

Westminster Presbyterian celebrates 50 years of preschool

By **AMY BROWNING**
Correspondent

Fifty years ago, Westminster Presbyterian Church was a pioneer in the education of young children. Today, its preschool and mother's day out programs are still going strong.

The church, located at the corner of Sage Avenue and Airport Boulevard, established the first kindergarten program in the city.

The school was the brainchild of the late Mary Pope, a charter member of the church. The school, which began with 21 students, was formed as part of a trend to offer educational opportunities to children before first grade.

"Mary Pope was a very civic-minded woman," said Trattie Ollis, the director of the school's early childhood program. "She saw a need and addressed it. She was a forward thinker."

Since its inception in 1959, the Westminster program has taught more than 3,000 children, according to Ollis.

The kindergarten program quickly had other programs grow out of it, including the mother's day out and the preschool programs. In 2008, the two programs came together to form the early childhood program, designed to serve children ages 6 months to 4 years.

The school currently has one 4-year-old preschool class, two 3-year-old classes and two 2-year-old classes. The mother's day out program has two classes with children ranging from 6 months to 4 years old.

"Westminster proudly offers the only program of its kind in Mobile for



Courtesy of Westminster Presbyterian Church

Preschoolers at Westminster Presbyterian Church's early childhood program enjoy a party as part of the school's anniversary celebration. Front row, from left: Julian Kahalley, Annie Taylor, William Taylor, Morgan O'Neill, Macy Browning, Maeghan Reilly, Anna Grace Cain; second row: Logan Cashion, Dryden Paddock, Beaux George, William Blanchette, Paul Dekle, John Dekle, Taylor Harrison, Sage Phillips, Hannah Broders, Lula Jane George; back row: Matthew Browning, Jake Rostron, Caston Paddock, Kent Rostron, Joseph Blanchette, Zach Hutchinson, Mary Ross Olander, Lexi Garside and Sallie Herndon.



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2½-year-olds, called the 'little learners,'" Ollis said. "Little learners is a bridge between mother's day out and preschool where children begin building a foundation for preschool."

The program has nine teachers, some of whom have been with the school for more than 13 years.

The children participate in music and Spanish classes and beginning computer skills as well as

phonics, gymnastics and ballet. The preschool children also attend chapel every Wednesday morning, led by the church's pastor, David Mauldin.

"We have a good staff. There is a good mix of old and new teachers," Ollis said. "I love the way these teachers work together."

The program's teachers were trained in 2008-09 in the method "Childcare Enhancement with a Pur-

pose." The program provides discipline strategies that are age specific and information regarding age-appropriate behavior, said Ollis. The program also gives teachers various tips for identifying certain learning problems in young children.

Preschool teachers have evolved in the 50 years since Westminster's program was established, said Ollis. Teachers used to be enthusiastic moms. Today, teachers are trained and more specialized. Some of the school's teachers are former or certified teachers; others are enrolled in college working towards masters' degrees.

Westminster offers half-day programs Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Parents have the flexibility of choosing three or five days per week for 3-year-old preschool children. Students in 4-year-old preschool attend five days a week. Mother's day out is available from one to five days a week.

"Since our beginning, Westminster's philosophy has been that learning is fun. Children learn best utilizing their five senses," Ollis said. "We encourage a wide range of experiences and provide educational field trips throughout the year."

The ratio of children to teachers varies, depending on the age of the children, said Ollis. For the mother's day out program, the ratio is four children to one teacher and the 4-year-old classes typically include up to 11 children per teacher, per class.

A half-day program is also offered during the summer months. "This is one of the sweetest places

ever," Ollis said.

The church is located at 2921 Airport Blvd. The school's Web site is

www.westminsterkids.com.

For more information, call Maureen Henderson at 251-471-9995.



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