

West Point Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) A Brief History

By

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West Point Christian Church was organized in 1884, when a small group of Disciples led by layman and local entrepreneur Thomas Baylor Henley began meeting in homes. In little more than a year the congregation had grown to the point where it was able to begin the erection of its first meeting house on land donated by Henley at the southwest corner of Lee and Eighth streets. Undeterred when the half-completed building was destroyed by a hurricane in October 1885, the congregation finally dedicated its first house of worship in April 1887. It also called its first minister, John Lincoln Brandt. Under the leadership of the Rev. Alfred S. Morrison, who arrived in 1888, the West Point Disciples also operated a school, which held its classes in a house at Second and Main streets.

The only church building destroyed in the Great West Point Fire of April 30–May 1, 1903, was that belonging to West Point Christian Church. James Welford Owens, the church clerk, entered the burning building to rescue the communion table, chalice, and ewer; pulpit; organ; and three chairs. Recovery from the fire was slow, both for the town and the congregation. The blackened lot at Lee and Eighth streets was sold and a new lot was purchased at the northeast corner of Fifth and Main. In January 1907 West Point Christian Church dedicated its second house of worship on this site.

During the years of slow recovery from the devastating fire, the church was without a regular minister. Dr. S. W. Glascock of Highland Springs held services in the public schoolhouse during the fall of 1903. Later, Richmond ministers Charles O. Woodward and Gerald Culberson traveled by train to West Point to hold Friday evening preaching

services. By February 1913, the church was so discouraged by its seeming lack of progress that it considered disbanding.

George Whitfield Kemper, minister of the Hanover Avenue Christian Church in Richmond and president of the Virginia Christian Missionary Society, pledged his support to the struggling West Point church. In June 1913, evangelist Henry Davis Coffey arrived in West Point to hold a "protracted meeting." This revival brought in numerous new members and revitalized the congregation. No little support for this revitalization was provided by lay leader Dr. Bathurst Browne Bagby. The young physician had settled in West Point in 1908 and was elected chairman of the church board in November 1912. A suffragist, prohibitionist, and tireless exponent of improved public health, Bagby championed the installation of West Point's first public water and sewer system. He is credited with the eradication of malaria, typhoid, dysentery, and hookworm in the town.

Walter Hoye Leake, son-in-law of Henry Davis Coffey, was called as the congregation's minister in the afterglow of the 1913 revival. But the young minister's leadership could not maintain the momentum. In 1915 he answered the call of the Christian Church in Fruitland, Maryland. By 1918, the Disciples in West Point were sharing a minister, J. T. Lipscomb, with the Jerusalem Christian Church in King William County. Lipscomb preached at Jerusalem on the first and third Sundays of the month and at West Point on the second and fourth Sundays.

In 1920, the Philippi Christian Church in Deltaville joined with West Point and Jerusalem in sharing a minister. Morton L. Figart arrived in June 1921, preaching at Jerusalem and West Point on the first and third Sundays of the month and at Philippi on the second and fourth Sundays. In 1926, under the leadership of the Rev. Charles E. Otey and lay leaders W. L. Neale and Dr. William E. Croxton, the three congregations purchased a parsonage at the northeast corner of Fourth and Main streets. (The house still stands but has been moved to the other side of Fourth Street.)

During the Great Depression, even the combined resources of three small congregations seemed inadequate to support a minister. "At a called meeting on July 2nd, 1933, of all the churches in this group ... that as it seemed impossible to continue the salary of \$1600 for Rev. J. A. Saunders ... he be so notified. But that he be invited to remain with the group and the churches would try the best they could." Saunders remained for a year and a half, resigning on January 1, 1935. When Zesley B. T. Cox arrived to take his place, only the Jerusalem and West Point congregations felt they had the resources to support a minister, and offered him a salary of \$800 a year.

At the end of 1936, the West Point church was blessed by the addition of prominent trial lawyer David Nelson Sutton and his wife, Frances, to the congregation. The Suttons freely lent energy, commitment, and their financial resources to the life of the church. The Rev. John Perdue Sala, a minister of equal energy and commitment, arrived in 1940 to lead the congregation through the difficult years of World War II. In 1943 the Philippi Church joined a circuit with the Oak Grove and Westville Christian churches in Mathews

County. The Olive Branch Christian Church in Norge combined with West Point and Jerusalem to form a new circuit under the leadership of Dr. Sala.

With Dr. Sala's retirement in 1947 and the return of servicemen from overseas, the need for a three-church circuit became less and less apparent. The postwar "baby boom" began filling the pews of churches throughout America. In West Point, the congregation bought out others' interest in the parsonage and, in 1956, sold the property to the First Baptist Church. Under the leadership of the Rev. C. Linwood Coleman and board chairman L. M. Browning, Jr., a new brick parsonage was erected on First Street. The fifty-year-old church building also was extensively remodeled at this time.

Growth of the church continued during the thirty-year tenure of the Rev. Norman E. West, Jr., who arrived in West Point in 1962. As membership reached nearly to the 200 mark, it became clear that the existing church building on Main Street could no longer serve the congregation's needs. In 1984, lots containing a little more than five acres were purchased at the intersection of West Euclid Blvd. and Southern Avenue in the Port Richmond section of West Point. The parsonage on First Street was sold and the minister was granted a housing allowance to purchase his own home. Under the leadership of Congregational Chairman Robert S. Knott and Building Chairman William J. Farinholt, a new brick church building was dedicated in September 1986. The former meeting house on Main Street was sold to the Canaan Church of God.

In June 2000 the Rev. William A. Palmer, Jr. was called to lead West Point Christian Church into the twenty-first century.