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The Panhandle Presbyterian

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Presbytery
of Florida
Furthering the Ministry
of Jesus Christ in Northwest Florida

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What if smallness can be an advantage?

I just finished reading Brandon J. O'Brien's *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, and I believe this book is worth our attention and one of his most important curiosity statements is this...

What if being small is not necessarily a problem to solve? What if smallness can actually be a strategic advantage for ministry?

That matters because so much of our understanding of a "successful church" has been shaped by numbers: more members, more programs, more staff, more money, more people in worship. Without realizing it, we can begin assuming that bigger means healthier and smaller means something has gone wrong. O'Brien challenges that assumption.

A strategically small church stops trying to imitate a large church and begins asking: **What has God uniquely equipped this congregation, in this place, with these people, to do?**

That moves us from scarcity—we don't have enough people, money, volunteers, or programs—toward abundance: **What has God already placed among us?**

Small churches can be



intimate, nimble, deeply relational, and wonderfully intergenerational. And because they cannot do everything, they have the opportunity to become intentional about doing a few things faithfully and well. O'Brien argues that selectivity, rather than an ever-expanding menu of programs, can actually make a congregation healthier and more effective.

I especially appreciate his challenge to our addiction to programming. Acts 6 offers a different model: begin with a real need, identify people whom God has gifted to respond, and organize ministry

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From our
Equipping
Presbyter/
Stated Clerk



By Rev.
Mario Bolivar

"A strategically small church stops trying to imitate a large church and begins asking: What has God uniquely equipped this congregation, in this place, with these people, to do?"

Continued from front

around the mission rather than maintaining the institution.

Sometimes the strategic decision is to start something. Sometimes it is to stop something. Sometimes it is to partner with another congregation or organization already doing it well.

For the Presbytery of Florida, I think there is something here worth exploring. Our small churches are not all the same. Their histories, communities, gifts, and challenges are different—and that particularity may actually be part of their strength.

Perhaps the question is not simply, “**How do we become bigger?**” Perhaps it is: **How do we become more faithful, focused, nimble, authentic, relational, and effective with**

what God has already entrusted to us?

I’m thinking about creating **four short, 15-minute videos** exploring some of the most significant teachings from O’Brien’s work and what they might mean for our congregations. Now, if you have already read the book—or would like to read it—I would love for you to join me, because I’m also thinking about recording a **podcast conversation** with folks from around the Presbytery for example: What challenged you? What do you disagree with? What ideas could help our churches? Where are we already seeing this happen? You don’t have to be an expert. Bring your thoughts, questions, disputes, and curiosity. Interested?

Let me know. **Call me—**

I always prefer a call. If not a call, text me. And if not a text... then email me. Haha! I plan to begin all of this after I complete my move.

You read that right! **The Bolivars are finally moving to the Panhandle!** We are set to close on our home in Orlando and move during the **first week of September** to Panama City, FL.

In the meantime, let’s keep thinking together about how God might be moving our strategically small churches. Because small does not have to mean unsuccessful. Sometimes small means **intimate. Nimble. Authentic. Focused.** And sometimes the mustard seed is exactly how God chooses to begin.

Count it all joy!



DOGWOOD ACRES

Retreat Center and Summer Camp
Chipley, FL

Upcoming Retreats

Reset Adult Retreat

September 18–20

Fork in the Trail Cooking Retreat

November 6–8

Pause Yoga Retreat

February 26–28

Dogwood Men’s Retreat

March 5–7

SpiritFest Middle

School Retreat

October 2–4

Dogwood Youth

Conference

February 5–7

Summer 2027

High School Week

June 20–25

Elementary/Middle

School Session 1

June 27–July 2

Elementary/Middle

School Session 2

July 11–16

More Details and registration at
dogwoodacres.org

The Presbytery and MPT celebrate and welcome new pastors

The August Presbytery meeting was a celebratory occasion for all who participated. We witnessed the excitement and joy of the First Presbyterian Church in Milton congregation as they welcomed their newly commissioned elder, **Deborah Potter**, as a pastor. Their vibrant spirit and commitment to reaching out to the surrounding communities provide a wonderful model for churches seeking to rediscover the purpose of church life and mission.

Rev. Mark Francis Phillips was also introduced to the Presbytery in person. His installation service at First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee will be held at 4:00 p.m. ET on September 13. Clergy are encouraged to wear red stoles and to be seated together.

First Presbyterian Church of Quincy extended a call to **Rev. William Darrell Arnold** as their installed pastor, and MPT is pleased to support his ministry as he begins his service on September 13. We look forward to welcoming and introducing him to the Presbytery at our next meeting in October.

First Presbyterian Church of Mariana has chosen **Rev. Cheryl Montgomery** as their interim pastor. She will



CRE Deborah Potter



Rev. William Arnold

walk alongside the congregation and guide them through this season of transition as they prayerfully seek their next installed pastor.

It is a great joy for our ministry to walk alongside these candidates and the search committees of each congregation. We are grateful for the opportunity to witness God's guidance and faithfulness throughout each church's journey.

With our workload becoming lighter, MPT will continue to support and work alongside congregations as they navigate their seasons of transition. We remain committed to supporting



Rev. Mark Phillips



Rev. Cheryl Montgomery

search committees and helping congregations discern God's direction for their future ministry. God is faithful, and we are called to be faithful, as well.

From the Ministry of Pastoral Transitions (MPT)



By
Rev. Hanlim Chae,
*MPT Moderator
and Lafayette,
Tallahassee Pastor*

"It is a great joy for our ministry to walk alongside these candidates and the search committees of each congregation."

Caring for Creation



By
Pam McVety,
*Presbytery
Stewardship
of Creation
Enabler*

“Artificial night lighting is increasing and has many negative effects on plants, animals and humans.”

Light pollution is not heavenly

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years.” From the beginning, light has been one of God’s good gifts—guiding our days, marking our seasons, and revealing the beauty of creation. But like many good things, light can be misused when we forget its proper place. Today, excessive artificial lighting is dimming the heavens above us and disrupting the creatures that depend on natural darkness below.

I first became aware of light pollution when I was working on recovery of endangered sea turtles. Upon emergence from their sand nest, hatchlings head to the nearest light source. In nature, that would be the reflection of the moon on the ocean, but in Florida, it more likely is the lights from hotels, businesses and private homes. Of course, this doesn’t end well for the hatchlings.

Excessive lighting is a common feature of our communities, and we need lights at night for security and safety reasons. There are, however, lots of uses of light at night that aren’t necessary. We don’t need lights to advertise or to illuminate our gardens and trees. Artificial night lighting is increasing and

has many negative effects on plants, animals and humans.

It affects the behavior of many species, including migration patterns, sleep-wake cycles and habitat development. Adult sea turtles and birds use moonlight to navigate during migration, and artificial lighting can disorient them. These lights also attract large numbers of insects, which are killed when they encounter light sources.

For humans, it affects our sleep cycle and makes only the brightest stars and planets visible. The sad fact is that night skies are getting significantly brighter due to artificial lighting, and that is increasing by about 10% each year.

Here is some good news. We have something called [Dark Sky Places](#), where you can experience the heavenly night sky with minimal to no light pollution. A Dark Sky Place is officially recognized for its dedication to preserving and protecting pristine nighttime environments. They are certified by International Dark Sky Places and represent areas dedicated to preserving the night sky. They adopt night sky-friendly lighting practices, provide educational outreach, and commit to ongoing preservation efforts.

The nearest one to us is St. George Island State Park, but it isn’t officially certified. The park limits artificial lighting to protect nesting sea turtles and to preserve night sky visibility. It provides an elevated observation platform and on certain nights the park hosts offer astronomy programs where you can look through powerful telescopes and learn from knowledgeable guides.

Other places in Florida include Big Cypress National Preserve, Everglades National Park, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, Chiefland Astronomy Village and the City of Groveland, near Orlando. It is Florida’s first dark sky-certified city.

Each of us can help restore the wonder of the night sky and protect the wildlife that depends on darkness. Start by turning off outdoor lights you do not truly need for safety or security. When you do use outdoor lighting, choose warm-toned bulbs—amber, orange, or red—shield them, and point them downward so the light serves its purpose without spilling into the sky. Small changes around our homes, churches, and communities can make a meaningful difference. For more ways to reduce light pollution, visit [DarkSky.org](#).

Why serve at Presbytery?

When we think about church life, we picture our church sanctuary, people sitting in the pews next to us, Sunday school classes and potluck dinners. But one of the most beautiful gifts in our denomination is that we never walk alone. We are connected.

Presbyteries bring churches together. Presbyteries form synods, and synods make up our General Assembly. Your church and mine make a community of churches that form the Presbytery of Florida. We are bound

together in mutual support, accountability and mission.

This is why Presbytery service matters. When you serve at this level, you are helping steward the health of the broader church. You help shape how our Presbytery cares for its people and helps them fulfill their mission. You also build meaningful relationships and connect with people across the region.

Wherever your passion lies, Presbytery has a place where your skills and talents can be used.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

God doesn't call us to do ministry in isolation. Offering your voice and gifts to Presbytery service, you strengthen not only our regional community, but the entire body of Christ. Volunteer leaders make an impact. If you are interested, please email office@presbyteryofflorida.com.

From the Ministry of Representation (MR)



*By Rich Kangas,
MR Moderator and
1st, Lynn Haven
Ruling Elder*

1st Wednesday
SACK Lunch Conversation
(South Atlantic Community Knowledge)
12-1:30 pm Eastern Time



A monthly zoom for sharing across the Synod!
**Learn and share experience, resources, and best practices
on a new topic each month.**

September 2 - New Worshipping Communities
October 7 - Courageous Conversations
November 4 - Systemic Poverty
December 2 - Food Ministries

To register: scan the QR Code or visit synodofsouthatlantic.org



From Dogwood Acres



By **Christy Williams,**
Director

*"...this retreat
makes space to set
the baggage down
and take time for
holy rest."*

DWA invites you to pause on the threshold

The church is a great place for a scavenger hunt — Can you find that box of red hymnals from before reunion, some of that CLC curriculum from 1960, or maybe a shelf full of construction paper with all the edges faded and cracking?

We are people who love to hold onto things. Sometimes that's a meaningful way to trace a long history of worship and mission in a

community. More often, we hold onto things long after they've served us. This is true of that old box of hymnals, but it's also true of the hurts, the disappointments, the need to be at the center of things, or the feeling that if we do more, we will be more worthy.

Even more difficult than tossing dusty books is giving up all that. If only we could stop, be still, and connect a little more deeply with our

Creator — maybe we could finally set some of it down.

That's the invitation of Dogwood's upcoming Reset Retreat: *Pausing on the Threshold*. Designed for guests to step away from the noise, this retreat makes space to set the baggage down and take time for holy rest. From September 18–20, guests at Dogwood will be welcomed into contemplative worship

What awaits you

Land. Water. Stillness.



Guided Hiking



Morning Kayak



Restorative Yoga

Three days shaped by the land and water.
No screens. No agenda beyond presence.
All fitness levels welcome.



Dogwood Presents:

Reset Retreat

Pausing on the Threshold

September 18-20

Register at
dogwoodacres.org

spaces, restorative yoga practices, time on the water to kayak, guided and self-guided hikes in the woods, fellowship, and nutritious meals.

Because the truth is, we can't just decide to let go — we need a threshold to cross. And thresholds are everywhere: in mornings and

evenings, at the water's edge or a trailhead, in doorways and gates, in births, marriages, retirements, and the turning of seasons. In Celtic tradition, these in-between places were honored as spaces of reflection and discernment — a place to stop, catch our breath, get our bearings, and become who

God created us to be.

Thomas Merton wrote, "For although God is already with us, in us, and all through us, we have to go on journeys to find him." This Reset Retreat is that journey — an invitation to find God within and around you, right there on the threshold.

Save the Date!

PRESBYTERY OF FLORIDA

FALL STATED PRESBYTERY MEETING



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2026



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH OF QUINCY, FL



Presbytery
of Florida
Furthering the Ministry
of Jesus Christ in Northwest Florida

Starting at
9 am CT/
10 am ET

FPC Milton “pulls out all the stops” for Summer Stated Presbytery Meeting

As the Presbytery’s August 11, 2026 Summer Stated meeting approached at First Presbyterian Church of Milton, excitement crackled, and the smell of chocolate cake baking filled the air. “Busy bees” strung sparkling lights over elegantly-set tables, expertly prepared a sumptuous meal, and artfully festooned the sanctuary with fresh, fragrant greenery and flowers. The scene was set to welcome visitors from sister churches to a worshipful, meaningful, memorable and efficient meeting.

At left, below, from left, FPC Milton volunteers Christina Smith, Kelly McKenzie, Sharon Brault, Sherri Kelley, and Tara Riggs warmly welcome visitors upon meeting registration. Below, at right, FPC Pastor Deborah Potter preaches a sermon titled “Where Faith Lives” from the scripture in John 20.

(Photo courtesy of Susan Barry)



At left, below, Presbytery Equipping Presbyter/Stated Clerk Rev. Mario Bolivar leads a lively “speed-SWOT” analysis of Presbytery strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats during the meeting’s resourcing time. The participants then share their thoughts during multiple SWOT rounds.



COME FIND REST

Church musicians and worship leaders are invited to join PAM's South Atlantic and Puerto Rico Region for a weekend centered on music, connection, and rest. Through thoughtful workshops and collaborative singing, we will consider how rhythms of sabbath can shape our work, returning home renewed in spirit and strengthened for the calling we share.



Scan the QR code or visit
presbysmusic.org/south-atlantic for more information

September 25–26, 2026
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Columbia, South Carolina



Augie Gil
Festival Director



Alicia W. Walker
Keynote Speaker



Interest sessions led by
Rev. Emily Mooneyhan &
Rev. Melissa McNair-King





Above and at left, meeting participants share their ideas about Presbytery strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats during multiple “speed-SWOT” rounds.

Below, from left, Chaplain Rob Sugg is recognized upon his retirement, as Ministry of Congregational and Pastoral Care Moderator Elder Linda Lovins shares about his dedicated ministry and his wife, Karen's, work alongside him.

At right, below, Presbytery 226th General Assembly Adult Advisory Delegate (YAAD) Dexton Teat, joined by Rev. Mario Bolivar, describes his experience among the larger church during GA.



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OF FLORIDA**

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**Presbytery
of Florida**

Furthering the Ministry
of Jesus Christ in Northwest Florida

All views expressed in this
publication are not necessarily
endorsed by the Presbytery
of Florida as a whole,
as we remember
"God alone is Lord of the
conscience." (F-3.0101)

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice,

...to love kindness

and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8



WORLD COMMUNION
OFFERING



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Chipley, Florida

**130th
Homecoming
Celebration**

1896 – 2026

"Celebrating 130 Years of God's Faithfulness"

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2026



WELCOME HOME

Registration, Welcome & Opening Prayer
Game Night & Fellowship

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2026



CELEBRATING OUR HERITAGE

Church History Tour
Our Presbyterian Heritage Presentation

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2026



WORSHIP TOGETHER

Celebrating 130 Years of Ministry
Worship Service

*A weekend of fellowship, memories,
and giving thanks for 130 years of God's faithfulness.*

ALL ARE WELCOME!

