

“Is Westminster Presbyterian Church Relevant in Today’s World?”

Being Made Pastor Emeritus – May 17, 2026

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:35-40

A couple of months ago Jean and I were at the Igazu Falls, the largest water falls in the world, sitting on the border of Brazil and Argentina. Our excellent, young, female guide was from the lower part of Chile’s Patagonia region. She remarked about the wildfires that were breaking out in her home region, and how significant was the destruction. And then she noted that some in the region were attempting to blame the fires on the Jews.

Seeking to suppress dissent the UN reported that Iran executed at least 1,639 people in 2025, and the Iran Human Rights Society recorded 657 executions in the first quarter of 2026.

In the Ukraine, Russia continues its devastating invasion, targeting both military and civilian targets, with 15,300 verified innocent Ukrainian deaths, with some nothing that figure could be as high as 100,000.

In Gaza, one in three people goes days with food. Eighty percent of structures are damaged or destroyed. Over 56,000 children have lost one or both parents.

In Haiti, gangs control large areas of the country, financing their control with violence and kidnappings.

In Hungary, the right wing government of Viktor Orban, which has now been voted out of office, had utilized emergency power to rule by decree, creating pressure on democratic institutions and independent media.

And in the United States, after ICE agents shot 37-year-old Renee Nicole Good, a doctor repeatedly asked to be able to assist the women. Over and over denied, he declared, “I am a physician.” And the ICE agent responded, “I don’t care.”

Now, a smart former pastor, on this auspicious day, would preach on something like God’s love, which is always a worthy topic. But in contemplating what to preach about, I recalled the admonition of life long Westminster member, Sam White, Jr., who before I would preach would look me in the eyes and say: “Bring the heat.”

Well, I don’t know that I have any heat anymore, but I wanted to contemplate the Church’s place in a world where the response of governments, of people, of neighbors in increasingly, “I don’t care.” How does and should the Church respond to a world run by violence, prejudice, the relentless pursuit of money and power? So, I have selected the topic, “Is Westminster Presbyterian Church Relevant in Today’s World?”

Now, your assumption is that I’m going to answer that question with an emphatic “Yes!” And, I am. But, recent statistics make that response feel more emotional than factual.

Sixty-two percent of Americans identify as Christian. That is a loss of sixteen percentage point since 2007.

Twenty-nine percent are religiously unaffiliated, that number having doubled in the last two decades.

Only forty-nine percent of Americans consider religion important in their daily lives. In 2015, sixty-six percent did.

And only about thirty percent of Americans attend church regularly.

Or, a more personal statistic, when the Northern and Southern branches of the Presbyterian Church merged in 1983, we were 3.1 million members strong. Today, we are hovering right at 1,000,000.

But, I still answer with an emphatic “Yes!” Why?

First, because character matters.

“Thou shalt not lie.”

“Thou shalt not steal.”

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

They are the Ten Commandments, not the ten suggestions. And they are commandments because this is how the Creator made and formed us to live not only in obedience to Him, but to discover our best lives. God did not give us these to thwart our ambitions, or to restrict our fun, or to limit our options. These were given to enhance and enlarge our lives. They are a road map, user directions of how to get the most out of living for ourselves, and all with whom we come into contact.

Disobeying one or more of these commandments will create character flaws within us that will have a negative impact on our jobs, our marriages, our relationships, our children, our church, our community, our country, our world. These ten demands are God Himself saying to each one of us, this is how I made you to function. And obedience to them forms a godly existence, a molding of character that creates all those elements of life we crave and desire: peace, harmony, joy, positive relationships, the success of joyful and creative existences.

Now, someone will immediately point out, as those writing the Psalms so often did, that it surely looks like those who disobey the Commandments are doing just fine. But the scripture also points out, that disobedience will produce devastating consequences not only for the individual, but those who surround him or her. It is kind of like slowing drinking poison. It may taste good for a while, but eventually the ignoring of God’s demands will bring destruction to one’s heart, mind, and character. And that is a wave of destruction that rolls outward to all who surround the offender.

Most of you have heard the old joke about Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments. Looking out over the children of Israel, he says, “I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news.”

“The good news is that there are only ten. The bad news is that adultery is still in.”

Though not usually a joke told in church, it succinctly and realistically sums up our feelings toward the Ten Commandments. Everyone of us at one time or another wishes one or more of the Commandments were not there. But when we choose to obey them, they produce a character within us that brings goodness, and light, and faith to us and those who surround us.

Westminster is relevant because character matters. And second, Westminster is relevant because what we believe matters.

Character, who we are in our hearts and minds, drives belief, which dictates what we say and do. Belief, what we acknowledge as right and wrong, determines how we respond and react to the world and one another. Sadly, there have always been, and still are, people who attempt to define what we believe in ways that separate us from one another. Liberal

versus conservative, woke versus anti-woke, Democrat versus Republican, evangelical versus progressive.

I experienced this when I was the pastor here. Upon learning I was Westminster's pastor, people would say, "Oh, you are the minister at that liberal church on Augusta Road." And, I would invariably reply, "We are in South Carolina. There are no liberal churches here." And, then I would add, "But, we are the Republican Party at prayer, and all the Democrats in Greenville County attend here, all five or six of them."

If we believe Jesus Christ is God's Son, that belief will demand that we respond in accordance with how he acted, believe that is how God expects us to act. Forgiveness, mercy, generosity, compassion, love, "doing unto others as we would have them do to us," become the foundation of how we care for God's creation, how we treat our neighbors, how well we pay our employees, how we respond to our spouse, the attention we give our children, how we vote.

That question that is so often misused, is actually relevant to everything we do. We should ask ourselves: "What Would Jesus Do?" Because if we can align the actions and words of the Christ of the New Testament with our own voices and actions, then the truth does reside in us and will be manifest in us, our families, our church, our community, our country.

If you have travelled to Nuremberg, Germany, you likely visited the parade grounds where the Nazi Party conducted their huge rallies attempting to combine their beliefs with both German mythology and pseudo Christianity. You can even climb up to the platform where Adolf Hitler stood and the Nuremberg Laws were announced, whose proscriptions against the Jews eventually led to the Holocaust.

But Nuremberg was also the site of the Nuremberg Trials after the war that tried Nazi leaders for their crimes against humanity. A new movie, entitled "Nuremberg" depicts the trial, focusing on Herman Göring, the second most powerful man in Nazi Germany, right under Adolf Hitler. Using official transcripts, the movie is relatively historically accurate.

The climax has Göring, played by Russell Crowe, in the dock being questioned by the Allied prosecutors. As the Allied psychiatrist assigned to Göring had warned the prosecutors, Göring was a highly intelligent, charming narcissist who would be difficult to depict as a murderous monster. And it plays out in exactly that manner, as the charismatic, often humorous Göring seems to be winning his case by claiming he, even as the Reich Marshall had no knowledge of the six million Jews, and hundreds of thousands of homosexuals, gypsies, ministers, mentally challenged, and political prisoners who were gassed, shot, or beaten to death. He believed they were only work camps.

But when the case looks lost, at the last minute, the English prosecutor steps in. He goes year by year detailing the number of the hundreds of thousands murdered each year when Adolf Hitler was in power. Then, he asks Göring, knowing that Adolf Hitler had millions of human beings tortured and murdered, if Hitler came back today, would Göring still follow him? And, staying true to his beliefs, while at the same time being forced to acknowledge his complicity in the atrocities, Göring answers, "Yes, I would."

If we truly believe that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, then our affirmation of that belief will undergird every word that comes out of our mouths and every action we initiate.

Westminster is relevant because character matters. It is relevant because character undergirds belief. And last, it is relevant because those beliefs dictate that people matter.

On March 31, 1948, Westminster's very first budget, for six months, totaled \$18,155.25. Thirteen thousand of this was for the Building Fund. But attached to the budget was this statement: "It is the hope of the officers of this church that approximately \$1200 will be contributed to Missions and Benevolences."

From the very beginning of this congregation, this church has sought to minister to the least of these. Hospitals and missionaries in countries such as Lesotho, South Korea, Malawi, and Bangladesh. Mission trips to the Dominican Republic, the Mexican border, and Malawi. Support for Thornwell Home for Children, Montreat, our Presbyterian seminaries.

Westminster's second senior pastor, John Haley, journeyed to Atlanta seeking how Greenville might avoid the explosive situation other southern cities were experiencing during the Civil Rights movement. On his return he was met at the train station by Westminster men because of the threat of violence.

Under Al Montgomery, Westminster's third senior pastor, the church allowed Meals on Wheels to move into our kitchen because twenty-two other church had turned them down.

During Zane Moore's tenure, Westminster's fourth senior minister, the church took the lead in getting the Gateway House apartments approved and gave \$100,000 for their construction.

This list could go on and on detailing the millions of dollars this church has contributed to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and support those mentally and physically challenged. But even this pales in comparison to the thousands of hours given by members on mission trips, serving on nonprofit boards and committees. I remember a three year stretch when every chairman of the United Way campaign was a member of this church.

And no less important than these physical elements are the verbal ones. We have unequivocally stated that everyone, everyone is welcome here. We have taught our children and reminded ourselves that antisemitism, hatred of the Jews, is evil.

We have been clear that the gospel proclaims that every individual is a child of God and worthy of respect. Christians do not judge by the color of one's skin, their nationality, race or religion. We teach our children that individuals are not to be demeaned by name calling, made fun of, or negatively categorized.

Come up with any group you want: Iranians, transgender people, immigrants, Chinese, take your pick and then remember: They were created by God and are God's children. It doesn't mean we always agree with their ideas or actions, but by word and deed they are to be treated with dignity and respect. If you have any question about that remind yourself of how Jesus time and again used the hated Samaritan as the hero of his parables, challenging his audience to see that person they thought was a heretical half breed was none other than someone God loved.

For the followers of Jesus Christ, the care of God's children mimics the One who healed lepers, protected the woman taken in the very act of adultery, forgave the people crucifying him. People, all people, matter.

One of my favorite stories is about a woman who died and went to heaven. When she reached the Pearly Gates she was met by St. Peter. She said, "Am I in heaven?"

He said, "Yes, you are at the Pearly Gates."

"Do I get to come in?" asked the woman.

St. Peter said, "Yes, if you can spell a word."

“What word?”

“Any word.”

She said, “Ok, I’ll spell love.”

She did and she was allowed to enter.

A few minutes later, St. Peter approached her and said, “I have to leave for a minute. Would you watch the gate?”

She looked astonished and said, “You want me to watch the gate?”

St. Peter said, “Yes.”

She asked, “What do I do if someone comes up?”

He replied, “Just what I did. Ask them to spell a word.”

As she stood looking around at all the beautiful sights in heaven, she saw a man walking toward the gates. As he drew closer, the woman recognized him. It was her husband. She was shocked!

He walked up to the gates. “What happened?” the wife asked.

“Well,” the husband replied, “I was so upset after your funeral that on the way home I had an accident and died. Am I in heaven?”

“You are at the Pearly Gates,” she said.

“Do I get to come in?” he asked.

“Yes, but you have to spell a word,” she said.

“What word?” he asked.

“Czechoslovakia,” she replied.

Everyone of us has groups of people, and individuals, we would like to make spell Czechoslovakia to be a part of God’s Kingdom. But the Gospel reminds us that whoever they are, they are already children of God, and to be treated accordingly.

“Is Westminster Presbyterian Church Relevant in Today’s World?”

Because character matters, beliefs matter, and people matter, then Westminster matters and is relevant. In these buildings, in Sunday School, “It’s Elementary!,” youth groups, Bible study, circles, in worship, the gospel of Jesus Christ is explained and proclaimed. Ask yourself if there is any place else your children are taught these eternal truths, where they are given a blueprint for how God made us to live, work, and respond to one another. In fact, is there anyplace else in your life where you are reminded of God’s core teachings and beliefs? I would argue that Westminster is more important and relevant today than it has ever been.

The culture and those who drive it increasingly view the faith as something to be ignored or manipulated. But not here.

As long as these walls stand, in this place the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be preached, sinners will be welcomed, the weary will find rest, and the love of God will be taught, lived, and extended to each one of God’s creation, from this day forward and forevermore.

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