



## CANDID CONVERSATIONS: RIGHT-SIZING OUR EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Brian Craker | Transitional Executive Presbyter

*“What is the Presbytery doing right now to address our pastoral shortage?”*

This was a question that I was recently asked by a member of a Pastor Nominating Committee. Their PNC had been struggling with very few pastoral applicants from our denominational job resource and wanted to know what additional resources could be tapped to help them in their work. Their problem was not unique. We have seen this shortage in available pastors for some time. Their pointed question, on the other hand, prompted me to do some deeper digging into the source of the problem before offering potential answers. Much of the following information and research coincides with the report I gave at our April Presbytery meeting, with additional perspectives on right-sizing our expectations for the future and anchoring those expectations in hope.

First, the data. They say numbers tell a story, and those numbers offer a clear explanation of the pastoral shortage we are beginning to see. According to the PC(USA) in 2024, over the previous 10 years we were retiring an average of 308 ministers a year, while only ordaining an average of 103 ministers. On the surface, that would mean we are retiring 3 times as many as we are ordaining. But there’s another level to the data. Of the 103 average ministers being ordained each year, roughly 30% are being ordained into parish or pastoral ministry. The rest are being ordained into chaplaincy programs, education, or community service. Turns out, we are actually retiring 8x as many as we are ordaining BACK INTO pastoral/parish ministry. The past reality of “a pastor for every church” is quickly disappearing, and a new reality is beginning to set in.

So why have the numbers of newly ordained ministers gone down so dramatically? There are several factors at play. The Association of Theological Seminaries has been tracking the steady decline of students enrolling for traditional Master of Divinity (M.Div) programs since 2000.

**Table 6. Mainline Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS enrollments decreased between 2000 and 2020.**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	9,319	4,975	-4,344	-47%
Total ProfMA	982	804	-178	-18%
Total Enrollments	10,301	5,779	-4,522	-44%

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That decline has been more significant for mainline seminaries, which saw a 47% decline in enrollment between 2000-2020, followed with an additional 13% decline from 2020-2025. The good news is that ATS is reporting the decline has appeared to bottom out, and they are even beginning to see numerical growth again. Barriers like higher tuition rates and cost of living have made seminary education more difficult. On the bright side, one of the indicators of new student growth in seminaries has been tied to more churches identifying and encouraging parishioners that they see may have a calling from God for ministry. And as we know, a personal invitation is always a powerful motivator.

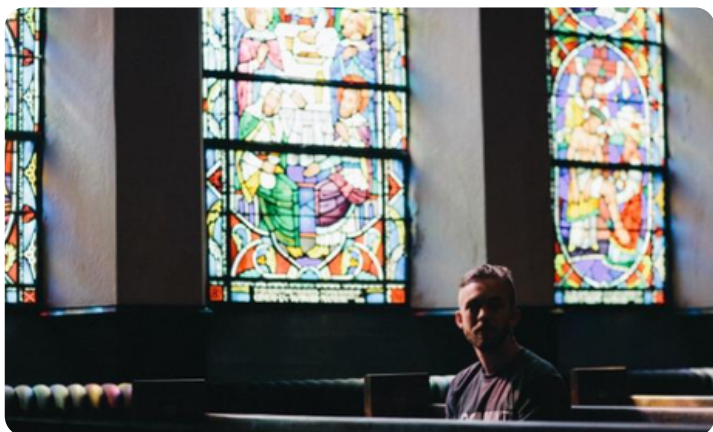
The Rev. Dr. Tim Cargall (HR) saw this wave coming, and in many ways was a prophetic voice while offering solutions of this adaptive challenge. He pointed out that within a decade, we could see up to 8 of every 10 churches without a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Tim highlighted that historically, over our 300+ year history, the majority of our pastoral care and functions for local congregations came through Commissioned Pastors, or what we now refer to as Certified Ruling Elders, or CRE's. In fact, in 2022, the number of CREs serving in our denomination surpassed 1,000 and is continuing to grow at a steady pace. In many cases, CREs are identified within local congregations and the

educational and training path for prepare them as a Commissioned Pastor is much shorter and easier than a traditional M.Div. While there are some limitations to their pastoral duties and scope, CREs have played a vital role in pastoral service for many mainline traditions over the centuries.

In addition to CREs, there are additional options churches can consider in the future. Many churches in rural areas have enjoyed a long history of pastor sharing, and that model has been expanding into more urban centers. In our Presbytery, some of our congregations have begun utilizing technology to help stream pastors from other congregations in a 21st century version of pastor sharing. "Parish Models" where congregations from a particular region are grouped together to help share missional leadership and worship planning have been successful in the UK, and we are starting to see more of it here in the US. Lastly, here in Cascades, we have seen two successful mergers in less than 2 years, as sibling congregations discover strategic partnerships and pooled resources as the best option for strengthening their witness and mission in their shared community.

All of this points to the need to "right-size" our expectations for the future. For centuries, our congregations thrived as the "connectional church" by working together, sharing resources, and raising up local leaders that God was calling from among their midst. The last 80 years gave us a period of ministerial abundance, but those numbers are now shifting back toward historical norms. Personally, I see this less as a challenge and more of an opportunity. In the Pacific Northwest, where there has always been resistance toward institutionalism and a push for "more local", right-sizing our expectations could

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show greater alignment with what our communities are looking for. For Presbyterians who value being active in their churches and in their communities, properly aligning our expectations will require greater collaboration and involvement...all marks of a healthier church.

What might “right-sizing expectations” look like for your congregation as you look to the future? Has your Session considered what effect the pastoral shortage might have on your church? Could models of collaboration be not just a lifeline, but a new source of life-giving purpose? What would it look like to return to a time when the connectional church really was *authentically connectional* with many examples of incredibly strong regional bonds?

Our Presbytery is already looking to the future, wrestling with these adaptive challenges and working on solutions. This is the work that your per capita and partnership giving helps fund. This is the work that volunteers from your congregations who serve in our Presbytery help us discern and refine. This is living into the purpose of being the Presbytery - finding ways to engage the connectional church in a deeper, more meaningful manner, so that we can continue to live out the Gospel according to the calling within each of our local congregations. We can only do that by right-sizing our expectations to reality, working together and building trust between us, praying for one another, and seeking the wisdom of the Holy Spirit together as a community.

Sources: PCUSA Office of Statistical Reporting; “We are Not in Kansas Anymore”: *The Changing Religious Landscape in the USA and the PC(USA)* (Rev. Dr. Tim Cargal, Oct. 2024); ATS.edu “Institutional and Student Data”; Ryan Burge “Graphs about Religion”. TABLE 6 Graph: Church Leadership “Changes in Seminary Enrollment Patterns”, January 2026.



## 227<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY TO CONVENE ON JUNE 22

The PC(USA) General Assembly is the highest governing body and primary discernment event of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Meeting every two years, it brings together elected ministers, ruling elders, and advisory delegates from across the denomination to worship, vote on church policy, and guide the national and global mission of the church.

We are particularly grateful to the following members of Cascades Presbytery that will be serving as GA commissioners: Dennis Smith (North Bend, First), Joanna Dunn (Bethany PDX), Kris Voss-Rothmeier (Southminster PC, Beaverton), Sharon Laddusaw (McMinnville, First) and Avery Clark (Young Adult Advisory Delegate).

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about GA227.



## CONFESSIONS OF A RELUCTANT ACTIVIST

Jeff Sievert, Honorably Retired Pastor

I was 13 in 1969 when the Donald M. Drake Company announced plans to develop an industrial park at Oaks Bottom in southeast Portland. I didn't know anything about it until our civic-minded elementary school teachers told us to get out our pens and paper. We learned about the natural value of Oaks Bottom, and how destructive it would be to pave over. We had a field trip. We learned how to address letters to city officials and what kinds of things to say. And we learned that we can help make a difference. Today that land is the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge, and I had a (small) hand in that.

If was my first act as an activist. Only at the time, I understood it be an act of "citizenship" -- a responsibility, a right, a privilege.

Moving forward, I missed Vietnam, the Civil Rights and Women's Movements, to name a few. It wasn't until I landed at San Francisco Theological Seminary in the early 1980's that I began to learn that faith naturally and necessarily has a footprint in the public square. I learned to question U.S. involvement in Central America, the Arms Race, and injustice of various kinds. I wrote some letters. I traveled to Guatemala for language school as a "sandalista" in solidarity. I protested outside Lawrence-Livermore Labs (only once, and partly because of a girlfriend who was strategically arrested on site). Watching the ill-conceived second Gulf War unfold, I lamented helplessly: "When do people take to the streets?"

Well, now, I'm in the streets. And not because I want to be. It seems we've drifted into territory characterized by a rise in fascism, authoritarianism, and white "Christian" nationalism that arguably threaten U.S.



democracy and world stability. I've walked in several "No Kings" rallies, written more letters, and attended some bi-monthly interfaith vigils at the ICE facility.

On May Day, at least seven Presbyterian clergy joined with over a thousand others lifting up worker and immigrant rights in Salem, along with other concerns. The Presbyterian clergy were there with Together Lab (a presbytery partner), beginning with a pre-rally gathering at St. Mark Lutheran Church near the Capitol. We reviewed the issues, noted lessons from Minneapolis, and were reminded about the importance of trust. And then we walked and sang, uniting our voices at the Capitol.

I'm thinking that there's a role for a reluctant activist retired Presbyterian clergyperson, a U.S. citizen, the church, a congregation, and our presbytery. Perhaps we too have been strategically positioned for "such a time as this."

We have a history. John Calvin was vitally engaged with Genevan civic life (and not always welcome). Karl Barth and the Confessing Church

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opposed Hitler’s state-sponsored “German Christian” movement, producing the Barmen Declaration. German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was eventually executed for his resistance. The Dutch Reformed Church opposed Apartheid in South Africa and adopted the Belhar Confession, now in our Book of Confessions. Churches were on the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. And General Assembly continues to formulate thoughtful position papers and take stands on many civic matters.

I still don’t want to be an activist. But history is overtaking preferences. Apparently it’s time to build public witness into my household routine, and also our organizational life, in fresh ways. Some clergy, elders, and church members are already on the front lines, meeting with lawmakers and even getting gassed and flashbanged. Presbytery, our shared faith community, has a role, providing platforms for conversation, education, and strategizing. We might publicize opportunities for action and connections with PCUSA resources. There could be presbytery workshops and updates on the docket. Perhaps we even go on record with a public position and letters to officials. This isn’t about “politics.” It’s about justice, peace, and God’s unfolding promise to mend the entire universe, including our own fractured country. It might be “activism,” but it’s really just faithful, engaged citizenship as Presbyterian people of faith.



A hymn from an Eastertide service at Portland First seemed eerily relevant:

*Where tyrants' hold is tightened,  
where strong devours the weak,  
where innocents are frightened,  
the righteous fear to speak,  
there let your church awaking  
attack the powers of sin and,  
all their ramparts breaking,  
with you the victory win.*

*("O Christ, the Great Foundation," Glory to God,  
#316, verse 3)*





## LIVING OUT THE GOSPEL AT SAVAGE MEMORIAL PC

Pat Berger | Northeast Region Reporter

How are things going at **Savage Memorial Presbyterian Church**? They sound good! **Pastor Chris Grewe** is looking forward to a time away this summer at **Ingalls Creek Retreat Center** in Washington. He will have time to hike, to rest, and to make new connections. There will be retreat leaders there to speak and to lead discussions on the church in these new times – all sounds like a wonderful time away.

And how about at the church? Things are going well – well, except their custodian had to have hip surgery and is out for eight weeks. Their office manager is dealing with strep throat, which slowed them down this week. And their handbell choir director had a fire at her home this winter (she and her dogs are fine, but they are out of the house for a year). Just one of those would be enough adventure to have at one time! And, Chris says, as a congregation they are getting along pretty well!

They enjoy each other's company, he says – not a bad place to start. Lent and Easter were meaningful times for this congregation. And on Pentecost, they had streamers and flames hanging from the ceiling. Most of those in attendance were wearing red – again, this group of people enjoys each other and what their congregation is doing.

Chris is proud of the fact that two members of **Savage** are now serving on Presbytery committees. Recently, they hosted the **Reverend Heidi Bolt**, who currently serves as Ministry Relations Officer for the Northwest Region of the Presbyterian Foundation. Chris said that she was very complimentary, and it is no wonder, when you hear about their mission involvements. For instance, when a former Clerk of Session died,



*Pastor Chris teaches from the pulpit at SMPC*

she left the church a bequest. The first thing the Session did was vote to give ten percent of the amount to a group known as **IRCO** – the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization. The group's local main office is close to the church. **Savage Memorial** learned about **IRCO** from their involvement in local food programs. The church provides weekend food for children from two elementary schools, serving 35 students each week. This summer, those schools are closed for construction, so **SMPC** is serving as the site for the food pantry every Tuesday.

This congregation is also intentional in their giving to **PC(USA)** special offerings. They have been a “Four for Four” congregation, participating in all four of the denomination's major offerings. Now that those offerings have been condensed to three, they are continuing as a “Three for Three” congregation! They also participate in the **Theological Education fund**, contributing mission dollars to **San Francisco Theological Seminary**, **Zarephath's Pantry**, **SnowCAP**, and to **Heifer International**.

**Savage Memorial** mostly held their own during the pandemic—they currently welcome about 50 people into worship on Sundays. Those in attendance enjoy the choir, handbells, and classically trained organist. The people at **SMPC** enjoy their worship and their fellowship. Blessings upon your ministries!



## MOTHER'S DAY TEA AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ASTORIA SIGNALS MORE THAN TEA AND FASHION

Dianna Weston | Northwest Region Reporter

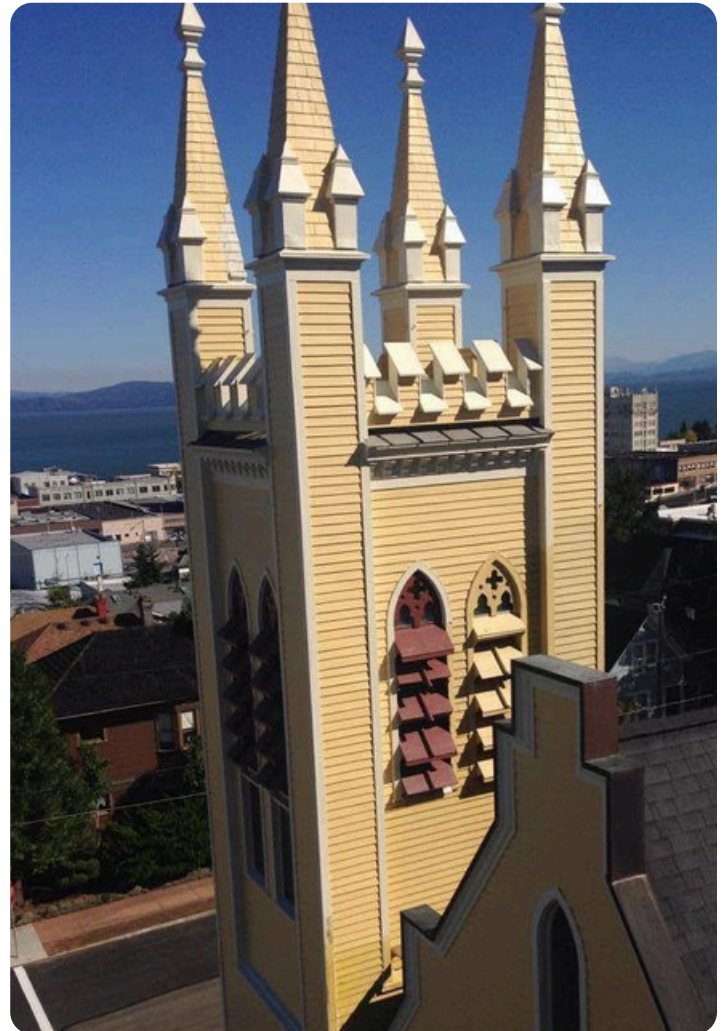
One Saturday afternoon in early May, church and community members of First Presbyterian Church in Astoria gathered for “A Stroll Through Time Fashion Show and Mother’s Day Tea.” There was tea, vintage fashion, a raffle, and an all-around good time. But more was happening than just tea and cookies.

In an interview with the Daily Astorian, Hazel Davidson, the pastor’s wife, said, “We are here because the actual building itself is in need of maintenance. We house a food pantry, two churches, the music conservatory, and the dance academy. This is a fundraiser to keep the building going. This is a very historic building and an absolutely beautiful building, and we’d like to keep it that way.”

The event was a success financially, raising more than \$6500, but also, according to Pastor Paul Davidson, because “It raised the joy in many hearts.”

First Presbyterian member Billie McBride-O’Neel spearheaded the tea and offered her collection of vintage fashion. She and her husband Dave also purchased 50 teapots for the church and donated everything else that was needed. They even sold ads for the program and kept things organized.

They promoted the tea with Next Door and Facebook posts, as well as enthusiastic word of mouth, the local Chamber of Commerce, and an appearance on the public radio station by Billie and local historian, John Goodenberger.



Pastor Davidson sums up the successful gathering by using the analogy from Joan Gray’s book, *The Sailboat Church*: “This event showed what can happen when a church family takes its hands off of the oars and raises the sails, trusting in the Holy Spirit to move us forward. As I’ve said before, just because we’re relying on the Holy Spirit to fill our sails with the needed energy to move us forward, it doesn’t mean that we sit back and do nothing. On the contrary, a sailboat requires the constant tacking of the sails to make sure they are best positioned to work most efficiently rowing.”

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Church leadership has already decided this will be an annual event, but next time they will add entertainment by a chamber orchestra, a new First Presbyterian tenant.

Like other mainline churches, First Presbyterian is attempting to connect with the broader community, particularly younger families. The hope is that they will come for events, or for the puppet shows during the children’s message time - and then keep coming back to share in the Holy Spirit. As Pastor Davidson (who has been a puppeteer since the 6th grade!) says, the children’s time lets even the adults “relax for a little bit.”

He continues: “We’re concerned with finances, but that can’t be the focus of our energy. We look at events as outreach, not just money raisers. We’re not just a congregation, but a church family. We’re trusting in God to help us get to a point where we’re no longer in crisis mode.”

“Remember, as long as we don’t lose sight of God and God’s path and keep working toward making God’s kingdom known in the here and the now to all who would receive it, great things will happen. As long as we all continue to listen to and follow the Holy Trinity, I know and trust things will be good.”



*Billie O'Neel, emcee and organizer of the event at the Daily Astorian offices in one of the historic gowns. (Heather Douglas)*

## RECENT TRANSITIONS IN CASCADES PRESBYTERY

### New Pastors

Gregory Allen-Pickett has been called to serve at Lake Grove PC, Lake Oswego to begin service on August 1, 2026

David Emery transferred his membership from Olympia Presbytery to POTC and is now serving at Rise Church, Tigard

Jennifer Bales has transferred her membership from San Jose Presbytery

### Installations/Commissioning

Dennis Smith was commissioned as a CRE to our North Bend, First PC on May 17

### Pastoral Changes

Kris Voss Rothmeier is the new Interim Pastor at Southminster PC, Beaverton

Laurie Newman is the new supply pastor at Tualatin PC

### Retirements

Scott Peterson retired effective December 31, 2025

Greg Wood was granted HR status effective March 1, 2026

### Necrology

Richard Lang passed away on March 10, 2026

Bruce Armstrong passed away on March 18, 2026

John Bell Pierce passed away on March 3, 2026.

Dean Rowley passed away on May 18, 2025

Donald Caughey passed away on June 7, 2024

Phillip Essex passed away on March 29, 2024



## JUST SAYING YES!

Dennis A. Smith | Central Region Reporter

“Lots of churches have preschools, but for our little church, inviting ‘Tip, Tap, Grow’ into our lives has been a really big deal!”

Rev. Karen Hill settles in for an extended conversation about how First Cottage Grove opened their doors to a new preschool that focuses on the arts, especially dance and music.



*Pre-School committee members David Hamilton and Mary Nisewander celebrate as co-owners Drea Smith and Matt Barnes cut the opening ribbon for Tip, Tap, Grow on April 17*

As it grows, Tip, Tap, Grow will be able to accommodate up to 30 children.

“It’s been a journey,” notes Hill. “There came a point when our session got serious about welcoming our neighbors into the building. There came a point when we just started saying ‘yes.’”

Cottage Grove’s story is not unusual. Over the years, some spaces that used to be full now stand empty. The session began thinking about how those spaces had been used in the past: community programs, a Montessori school. There was a time when the rooms were filled with their own children.

The congregation of 81 members is still vital. Sunday worship regularly pulls in 60 people.

That’s just the right size for their building. But they are an aging congregation.

The pandemic was a wake-up call. Their building was basically closed for two years, and nobody liked it. 13 members in their 90s died during that period, and the church grieved. Some thought that the church would not survive. But Rev. Hill was confident that her job was not to save the institution, but to serve the community.

She knew that they had been identified as a “More Light” congregation in the 90s, and that was a contentious time. Some members left. Perhaps as a result, the church went silent, shying away from social justice issues.

Rev. Hill took a sabbatical in 2022. She took a road trip around the country and ran into all these churches that were very open about who they are and how they live out their commitment to inclusiveness. She met a trans person working at a Wendy’s in Alabama, and thought: “This is the bravest person I’ve ever met!” There was also a church in Arkansas that had a big Pride banner out front. She thought: “If these churches in the Deep South can stand up and be inclusive, what’s our problem?”

When she returned from her sabbatical, she shared her observations with the session. They concluded that they must move beyond COVID and open their doors again to the community.

They reviewed their understanding of their identity as followers of Jesus. The Worship Committee drafted a statement that is now in their bulletin and on their website: “All are welcome. All are invited. We believe that God

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*loves us all – no exceptions. We celebrate people of all ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, faith traditions, and, without inquiry, immigration status. We welcome into leadership everyone called by God.”*

As they began to say “yes” to their community, they began to see lots of new faces in worship.

They also became increasingly aware of the urgent need for childcare.

Then they had a reality check. A qualified childcare program requires qualified facilities. They would have to invest heavily in their building to meet the necessary standards.

They discovered many gifts available among their members. One was an expert in processes and planning. He helped them develop a step-by-step plan to get them where they needed to go. They had grant writers. They had members who were well-connected with local philanthropists, local government, and civil society.



*County Commissioner Heather Buch in conversation with Matt Barnes, co-owner of Tip Tap Grow*

They understood that community funding sources were waiting to help them make the changes that needed to be made. The community urgently needed childcare facilities!



They installed heat pumps. They updated the bathrooms. One bathroom had not functioned for years. Instead of fixing it – a major expense – people had posted a sign and ignored it. Now it works!

They have done the work.

Rev. Hill notes that every time they invite a community partner to use their space or welcome a new person to their staff, she welcomes them, making clear their commitment to inclusiveness: “This is who we are. We just need you to know that.”

The response, usually, is a sharp intake of breath, a smile, and a quick: “Oh! Thank God!” Tip, Tap, Grow is an investment in the future of Cottage Grove. But it is also a gift to the church.



*Stated Clerk Paul Belz-Templeman talking to Pre-School Committee member Pauline Thorstenson*



## SAVE THE DATE FOR UPCOMING PRESBYTERY MEETINGS!



- June 18, 2026:** Online Meeting
- October 23-24, 2026:** In-person meeting at First, North Bend
- January 27, 2027:** Online Meeting
- April 2027:** In person, NW Region (Dates TBA)
- June 23, 2027:** Online Meeting

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