

**745 WESTMINSTER AVENUE – WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
(WESTMINSTER UNITED CHURCH)
*J.H.G. Russell, 1910-12***



By the early 1900s, advances in engineering and building materials, coupled with an increasingly affluent urban population, enabled a number of Winnipeg's Protestant congregations to replace their early, often austere houses of worship with large, ornate, Gothic-inspired symbols of faith.

Among this group was Westminster Presbyterian Church that in 1910 engaged prominent local architect John H.G. Russell to design a stone edifice for the northwest corner of Westminster Avenue and Maryland Street in the recently developed Wolseley district.

This church had been organized in late 1892 as an offshoot of the St. Andrews Presbyterian

congregation. Its members initially occupied an 1893-94 facility at the southeast corner of Notre Dame Avenue and Charlotte Street in the city centre. By 1909, however, they needed more space. The search for a suitable building site concentrated on the Wolseley area, adjacent to the north bank of the Assiniboine River and in proximity to the middle-and upper-class neighbourhoods of west and south Winnipeg where many Westminster members resided.

Once the building's basement was completed in 1910, it became the congregation's meeting place while work proceeded on the superstructure. A special opening service was held in June 1912, just over a year after Governor-General Earl Grey laid the cornerstone.

Like most Presbyterian (and subsequently United) churches of the 1900-30 period, Westminster displays the Beaux-Arts Gothic style of religious architecture, noted not only for pointed arches, flying buttresses, rib vaults and other elements of Gothic Revival detailing, but also for the generous use of masonry surfaces, limited flat wall space, and well-organized interior plans.

The church rises from a stone basement on concrete footings to a three-storey stone superstructure around a frame of cast iron columns and steel I-beams. Walls and buttresses are of uneven, coursed, rough-cut stone, while exterior staircases, coping, window accents and buttress caps have a smooth-cut finish. The wooden rafters and beams of the cross-gable roof are held in place by five rows of tension rods.

The imposing Maryland (front or east) facade displays a central gable and multi-hued rose window framed by two corner towers; a broad staircase leading to two pairs of wooden entrance doors set in arches; and transoms and other windows adorned with elegant tracery. Stretching upward 30.5 and 21.3 metres respectively, the towers are outlined by corner buttresses and battlements with corner pinnacles. The leaded, stained glass rose window, 4.3 metres in diameter, contains a small clear space in the centre to permit sunlight to fall at 11 a.m. during summer and winter solstices on an open Bible at the Communion Table.

The south (Westminster) elevation incorporates a second raised entrance between two gable ends.

The southeast gable, which is matched on the north facade, features a 7.3-metre-high stained glass opening, while the southwest gable, which does not have a northern counterpart, holds a trio of windows on each level. These are set in square surrounds at grade, then in much taller rectangular and arched frames above.

The sanctuary, laid out in the form of a Maltese Cross, is based on the auditorium plan. It has a two-storey vaulted ceiling, curved pews and balcony, and dark wood accents. Floors slope toward the front (west) wall where the pulpit, choir and pipe organ are located. Built in 1912 by the Casavant Freres of St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, the four-manual organ is one of the finest such instruments in the city. Six principal stained glass windows designed by the Luxfer (*or Luxfur*) Prism Co. and Robert McCauseland Ltd. highlight the gallery, nave and narthex.

To the rear of the sanctuary on the main floor are a lecture hall, chapel (originally a ladies' parlour), and church offices, library and archives in former classroom space. The rear second floor includes a choir vestry, secretary's room, auditorium and stage, library, and more classrooms, some of which have been converted to rental offices for community groups.

A one-bedroom apartment occupies the attic. The basement initially included storage space, complete with a large wooden box that once held ice to cool the sanctuary; a gymnasium/social room; club room; showers; lockers; kitchen; pantry; engine room for the organ billows; and a fan and boiler room behind thick masonry walls. Today, the gym and storage space are unaltered, while the remaining area accommodates a day care centre, large kitchen and new heating system.

Westminster Church was built for \$158,604 under general contractors Saul and Irish. Architect Russell (1862-1946) was prominent in the governance of the Presbyterian Church and designed more than a dozen buildings for the denomination in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and northwestern Ontario. Born in Toronto, Russell worked for architect H.G. Gordon before relocating to Winnipeg in the early 1880s. He travelled and studied in the United States for several years, then returned to the city to conduct a western Canadian practice from 1895 to c.1940. His local portfolio included schools, houses and apartment blocks; the Ashdown, Adelman, Hammond, Silvester and Willson,

Franklin Press, Porter, and Dingwall warehouses; the Great West Permanent, Ashdown, Thomson, Allman, McKerchar, McArthur, and Eastman Kodak retail-office blocks; and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. Among other clients were the Manitoba Government Telephones, Royal Bank and Young Men's Christian Association.

The Westminster congregation blossomed in its new location. Upon union of the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists in 1925, 124 dissenting Westminster members broke away to form the nucleus of a new church, First Presbyterian, at 61 Picardy Place. Nonetheless, membership of the renamed Westminster United Church topped 1,100 and continued to grow steadily thereafter. With subsequent expansion of the city's inner core, Westminster has once again become a downtown church, just as it was at its founding a century ago.