

INTRODUCING OUR CANDIDATE FOR PASTOR



THE REV. MARK F. PHILLIPS

The Rev. Mark Phillips was born and raised in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh. He spent his early years as a member of the Hungarian Reformed Church, where he was baptized and confirmed. From a very early age, Mark sensed a call to ministry and was active in church, school, and youth group activities. Mark began studying organ in junior high school and continued those studies through college. While in high school and college, Mark served several churches in Pittsburgh, northern Virginia, and Washington, D.C. as organist and choir director.

After attending Point Park College in Pittsburgh, Mark spent a year and a half at Carlow College as a major in liturgical music ministry. When the program was discontinued, he transferred to George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, from which he graduated in 1991 with a Bachelor's degree in Social Work.



Mark earned his Master of Divinity degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in May 1994. While at Pittsburgh Seminary, he served as a Student Assistant Minister at the Riverview Presbyterian Church. He was ordained by Pittsburgh Presbytery on July 31. The next day, he began his ministry at The First Presbyterian Church in Mineral Ridge, Ohio (a suburb of Youngstown), where he served for 16 years. During that time, the church expanded its ministry beyond its walls to those in need. During his years in Ohio, Mark served on the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry and served for eight years as chair of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Eastminster Presbytery elected him as a Commissioner to the General Assembly in 2008.

In April of 2010, Mark was called to be the pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church, "The Old Whalers' Church," in Sag Harbor, New York. "The Old Whalers Church" is a national historic landmark home to many outside groups, including a large community food pantry and several

chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous. During Mark's ministry at Old Whaler's, the church became a home for the Long Island GLBTQ Network's Hampton Center. The church also instituted a summer concert series that attracted many to the church.

In 2015, Mark was called to Cherry Hill in Dearborn, Michigan following a troublesome time in the life of Cherry Hill and a long interim period. Trust was built between the pastor and the people early on which enabled new life and growth in the congregation. In addition to his ministry at Cherry Hill, Mark served as chair of the Committee on Ministry and was elected as a Commissioner to General Assembly in 2020, which was to meet in Baltimore. Once again, during Mark's ministry at Cherry Hill, the church created the concert series, "Music at Cherry Hill" which remains a vital part of the church's ministry and outreach.

Mark currently serves as the pastor of First & Franklin Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland. First & Franklin traces its history back to the year 1761. Today's congregation maintains several outreach programs including a weekly food pantry, works to eradicate gun violence on city streets, and is part of a partnership with a Presbyterian Church in Taguasco, Cuba. He continues to be active in the work of the Presbytery of Baltimore, serving as chair of the Commission on Preparation for Ministry.



In 2021, Mark and partner Larry Cereso were married in a ceremony held at Cherry Hill Church. Larry is a native of Toledo, Ohio, and has lived in Las Vegas, Nevada, and Columbus, Ohio. Larry work as the Director of Facilities and Operations at the Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. They share their home with their two cats, "Russell" and "Robert." Together they enjoy community events and activities, theater, and concerts.

A FEW THOUGHTS FROM MARK

As a pastor, it has been a great privilege for me to be involved in people's lives when they have been at their best or worst. To sit beside the bedside of one who is ill, to baptize a son or daughter of members, to officiate at a wedding ceremony, to stand with a family to send a loved one off on the final journey home, or to hold the hand of a member as they pass from this life to next is indeed a privilege beyond words. However, for me, pastoral care also takes place around a dinner table, in the hallway, or even bumping into one another at the grocery store.

I believe that pastoral leadership begins by building meaningful relationships with others. Therefore, I am passionate about being a caring and involved presence in people's lives. Such relationships allow us to grow together in Christ and empower us to use our gifts in His service. I love that about ministry. I want to know the people I serve with, and I want them to know me. I have always believed that if a pastor is a stranger to her/his people, they cannot be effective.

Please never come into the church building without stopping to say hello. I would be most unhappy if my work was to be done in isolation from others.

I believe that my greatest gifts are in the areas of preaching, worship planning and leadership, and pastoral care. I believe that God is calling me to a church that understands worship to be at the center of its life and where worship leads to the love of neighbor as self. I strive to make worship relevant so that worshipers may take what they hear and experience on Sunday morning and draw upon it during the week or even much later. I write my sermons with those who will be listening to me in mind. I ask myself, what are people experiencing in their own lives? What are we as a congregation experiencing in our community, nation, or world, and what word might I be able to share that would be helpful in the midst of all that? Of course, I discovered a long time ago that the sermons I preach to myself are the ones that reach the most people. When I start talking to other people, I find that I miss everybody!

In my work, I strive to be a servant leader who provides the environment, the means, the vision, and the enthusiasm so that we can fulfill what the Spirit has in store of us. In doing that, I seek to point beyond myself to the One who continuously challenges us to take His saving love, forgiveness, and hope to a needy world. I am energized by others and by working with others.

It has been a pleasure getting to know the members of the Pastor Nominating Committee over the past few months. I am very impressed by the great history of this congregation and the ministry that you are doing today! So, it is with great anticipation and excitement that Larry and I both look forward to coming to Tallahassee to be part of the vital ministry of the First Presbyterian Church. We look forward to getting to know you and to working together to bring about a part of God's kingdom in our corner of the world. I look forward to discovering how the Holy Spirit will stir the deep well of faithfulness at First Presbyterian and then pour us out anew into a future filled with hope.