

Presenting!

The Executive Presbyter Search Committee is delighted to be able to present **Robin** and **Ray Thomas** as its candidates for Executive Presbyter.



Robin at a Glance

- Grew up on a dairy farm in Oneonta, NY.
- Baptized, nurtured, married at First Presbyterian Church, Oneonta, NY
- Ordained as an elder in the PC (USA)
- Elder Commissioner to the 222nd General Assembly
- Coordinated the Christian Education program at Holy Way Presbyterian church, Tucson, AZ.
- Served as a communication, leadership development and activity hub for the Synod of the Southwest.

A ray of Ray

- Grew up in New Jersey. Confirmed in the Presbyterian Church in Metuchn.
- An undergraduate degree in mathematics from the University of Michigan.
- McCormick Seminary graduate with a first call at First Presbyterian Church, Oneonta, NY.
- Called to The Holy Way Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ in 1995.
- Chaired COM.

- Commissioner to the 218th General Assembly



Haddie the granddaughter



All in the family!

What was the search committee thinking?

This committee began its search with several goals in mind. One was to build on the legacy provided by Warner Durnell's years of outstanding service as executive presbyter—especially our understanding of what it means to be an effective presbytery, which he helped us articulate in Vision 2020. We were equally mindful, however, of the need to avoid complacency. We live in a world of constant change, and our churches face new challenges at every turn. Many are struggling to survive and remain relevant. We accordingly made it a priority to look “outside the box” for someone who would bring innovation and creativity to the job. We even considered the possibility that it might require more than one person. To emphasize this approach, we asked presbytery to approve a different type of job description, which it did (a copy of which is included in this document.) We also determined not to rush the process but to give the Spirit room to work, confident that the presbytery was in good hands during the interim and that with patient discernment we would eventually find the right candidate (or candidates).

The greatest challenge in any discernment process is recognizing the answer to prayer when it comes. Like the apostles, we can be maddeningly slow to catch on, especially when we are led in a different and unexpected direction. Fortunately, the circumstances under which this committee and the Thomases were drawn together made the sense of call on both sides unmistakable. They were not looking to make a change, but instead came to Middle Tennessee to visit family. An encounter with one of our members after a church service led to an exchange of expressions of interest, which rapidly blossomed into a serious dialogue about the executive presbyter position.

Members of the committee met with the Thomases on several occasions and came away increasingly convinced that they were the right people for the job, an impression that was cemented by the glowing recommendations they received from their colleagues in the Synod of the Southwest.

Typical comments about Ray were that he is very compassionate but holds people accountable; he is the perfect person to mediate conflict and get people to work together; we could not find anyone better for a pastoral role; he also handles administrative tasks well; lots of plusses; ten stars on a five-star scale; has integrity; is humble and a good listener; true servant leader. Several mentioned what a wonderful job he did in working with a congregation in a very difficult situation following a pastor suicide, which also indicated the confidence his colleagues had in his abilities.

Robin was lauded for her work with the synod and its member presbyteries; strong in her faith and strong in her commitments; always follows through and does what she says she will; a good planner, who sees that the plan is carried out; has a love for the small church and providing resources for the small church; as good as it gets; we are very lucky to have her.

At least three common themes emerged. One was that everyone had trouble naming any weaknesses for either. A second was that most knew both and said they were great individually but together as a team they were “awesome,” a “dream team,” and would be a “great asset” to our presbytery. They are very different and have complementary skills. One sees the forest, the other deals with the trees. This is especially valuable given the wide range of things we ask executive presbyters to do. We were wise to take advantage of this synergy. A third was that they would be greatly missed. Their colleagues hated the thought of losing them and directed some (we believe) friendly barbs at us for stealing two of their best people.

All of which is to say that we are hopeful and excited for the future of our presbytery. We are confident that Robin and Ray have been called not just by us but by the Holy Spirit to this new ministry, to which they will truly bring energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

Chair, Sally Hughes

Ed Lancaster

Melinda Sanders

Steve Douse

Donovan Drake

Spiritual Autobiography

Rev. Raymond S. Thomas, February 20, 2019

I was raised in New Jersey, where my family attended the Presbyterian Church in Metuchen. Growing up, I attended Sunday School, all the way through Confirmation Class, begrudgingly and inattentively, because it was obvious to me that my future was going to be in sports, certainly not in the church. During my college years, I dropped out at the start of my junior year, stopped in my tracks by a personal crisis around not being able to imagine my future in the fields I was pursuing, in which I had an aptitude: mathematics and computer science. Not firmly committed to a plan, but not sure what else to do, after taking a semester off, I completed my undergraduate degree in mathematics, at the University of Michigan, with a new and strange notion of attending seminary.

My seminary years at McCormick Seminary were extremely formative. The tightness of the community and the richness of the studies were a good fit, and my desire to discover a clear call in life found its grounding. Not wanting my seminary experience to be entirely academic and feeling a need to put this peculiar role as pastor to the test, I served an internship year in Southern Illinois, in a small county-seat, Golconda, before returning to McCormick for my senior year.

My first call out of seminary was as the Assistant Minister in Oneonta, NY, where I met my future wife, Robin. I thoroughly enjoyed this first stop in my ordained ministry journey, moving on after two years to serve as pastor of a church in the outskirts of Rochester, NY, in the farming community of Byron. There, I served for eleven years; it's where Robin and I began our marriage, and where our two children, Britney and Andy, were born. It was a fruitful and enjoyable ministry as well. The church prospered and grew, and expanded its involvement in the local community.

In January 1995, I began serving in my present call, at The Holy Way Presbyterian Church, in Tucson, AZ. I entered a church that was still reeling from a major split and nursing wounds left by a severed pastoral relationship, resulting from sexual misconduct and misappropriation of funds. We had numerous bad behaviors to rehabilitate, as well as a need for practical lessons on what it means to be a Presbyterian church. Within four years, we got ourselves sufficiently on track to take on a major financial campaign and building project to construct a sanctuary building (we recently paid off both mortgages). My twenty-four years in this church have been a series of transformations: growth which pushed us up against the limits of becoming a program-size church followed by retraction into a more comfortable pastoral-size body, beginning and then disbanding a contemporary worship service, expanding our mission outreach and enthusiasm, adding a second, half-time, ordained pastor to our staff, as well as every other change you might expect in a congregation over the course of that span.

Within the life of the larger church, I've served on numerous presbytery committees, notably on the Committee on Ministry for a lengthy period, as well as chairing COM. I've chaired a visioning task force for the presbytery, which led to a new staffing model, as well as chairing the search committee for a new Presbytery Pastor. I have served, and chaired, Administrative Commissions, and assisted sister churches through periods of conflict. In the synod, I've served on its visioning task force, as well as being a

commissioner and its current Moderator-elect. I was a commissioner to the 218th General Assembly, in 2008, for which I served as the Vice-Moderator of the Church Polity Committee.

Looking back across the span of my ministry and the course of my spiritual journey, it may seem as though I abandoned my dream of playing sports (which garnered no takers, ever) for the call to be a Presbyterian minister, but it feels like I've brought a lot of play into my ministry. Play, as in lightening up the heaviness in a tense room, or amidst the burdens of life, by bringing attentive love, heartfelt prayer, a touch of humor, the strength of hope, and the assurance that faith in Jesus Christ will deliver. Play, as in enjoying this shared, undeserved calling we each live, fueled by God's grace and our humility. Play, at trying to speak the ineffable, rearrange the intractable, open a closed mind, or free persons held captive. Play, as in moving our game piece forward along the partially revealed gameboard, one small step at a time, sometimes drawing the "Move Back 5 Spaces" card, but always sensing that we are being pulled further along the way, little by little, toward the goal: the coming reign of God. Play, as in expanding our imaginations, stepping out into new and unknown challenges, risking what we have and what we know for the broader enrichment of all God's beloved, in constantly observing, constantly learning, constantly praying, constantly connecting more widely and deeply throughout God's glorious, ubiquitous diversity that is us. Play, as in keeping a flexible grip, allowing some wiggle and movement, some losing and finding, not being static and rigid, not staying locked into what's always been or touting the same, old answers. Play, as in **everybody** has a place on the field, **everyone** gets a turn at bat, **everyone** has their name in the program. Everyone plays, and we regularly practice, as church, how to play well together, a fresh new game every day, faithfully following the risen Jesus Christ.

Robin and I are excited and awed, humbled and amazed, scared and overwhelmed to come before you, Middle Tennessee Presbytery, to be presented for the call as Co-Executive Presbyters. This is not a calling we imagined nor did we originate contact with the Search Committee. From its beginning, through a "chance" Sunday morning visit at Woodland Presbyterian Church and a "casual" conversation between Robin and Melinda after worship, God appears to be having some kind of fun, leading us onto this day when we come before the presbytery body to confirm God's call. Both of our separate, but informally shared, previous callings, Robin as Synod staff, me as pastor, seem to have uniquely crafted us to fill this shared calling as your EP(s). Robin brings experience in leadership development, I bring experience in church transformation, and we both naturally foster trusting relationships and build meaningful, inclusive community. As we've met with the search committee, contacted references, and talked with trusted friends and family members about this new call, we have been amazed and humbled how positive, encouraging, and unified the feedback has been. All vectors point to Middle Tennessee! Our gifts, experience, and inclinations, our solid relationship with each other and our readiness to receive new calls, all align perfectly with our understanding of the EP position at this time in the life of the presbytery. We are excited and eager to get to know you and begin to serve Christ among you all!

Statement of Faith

Rev. Raymond S. Thomas, February 20, 2019

I believe in God the Creator, who births order into chaos, who promises hope that is certain in arriving yet mysterious in its details, who compels us to stretch beyond self-absorbed, disconnecting impulses to work together for common good, who delivers us from destructive, evil, and deadly forces. The Creator is active in bringing all creation from death plots to life promises, fully revealed in Christ's resurrection. Our unique, elusive, awesome God chooses to speak people into being saved: through our listening, trusting, loving, and following.

In Jesus, God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us, mending the guilt-torn, healing the sick, seeking the lost, liberating the oppressed, proclaiming the good news of life by faith in God, and saving generations from every threat to living as God's beloved. Jesus Christ speaks to the world, through the inspired, empowered, transforming words in the Bible and interpreted, heard, and embodied in the Church. We listen as individuals and communities, and discover chaos becoming ordered into fertile gardens where life blossoms, faith seeks and sees new possibilities, love fills emptiness, and joy becomes complete. God speaks and, as we hear, we may be disturbed, perturbed, baffled, and humbled. God continues to elude our grasp and blur our definitions, but how we yearn to hear more of the amazing life-giving Word.

Always beyond our control and never limited by our skewed perceptions, God's presence saturates our imaginations, our relationships, our purposes, and our stories. This is the Holy Spirit, who blesses us with calming assurances, nudges us out of complacency, summons us to justice, interprets the trajectory of our lives with holy spins, and transforms our journeys into humble churnings forward, with our God. The Spirit draws us into the Church to worship, to pray, to learn, to be refined, and to be sent out. The Spirit exhales the Church, compelling us to extend our reach outward to the hurting, the forsaken, and the lost: God's beloved. All are in the circle of abundant grace. The Spirit reveals and honors each name, each face, each heart of "all". The church is healthy and fit, as a body, when resplendent diversity is present and pursued, at all costs.

God's Word is enacted in the touch of a gentle hand, a compassionate tear, open doors of welcome, vulnerable words of forgiveness, and revolutionary acts of justice. God's Word is enlivened in prayer, in song, in art, in wonder. God's Word is particularly animated in the Church as we enter the waters of baptism and as we come to the Lord's Table to eat the bread broken for us and share the cup poured out for us. We remember God, who promises life in abundance and victory over death, always. We remember our Savior who feeds our deepest hunger and thirst, always. We remember that the promise is sealed in our crucified and risen Savior. Also sealed is God's promise of triumphant life for all who believe in this unimaginably powerful, mysteriously present, immensely gracious God in three persons: revealed in the Bible. We join together to give all thanks, glory, and praise to our God, and to enjoy our God forever.

Spiritual Autobiography

Robin H. Thomas

I was born and raised in Oneonta, NY, a small town in upstate New York. I grew up on a dairy farm that my father and uncle operated with love, following in my grandfather's footsteps. The big red barn was filled with wide-eyed Holsteins, ready for their milking every morning and every evening. I learned about life and death on the farm at an early age, gently explained to me by my father or as I witnessed him assisting a laboring cow in the wee hours of the morning deliver her newborn calf.

I grew up in the First Presbyterian Church in Oneonta, NY, where I was baptized, attended Sunday School, confirmation class, youth group and sang in children's choir on up to Adult choir. I walked down that aisle to marry my sweetheart, Ray Thomas, and celebrated the wonderful life and faith of my grandparents and parents in that church. My faith formation began in this church and it continued to be nurtured by the faithful church members who promised to do so in my baptism. This bond of unity in Christ joins us with each other and with the church in the unseen road ahead.

Following my high school graduation and before starting college at SUNY Cobleskill, I spent a year in the Philippines as a Rotary Exchange Student. It was an amazing experience that burst open my cultural awareness and stretched my faith, as I leaned on a lot of prayer and a lot of trust that I was doing the right thing and in the right place. "I need you more than ever, Lord", I prayed.

I met Ray a few years out of college and we married two years later while he was serving the Presbyterian Church in Byron, NY. We began leading this animated and faithful group of young people in our home, the church manse. We would gather every other Sunday evening for a mix of goofy games, scripture lessons and lots of messy snacks! This was our first experience working together. What a joyful time it was. During our time in Byron I was humbled when a woman from the Nominating Committee asked if I would prayerfully consider serving as an Elder for my church. This church that my husband serves as Pastor. Could this pastor's spouse serve a long side her husband on Session? Prayerful consideration was on my heart. I had watched my parents and aunts and uncles serve devotedly as Elders and Trustees at their respective churches. I prayed for wisdom and I prayed for courage. I remembered my baptism and the bond of unity that joins us together in the church. I said yes, and promised to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love, with God's help.

While in Byron I served on the Committee on Ministry in Genesee Valley Presbytery and even agreed, with trepidation, to serve as Co-Moderator one year. We Co-Mod's were blessed with an experienced, savvy Stated Clerk who calmly guided us through uncharted waters.

On a very warm and muggy day late in August, we were blessed with a beautiful, healthy baby girl, Britney Sarah. Our hearts overflowed with love and joy and gratitude. Our lives were changed forever. Three years later, the day after Hanging of the Greens Sunday at church, Andrew Raymond made his appearance. Healthy and happy, we were doubly blessed!

In mid-January 1995, we felt God calling us to something new, something out of our comfort zone, stretching and challenging our faith in ways in which we were completely unaware. We packed up our belongings, nestled our 6-year old and 3-year old in the back of our Toyota Camry and headed West to the warm and "prickly" state of Arizona. With grateful hearts, we drove away wondering and dreaming of the plans God would have in store for us. And in the backseat the question would continually arise, "Are we in Arizona yet?"

We arrived at The Holy Way Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, far away from family and friends we cherished for so many years. New and completely different surroundings were before us. “I need you more than ever, Lord”, I prayed. I focused on getting our children settled in school and pre-school and at home. The church was growing and beginning to attract young families. I felt God nudge me, telling me I could help out here. What experience did I have other than two small children of my own? I jumped in with both feet coordinating the Christian Education program, recruited and trained volunteer teachers, organized classes, and selected curriculum. Currently, at The Holy Way, I serve on the Board of Deacons, sing in the Chancel Choir and am blessed to be a Stephen Minister.

I began working for the Synod of the Southwest in May of 2014, in a staff support role. I eagerly learned the work of mid-council service assisting in meeting and event planning, familiarizing myself with committee structure and the many names and faces of dedicated volunteers and presbytery colleagues. I love traveling throughout Arizona and New Mexico building relationships and navigating the beautiful landscape while serving the Synod in this part of God’s world. I’m happy and blessed to be the communication hub, face and smile to the members of the Synod, its Presbyteries and Churches.

About six years ago my title was changed to Associate Stated Clerk/Executive Assistant reflecting more of the position I was currently performing. I continue to coordinate and resource Synod Committees, teams and their members; providing and facilitating committee projects, schedule travel and manage logistics for meetings and gatherings located throughout Arizona and New Mexico. I have been directly involved in the creation of a variety of leadership development events including a yearly Biblical Preaching event, two Stewardship Development events, entitled “Nurturing Generous Hearts”, A Native American Ministries leadership training event, “Rest Stop” and a powerful conference, “Serving the Marginalized: In a World of Privilege & Power, Classism, Racism, and Violence”. I coordinated the planning and creating of two Synod-wide Commissioner Trainings for our Presbytery’s General Assembly Commissioners and its Young Adult Advisory Delegates. I had the privilege of serving as a Ruling Elder Commissioner at the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

As I reflect on the position description of Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee, I feel God calling me to bring my talents, gifts and love for the church, in new ways, into the life of the presbytery. My desire to foster deeper connections and strengthen mutual support seems well-suited for where the Presbytery hopes to grow. Building trust and lasting bonds, envisioning new ways to be church, while honoring God and honoring each other, energizes me and enriches my life.

I’m eager to visit and meet with congregations and pastors and to listen and hear what good things God is calling us to do in our church and communities. I am excited about the opportunity to learn what leadership development training and tools are needed and hopeful hearts are yearning for. I am excited about and look forward to, with my best friend and most trusted colleague, serving the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee with all my energy, imagination, intelligence and love, with God’s help. I am humbled by this new, unexpected turn in our life, and the beginning of our new life together. I continue to trust in our baptismal vows, the many prayers of God’s people, and the unfolding grace of our living Savior.

Ray's area of focus

- Committee on Ministry
- Finance
- Committee on Church Transformation - Committee on Preparation for Ministry - Church conflict

Both Ray and Robin

- Administrative Committee
- Visiting Churches and Pastors
- Mission Outreach
- Stewardship
- Celebrate/attend Ordinations/Installations

Robin's focus area

- Committee on Mutual Support
- Committee on Leadership Excellence - Educational Events
- Personnel Task Force
- Nominating Task Force
- Relationship to Synod and GA