



# First Presbyterian Church of Naples

## Mission Study Report

### May 2025

## I. A Brief History

The First Presbyterian Church of Naples began in 1952 at the Naples Women's Club when there were approximately 1,500 residents in Naples and about 6,000 residing in all of Collier County. The first worship service was conducted on Sunday, January 20, 1952, with the Rev. Tracy Day Spencer as acting minister of the proposed Presbyterian Church. The official organization meeting was held March 25, 1952. Rev. Spencer was called to be the permanent Pastor of the new church on April 6, 1952, and stayed until his retirement on January 1, 1962. The first worship service in the new sanctuary was held on Sunday, May 15, 1960, at its present location.



Rev. Rice, Rev. Stump and then Rev. Russell E. Mase served as successive Senior Pastors from May 1, 1976, until Dec. 27, 1998. There was great growth in the church during this time. A sister church was established in Guatemala, the Christmas-time Angel Tree gifting program was initiated, an Endowment account grew to over two million dollars, Project 5,000 provided food to the homeless and needy in Collier County, Habitat for Humanity was initiated in Collier County on April 1, 1978 with FPCN as one of the four founding churches. Church members assisted the startup of Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church giving time, funds and materials in 1981. FPCN Preschool celebrated its 25 years of existence in 1998.

The years 1999 through 2001 were marked by extraordinary change for the church. The decision to rebuild the church on the existing site began. Rev. Kirk E. Anderson was the Pastor from August 2000 to 2006. Brice Gerlach was hired as the Director of Music in July 2001. The Stephen Ministries program was established. The Cerulean Cross was installed in the Sanctuary in March 2002. The sculptor, Henry Richardson created this Masterpiece in Massachusetts with a weight of over one ton. It was transported on a flatbed truck driven by Richardson. A new pipe organ was installed in March 2004. There were 5,500 pipes built by Fratelli Ruffatti Builders of Padua, Italy. The organ was dedicated as the Julia Thompson Smith Memorial Organ. In 2009, the antiphonal organ pipes from Padua, Italy were installed with the Ruffatti family in attendance for the installation process. The 6,218 pipes makes this organ the largest organ in Southwest Florida.

Changes in the pulpit occurred with Dr. Robert Bohl hired in 2006 and serving for 22 months as Interim Pastor. Rev. Dr. Edward Thompson was the Pastor from July 20, 2008, until November 2012. Rev. Dr. Will Browne arrived October 1, 2014, as Interim Pastor. During this period, the church began participating in Meals of Hope, supporting food pantries at various non-profit organizations. We helped Mision Peniel in Immokalee with monetary support. The Prayer Shawl Ministry began.

A turning point for FPCN occurred with the arrival of Rev. Craig Goodrich on October 19, 2015. Adopting Rev. Goodrich's church motto, "In the Heart of Naples with the Love of God", the church looked forward to new growth and improved finances. We celebrated the 65th Anniversary of the church in February 2017. We received the official key to the city of Naples, a first for a city church.

Rev. Goodrich also helped get Christian Education going again at the church. An Adult Christian Education Committee was formed, and we developed both men's and women's fellowship groups. Additionally, a Wednesday Night dinner program was re-established where we break bread together and listen to a presentation. Speakers have covered a wide variety of current issues of interest to our congregation as well as topics the church considers relevant to its future. This committee has since grown to become the Intergenerational Christian Education Committee, with an emphasis on developing relationships across the full age range of our congregation.

Rev. Rex Childs was hired as Associate Pastor on July 2, 2018. These two Pastors complemented one another as our church community continued to grow. A Partnership Agreement between Central Presbyterian Church in Matanzas, Cuba and FPCN was created January 22, 2018. A Strategic Planning Committee added the slogan "we worship, we love, we grow, we serve" to our motto.

Nancy Van Fleet became the Director of Children and Youth Ministries in December 2019. The Sunday school was renamed "Kidz Lab". The church library was relocated to the Parlor. Rev. Rex Childs was elected Moderator of the Peace River Presbytery in February 2020. Rev. Craig Goodrich also co-chaired the Finance Committee of Peace River Presbytery.

In March 2021, First Presbyterian Church of Naples was certified as an Earth Care Congregation by the denomination. This honor speaks to the great commitment that our church has made to care for God's creation.

First Presbyterian Church of Naples has historically had an admirable benevolence record, giving nationally and internationally to facilitate evangelism, mission, education, and medical needs. More importantly, this church is recognized in the community as being quick to meet and respond to needs. We support 17 local Missions in Collier County. It represents a traditional legacy of service in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## II. Demographics

### A. In the Community (Source: MissionInsite)

The study area is a rectangle bordered by Moorings Presbyterian Church to the north, Lely Presbyterian church to the south, Collier Boulevard to the east, and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. The distance between the northwest corner and the southeast corner is approximately 13 miles.

The study area's 2024 population is 93,044 and by 2029 is projected to grow modestly to 93,509. In 2024 there are 26,503 households with an average population per household of 2.20 people. This is below the state average and is not predicted to change over the next 5 years.

The average age in the study area was 51.8 in 2024, which is expected to grow to 52.64 by 2029. The median age in 2024 was 56, which is expected to grow to 57 in 2029. In this study, the number of children 17 years of age and younger is growing while adults 55 years of age and older remains stable.

Age	2024	2034
0-17	13.56%	14.33%
18-24	6.38%	5.61%
25-34	8.97%	9.65%
35-54	18.36%	18.99%
55-64	13.38%	9.81%
65	39.35%	41.60%

The educational attainment of adults (25+) has been rising over the past few years and is projected to rise over the next five years by 1.47%. In 2024, 30.43% have either an associate or bachelor's degree and 14.19% have a graduate or professional degree. These

numbers are expected to rise to 31.57% and 14.52%, respectively. Similarly, for 2024 roughly 41% of household incomes exceed \$100,000 per year and that is expected to increase to 49% by 2029. That can be contrasted to the 30.24% of households with incomes less than \$50,000 per year. The racial-ethnic diversity is expected to remain relatively unchanged from the current mix of 63.34% White, 25.79% Hispanic/Latino, 7.29% Black, 1.26% Asian, and 2.32% Other.

While the study area's reasons for non-participation in a religious community are in-line with the national averages, the top reasons can be examined relative to First Presbyterian Church of Naples' strengths and weaknesses.

About the Church	Study Area %
Religion too focused on money	56.28%
Religious people too judgmental	55.64%
Don't trust religious leaders	53.49%
Don't trust organized religion	53.18%
Disillusionment with religion	46.84%

## B. Within The Congregation

The membership of the First Presbyterian Church of Naples primarily consists of retirees. This is to be expected in a retirement community like Naples. The age distribution of our congregation is below:

Age	Active Members	Affiliate Members	Total
100+	4	1	5
90s	39	21	60
80s	176	67	243
70s	143	49	192
60s	64	6	70
50s	37	2	39
40s	23	0	23
30s	14	0	14
20s	7	0	7

No Age Data	32	10	42
<b>Totals</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>695</b>

One of the issues that the church has been grappling with is membership as a concept. We are aware that churches across denominations are seeing that people are not joining the way they have in decades past. We have seen this firsthand at our church, as well. We keep track of what we call “regular attenders.” These are people we see at church on Sunday mornings and who give financially in support of our ministry. They are actively involved in the life of the congregation, but for whatever reason have made the decision not to officially join as members. We have around 150 people who fit in this category and thus are not counted in the table above.

A good number of these individuals are seasonal, so they are likely members of a church up north. Yet, even when they are made aware of the Affiliate Member option, they still choose not to go through the membership process, even when we have done our best to make it as easy as possible.

Another significant portion of these people are young adults with children. We have a thriving preschool as part of our church. The Session and staff have made a conscious effort to reach out to these families to build relationships with them and hopefully welcome them into the life of the church. We are grateful to God that this work has begun to bear fruit. We have about 25 young adults who attend worship regularly with their children. Regular worship attendance according to young adults is about once a month. For many of our young adults, they attend more frequently, and a good number are in church most Sundays.

### III. Congregational Surveys

In seeking feedback from the congregation, we wanted to be inclusive about who could respond. We made an effort to reach not just our members, but also those who are regular attenders. Furthermore, we wanted to give everyone different options about how to respond, depending on what was most convenient for them.

We began by putting together an online survey that was sent to our email list. The survey was distributed on the week of March 24, 2025, and we received over 80 responses. The questions included in this survey were:

- Why do you attend FPCN? Why do you think others attend?
- What is most important to you in a worship service?
- What are your desired character traits in our next pastor?
- Where do you feel the church could use the most improvement?
- What are three things our church should do in the future?

We also had three in-person gatherings to receive feedback, as well. Two of these sessions happened after church on Sundays, April 6 and 13. In addition, one of our usual Wednesday Night Dinner gatherings focused on this. We usually charge for these dinners but offered a free dinner to encourage more participation. Between the three in-person sessions, we had over 100 people participate. The questions asked at the in-person sessions were:

- What do you love most about our church?
- Where is God leading our church?
- What is the most important aspect of our ministry to each other and the community?
- What else do you want to share about our church?

In compiling and analyzing the responses, we got a clear picture of the church's strengths as well as opportunities for growth and exploration.

## A. Strengths



### a. Worship & Music

One of the most consistent responses we received were compliments about our worship experience. A little over a year ago, we decided to have one service year-round, which was very positively received. With our large Sanctuary, we can all be together and truly feel the Spirit moving amongst us. Our worship style is traditional which fits the culture of the congregation.

Music is another major strength of our church, both within worship as well as concerts put on at various times throughout the year. Our music program is overseen by our much beloved Director of Music, Dr. Brice Gerlach. Brice has served at the church for over two decades and has been a real anchor for the congregation. He has provided stability and

consistency during the ups and downs the church experienced before Craig's arrival. Many people responded that it was the music that first brought them into the church.

### b. Warm and Welcoming Congregation

Many of the responses also pointed to how welcoming the congregation is to new people. A number of respondents mentioned feeling at home the first time they came through our doors. There is a strong culture of hospitality and caring amongst the congregation. Whatever brings people into the church, it is the warm welcome that gets them to come back.

### c. Generosity

The congregation also has a strong culture of giving. The church is blessed to have an Endowment that currently totals just over \$9 million, which helps support our annual budget. We are also grateful for the annual giving from our members which has resulted in a budget surplus for at least the last five years. For the 2025 pledge year, we had our largest goal ever of \$1.7 million. We not only met that goal but exceeded it with pledges totaling \$1.75 million. The church is in a strong financial position. This has allowed us to be generous in supporting other local organizations. Many people responded positively about our Mission giving, which has exceeded \$1 million over the last three years. We also offer opportunities for hands on Mission work throughout the year.

## B. Opportunities for Growth & Exploration



### a. Young Families

One of the consistent responses we heard was a desire for more young families in the church. As an aging congregation, this is not a surprise. Many of our members are concerned about not just the future of our church, but the church in general. Thankfully, we are making strides in this area. We have a thriving preschool and have made a concerted effort to build relationships with these families. Gulfview Middle School is also directly



across from our church. At the beginning of the school year, we launched a Middle School Youth Group and have had fifteen students regularly attend our biweekly gatherings. There is still room to grow, and we will continue to work towards that goal, while also better communicating the success we have already experienced.

## b. Politics

One of the challenges facing the church is navigating the political landscape. We have people who fall everywhere on the political and theological spectrum. This was clearly seen from the congregational input. There were people who responded that they would like to see less engagement on political issues while others see it as necessary for understanding how the gospel should be lived out in our modern lives. We have embraced the idea of being a “big tent church.” Every Sunday we say, “We welcome all.” Above all, we seek to serve God, follow Jesus, and be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## C. Our Next Pastor

Thankfully, the congregation is in a good and stable place. We are looking for someone who will continue to keep the ship steady while encouraging us to be open to the movement of God’s Spirit. The congregation looks forward to calling our next Installed Senior Pastor who will be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. We seek someone who lives out their faith in addition to teaching it. With God’s help, we hope to find someone who is compassionate, caring, full of joy and excitement, who has a good sense of humor, as well as strong leadership skills. Being a “big tent church”, we are looking for a Senior Pastor who can support the whole congregation and meet people where they are. They will need to be adept at navigating and resolving conflicts when they arise.

Our new minister will need to be someone who provides dynamic worship leadership, works collaboratively with our staff, and encourages the congregation to generously share their gifts for the building up of God’s kingdom here “in the heart of Naples.” We are looking for someone who gives engaging sermons that elucidate Scripture in ways that are relevant and meaningful to our everyday lives. We seek someone who will foster a work culture that is positive and supportive of the gifts each person brings to our staff. They will also need to be comfortable and skilled at encouraging the congregation to generously offer their time, talents, and treasure.

We give thanks to God for God’s faithfulness in the past and we know that God will continue to be faithful on the road ahead. With joy and in hope, we step forward into the future God is preparing for us. We will continue to follow our Lord Jesus Christ. We will rely on God’s Spirit for guidance and discernment on who will be our next Installed Senior Pastor, to serve with us here in the heart of Naples at the First Presbyterian Church.



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*At its meeting on May 27, 2025, the Session of the First Presbyterian Church of Naples approved this Mission Study report.*



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