

The following article appeared in the October 2016 issue of *The Spire*.

Dear friends at First Presbyterian Church,

On Sunday, September 25, we held a congregational meeting to elect your Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC), who will do the work of searching for your next installed pastor. They were elected confidently and unanimously, and at this point, probably the most important thing I could say to you is: Pray, pray, pray, pray, PRAY (!!!) ...for those who were elected for this awesome task. The members who have answered God's call to serve the church in this way are David Albright, David Arango, Pat Bishop, EB Gee, Ellen Matthews, Lannie Mercer, and Jim Yancey, and as they embark on this journey to figure out who God has already chosen to lead you, prayer is what they need the most.

I know there are a lot of questions about exactly how this search process will work, how long it takes, and why it takes as long as it does. Hopefully, this article will help answer most of those questions, but if not, or if you are curious about any specific part, I would be happy to help with that. So, let the fun begin!

First, the PNC will decide a regular meeting day and time that is conducive to everyone's schedule, then they will decide "who does what" on the committee – chair, secretary, internet communicator, one who will bring weekly devotionals, and one who will bring weekly team-building exercises. There are plenty of ways for the gifts of each person to be celebrated and used as they serve.

Next, the PNC must be trained, which does not happen in just one meeting. There are tons of tasks to be accomplished and they need to know what those tasks are and how to do them *faithfully and well*. One thing I will impress upon them – and upon you as you wait – is that the tasks **must** be done correctly and (decently and) in order. I have worked with committees in the past who thought they knew a better way than this one that has been researched and revised and revised and updated and revised, and when those committees went their own way, they paid dearly for it in the long run. The PNC will be trained primarily by me, but also with input from our Committee on Ministry (COM) liaison, the Rev. Gary Marshall, and our Presbytery Executive (and church member) Steve Benz. My experience here is pretty extensive, but Steve has me beat by a long shot – he has worked with over 90 PNCs in his many years as an Executive, and he has seen the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Once the initial training is completed, a mission study will be conducted. This will be done through focus group meetings, small gatherings of no more than 12 members (only) who come together for *exactly 90 minutes* to answer a prescribed set of questions, each of which will help inform the PNC about the characteristics to look for in your next pastor. **When the focus group meetings are scheduled, please make sure you sign up to participate in one!** You want to have input into the process? This is your chance! The questions will be published in advance of those meetings **so you can begin praying over them**. Truthfully, our own personal opinions in this case are not helpful; what we need to know is **what you have discerned from God** about the questions that will be posed. Once all those meetings are concluded, I will prepare a lengthy document for the PNC that will give them a very good idea of the kind of person they are to search for as they fill out the Ministry Information Form (MIF). The amount of time all this takes will depend on how many focus group meetings there are. Those meetings will be scheduled on various days of the week at various times of day so there should be one available for every member of the church. If all the meetings fill up (remember, they are limited to 12 attendees each), we will schedule more.

Next is completing the MIF, which is a 10-page document before it is filled in, and somewhat longer afterwards. As you might imagine, a form that long is not completed overnight, it will take a number of meetings and could possibly take several months. At its completion, the session approves it, then the presbytery (the COM) approves it, then, the PNC is given a password and sign-in instructions, and ... *dum dum duuuuuuum* ... it goes online! Once the MIF is in the Church Leadership Connection (CLC) system, it is matched – *like computer dating!!* – with ministers who are searching. Ministers fill out and upload a Personal Information Form (PIF) which is what is matched to the MIF.

The PNC will be matched with anywhere up to 100 PIFs (hard to believe, but true, sometimes even more), which are also lengthy – 12 pages before completion, several more afterwards – and every PNC member must read every word of every PIF to determine if there is a “fit” with the First Presbyterian Church. They will figure out a ranking system to narrow down the candidates and will likely have something like an A pile, a B pile, and a C pile. They will then view DVDs and websites of candidates about whom they are curious, narrowing the field a little further. Sometime during all this, the PNC will be further trained in how to look for “red flags” in PIFs and how to conduct successful interviews ... believe me, it is not as easy as it sounds ... and they will *practice* interviewing, in order to do it professionally and well. There are phone interviews, then Skype or FaceTime interviews, and only when the PNC narrows the field down to 1-3 candidates do they visit with them in person. Because of the beauty of modern technology (!!!), there is not nearly the amount of traveling there once was in a process like this.

At the end of the process when the PNC determines they have located just the right person God has (long since already identified) for this church, it will go something like this: The candidate will come and preach and lead worship in what is called a “neutral pulpit,” which will be a congregation within relatively easy driving distance for the PNC, but not necessarily even in our presbytery. If the PNC is completely convinced after that, they officially extend the call to the candidate. But, there are still a few more steps! Once the terms-of-call (salary and benefits) are agreed upon, the candidate must meet and be approved by our presbytery’s Examinations Commissions (which, if I’m not mistaken, meets monthly). As soon as that happens, a congregational meeting is called to elect the new pastor (pastors are elected, not hired). The candidate’s information is shared with the congregation by the PNC, then the members vote by ballot. *The candidate is not present for this meeting.* Once the votes are counted but before returning to the congregation, the PNC chair contacts the candidate by phone, shares the vote count, and at that point, the candidate either accepts or declines the call. The PNC chair returns to the congregation and announces the results. Hopefully, at that point y’all will all be dancing in the aisles! If (when!!) the candidate accepts, then she or he gives notice to his or her congregation, arranges for the move, and all the details that go along with that. Mission accomplished!!!

So, at this point, my question is – does this sound overwhelming and time-consuming? If not, it should. It is a very good, very detailed process, and I pray that this gives you an idea of why it takes the time it takes. The reality is that it could take, as has previously been shared with you, about 18 months. It could be a little shorter or a little longer depending on various factors, not the least of which is the availability of good candidates when the actual search part takes place. But, please remember, if the PNC tries to short cut any of the steps in the process, it could be disastrous – believe me, I’ve seen it. In the coming months, please pray and pray mightily for the members of your PNC, for the questions you’ll be asked to speak about in the focus groups, and for your church. And knowing that this is such a lengthy process, please offer words of encouragement *regularly* to your friends serving on the PNC, rather than asking why it’s taking so long. They are good and faithful servants called by God to do an important job and it will be much easier and likely more successful if they feel loved, rather than rushed.

Thank you for enduring this long article and if you have questions, please let me know. If *you* have a question, it is likely someone else will be wondering the same thing! And in all things, just remember this: **GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME AND ALL THE TIME GOD IS GOOD!** *Thanks be to God!*

Blessings,

Cindy BEnz