

## A Sacred Space



From the introduction to "A Sacred Space," the history of Westminster House. Copies are available for \$10. For information or to order email [randy@westminsterhouse.org](mailto:randy@westminsterhouse.org)

Prologue:  
*...Planting Arts and Learning in America*

*"...what we are likely to gain from our university life is not bits of knowledge, is not maxims and rules for getting this or that; but....(that)...one thing we talk so much about and understand so imperfectly - it is character....As I grow older I come less and less to respect men of brilliance and to tie to men for their characters."*

Benjamin Ide Wheeler, President, University of California (1899-1919), from his inaugural address on October 3, 1899.

The fascinating story of Westminster House (W House) - more properly, the Presbyterian campus ministry alongside the University of California at Berkeley (UCB) - is one small part of the larger and longer story of the deep commitment of the Presbyterian Church to education, particularly higher education.

The Presbyterian engagement with education is rooted in the Protestant Reformation in Geneva in the sixteenth century, and was brought to America by the staunch Calvinist founders of New England. To build a civil society on biblical principles they taught their children to read in order, mainly, to read the Bible, a major step toward the founding of Harvard in 1636 and Yale in 1701. The charter of Yale held that its students were being educated to be "fitted for public employment both in Church and Civil state."<sup>1</sup>

As the frontier of the nation moved westward through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Presbyterian Church's commitment to education was expressed through the founding of dozens of colleges. Many of these colleges were church-related or nondenominational and some were private. Volunteer Christian student societies were organized in almost all of them. Thus, as one leading historian of campus ministry noted, "Religion is connected indissolubly with the beginnings of American higher education...For two centuries the church in America followed the moving geographic frontier. It brought with it churches, schools and colleges."<sup>2</sup>

Most of the new colleges arose out of the vision and energy of leaders in the several Protestant denominations, with Presbyterians, given their historic commitment to education, playing the leading role. Colleges, they reasoned, were the major means to educate new generations of civic and church leaders; they could thus ensure a growing future for both the nation and the mission and ministry of the Christ. By 1861 the Presbyterians were "operating over 25 percent of the existing colleges that would survive into the twentieth century."<sup>3</sup> Though the mortality rate for the new colleges was high, there are today, across the nation, 66 colleges and universities related to the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), and many others related to other denominations.

Not surprisingly, the Presbyterian vision of higher education contributed substantially to the founding of the University of California (UC), at the western edge of the continent. Beginning in the 1850s Presbyterians in northern California started several colleges in San Francisco and the Bay Area, but only one of them, begun in partnership with Congregationalists, survived, and in a radically different form. The surviving institution, the initiating predecessor to UC, began as the nondenominational College of California, founded in Oakland by Congregationalists and "New School" Presbyterians in 1855.

The "Organic Basis" of the College of California was congenial with the vision of the later and successor state university. It was founded

...to furnish the means of a thorough and comprehensive education under the pervading spirit and influence of the Christian religion. The bonds which unite its friends and patrons are a catholic Christianity, a common interest in securing the highest educational privileges for youth, the common sympathy of educated and scientific men, and a common interest in the promotion of the highest welfare of the State, as fostered and secured by the diffusion of sound and liberal education.<sup>4</sup>

In October, 1867, after 13 reasonably successful years and aware of the promise of state-supported higher education, the College trustees transferred its still-functioning educational program, and extensive properties in Oakland and Berkeley, to the anticipated state university, which was chartered the next year, 1868. Only one professor of the former College, Martin Kellogg, was invited to join the faculty of the new University, though Henry Durant, once a pastor and then professor of Greek at the College and an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Oakland, served briefly as the first president. In 1873 the University moved from the Oakland site to new buildings in Berkeley. The enrollment that year was 199 students, 26 of whom were women.

One further note about the founders of the College of California that reveals their ideas about higher education. It was they who named the city of Berkeley and several of its streets near the University. In 1865, as part of their plan to move the College away from the distracting bustle of downtown Oakland, they bought 160 acres in the more isolated plain and hills to the north. South and west of this proposed campus they acquired additional acres and prepared plans for a small town to be called "Berkeley," after the 18th century Irish philosopher and Anglican bishop George Berkeley. His challenging poem - "Verses on

the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" - contained the then well-known line: "Westward the course of empire takes its way."

...An important leader in these various developments was Henry Haight. In 1855 he was among the group of citizens who petitioned the State for the charter of the College of California. In 1868 he was governor of California and, as such, was a strong supporter of the new State university, signing its founding charter in March, 1868. He was also an elder at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco and, in 1871, became a director (trustee) of the newly-founded San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS). Haight Street in San Francisco - part of the now widely known "Haight-Ashbury district" - was named in his honor.

The early church-related and private colleges focused their formal curricula on shaping persons (note: mostly men in men's colleges) into citizens devoted to the common good....

...Around the Student Christian Movement experience students of all lands have for more than two centuries been finding their experience of God and dreaming dreams for the refashioning of person and of the world along the lines which they have considered to be implicit in the life and religious experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>1</sup> "Religion in the State Universities: Its History and Present Problems." Clarence P. Shedd. *Religion in the State University: an Initial Exploration*. Henry E. Allen, Editor (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1950) p.13

<sup>2</sup> *The Church Follows Its Students*. Clarence P. Shedd. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938) p.1

<sup>3</sup> *The American College and University*. Frederick Rudolph (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) p. 55

<sup>4</sup> *Ninety Years of Education in California*. William Warren Ferrier (Berkeley: Sather Gate Book Shop, 1937) p.181