our [marketing and communications] team includes two alumni, someone who's been here for many, many years, and someone who's a Westminster parent. We all know this place far better than anyone outside of it ever could. Translating that lived knowledge—who we are, what matters here—into bits and bytes and code is never easy. Creating a new website is always a challenge. It took a lot of back-and-forth, but we got there eventually. The new site has a fresher, simpler design. It's much easier to find things, with new menus and dropdowns all at the top that don't require a lot of clicks to get where you need to go. It's also very easy for us to guide people in the right direction by adjusting things at the top of the page, like highlighting popular searches. There's now a search bar that actually works properly, which our previous site didn't have. You can type in what you're looking for and quickly get to the right spot on the site. We've also recently added an AI chatbot that knows our site really well, and we can manage it from the backend if it doesn't. It allows people to get answers to their questions very quickly. At the end of the day, it's all about getting people answers as fast as possible and moving them into the admissions pipeline as easily as possible, so they can inquire, tour, and apply.

Amy Roff: Our previous website looked great, but over time, some of its functionality no longer met our needs. It was time to build a new site that could adapt to an ever-changing digital landscape. We spent a lot of time evaluating every page, streamlining content where there was too much, and making sure information was intuitive and easy to navigate. At the same time, it was a genuinely fun project. We had the opportunity to look closely at every part of the school and showcase the incredible work happening across campus through more photos, videos, testimonials, and storytelling. The result is a site that reflects who we are, supports our current families, and clearly communicates our mission to prospective families.

The new website launched in September 2024 and was designed to appeal to prospective families as well as the Westminster community of current students, parents, faculty and staff, and alumni. The results were resoundingly positive.

> Jennifer Sengpiel: If you ask about the specific benefits of the new site, the lowest-hanging fruit is that our search feature works. Our phones ring exponentially less with frustrated parents who can't find things. The search doesn't even have to be spelled correctly, and it still works. People are using it. Engagement is up. Our Google Analytics reflects that. People are interacting with the site in ways they couldn't before. We also now have a chat feature, which has become a major inquiry point for admissions. Current families use it too. They'll ask things like, "When is the next volleyball game?" That kind of engagement just wasn't happening before. The calendar works. The search works. The site is highly optimized.

Having a working and successful website, though, takes consistency and continuous efforts to keep up with the latest best practices.

> Jennifer Sengpiel: Now that we're more than a year into this, my focus is on taking that engagement and growing our thought leadership. That's where Campus Conversations came from. The writing Christian [Meeks] is doing, the expertise we're putting out there, is becoming viral. [Aaron] Layton's Chapel, our valedictorian speeches, those kinds of things are being found online. People discover us through the website and then ask, "What's that school about?" That's how we grow. It increases word of mouth.

Part of what has made enrollment so successful in recent years is Westminster's innovative spirit, with families thrilled to see programs such as Pawprint and the new coral lab on display as they go on tours or participate in Open House. Another part is Westminster's desire to see innovation in the form of updates to the building itself, creating a more visually desirable campus.

> Jennifer Sengpiel: It's so funny. You can't really help making your passions known to people. My collegiate background is a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art and English. I made art, and I wrote. That's my background. I did not get a marketing degree or a business degree in college. At my core, I am a creative individual. Peggy [Johnson] knew my role, and I became part of what was essentially the Beautification Committee.

The first major update to renovate Westminster's Town & Country campus was done to the Hub ahead of the 2021–2022 school year.

Jennifer Sengpiel: Dani [Butler] had the original idea of turning the Hub into something new. That was the first project we did, and it happened quickly. I remember looking at this big, beautiful space and feeling giddy. We partnered with our furniture company, designed the space, and had ideas for what we wanted it to be. We had donor funding, designed it, and it turned out great.

Amy Roff: I loved getting to help choose the paint colors and accessories for the Hub because it combined my role as graphic designer with my interest in interior design. I remember being nervous about choosing such bold colors when most of the school was beige. Now, when I walk by the Hub, it feels like such a bright spot that brings great energy to our school and encourages community.

The renovation of the Hub completely transformed the space, and when Pawprint Coffee moved in, it truly became a "hub" for the community to engage and build relationships with one another. With the success of the new Hub, the Beautification Committee turned to updating the Grand Entry as well.

Jennifer Sengpiel: After [the Hub], I thought, *OK, if you trust me with that, then the brown has to go in the Grand Entry.* We repainted the whole thing over Christmas break. People left, and it was chocolate brown. They came back, and it was navy. Todd [Fuller] agreed to it. Barrett [Mosbacker] said yes. We all picked the color together. I was so nervous. I remember being out of town when Mike Rohlfing sent me a picture and said, "It looks awesome."

Updating the appearance of the school is important for taking care of the gifts and blessings God has given Westminster.

Jennifer Sengpiel: I'm always thinking about our brand and who we are, and about bringing this building into today. This is a luxury product. Our tuition reflects that, and the space needs to reflect it too. It can't feel dated. So I've been slowly making small changes here and there that aren't extremely cost-prohibitive, just trying to bring us into more current times.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: This is a beautiful campus, and we have nearly all the resources a person could possibly want. You know,

it's interesting. I had lunch with a couple of people, and one of the individuals is from another country, a European country, trying to run a Christian school, and they have so little in comparison. There's so much more interference by the state and all of these sorts of things. And it's easy for us, because we've been blessed so much, to not realize just how blessed we are, with the freedom and the flexibility to do what we want, but also just the magnificent resources that we have in the facilities. Other things we would like to improve, yes, and we'll probably do that, but it's a beautiful facility. It provides all the resources that we need to accomplish the core mission of what we want to do. Now, there are some challenges. It's a big building, and so people can get separated a little bit. It can be hard to maintain a sense of community in some cases, and good communication. So that's something we have to constantly work on. But we're very blessed to have this fine facility.

Renovating the building has also provided opportunities to bring new ideas to Westminster, such as esports.

Cory Snyder: Jen [Sengpiel] was really the impetus for it. I'm not going to take credit for that. She had been thinking about it, and there were schools in St. Louis already doing it and doing it really well. She felt strongly that it would help our enrollment. She was trying to find a home for it in the building, figuring out who was really going to take charge of it, manage it, and shepherd it. Eventually, I said it could fall under athletics, which wasn't the original plan. She really spearheaded it, got the ball rolling, and then handed it off to us. She felt like we could reach prospective students that we hadn't been able to reach before. From there, it became a matter of finding the right coach and waiting for that person to come along, and that took some time. We had the plans in place, and then God brought Josh Leary to us, almost out of nowhere. Nobody really knew him. He applied, we met him, and it was immediately clear how special he was. Glenn [Adams] agreed to help spearhead things as a program coordinator and walk alongside Josh. Then it became about structuring the program. What games are we going to play? What games are we not going to play? How do we structure the high school program and the middle school program? Do we tier it the way we tier our other athletics at Westminster in terms of commitment level and time?

> Shannon Kekhaev: Esports as a concept in a school—especially at the height of conversations around the anxious generation and understanding kids, technology, and its impact—really needed some explanation. Giving kids who love video games or gaming in general a space where they can be known, seen, and nurtured is really important. Athletics at Westminster are awesome. The arts community is amazing. But there is a group of kids whose social needs may not have been fully met through an activity or a club. Esports became an opportunity to say, "We care about all kids at Westminster." Having Josh [Leary] come in as the coach and create such a nurturing team atmosphere has made a huge difference. It's given my son, specifically, a lot of confidence. It's given him something to be part of that's bigger than himself. The team has also had a lot of success, which is wonderful.

Esports is currently the fastest-growing sport in the world, particularly at the middle and high school level.

> Cory Snyder: Esports is considered an emerging sport in MSHSAA, which basically means there aren't enough schools registered for it yet. There are probably enough schools participating, but not enough officially registered to make it a full MSHSAA sport. It actually came up for a vote to become a full sport, and the esports community, through the athletic directors, said no. We decided we wanted to keep esports as something that operates outside of MSHSAA. The reason for that is flexibility. If esports became a full MSHSAA sport, it would likely be confined to one season, probably one game, with one state championship. Then you'd have all the offseason restrictions where you couldn't really do anything. So it might become, for example, a winter sport where you play Super Smash Bros. from November to March, and then that's it. You wouldn't be able to do anything else. That would cut out kids who play other games like Rocket League.

While esports may seem, at a glance, to be nothing like football, basketball, or soccer, at Westminster, it is held to the same athletic standards as every other sport.

> Cory Snyder: [Esports] is no different than our other athletic sports. You're learning how to win with humility and lose with grace, how to interact with your opponents and officials, if they're there, and

with your teammates. What we're trying to teach in esports is no different than what we're trying to teach in baseball, soccer, or lacrosse. It just happens to be video games. When people ask, "Why esports?" it's pretty easy for me to answer. God blesses people with talents and gifts across the spectrum. That includes academic gifts, fine arts gifts, visual arts gifts, and athletic gifts. Some kids are really good at video games. That can be their platform to glorify God, to learn about themselves, to compete, and to make God known to others. Why wouldn't we want to speak into something they're already going to be doing anyway and help develop it? Josh [Leary] does a great job making sure it's not just about playing video games. He coaches them. They break down gameplay. He gives them drills and specific things to work on. He also talks about the spiritual side of competition and athletics. It's been a really good addition to the school and to our athletic program.

Like the other athletic teams, esports follows the Ten Athletic Pillars, the first two of which are to "Honor Jesus Christ in all things" and "Christian character defines who we are." These pillars are particularly important in the online world.

> Cory Snyder: There's a component in esports competition where students are on Discord (an online communication platform) and have opportunities to talk with opponents and interact in those spaces. Then they also come together in person for state championships, which we've sent students to in the past couple of years. There are real opportunities to practice those skills. It's also about understanding that just because you're online doesn't mean you're a nameless face. You don't get to say whatever you want or act however you want just because someone can't see you. There's a strong digital citizenship component. You're interacting with others as if you were on a playing field or on a wrestling mat. When you're sitting behind a keyboard, you're still a person, and they're still a person. You still have an opportunity to reflect God in the way you act, the way you behave, and the things you say.

Another need in the Westminster community was for summer theatre programming with a distinctly Christian worldview that could provide new opportunities for middle and high school students interested in stage productions.

> Jim Butz: We have a lot of students who want to be involved in theatre and want to perform. Every year, far more students audition for our productions than we can possibly cast, and certainly far more than can be given sizable roles. The opportunities are few, and the kids are many, so we wanted to create one more avenue, not only for skill building, but specifically for students who may not land lead or even supporting roles. There's a real catch-22 there. How do you build skills if you never get the opportunity in the first place? We wanted to embed something into the program that gives everyone a chance, especially those students who are often considered but don't quite make the cast.

The Westminster Summer Players launched in the summer of 2025 with nearly twenty participants, including both Westminster and non-Westminster kids.

> Jim Butz: [Allen Schwamb] and I ran Summer Players for one season and saw that it worked. It's done exactly what we hoped. Several students ended up becoming more deeply involved in our program because of it, and we even had a couple of students who weren't even planning to attend Westminster participate and then end up enrolling.

All of the wonderful, innovative changes at Westminster were made possible by the generosity of so many within the community. Much of which stemmed from the most recent capital campaign, *Our Faith. Our Future. Our Time. The Campaign for Westminster*, which began in 2020 through a feasibility study.

> Shannon Kekhaev: The feasibility study was really about reaching out to the community and asking whether this was something they would want to be a part of, specifically to accelerate debt principal payments, increase tuition grants for families, and support innovative programming. That messaging and communication began very quietly in 2020 and was launched more publicly in 2021, inviting major gifts and long-term pledges. By 2022, the campaign was about $14.5 million toward a $25 million goal.

Shannon Kekhaev took over as the director of development operations at Westminster in 2023 and helped to lead the public phase of the capital

campaign. By 2025, *Our Faith. Our Future. Our Time. The Campaign for Westminster* had reached $25.99 million.

> Shannon Kekhaev: Generosity moves missions forward. The fact that we've been able to go out and invite people to help pay down our debt through giving is miraculous. As a Christian school, we want to be accessible to as many families as possible. There are families here who can pay full tuition, and there are families here who cannot. Bridging that gap is really the role of generosity. Certainly, stewardship matters, how we use our finances to meet the needs of the school, but in large part, filling in those gaps comes through giving. It's God working through the hearts of families, giving resources to certain people, and those people prayerfully choosing to share what they've been given so that Westminster can thrive. That generosity supports tuition grants and helps students and families receive a Christian education. It also supports programs. Many of the new things we've launched, whether through different Academies or the STEM program, have been funded through giving.

Generous funding has provided incredible opportunities for students, including the Leadership Institute, discipleship groups, and STEM enrichments, but it is also crucial in ensuring that Westminster can continue to serve families year after year.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: First and foremost, our job here is to engage young men and women to change the world and have an impact for Jesus Christ. We can't do that without filling this building with students. We want every Christian family to be able to access this education because we have a greater purpose to do God's work. To think, even for a minute, that money would stand in the way of that is heartbreaking. So that's where accessibility comes in. We want the school to reflect God's kingdom, and that means learners from all different backgrounds and with different ways of learning. We have to be accessible to that. We offer need-based tuition grants, and we work with families. Our tuition grant application is not just debits and credits, what you owe and what you don't, plug it into FACTS, and it spits out a yes or no. That's not how it works, because life happens. There are families caring for elderly parents. There are students in crisis who may need additional support outside of school. When I first started, about 20 percent of our families were on tuition

grants, and now we're at 37 percent. Accessibility is key to achieving our mission and serving families well.

Accessibility is particularly crucial as Westminster continues to partner with families and look for the best ways to enable all students to find a home at WCA. One example is special services, which has continued to grow since the program first launched in the 1990s.

Chris Pederson: Jim Marsh really understood the value of reenrolling families. He believed that if we were truly partnering with families, the school had to expand how we supported them. He has told the story of a conversation with a family where one sibling could enroll at Westminster, but the other could not, and he was not OK with that. He felt strongly that we had to figure out how to make it work. That conviction is really where the program began. The initial launch was hard, and I think it sputtered, maybe even failed. The second launch was when the right people were in place to get it off the ground. Kate Vonder Bruegge played a major role in that, working alongside Sherry Blough, Jim, and likely the administrative team. Kate was able to help establish the program in a meaningful way, and Lucy Erdman came in shortly after. The structure that was built then is essentially the structure we still have now. It is a resource room model at the grade level. Over time, we have expanded who we serve and how we serve them, but the foundation has remained the same. The goal has always been for students to experience all of Westminster. Inclusion has been a central value, but there is also the reality that some students need explicit support in learning how to learn. That requires pulling them out for targeted instruction and intentional support.

By 2019, the special services program was struggling as confusion arose as to the ultimate goal and purpose of the program.

Chris Pederson: When Jen Sengpiel came in, around the same time I [became director of special services], we started having conversations about how the learning center was a little confusing conceptually. I had heard echoes of this before. The term "learning center" suggests a single location, one central place. That was true on the old campus. When we moved here, though, the learning center existed at every grade level, which meant it was actually multiple locations. That created some confusion. At the same time, we were trying to figure

out how to talk about what we were then calling the extended learning center. As is still true today, the increasing variability in student profiles was pushing us in a lot of different directions.

Rising costs also became an issue for special services.

Jennifer Sengpiel: We had the Learning Center (TLC) and the Extended Learning Center (ELC), but financially, the ELC was not creating enough revenue to cover the expenses of operating it. We weren't covering resources. We weren't covering teacher pay. It was upside down and completely unsustainable. In a school, quality can never suffer, ever, and what we were looking at was the reality that we were not going to be able to pay the people needed to serve students at that level of need. That was terrifying. So [Chris Pederson] and I came together and said we have to hit pause, because something is out of whack here. We paused the ELC program. In total, it was paused for about two years. We grandfathered in the students who were already enrolled, but for those two years, we continued enrolling students in the Learning Center while pausing the ELC piece. That launched more than a year of committee work, asking some hard questions. Is ELC, this level of service, something we can do? Can we do it well? And is it on mission? We ultimately decided yes, this is missional work, and this is something we should be doing.

In 2023, the Learning Center and Extender Learning Center were consolidated into a restructured special services program called Pathways.

Chris Pederson: The idea of Pathways came from Jen. We leaned into it because it made the concept easier to explain to prospective families. It also allowed us to bring all of our support structures under one framework, instead of separating things into the Learning Center and the Extended Learning Center.

Jennifer Sengpiel: If we were going to continue, we had to fix how we were doing it. I also didn't love the naming convention of TLC and ELC. Families didn't like it either. They felt like labels. These students simply learn differently. There's no right or wrong in that. We felt strongly that the naming needed to change. That's how Pathways was created. There are different paths that learners take. We then developed eight levels of service. Levels one through four are more

mild, and five through eight are more moderate. I think it's going really well. It's much clearer what we do and how we do it. The name Pathways is really resonating with families. We're very thoughtful about the program and the resources required to fund it.

Ensuring that special services would continue to exist at Westminster was incredibly important. Serving Christian families is the mission of the school, regardless of background. The diversity of Westminster is not intended as a statistic or metric for appealing to prospective families but as a dedication to reflect the kingdom of God.

Aaron Layton: Jim and I were very intentional about how we defined diversity from a biblical worldview. We knew that the world's definition was not going to be our foundation. So we did the hard work of defining what diversity meant at Westminster Christian Academy. We grounded it in Scripture, particularly 1 Corinthians 12 and Revelation 7:9, and we identified four areas: Church affiliation, socioeconomic status, learning styles, and ethnicity. We wrote this into what became the Westminster Statement of Diversity. That framework has endured, and even now, it has helped us navigate conversations around diversity because it was always rooted in the gospel.

Jim Marsh: This is what [Westminster] really is all about. We're focused on our effort to build a student body that reflects the kingdom of God on earth. If we're truly preparing more young people to engage the world and change it for Jesus Christ, if you're going to change the world, you're going to have to know about the world and the fact that there are different people in the world with different needs and different colors.

The international student program, which began in 2002, is a powerful example of the kingdom of God being reflected at Westminster, and that vision of diversity has only continued to grow beyond Town & Country, beyond St. Louis, and beyond the United States.

Dr. Dani Butler: Westminster now partners with Christian schools in France, Japan, Spain, Korea, and Zambia, and it all began with a call from my uncle. My uncle wanted to start a new Christian school [Saemmul Christian Academy] in Korea, and he asked me if Westminster could help them prepare before they officially launched.

> Westminster decided to share virtually everything we had—from business office systems to curriculum—so they could build a strong foundation for their middle and high school. For ten years, they have sent their senior leadership, department chairs, faculty, staff, and members of their support team to learn from Westminster for two weeks at a time. With a vast network of Christian schools, we have slowly expanded our global partnerships with five Christian schools on different continents with a shared vision.

With Westminster partnering with Saemmul Christian Academy in Seoul, South Korea, several of the faculty began wondering how Westminster could continue to reach out globally and partner with other schools.

> Dr. Dani Butler: The world language department proposed starting a language immersion summer program and asked if there was any way they could work with a partner school similar to what we were doing with Saemmul Christian Academy. They wanted to take their French and Spanish students to Europe. I knew the president of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) at the time, and he helped us find a Christian school in Spain to partner with. Our French teacher, Peter Barrs, also connected Westminster with Christian schools in France to launch a French immersion program.

For nearly fifteen years, Westminster students have traveled the globe over the summer, visiting partner schools in France, Spain, Korea, and, as of 2025, Japan as well. In 2017, Westminster's global partnerships continued to grow as the school began supporting African Vision of Hope.

> Dr. Dani Butler: We began our partnership with African Vision of Hope in Zambia in 2017 through Steve Darr, a former parent and board member of African Vision of Hope. Steve had contacted us to ask whether Westminster would be willing to help them launch a STEM school. We invited their leadership and faculty members for years, two to three weeks at a time, to provide training on our campus. We also sent our teachers to their campus in Zambia to provide two weeks of training. When we first started partnering with African Vision of Hope in 2017, they were serving three thousand children. Now, they are serving seven thousand students across four campuses.

THIRTEEN

BELONG. BELIEVE. BECOME.



Members of the 2023–24 Student Council

From the beginning, Westminster has been dedicated to enrolling all Christian families. The WCA community is made up of students, teachers, parents, alumni, and even grandparents from all over the world. The school's mission is to honor Jesus Christ by providing an excellent education, rooted in biblical truth as interpreted by the Westminster Confession of Faith, for the children of Christian parents.

> Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: [In the summer of 2025] we launched a new tagline: "Belong. Believe. Become." In a way, that encapsulates a lot of what we are about. We mention all the time how wonderful this Christian community is. That's belonging. We want everyone to feel like they're seen, they're known. They belong to something important. They belong to this community. But we also want them to

believe. What we mean by that is we want them to feel confident in their faith. We want them to know what they believe. We want them to know why they believe it. We want them to know how to apply biblical truth in every area of their life. And then we want them to become. That has to do with being equipped to fulfill their calling, whatever that might be. To borrow from an army commercial, they become all that they can be, all that God designed and called and created them to be.

As Westminster Christian Academy celebrates its 50th anniversary, those who have invested their lives in the school are grateful for God's faithfulness over the past half-century. Those students who were part of the initial student body value that Westminster has consistently remained faithful to its mission.

Tim Hall: When I came back to serve as a teacher, I resonated strongly with the vision and mission of Westminster. I understood it a lot more by that time than I did as a fourteen-year-old 9th grader. We have stayed true to that mission and vision, though things have certainly changed. I can't say that I had dreams that I was hoping would be realized, but I certainly appreciate the effort of the board and the administration to hold fast to the mission and vision that have remained intact from those earliest days.

Kent Kehr: God is the most important part today, and I think even more so God's leading in those first two, three, four, five years. He is present now, and He was present then. It is by His grace and mercy and by His leading that we're where we are today, and this was not a bunch of people deciding that they are going to extricate themselves from culture and society. It was more about the fact that we wanted a Christian view and a Christian perspective of teaching, and the connection between teacher, coach, student, family, and parent was of utmost importance. The mission has not changed from when I was there to now, and I think this is a good example. When I walked into Westminster, the first day, first week, with trepidation, I thought this is a big miss because you walk in going, "This is a school, and school is supposed to be academics," but then two weeks in, three weeks in, and you realize God has a bigger game going on than my little game of academics. He has a big game of changing hearts and minds and presenting the gospel. That has not changed from then until now.

As of 2025, Westminster boasts over five thousand alumni in nearly every corner of the world across a spectrum of professions, and part of what makes WCA so special is that even after their children have graduated, parents of alumni continue to be active members, praying for the school and returning year after year for special events. Westminster has truly become a Christian community dedicated to the vision of engaging the world and changing it for Jesus Christ.

> Arlen Dykstra: We started off small. We had our band of warriors and were all pretty young. We all thought we had it right, and we had some bright, talented people, but in many ways, it was an experiment of what we thought a Christian school could be, and it has become everything we ever thought it could be. What's the difference now? St. Louis knows about WCA. They really do. And to be a Christian school, still believe the Bible is trustworthy, be academically rigorous, love the Lord Jesus Christ, see Him as the significance of all truth, and have even those who are not believers respect what WCA is, that's pretty special.

> John Prentis: There were very few churches with a full Christian view of life in the community years ago, which has changed a lot. When you get people who are exposed to God's truth on a regular basis, it tends to affect a community. You can't look back and say, "Gee, how would things be different if Westminster had never been," but I'm convinced it would be a lot different, and it laps over into every aspect of life.

Bobby Duck, one of Westminster's founding board members and the school's first treasurer, continues to give God glory for all He provided to make Westminster a reality.

> Bobby Duck: When you view the start-up and progression of WCA from "forty thousand feet," you can see the different phases. God used Dr. George Knight to recruit the founding board members and to serve as the first board president, Arlen Dykstra to provide the first rental building, Paul Akin to secure the loan to purchase the first facility, and John Prentis and Jack Kramer to lead the effort to buy the Creve Coeur campus. God always provided the people needed, as I am sure He did in 2011 when He made it possible to build the beautiful Town & Country location.

I was elected by the board to be the first WCA treasurer, and I served in that capacity and as a board member for nine consecutive years. I was blessed that both of my daughters (Lisa '83 and Lania '85) graduated from WCA. I saw the budget grow from $80,000 to over $1 million. I was always amazed that whenever there was a legitimate need, God always provided. Make no mistake, we, as the founding board members, were nothing but conduits that God used to start WCA. To God be the glory!

One of the many reasons for Westminster's continued impact in St. Louis is through its world-class faculty and staff. Consistently, graduates share that the reason they love WCA is because of their teachers and coaches.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: I tease people when I say being the head of school is an easy job. You only deal with people's children, money, and religion. What could possibly go wrong? And in today's world, it's gotten increasingly complicated and difficult to lead a school. There are a lot of reasons for that, but that's not where I focus. I can get stressed like anybody else. I can get an angry email, and I have to deal with it. But the reason I get up very early in the morning, and I continue doing this, and come to lots of events in the evenings and on the weekends, is because it's a calling. I am absolutely convinced that, for whatever reason, God created me and called me to be the head of school, and I believe, for whatever reason, called me to Westminster at this time, for this period of time, and what the school needed. There were better heads of school; there will be better heads of school. But I do believe that God called me here at this time.

Dr. Andrew Shaw: I love the environment at Westminster because I am free to teach the truth—capital "T" Truth—which wasn't true when I was teaching in a public school even years ago in the Bible Belt. I am free for my passion, my discipline to be expressed, and my compassion for my students to be fleshed out. That's missing in so many other places. There is only one God, so there is only one capital "T" Truth, and we get to teach that Truth.

Aaron Layton: I believe deeply in the vision and mission of the school. It is simply the right approach for a Christian school to say that we exist for the children of Christian parents. That makes

complete sense to me as a Christian parent, and I believe in that wholeheartedly. Then there is the vision to raise up and train young men and women to go into the world and change it for Jesus Christ. Those two things, the mission and the vision, feel utterly biblical to me. In some form or fashion, every Christian school should be able to say that, because this is the Great Commission lived out through education. That is who we are, and that is what we do. Every Christian family that values Christian education can commit to that.

Chris Knerr: I have taught in public schools and in other private schools, and I talk to friends back home who were thrilled to retire at fifty because they were just worn out. When I hear how teachers are treated in other places, even at highly regarded private schools, it really puts things in perspective. From my experience, you will not find a better teaching position than this school. The students we work with, the relationships among faculty, and the highly functioning, competent administration—all of that clears the way for good teaching. I know private schools are not overly lucrative, but I am not foolish enough to leave this place. I truly believe you will not find a better teaching position. Despite all the frustrations of this profession, which are many, I honestly cannot imagine a better situation. Parents take care of us. How many schools have parents contribute money for staff bonuses? How many schools have administrators who pray for their employees? That is almost unheard of. It really is something special.

Hans Deutschmann: I think one way teaching at Westminster affected me in the long term was by seeing God provide for people who believed in a biblically based vision. He honored that and provided so the school could move to Manchester Road and take over the building on Ladue Road. That is confirmation for me of the reality and the truth of what we believe as Reformed Christians: God is sovereign, God has a purpose, and His purpose will be fulfilled, so we are to be faithful in responding to His call in our lives. The reality of God's call is not always easy, but it is always good. It may require a sacrifice, but that reminds us that He sacrificed for us. That laid a foundation for my own growth in learning what it means to be a Christian teacher, to be part of a family with a common desire to serve the Lord and kids.

The beauty of Westminster, the story of God's faithfulness, is that it has become more than a school. It's a family.

> Chris Pederson: One of the real turning-point experiences for me happened back on the old campus. [My wife] Maureen was pregnant with our second child, and it was the beginning of football season. She ended up being put on bed rest with six to eight weeks still to go in the pregnancy. We already had a very young child at home, and suddenly things got complicated very fast. Once that news got out to the football community, something incredible happened. At the time, JD Perona was coaching, and I let him know this was going to be tricky. The moms in the program, with Diana Rohlfing really taking the lead, put together a full calendar of families who came to our house. They played with [our son] Jacob, let the dogs out, and took care of Maureen. This went on for weeks, full days, for that entire stretch. Even now, thinking back on it fifteen years later, it still moves me. They made it all happen for nearly eight weeks. That moment made me realize, whatever plan we thought we were on, this is Westminster. That kind of care is just who this community is. It was a true turning point for me. Things might get hard at Westminster, but moments like that made it clear we are never leaving.

> Mike Rohlfing: [My wife] Mallory has an incredible group of friends from here because she worked here for so long. This was her first job out of college. She moved here not knowing anyone. She just wanted to get out of Michigan, took the job, and moved to St. Louis. Because of that, and out of sheer necessity as a new person in a new city, she formed some very deep friendships here. I've seen those people show up for us in really tangible ways, bringing meals when we had kids, helping when we needed support, things like that. And you see that all the time in this community. When people have health issues, personal struggles, losses, serious illnesses, or even near-death situations, the community rallies behind them in prayer and in real, practical support. There have been some incredibly hard and challenging things here: students passing away, teachers passing away, people dealing with serious diseases and illnesses. There are so many things that could tear a place like this apart. But I really believe it's that foundation of faith that holds everyone together and keeps people on the same path. That understanding that this isn't the end.

A beautiful reflection of the lasting impact of being part of the Westminster family is the number of alumni who have returned to serve as faculty and staff.

Tim Hall: Seeing so many alumni return to work at WCA has been a really rich part of the journey along the way because many of them were students of mine, and I developed rich relationships with them. So to see them come back … You know, Kent Kehr, one of my schoolmates, was the business manager and then came into technology oversight. I worked with my brother here at WCA for twenty-five years. That's something I couldn't have dreamed of. But it was a really rich thing. So many former students teach here, which is just an encouragement because they obviously love the Lord, they love the students, and they love teaching at Westminster as I do. There's a strong sense of camaraderie here, and it's a great blessing to see God raising up the next generation of leaders and teachers here at Westminster. It's been so, so gratifying and encouraging for me.

Micah Gall: It's our mission and vision combined with the people. I think many of the students we've hired who went here had a great experience as students. They connected deeply with their teachers and were inspired by them. And when you're inspired by someone, you want to emulate them. I think that's especially true at Westminster. A lot of our former students, who we've hired, were the recipients of that kind of inspiration.

Todd Fuller: The older I get, the more I realize that what matters is who you're doing life with, who you are walking with, and what impact you are having on others. I think about the impact Westminster has had. People like Andrew Shaw, who has been here almost since day one. Rich Van Gilst, David Haas. I think about Sherry Blough. They spent so much time here. This was their life's work, and now, seeing students who have been impacted by this place come back and start to make this their life's work as well is a really cool thing. It's powerful to see how a community can impact individual lives. I think God is pleased when He sees the impact Westminster is having on His people.

Dan Burke: Westminster's legacy really is its alumni. People say that sometimes your alumni define you, whether or not they give, and

while a lot of people go off to college and end up feeling more tied to their college than to where they went to high school, the fact that so many alumni come back or want to send their kids here says a lot. We now have three and even four generations of families, and that speaks to the health of the school. I think people come back because they get out into the real world and, to be frank, they see how godless it can be. They want a Christian community for their kids that is authentic and Reformed. I also think many of them look back and remember the fun they had here and the relationships they built, and they want that for their kids, too. In St. Louis, I honestly don't know where else you would find a place like Westminster. The people who work here actually believe it.

Meghan Goessling: I think kids who come through here really feel the care, and they sense that it's different. It's a place where, while it's not for everybody and it's not perfect for everybody, I'm not saying everyone has a perfect experience. I didn't have a perfect experience. Middle school is really hard. But I think getting through those hard, formative years with teachers who care, with friends you come to realize are truly lasting, friends you still have many years later, and maybe even meeting a spouse here, matters deeply. I think it becomes something people want to be part of, and that's what draws them back. It's the sense of, if I'm going to be part of something, I want it to be something that really makes an impact, something that genuinely affects kids and makes a difference for Christ. You could go out and do so many jobs anywhere. I could do HR anywhere, but for me, especially as a mom, if I'm going to work full-time, I want to work somewhere that truly matters, somewhere I'm passionate about, and somewhere that's making a real difference.

Mike Rohlfing: Ultimately, I feel like I'm working for all of the teachers here, because they're the most important part of this place. A lot of them were my teachers back in the day, and there are still a good ten or dozen who were here when I was a student—teachers I had for math class, science class, Bible class. Being able to support them is something I really love, and being able to tell their stories is something I really love as well. Will many of them still be around when my kids are old enough? Probably not. But there are plenty of newer teachers whom I've gotten to know so well, and it's a very encouraging environment. That's been my experience. People are

happy, they smile, they say hi, they ask how you're doing. Not that I didn't experience that before, but it feels like there's another level here, where people really care about each other. When it comes to that, yes, it would be incredible to have my kids here, being taught by those people, because I've gotten to know them even better than I knew them before.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: A great blessing is the fact that we have teachers who were former students—quite a few, actually—who are here, who loved the school, were highly impacted by the school, were transformed by the school, and now they have come back to take that experience and become that experience for their students. We have faculty who have been here thirty, forty years. Faculty and staff. And when you have that in any school or any institution, but particularly at Westminster, it not only speaks of God's blessings and the effectiveness of it, but also how much our community means to these folks. So they want to remain a part of the community, and they want their own children and their own grandchildren to be a part of the community and to receive the blessing of a Westminster Christian Academy education.

Just as many alumni return to work at Westminster, it is a blessing to see so many children of alumni follow in their footsteps and make new memories.

Meghan Goessling: Once you have children in school and you see what kids are exposed to and what school culture can be like these days, you think much more intentionally about where you want them to be. Having them in a place that is grounded in faith has been incredibly important to us. The staff and faculty here are truly amazing, and it has been such a blessing to watch our girls go through the school and be taught and cared for by people I've worked alongside for years, but to now see them in a completely different light, as teachers to my children, has been incredible. To have been part of this community ourselves and now to have our girls be part of it too, even though it's a different experience, has been really special for our family. Last year, our oldest daughter became very sick and had to miss a significant portion of the school year, which was incredibly difficult. The genuine care and concern we saw from her teachers during that time was honestly amazing. It was overwhelming in the best way. They truly care so deeply about these kids.

Dan Burke: I think [Westminster] is a really fun place to do school. My kids are all very high-energy, and they're not hard to engage. Since they've gotten here, it's turned out exactly how I thought it was going to be. Emmett, especially, is just excited about everything that's going on around here. The school really has something for everybody. I wanted my kids to be in a place where, yes, we have a lot of conversations at home about faith, we have devotional time, but I also want other adults pouring into my kids who are going to augment those conversations. Westminster can't replace parents, but it really is a place that can partner with parents. I feel that partnership. The conversations Emmett is having in New Testament are a good example. He'll come home and talk about what they discussed, and we'll extend the conversation at home. Or he'll say, "Remember when we were talking about this?" and then tell us how they talked about it in class that day. To see my kids thriving, whether it's on the field or on the stage, or doing chess club and things like that, it's just fun to watch. I try to keep my distance and give them space, but it's really fun to be here and see it happening.

Alumni are not the only ones sending their children to WCA, either. Many teachers and staff members have raised their families within the Westminster community.

Jim Sefrit: I don't know the relationships [my children and grandchildren] would have had if they had gone to another school, but I know that the positive relationships they had with the Lord, first of all, and then with teachers and others who have said, "This is what life is all about." It's got to be your faith, and they were challenged to make it their faith. They were seeing and hearing the same things they were hearing at home. There weren't mixed messages. Everything was down that track, and we said, "This is where we want you." Interestingly, every one of them absolutely loved the place. They loved the people they went to school with. They loved their teachers. They really enjoyed it. They came out of here with a feeling that it was really a great experience. I am really thankful we had that opportunity. As the years went by, it was sort of automatic that the next one would go there—the next grandkid. We believed it was going to be an excellent education. That's got to be either one or two, and the faith part has to be the other.

Tim Hall: Both of our kids, our daughter in 2011 and our son in 2016, graduated from Westminster, and it was very rich to go through their educational years. I got to learn more about my colleagues who had become their teachers, and to find out from their teachers things about my kids. It was fun. It was an absolutely wonderful blessing to have that opportunity, not just to be a teacher here, but to be a parent. To be here with my kids while they're going through it. I mean, that's just a blessing most parents don't get. So, I'm grateful for those days. And thankfully, while they did come to my office, they were never sent there.

Peggy Johnson: Westminster is part of our family. I was committed to Christian school before my kids even went to school. I was Christian school all the way. I knew the impact of God's word on someone's heart. I knew that was valuable, regardless of what the building looks like. If a child has God's word in their heart every day through prayer, Scripture, and the environment, He will have an impact on their lives. What a gift these families are giving their children. It was remarkable having my kids go to Westminster. It was great that we could send our kids there. All my kids, my grandkids, are walking with the Lord. It's a heritage. You give this to your kids, and they give it to their kids. It's what God tells us to do. That's what Westminster has been doing for fifty years, following that biblical mandate.

Micah Gall: Walking in every day not only with my dad, but now with my daughter as well, and soon my sons, is incredibly meaningful to me. Westminster is the reason we've stayed in St. Louis. It's because I love working here, but it is also because my wife and I wanted our kids to attend a place like Westminster. There just aren't many places like it. To see my daughter being poured into by colleagues I have admired for so long is incredibly special. One of the things I remember from my first year on campus was thinking, *I want to spend my career here, but I also can't wait for my kids to be here.* That has only grown stronger over time. It starts with our teachers. Despite all the incredible blessings here, it's not as though our teachers are getting paid more than elsewhere. Our salaries are competitive with other schools in the area, but they are still teacher salaries. A teacher's salary is plenty to live on, but it's not comparable to many other careers. Because of that, I think our teachers are, by nature, wired a certain way. It's not about the paycheck; it's about the work at

hand. And I don't think we've lost sight of that, largely because of the people we have teaching here.

Cory Snyder: I love Westminster because I love the mission and vision of our school. I want to win championships and games and see our kids be successful and go on to play in college, but what I want most is to see our kids know Christ and know they are created in God's image, that He created them for a purpose, that He has a plan for them, and that they would want to seek and fulfill that plan. I want them to love the Lord and know that He loves them. That's why I love this school. I love the opportunity to do that here. One of my favorite verses is 1 Corinthians 3:6, where Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." I want to be faithful in planting and watering, even if I never see the growth. I trust that God will, at some point in the lives of these young men and women, bring that growth and draw them to Himself. As a school, that's who we are. That's who we say we want to be, and we live it. It was easy to bring [my kids] here because of the faculty and staff. I know that when my son or daughter develops a relationship with a faculty or staff member, they're going to hear the gospel.

Dr. Dani Butler: I began working here when I was twenty-six years old. From the very beginning, I poured my heart and life into this place. For a long time, that was how I saw Westminster: A place where I was contributing, a place where I could make a difference in students' lives. But everything changed when my own children started attending here. Suddenly, I realized that this is not just a place where I work. This is a place that has blessed my family and me. Watching how Westminster shaped my children, supported them to grow, and loved them completely changed my perspective. Westminster has helped me grow in faith, mature as a believer, and humbled me beyond description. Without Westminster, I would not be who I am now as a follower of Christ. This place has become deeply personal and impactful.

Todd Fuller: I remember right away coming to Westminster and realizing quickly that this place was different. I'd had great positions in the past and worked for great companies, but those were for-profit companies, and their job was to make money. I came here and quickly realized, within the first few weeks, this was about people.

It wasn't about making a profit. My job was to make sure there were resources to deliver on the mission. That was a really cool experience. A recognition right away that this place was different. You hear a lot about the community of Westminster, but I think the people you do life with—I mean, you work in a place you send your kids to school. There are so many overlapping communities. We go to church with these people. This is my adult community. This is how I've raised my family, my kids, in this Westminster family. That certainly impacted not just my faith, but the faith of my children as well. I also think that moving into the classroom and being able to not just teach kids about business, but to speak into their lives, to be the type of teacher that my kids had, to challenge them and stretch them to think about who they are—that's huge. To be a part of that has been pretty amazing.

Jennifer Sengpiel: Westminster means everything to me because to my husband and me, God is everything. To partner with a school that agrees with that, and not only demonstrates it in the hallways but teaches it from the front of the classroom, and lives it out in community, is incredible. Our kids are going to have hard days. Middle school and high school are no joke. But to be able to make mistakes, to have hard days, and to have people in this building come alongside my children is everything. My children were recently baptized over the summer because they chose to be. They were thirteen and fifteen years old, and they love the Lord in a way that is such a gift. Westminster is part of that journey. So yes, it's everything to me. It's everything because at eighteen, they're going to leave our house, and I'm going to be on my hands and knees praying that we've done everything we can do. And I know that by being in partnership with Westminster, we've set them up for success. Working here, I get to come alongside people who support me, give me grace and encouragement, and share this mission. We believe the same thing. It's miraculous that I get to give my professional gifts to something that matters so deeply. I'm humbled every day to be a part of it.

Aaron Layton: When I think about my own kids, I know that Westminster provided a world-class education, and I do not say that as a slogan. I say it because in my seventeen years here, I have seen graduates go all over the world and into every possible industry, doing meaningful work that the Lord is using. There is not a field

I can think of where Westminster graduates are not present and thriving. So I know my kids were academically equipped to do what God is calling them to do. But there is another piece that you cannot fully capture in a mission statement, something people on the outside may not see. My kids were discipled by their teachers and coaches, truly discipled, in different seasons and in different ways. I remember thinking at times that I would gladly pay for that alone. When my kids came home from college, and I asked them which teachers had made the biggest impact on their lives, the answers surprised me. The stories they told were about moments of discipleship, conversations in the classroom, words spoken on the field, small moments that stayed with them. They had adults in the community they could emulate in compassion, mercy, faithfulness, and devotion to the Lord. That kind of environment, where students are being mentored and discipled daily in both intentional and unintentional ways, is invaluable. I see it clearly in my kids now. I see that what sits at the forefront of their minds is a desire to ask, "What is the Lord calling me to do?" and "How do I live that out faithfully?" The imprint left by the people who invested in them at Westminster is undeniable, and I see the fruit of that in their lives today. Both of them were prepared here for what the Lord has called them to do now, and I am deeply grateful for that.

Westminster Christian Academy's story is one of God's faithfulness, but that story is not over.

Jim Sefrit: I'm hoping that the board, the parents, the teachers, and the whole community can keep their focus on Jesus Christ. Focus on Jesus Christ. Physically and humanly, it's only possible to focus on one thing at a time. The more that focus on Jesus Christ impacts what you try to do in a relationship with people, especially kids, the better.

Todd Fuller: There are great schools everywhere. My kids could have gone to public school and gotten a fine education, but would that have poured into their lives in such a way that they are grounded in their faith? Are we doing kingdom work? Are we doing the work God is calling us to do? My hope for Westminster is all about the students and the impact on their lives. I hope that remains a priority. We want to give them a great academic experience and a great athletic experience and whatever else they're involved in … STEM,

robotics, fine arts … We want those to be excellent experiences, but really, we want to impact their lives for Christ and develop in them a foundation that they can then go forth and make an impact in the world. But it's all centered on the students. My hope is that we never lose that. When I think about how we got to this point, I think back to those first families that took a big risk to send their kids to a school that wasn't developed. Now, we have all these great programs. They didn't really have anything back then. Except, they had this community and fellow believers and teachers who loved them and wanted to impact our kids. We stand on their shoulders. We're here because of the work that they did. And I can't say enough about Jim Marsh and how he came to the school and took it from where it was to where it is now.

Sherry Blough: My prayer for this school going forward for fifty years and beyond is that it would continue to raise young people to serve Christ in their communities, in their jobs, in their families, and to really live for Jesus because they have a foundation that they got at Westminster Christian Academy. Not just in their home, in their church, but in their school as well, where they learned everything from a biblical perspective and understood God is at work in their lives every day in every way.

Jim Marsh: I think what I would want is for Westminster and other Christian schools throughout the country to be recognized as among the best, if not the best, and to make it accessible so that Christian schooling becomes a really central part of what education can mean in terms of building character, faith, and impact—all of that. That's a huge goal, but that's what I would love to see. During my career, who would have thought back in 1985 that we would be sitting here on this campus and this Christian school would have become what it is in St. Louis? You can have huge goals, and God can do things beyond what you can expect, imagine, or even dream. That's what I hope. Don't make this the end of the story. Have bigger dreams. God can do this. What can He do in the next fifty years? It's hard to imagine, but I pray that Westminster never feels like it has arrived or that we're *there*. I pray that we're always willing to grow, to change, to take steps of faith, and to think big. Change is inevitable. Who knows what AI is going to mean over the next five or ten years? But I pray that Westminster will always be striving to become better than we once

were. And, at the same time, hold on to the non-negotiables of who we are, but basically be willing to change everything else. That's what I would hope.

Tim Hall: My hope is that God will continue to raise up the next generation of leaders and teachers in the school who share the school's historical vision for what Westminster is all about and why it was founded. I pray that God will raise up faithful board members who will likewise grab hold of those really critically important elements of our school's history that continue to inform what we do, that serve as a starting place—a foundation for what we do. I'd love that for us. I look forward to the day when we've paid off our debt. That would be a big thing, freeing up money to make it more possible for others to come here. And I pray that we continue to engage with our culture, like how we do through service, in meaningful ways to represent Christ to a watching world. That we learn and grow and continue to become better than we once were.

Dr. Dani Butler: My prayer truly comes from my gratitude and humility—that we are able to serve as many young men and women as possible, and that God provides the resources and opportunities to make that happen. I know it can be difficult for some families to come to Westminster because of the cost. My prayer is that we are given the resources to open the doors wider, so more children can experience the life-changing impact of the gospel in our community.

Chris Pederson: My prayer is that we continue to take on the hard things. Right now, that includes things like AI and rethinking teaching and learning in light of a changing student profile. I think we are entering a new era of what teaching and learning are going to look like. There will always be a call for Christian education and for keeping Jesus at the center of it, but we are going to have to go through some difficult seasons. We cannot avoid them. If we do, we avoid the very things that will make Westminster better for whatever the next challenge is. It might be really difficult. Parenting, learning, and partnering with families all feel complicated right now. Teaching and learning are changing, and even how churches connect to schools feels less clear. It is a complex time. Keeping Jesus first is essential, but my hope is that we do not avoid the hard conversations and the hard work.

Aaron Layton: My first prayer is that Westminster would always stay committed to its mission and vision and not drift. I think that is always the challenge for any institution, and while Westminster has done this well, it has to remain at the forefront. It reminds me of Scripture, where God continually calls His people to faithfulness, to the covenant, and to His commands. In the same way, Westminster must remain faithful to what God has called it to be. Alongside that, something Jim Marsh and I are both excited about in this season is seeing Westminster increasingly reflect the diversity we see in the kingdom of God. I love that as the school continues to grow, many students will not know a Westminster where there are not multiple minority students in their classrooms. That will simply be the world they grow up in here. I see it firsthand in my own classes. At the beginning of the year, I realized I had two African American boys, four African American girls, an Asian girl, and a Hispanic boy all in one class, and I just thought, *This is wonderful*. It is beautiful to see the Lord at work in that way, and I hope we continue to grow in that direction.

Dan Burke: I want us to stay true to our foundational documents. I do not want us to experience mission drift as so many other institutions do. I want us to remain committed to excellence, while also continuing to be creative, to build new things, and to grow. I would love to see our school become more and more of a place where learning is hands-on. In our mission statement, we talk about discover, embrace, and integrate, and I would love to see our students doing more of that in practice. Many of our classes are very discussion-oriented, and I think that is good, but I would love to see learning become more experiential, where students get to play the role of the investigator or the creator. I would never replace discussion or the Socratic method in our classes, but I would like to see students given more opportunities to be creative. Above all, I hope we continue to pursue excellence while remaining humble, grounded, and down-to-earth, living out God's calling on our lives and inspiring young people to do the same.

Micah Gall: My prayer would be that we would remain true to who we have always been. We had a speaker come who said, "A successful institution knows who it is, is who it is, and communicates who it is." My hope is that, no matter how our world changes in the coming

years and decades, we will remain faithful to those core principles that, through God's blessing, have brought us to where we are today.

Jim Butz: My prayer is that we prioritize being authentically and deeply Christian. Not to say that we're not, but I think there's always a danger of drifting. My hope is that the community would be sanctified. It's a story we see even in Scripture. Once you become comfortable, once you have resources and good things, sometimes you come to the feast for the goodies and not for the Giver. That's a real danger. I think about what we're here for. Are we here just to be a college prep school? That's good. Are we here just to have a lot of bells and whistles? Those are fine too. But ultimately, if we're not becoming better Christians, if we're not being sanctified, then what is it worth? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? I think about our theatre program. It's great if we win awards or get community recognition. That's fine. But a lot of schools do that. There are many places that produce an amazing product. But the process isn't sanctified, and the results become very worldly. My hope is that our theater program will be distinct and that it will become even more distinctly Christian. I hope it is sanctified, both in how we do the work and in what it produces.

Mike Decker: My hope and prayer for leadership moving forward, especially coming from someone who has stepped into a lot of unknown territory recently, is that we would recognize that new things can be scary, but they are also opportunities for growth and deeper trust in the Lord. When something new comes up, instead of saying, "No, that's not how we do things," or "That's not who we are," I hope that the response would be, "That's interesting. What could that look like?" I believe that posture preserves what truly needs to be preserved here, while also giving us the freedom to step into the future and continue being salt and light for the next fifty years. My prayer is that when we look back on this place, it is still uniquely Westminster, but also a place where even more opportunities have been created, many of which we cannot yet imagine.

Dr. Barrett Mosbacker: When I think in terms of the next few years and then the next fifty years at Westminster, I'm excited about several things. First off, by God's grace, we have a very, very solid foundation upon which to build. Now, it's very important that we

continue to build upon that foundation and we remain faithful to it. I'm emphasizing this over and over and over again. In fact, our 50th anniversary theme, "Celebrate the Story," has three pillars to it: faithfulness, fearlessness, and fruitfulness. Fearlessness has to do with having the courage to be faithful even when you're facing opposition. When we're faithful to God's word, we're faithful to our mission, and we're courageous enough to be faithful, I believe God will then make us fruitful and even more fruitful. And that fruitfulness shows up in a lot of ways, but the primary way, of course, is in transformed lives. What I get excited about is the ability of Westminster to continue to develop and grow, particularly in terms of the breadth and depth of its programs, and the ability increasingly to customize our education and to customize our programs, to tailor them as much as possible to the gifts and interests of each individual student. We'll never be perfect at that. You can't do it completely. But more and more, that's the model in education, to customize it as much as you can. Technology makes it increasingly possible, if it's done well. I think that's what excites me. What I'm most hopeful and prayerful about is that fifty years from now, at our 100th anniversary, someone could sit in this chair and say the same thing. That we have been faithful for the past one hundred years to God's word and to our mission, even though we don't look anything like we did fifty years ago as an institution.

AFTERWORD

> When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, … "Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan … and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight" … Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel … and Joshua said to them … "Take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever."
> — Joshua 4:1–7

The history of Westminster Christian Academy is a powerful testimony to God's faithfulness and those who came before us. Just as the people of Israel set up memorial stones to remember God's blessings, protection, and provision, Westminster's story reflects His unwavering guidance, grace, and goodness.

For fifty years, God has sustained Westminster Christian Academy, shepherding its leaders, teachers, students, and families in the mission to provide a Christ-centered education of excellence. Like Israel's memorial stones, this history serves as a remembrance of God's goodness and a call to remain dependent on Him—faithful to His word and the school's mission.

God's past faithfulness assures us of His guidance for the future: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). When Joshua charged Israel, "Be strong and very courageous … do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left" (Joshua 1:7), he called them to steadfast faithfulness. That same call extends to future generations of Westminster

leaders and families, who must hold fast to God's word and the school's vision—to prepare and equip young men and women to engage the world and transform it for Jesus Christ.

Westminster Christian Academy's future is bright. As we embark on the next fifty years, we remain steadfast in our commitment to biblical truth and our mission. We will continue hiring outstanding Christian teachers and staff, expand and enhance programs, upgrade facilities, wisely integrate new technologies, and graduate thousands of students, all while remaining anchored in our purpose. By God's grace, Westminster will continue to be a city on a hill, a light shining in St. Louis and beyond—so believers and unbelievers may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16).

To God be the glory—great things He has done, and even greater things He will do!

— Dr. Barrett Mosbacker
Head of School

Beginnings

In the beginning Westminster Christian Academy was only a thought ... a dream. In 1970, thanks to the diligence in work and the faithfulness in God of a few teachers and parents this dream became a reality as Westminster opened its first succesful year with seventy-two potential students.

Everyone, teachers, parents, and students throughout the many stages of planning, organizing, building, and finally blossoming, had a strong faith in God, and He opened many closed doors. These people toiled for the glory of God and a firm Christian education. The reward for their persistence came as gifts were showered upon Westminster in full abundance.

We thank the many people who were with us in support and prayer all the way. We also thank the teachers, who with much sacrifice of their time, made the dream of Christian education become a reality and who continue to make Westminster Christian Academy become the hope of a bright new tomorrow in Christ.

— The Student Body

Westminster Christian Academy
800 Maryville Centre Drive
Town & Country, MO 63017
wcastl.org