

Presbytery of Middle Tennessee

Executive Presbyter

Ours is a geographically large and diverse presbytery. Its 84 churches are scattered from Alabama to Kentucky and span nearly 200 miles east to west. Several dozen are in Nashville and the surrounding area, including three very large congregations ranging in size from 1200 to 4500 members. Another 12-15 are county seat churches, typically with several hundred members. The rest are small and rural, many with only a few dozen members. There is an equally great theological and political diversity in this presbytery, although our liberal and conservative congregations have thus far found ways to live and work together peacefully, with minimal drama. We have not suffered major losses of churches through dismissal (only one so far), though many churches have faced declining enrollments and budgets, and several have been shuttered. These losses have been only partially offset by several new church developments.

The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee is looking for a full-time executive presbyter. The Presbytery office consists of a full-time assistant, a part-time stated clerk and a part-time bookkeeper. The presbytery's offices are in one of the large Nashville churches. The executive presbyter is charged with many of the supervisory and administrative tasks typical of an executive director. This includes dealing with polity issues and helping us relate to the wider church. Yet these tasks, while necessary and important, are not the essence of the position. Rather, we look to the executive presbyter most of all to help us live into our vision of how a presbytery should serve its constituent churches and ministers.

Several years ago we engaged in a process of self-examination designed to help us focus on the core functions of a presbytery—the areas in which connectionalism truly brings added value to our constituent congregations and ministers. We identified three, which are embodied in the resulting vision statement:

The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee is a community of churches and church leaders whose role is to guide and support the work of its constituents, striving to build up the body of Christ through connections of mutual support, creating a culture of leadership development, and church transformation.

The first essential function—fostering connections of mutual support—recognizes that as Presbyterians, we are connected to fellow believers and congregations by a common history, geography, polity, and mission. We are at our best when we see our bonds of connectedness as opportunities to learn from each other and to lean on each other. Our role as a presbytery is to help broker fruit-bearing collaboration and community among the presbytery's member congregations, countering isolationism born of geography or parochialism.

The second—leadership development—builds on Presbyterians' well-known love of learning and commitment to excellence in the training of their ministers and lay leaders. Together we can offer leadership training and resources that far exceed what all but the largest churches could do on their own.

Finally, a commitment to building up the body through church transformation comes from the recognition that to honor the Great Commission, we must be prepared to change and adapt as the world around us—the mission field—changes. Our call is not just to share the gospel, but to share it effectively. For that, we need to be willing to follow the leading of the Spirit, even when it takes us outside our comfort zone. That happens in two ways: first, by planting new worshipping communities where they can thrive and become self-sufficient, and second, by revitalizing existing congregations that are in decline but are willing to undertake the hard work of moving toward a new, missional understanding of what sort of witness they are called to make in their changing communities. We must do both if we hope to have a presbytery of healthy, thriving churches in years to come, which is exactly what we hope our new executive presbyter will help us achieve. The person we are looking for cannot be content merely to provide hospice care for dying churches; rather, that person must be committed to fostering spiritual and numerical growth and vitality in the churches of this presbytery.