

Michael Cuppett, Minister

First Presbyterian Church of Newton

Local Church Involvement:

Beyond serving as the minister of First Presbyterian Church of Newton, I stay connected and in-the-loop with nearby congregations, particularly Andover PC, First Stanhope, First Franklin, and Yellow Frame. Through Manna House, First Newton is tied to over 20-25 local congregations, including many Presbyterian congregations.

Presbytery Involvement:

I'm currently a member of the ACT/ACC, and though I'm a recent arrival in the presbytery, I've connected with quite a few minister members of the presbytery (and meet with a few regularly). I look forward to deepening my connection and roots in the Presbytery of the Highlands.

Prior to the Presbytery of the Highlands, I was very involved in the Presbytery of Baltimore and chaired its CPM while serving on the steering cabinet.

Have you attended General Assembly as a Commissioner before? If so, when?

No

Have you attended General Assembly on your own before? If so, when?

No

Tell us about yourself:

I was ordained in 2022 after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, and since then, have served in several ministry contexts. I was ordained as a chaplain with Johns Hopkins Medicine, served a mid-size congregation (about 400 members) as their operations manager, and in January of this year stepped into the solo pastorate at First Presbyterian Church of Newton. Like most of us, I've experienced the promise and peril of denominationalism and the institutional church, and during my time in the Presbytery of Baltimore, demonstrated a strong commitment to our shared ideals and responsibilities.

I've found a home in many different places spanning the midwest, south, and mid-Atlantic, and remain closely connected with friends and colleagues in each of these places. I studied music at the College of Music and Performing Arts of Belmont University, and enjoyed my time in Nashville and its diverse music scene. While at Belmont University, I found a spiritual home in the PC(USA) through UKirk Nashville, a Presbyterian campus ministry that spanned Belmont, Vanderbilt, and Lipscomb. UKirk Nashville was a profoundly healing experience, especially as I emerged from far-right religious fundamentalism and grappled with my identity as a queer man.

While at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was the operations manager at Evolving Faith, a conference founded by Rachel Held Evans and Sarah Bessey. During that time, I was responsible for executing the online conference, managing digital media, and overseeing its social network. It was an exhilarating experience, and in my first year with the group, over 12,000 guests attended the conference online.

All that to say... there are many corners of vocational ministry, all with their unique challenges, and I'm grateful for all those opportunities to witness the diversity of the institutional and non-institutional church.

What excites you or concerns you about G.A.?

Presbyterian polity has been a very influential part of my journey into and through vocational ministry. UKirk Nashville is one of many examples -- there were ministers, congregations, and church members who all shared in the responsibility of campus ministry. As students, we met people from across the area who had little in common except a commitment to our lives.

On a personal note, several friends were directly affected by the brazen sexual misconduct of a pastor; many of them joined a chorus of ministers who considered the disciplinary process a shameful misuse of polity and power.

My excitement is pretty wide-ranging. It is certainly a privilege to participate in the national governance of the church and to bring our presbytery's voice into its conversation and debate. But beyond the opportunity to shape our polity, policy, and process, there is much to gain from the less-formal participation that happens between plenaries and committee meetings. It would be a treat to bring the gift of new connections, ideas, and conversations back to the Presbytery of the Highlands, and offer a glimpse into the ministry happening around the country.

There's always a nagging concern about focusing on the trees and not the forest. There is real concern and tension across the denomination, with some very loud narratives competing for attention -- one of the most pronounced being that the "church is dying." There will be voices that are frustrated, burned out, tired, or anxious - there is an important inner work that is required as part of GA.

What excites you or concerns you about the church today?

In addition to being a recently-ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament, I'm also a young adult (at least by Presbyterian standards). My experience in ministry is remarkably different than those who served booming, thriving congregations where money and members were easily found.

I don't think that the "church is dying" narrative is a worthwhile or accurate one, and I believe it causes many congregations to drown in shallow water. Vision is lacking in the national church, and we are simultaneously seeing the corrosion stemming from "spiritual entrepreneurship," venture-capitalist fever dreams, and national consulting groups that offer snake-oil solutions to evade the challenging (and sometimes painful) work of discernment and congregational reflection. Yes, many churches need to close, and yes, there are grim financial realities ahead, but the church is also allowing its corporate witness and vision to drown in a simple and unmoored narrative about its death.

Some of the strongest evidence that God loves the church is the people who comprise it. God has drawn remarkable, wise, colorful, and passionate people into the church and continues to do so. At the same time, the need for the church in the United States has grown dramatically as a result of worsening political and social ills. There is evil in the world, and it is rearing its head in ugly ways. Though there are congregations that are dying, this is an opportune moment when the Presbyterian Church and nature of ministry is transforming -- and this makes the church ripe for a bright, faithful future.

