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**Westmoreland Congregational
United Church of Christ**
1 Westmoreland Circle
Bethesda, MD 20816



I. Introduction

God who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.
Adapted from Philippians 1:6

After 139 years, members of the Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ still believe God is speaking powerfully and calling us to grow and grapple in faith. At this time in the life of the church, we are especially open to dynamic new ways of being in ministry. We seek a settled minister who will continue to nurture our children, youth and adults, and who will carry-on God's work of justice and love both locally and in the wider world. We believe that where there is suffering and sadness, we are called to be more engaged in ministry.



We invite a minister who will revel in the beauty and diversity of our worship and music; who will foster a deeper spirituality; who will offer inspirational sermons that are meaningful, thoughtful and challenging; who will promote the importance of generosity; who is committed to acting for social justice; and who offers an extravagant welcome to all in the Westmoreland congregation.

II. Who We Are

Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ is a progressive and Open and Affirming congregation located in Bethesda, Maryland, at the border of Washington, D.C.

The church has members of all ages, and many denominational backgrounds, including several inter-faith families. While the church has maintained the level of member contributions through the pandemic, other measures of activity, including participation on boards and committees and weekly attendance declined, as has been the case with mainline congregations across the United States. Participation of families with younger children initially declined, but has since rebounded.

Westmoreland has an exceptional faith-based musical program, with worship services including traditional hymns and organ music, as well as spirituals, jazz and bluegrass music. The Festival Chorus, which includes the Chancel Choir and community members, also presents two concerts a year that raise funds for area nonprofit groups.

"I was drawn to Westmoreland for its inclusive community, focus on God and Jesus' message and the beautiful music."
– Shirin Hemmat, new member

Our congregation is notable for the diverse theological backgrounds of our membership. Members have come to Westmoreland from traditional Congregational backgrounds, Catholic, conservative evangelical, and mainline Protestant denominations. We have all come seeking something different and have found it at Westmoreland, which demonstrates the breadth of acceptance in our community. These diverse backgrounds add to the richness of the experience at Westmoreland and create significant opportunities for theological exchange.



The church also has a long history of promoting women leaders, having for decades alternated between female and male moderators. Women have, and continue to, serve in pastoral roles as well. The church hosts a variety of spiritual and Bible study groups and maintains an active commitment to justice and peace in the Middle East.

Declaration of Purpose

Our Declaration of Purpose, adopted nearly a century ago, still captures the deepest aspirations of our congregation:

We do hereby set forth the principles of the Christian faith as commonly held among us, believing that the life, spirit, and teachings of Jesus Christ provide the foundation for our faithful aspirations.

It shall be our aim to bring joy to little children, instruction and high ideals to youth, inspiration to people in the midst of life, and comfort to those in life's later years; and to labor together for the betterment of humankind.

Our fellowship shall not be dependent upon identity of theological opinion, or of outward circumstance, or of denominational name, but shall grow from a common loyalty to Jesus; a common passion to serve the world; and a common purpose to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

Our ideal is a church of the open mind, the warm heart, the aspiring soul, and the social vision, which ever seeks to express, in all the ways of life, the mind and spirit of Jesus."

Our commitment to these ideals permeates all aspects of our congregational life, as we:

- Present an educational program that inspires young children with a lively program of "Godly Play," challenges young people to struggle with the place of faith in their daily lives, and provides adults with a range of Biblical study offerings.
- Create worship services that include thoughtful sermons dealing with spiritual questions and ways to confront life in the everyday. The congregation shares a lively observance of the Passing of the Peace, thoughtful Joys and Concerns, and celebration of the Holy Eucharist.
- Experience a creative faith-based music program led by the Chancel Choir and the Westmoreland Festival Chorus.
- Continue the church's strong commitment to social justice and outreach ministries. Many Westmorelanders are drawn to the church through opportunities for active engagement in a broad range of issues from Middle East peace and refugee resettlement to affordable housing, sandwich-making for the homeless, and local hunger concerns.

"When I first walked into Westmoreland, I knew from the warm welcome that it would fit into the space that my old churches hold in my heart. I had the same feelings that I had back home - immediately I knew this was a place where I could learn and grow in a community that is so ready to be neighbors to one another through triumphs and challenges alike... each time I have left with the feeling that this is a place where newcomers are not only welcome, but where new friends are delighted to set up a place for you."

- Erica Walters, Visitor

Our History

Westmoreland began in the mid-1800s in the Mount Pleasant area of Washington, D.C. In 1948, the congregation moved to Westmoreland Circle, on the boundary between Washington and Bethesda, Maryland. Over the past year,



the congregation has been researching, studying and discussing the connections between that move and the history of racial injustice and “white flight.”

In 1968, the church joined with a historically Black congregation to found Lincoln-Westmoreland Housing, providing low-income housing in a part of the city affected by riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This pioneering effort continues, including plans for a fourth building, though the congregation’s involvement has diminished. Identifying ways to reinvigorate this historic partnership is one of the exciting possibilities our congregation is considering to broaden and expand its involvement in the local community.

In 1984, the church founded a Service Corps of four to five recent college graduates working full-time with local service agencies, housed in the former parsonage. The program took a hiatus this past year as its next phase is evaluated. The congregation has also taken an active role in supporting two refugee families from Afghanistan, including one that resides in the former parsonage that had housed the service corps members.

Westmoreland’s robust Middle East Committee has focused on issues of peace and justice in this critical region for over three decades, including organizing trips to the region. The committee coordinates the Palestinian Olive Oil Ministry with a consortium of more than 30 area congregations that raise funds for Palestinian hospitals and social services.

In the late 1990s, Westmoreland underwent a process of discernment to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) church, culminating in a shared commitment to become one in 1998. We are wholeheartedly committed to being an open and affirming congregation. We reached this commitment through a careful process of discernment that helped establish a strong unity that continues to this day.

“As a child of a government worker, we moved every few years, in and out of Washington, many times. Westmorelanders always remembered who we were and greeted us warmly.”

– Pete Davis, Long-time member

Westmoreland sends delegates to both the Central Atlantic Conference and Potomac Association, which we also support financially. Our ministers have traditionally been involved with and had good relationships with other clergy within the Association. The congregation supports the Association, Conference, and Denomination through financial contributions.

Membership, Attendance and Financial Health

Current Active Full Membership: 305; Active Associate Members: 14

Active Full Membership in 2018: 375; Associate Members: 10

Average weekly worship attendance on Sunday mornings: 91

Average YouTube subscribers on Sunday morning: 17

2025 approved budget: \$1,106,000

Contributions to the church from congregants represent 70% of church revenues. Leasing of the church facilities to a variety of organizations total 30% of revenues, which generally cover facility-related expenses.

Mission giving represents nearly 13 percent of our budget: Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM); special projects; and over \$80,000 in grants to local charitable and social justice causes. Westmoreland’s expenses have exceeded revenues over the last several years, averaging a deficit of 5-10%. In 2025, the deficit is projected at \$72,000, or 6%. In past years, the deficit has been covered by tapping reserves and one time bequests.



Church Leadership and Staff

The church is led by a Governance Council, chaired by the Moderator. At present, there are also official boards of Deacons, Spiritual Formation, Social Justice and Action, Membership and Fellowship, as well as committees (reporting to the Governance Council) for finance, personnel, property, stewardship, arts, flowers, Middle East concerns, and archives.

The church staff is comprised of three full-time positions and several part-time positions:

Yonce Shelton, Transitional Minister, full-time
Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly, Theologian in Residence
Rev. Dr. Kate Epperly, Pastoral Care Team
Alec Davis, Director of Music, Organist, full-time
Abigail Chamblee, Faith Formation Coordinator, full-time
Vacant, Interim Office Manager
Martell Galloway, Second Floor Custodian
Samantha Wassmer, Interim Communications Coordinator
Myleah Lofland, Media Production and Livestream Manager

Worship and Music

Worship at Westmoreland blends a traditional structure with nontraditional thought. Most Sundays feature a prelude, a welcome, a hymn, time for children, a sermon, and another hymn. Within that familiar framework, however, lies space for inventiveness, challenge and play.

***“Passing of the Peace: friendly handshakes, warm hugs, cheerful fist bumps, kind words, generous acceptance. A time of acknowledging that Westmoreland is ‘church.’
My church – the place for me to live out my faith.”
– Maryn Goodson, long-time member***



Worship is profoundly interactive through the participation of children and youth in our monthly “open table” communion services. For many congregants, the highlights of Westmoreland’s worship services are the Passing of the Peace and the sharing of Joys and Concerns. Since the congregation returned after the Covid-19 pandemic, these lively rituals have become an important opportunity for deepening our connections, sharing vulnerability and supporting each other as a faith community.

The congregation responds to sermons that are thoughtful and imaginative, that help us comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Scriptural readings provide a jumping-off point for the integration of profound spiritual questions with contemporary social issues and the challenges of daily life.

Our worship service joins head, heart and hands. Lay-led social justice “moments for mission” messages are also a regular feature in our spirit-filled, yet innovative, progressive worship. We enter to worship and go out to serve.

Westmoreland’s music program is a bedrock element of worship. The flagship of the program, the 12-member Chancel Choir, provides music for the majority of the services throughout the year. The Chancel Choir includes four



paid section leaders. Music at Westmoreland includes contemporary, classical, Renaissance, gospel, and other genres. Guest instrumentalists are frequently a part of worship.

The music program at the church also includes the Westmoreland Festival Chorus, a community organization of approximately 35 additional singers, prepares both sacred and secular works for the local community, and raises funds for local charities and service organizations. In 2024, the Festival Chorus presented a concert featuring Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, as well as a benefit concert for Gaza artists featuring Ramzi Aburedwan and the Ensemble Dal'ouna from Palestine and the local Atlantic Reed Consort. One other important highlight has been an effort, called Music @ Westmoreland, to host performances from the wider local music community.

Congregational Life



Westmoreland provides a variety of activities for both its children and adult members. For children, "Godly Play" Sunday school is available for me kindergarten through fifth grade, following the children's time in service. Godly Play features a reading from the Bible with accompanying props, a time for thoughts and discussion, and then related activities.

For adults, the church hosts weekly online spirituality gatherings, including a Tuesday night Small Group Spiritual Conversation, a Wednesday morning Holistic Spiritual Nurture Group, and a Thursday morning Bible Study Group. The church also sponsors a Men's Group that discusses current events, and a monthly "pub-theology" discussion, held at a local restaurant. There are regular seminars to discuss scripture,

books or topics of interest as well as a monthly "Knit for Others" group, whose members knit prayer shawls, baby blankets, hats, and sweaters, with the purpose of giving to others.

"Last year my family began looking for a church, as we felt socially isolated and disconnected, especially following the Covid pandemic. The first Sunday we attended, people welcomed us warmly and made us immediately feel at home. Through many worship services, coffee hours, and volunteer activities since then, we feel we've found the community we were searching for!"

– Sean Kelly, new member

Church members are also intent on bringing the community together, in strengthening the ways to reach out to new members, and encouraging communication among groups within the congregation. This includes sponsoring "Dinners for Eight." Members host dinners for eight other members to help introduce and reconnect the congregation.

Community of Care: The Community Care program was revived after the pandemic and about 25 members of the congregation volunteer in three areas: preparing meals to celebrate the birth of a baby or following surgery or other medical situations, driving members to medical appointments, and helping out at Memorial Services.

Church Retreat: The church also sponsors an off-site annual retreat to bring church members and families together for fun, food and spiritual reflections. It has helped shift relationships from "being with people we know on Sundays" to "being with friends!" For almost 20 years, the retreat has been a key event on our fall calendar.

Children's Ministries: In addition to Sunday's *Godly Play* classes, the children and youth of the church joined with the children and youth of St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church in the summer of 2024 for a Vacation Bible School, which was a



mix of creative activities, songs and dance, and service. The children also participated in service projects throughout the year, including an interfaith and intergenerational day of service with Washington Hebrew Congregation as well as collecting food and personal items for various nonprofits in partnership with the Social Justice and Action Board.

The Faith Formation Coordinator recently introduced the children and youth to “Messy Church,” an intergenerational program designed to bring connection to congregants through crafts, music and a meal. This program is new for Westmoreland, and it has been successful in creating engagement with church families with younger children.

The young people of the church get to know each other through morning walks before worship. In the past year, they learned about justice issues in Montgomery County from a community organizer at AIM (Action in Montgomery). Youth in grades six to eight are invited to join in Confirmation class, where ministers and lay leaders help them explore their faith and make decisions about confirming the promises made at their baptisms. If they were not baptized, the class helps them with the decision to be baptized and to join the church. This year, 13 students are part of the confirmation class, the central principle of which is “confirming and not conforming.”

The older youth are also invited to participate in a human sexuality education course called Our Whole Lives (OWL). This comprehensive course aims to help youth make informed and responsible decisions about caring for their bodies and minds. Aimed at middle school students, OWL offers honest and open discussion of relationships, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and sexual health. The OWL class is offered in conjunction with neighboring congregations.

Youth mission trips: Every summer, church youth solidify their friendships and learn more about social justice and faith. Youth journeyed to Nashville in the summer of 2023. They made connections with peers from other churches and with members of the Nashville community, who are receiving services at local organizations. They also learned of the deeper roots and causes of social injustice. In the summer of 2024, the young people and their sponsors traveled to Colorado to learn more about caring for creation.



Church Property and Use of Church Facilities

The Westmoreland building is a traditional-style church with a narthex, sanctuary, offices, steeple, and three social halls.

The building is used nearly every day. The church leases its lower level to a daycare center. Three AL-ANON chapters hold regular meetings in the church building. The church also rents space to several choirs, a youth ballet program and other musical and charitable groups. In partnership with the Briggs Center, a local faith-based nonprofit, the church provides space for an English as a Second Language program that meets two weekday mornings.

The church completed a renovation in 2018 that added an elevator, refreshed the kitchen space and updated the parlor. More recently, pursuant to our commitment to being environmentally and fiscally responsible, Westmoreland replaced its old roof and added a solar generating system, which will provide 100% of the church’s electrical energy from clean, renewable solar power. The Property Committee also upgraded our security systems.





III. Our neighbors: A mission-driven congregation

Our neighbors are both literal and figurative. Our understanding of our place in the world encompasses each.

Social Justice and Action

The Board of Social Justice and Action strives to serve by partnering with others. For example, many Westmorelanders volunteer monthly to distribute free food at Wheaton Woods Elementary School, a mostly Hispanic Title 1 public school. The church is a founding member of Action In Montgomery (AIM), an ecumenical coalition of 40 churches, schools and tenant groups advocating for social justice and addressing issues of affordable housing, public education funding and climate change. The church's social justice programs aim to promote the engagement of Westmoreland families and friends in outreach and involvement in direct service.

The church's weekly offerings – aside from the annual pledges – are directed specifically to social justice and action activities. Last year, many members participated in church-sponsored sandwich making events for the nonprofit So Others Might Eat and the RISE Against Hunger meal-packing program.

Middle East Support: The Middle East Committee, established in the 1970s by the church's Executive Committee, uses a human-rights non-partisan approach to focus on understanding the root causes of injustice, inequality, poverty, and war in the region. The committee runs an active Olive Oil Ministry, selling olive oil from the region through a network of over 30 congregations from 10 different denominations, which has resulted in donations of tens of thousands of dollars to support Palestinian health and social service projects.

Refugee Resettlement: The church has a history of welcoming the stranger, including Vietnamese, Iranian, Guatemalan, Honduran, Benin, and, most recently, Afghan refugees. Offering safe harbor, social services and housing, we stay present with them as they resettle. We have partnered with other faith communities, as well as nonprofits and governmental agencies to offer a full range of services. In addition to providing housing at two church-owned houses to displaced Afghan families, members of the congregation volunteer to teach English, help register the children for school, schedule medical appointments, and assist with finances, including setting up bank accounts and establishing credit. More importantly, church members offer friendship to often traumatized people.

Lincoln-Westmoreland Housing: This effort flows from the historic partnership of Lincoln Temple UCC and Westmoreland CUCC, which began in 1970. Together with tax credit investors, the church owns two multi-family low-income apartment buildings, providing 166 units of much-needed housing in D.C.'s Shaw neighborhood. The core mission is to operate these units and seek out new residential development opportunities that help to meet housing needs among our most vulnerable citizens. Both buildings are now fully occupied and also house a community room, and several commercial entities, including two daycare centers, and a nonprofit group, which helps individuals and families transitioning out of homelessness or fleeing domestic abuse. The next affordable housing project has begun with pre-development tasks including design, permitting and public/private financing applications.

The Bethesda Community

Our neighborhood includes both Bethesda, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. *Westmoreland* is located within Montgomery County, Maryland, approximately 50 yards from the D.C. boundary.

According to Quick Facts from the Census Bureau, the population of Bethesda in 2020 was 68,056. It includes a highly educated and wealthy populace:

Education: 97.7% of residents have a high school diploma or higher, and 87.7% have a bachelor's degree or higher.



Income: The median household income is \$185,546.

Housing: The median value of owner-occupied housing units is \$1,088,000.

Cost of living: The cost-of-living index in Bethesda is 138.5, 38.5% higher than the national average and 23.9% higher than the Maryland average.

Ethnic Makeup: The ethnic makeup in 2020 was 69.5% non-Hispanic white, 8.9% Hispanic or Latino, 4.9% black, 11.7% Asian, 0.3% American Indian, and 8.2% of two or more races. 24.4% of the population was foreign-born.

In the past few years, Marriott International and Fox 5 DC, a local television station, have built new headquarters in downtown Bethesda. Many new shops and eateries have opened. Housing, condos and new apartment buildings try to fill demand for convenient living and easy access to shops, dining and mass transportation. Bethesda is tightly connected to the rest of the D.C. region, including a stop on the Red Line of the Metro system. Construction of the Purple Line, a 16-mile light rail service, is underway. When completed, it will extend from downtown Bethesda to Silver Spring, College Park and New Carrollton, connecting to Metro, rail and local bus lines.

Downtown Washington, D.C., is five miles from the church and is reachable in about 25 minutes by car, depending on traffic. The nation's capital is not only the seat of the federal government, but also a thriving city of neighborhoods that house world-class museums, theaters and restaurants.

IV. What God is Calling Us to Become

Our Calling

We are proud of our past and encouraged by our present. We engage meaningfully with each other and our neighbors. We also recognize that our congregation falls painfully short as a vehicle for God's love in the world.

We believe that God is calling us to become a better, more generous, more spiritually alive version of ourselves. There is a thirst for connection within the congregation. Westmoreland has gone through a number of changes over the last five years: the Covid-19 pandemic broke the habit of churchgoing, and some families have not returned; our congregation continues to age; the church has been in a lengthy time of transition since the departure of the previous senior minister in 2023. Our connections with other congregations and interfaith organizations are rebuilding and being reimagined, with some new partnerships coming into being.

Those changes, while challenging, are not unique to Westmoreland. Like many churches, we have built back many of our strengths. We have a successful youth program, terrific music and no shortage of people willing to serve on church committees. Despite an annual budget deficit, we are reasonably well funded. Many of us are involved in the social justice efforts described above.

We are also a theologically diverse congregation. Congregants often do not agree on the nature –or existence – of God, or the teachings of Jesus, or the importance of the Bible. We view this diversity as another strength.

The Westmoreland community is also environmentally alert, taking seriously the mandate to “think globally, act locally.” Mindful that our church is built on what was once Piscataway tribal land, stewardship of our natural inheritance is a cornerstone of Westmoreland's social engagement. That commitment is reflected in the church's new solar roof, a strategic investment intended both to economize on energy consumption and to help alleviate global warming. More modestly, it animates Westmoreland's participation in the Little Falls Watershed Alliance, a project devoted to



Westmoreland is on the border of Washington, D.C., both geographically and spiritually. We are a congregation of doers who are accustomed to defining tasks and executing plans of action. This quality acts as both a blessing and a challenge.

Underneath the professional competence of so much of our congregation lies a need and a yearning for spiritual growth. The Westmoreland congregation desires a future in which our commitment to God's work moves in and through a sense of spiritual purpose, humble acknowledgment of our privilege, and care for each other.

The productivity of our efforts to further the justice work of Jesus is both a hallmark of our congregation and a large part of our identity. As a congregation, we are committed to continuing this work and progressing toward new needs and issues. We are proud of our history and present efforts. As Charles Cobb writes, interdependence is inescapable, and "we can either exult in this fact or bemoan it." We choose exultation.

Westmoreland has a long tradition of strong lay leadership working in cooperation with our ministers. The boards and committees of our church consist of lay chairpersons who manage everything from our facilities, budgets, personnel matters, outreach ministries, and spiritual formation programs to portions of our music ministry and worship planning. Our congregation desires a new senior minister who will provide spiritual direction to these efforts and play a leading, vital role going forward.

We are fortunate to have an outstanding Director of Music, Alec Davis, who has been serving Westmoreland for several years. Our Faith Formation Coordinator, Abigail Chamblee, is currently applying to seminary, and her role at Westmoreland remains uncertain. Three current members of the congregation, Yonce Shelton (Transition Minister), Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly (Theologian in Residence), and Rev. Dr. Kate Epperly (Pastoral Care Team) are playing crucial roles in guiding the church through the present interim period. Our church will not call any additional ministers on a permanent basis until a new senior minister is in place and could participate in the search and call process.

We need a leader of vision, faith, self-confidence, and humility to guide us. God has given us a path on which to tread, one that contains obstacles, turns and beautiful vistas alike. Walk with us on this journey.