



University Presbyterian Church  
125 YEARS  
and **STILL GROWING!**

*A Generous People Responding to a Generous God*



The Pastor Nominating Committee  
is honored to recommend that  
**The Reverend Matt Gaventa**  
fill the position of Senior Pastor / Head of Staff of  
University Presbyterian Church.



## INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Pastor Nominating Committee I would like to thank you, the congregation, for electing the committee and trusting us to work on your behalf to bring you a candidate for your approval.

We are grateful to God for how—supported by your prayers—we have been led to the Rev. Matt Gaventa, trusting that God’s hand has been in this process every step of the way. I want to let you all know that we unanimously voted to call Matt because even among a field of outstanding choices, we felt that Matt was exceptional and gifted. We all feel excited about the possibility of Matt leading University Presbyterian Church into a faithful and exciting future, with energy, exceptionally strong preaching, and a heart for the calling of following Jesus.

The information following introduces Matt, his wife, Sarah, and five-year-old son, Charlie. We are also providing links that you can follow to learn more about Matt by reading sermons and listening to podcasts.

If the congregation decides to call Matt today, we expect Matt to start at UPC in mid-March.

I ask that you keep Matt’s current congregation in your prayers as they work through their sadness at his departure, and as they start their own process of searching for a new senior pastor.

Cordially,

*Robert F. Bridge*

Bob

### Ways to Learn More About Matt

Read Matt’s Sermons:  
[mattgaventa.com](http://mattgaventa.com)

Listen to Matt’s Podcast on  
Movies & Ministry  
[technicolorjesus.com](http://technicolorjesus.com)

### “Mum’s the Word” until January 25th

Matt will be telling his congregation about UPC’s call at a January 24th evening Session meeting. We need for his congregation to first hear about this change from Matt, and not hear it first through social media, Facebook or conversation chains. Information on new calls flows quickly through the PC(USA) community. Please help Matt by strictly limiting discussion of UPC’s call to just UPC members until the morning of January 25th.

## LETTER TO UPC FROM MATT

Dear friends,

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! My name is Matt Gaventa, and I could not be more excited to introduce myself to you, to meet each of you, and to enter into a new season of ministry together at University Presbyterian Church.

For the past four years, I have served as the Pastor at Amherst Presbyterian Church in Amherst, Virginia, between Lynchburg and Charlottesville in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. For the past two years, I have also worked as part-time chaplain to nearby Sweet Briar College. I've also married into my own profession: my wife, Sarah, is the Associate Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Ivy, Virginia, just outside of Charlottesville, and we live between the two with our five-year-old son, Charlie.

Amherst is just the latest in a long line of college and university towns that have been home to me. My mother teaches New Testament so I spent my childhood in and around seminary campuses in Rochester, New York; Atlanta, Georgia; and then finally Princeton, New Jersey. I went to college at Georgetown University, graduating with a passion for film and media studies that led me to a Master's at the University of Iowa. Afterwards, I found myself in Charlottesville, working for the University of Virginia, meeting and marrying Sarah, and reconnecting with the church and with my own call to ministry. We made the decision to return to Princeton for my seminary education, and I loved every moment of it.

I love church, especially the Presbyterian church. I love the work that we get to do together. I love the liturgies with which we get to worship together, the music we get to sing together, and the relationships we get to build together. And I love that I get this amazing responsibility of standing up on Sunday morning and helping us to say something about the grace of God. Preaching is at the very center of my sense of God's call, and it's a calling that has been well-affirmed: as a seminary senior, alongside a host of Princeton awards in preaching and church leadership, I received the national David H.C. Read Preacher/Scholar Award given by Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.

In Amherst, I've also had the chance to expand my voice beyond the Sunday morning pulpit. I've done some writing for publication, and you can find a few of my pieces in *The Christian Century* among other places. I've also returned to some of my old film and media roots, and I now co-host a podcast called Technicolor Jesus, all about movies and pop culture

for pastors and preachers and anybody who cares about the church. But for me, nothing in ministry compares to the holy time of Sunday morning, and I can't wait to share it with you, in word, in sacrament, and in fellowship.

University Presbyterian Church is such a dynamic congregation, both in the richness of your Sunday morning time together and in your dedication to engaging the bounties and the needs of the Austin community. I'm eager to work alongside your dedicated staff, to hear the harmonies of your amazing choir, and to walk with each of you in our common faith journey. Your PNC has served this process with such rich faithfulness, integrity, and joy, and I am bursting with excitement to meet the rest of the family that they have so diligently represented.

I know that you have been preparing for a new pastor for a long time, and now Sarah and Charlie and I are busy getting ready for this major adventure. But I can't wait for a time when we can all find our new rhythms again: after Charlie has found himself in a new school, after Sarah has found how God is calling her to serve in Austin, after the boxes are put away and a new home returns to its natural messy state. I'll hope to unpack the kitchen first: it's my natural habitat, not to mention the source of many of my best go-to sermon illustrations. And then I hope we can sit together at the table, and share our stories with joy, and listen for God with grace, and pour out a glass or two with love, and recognize each other in the breaking of the bread.

Until then,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt Gaventa', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rev. Matt Gaventa



## REFLECTIONS BY PNC MEMBERS



*Bob Bridge, Chair*

Working with the members of the PNC has been very rewarding. After all of the time spent with my fellow committee members, they feel like family. A family may not always agree, but we are bound together by a deep sense of knowing about and caring for each other. Each of the committee members brings different gifts and talents, but we all share a profound, loving and prayerful concern for UPC. If I had more space here I would share heartfelt words of praise for each member's unique contribution to our work.

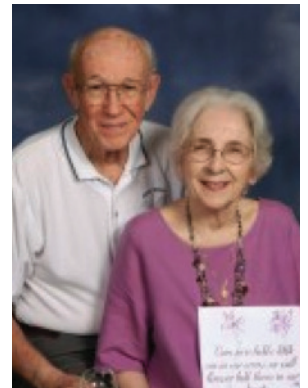
UPC is a highly respected church in the denomination. That has made our task really exciting. We have had so many highly interested and qualified candidates, the majority of the candidates being referred to us by experienced and respected leaders of PC(USA).

UPC has been blessed by God leading the committee to Matt, one of the finest young preachers in our denomination. At the end of our search, the PNC had two wonderful candidates on our list, Matt and an equally amazing woman. It was difficult decision, but the final decision gave the nod to Matt based upon his outstanding preaching ability. Worship is one time that UPC comes together, and is the heart and soul of UPC. Matt will bring great energy and ability into the pulpit, and will also support our wonderful music program. Shepherd of Hills recently called a new pastor and has had standing-room-only at worship since his arrival. We pray that UPC will be equally blessed.

Matt has great theological depth, having grown up with a mother who is a noted reformed theologian. That reminds me of Carter King's daughter, Keaton, who grew up having theological discussions around the dinner table with her father!

*Rosanne Becker*

It is difficult to express the experience of serving on the PNC to find the one who God would lead us to and the one who God has been preparing to come to us. In looking back recently at the Personal Information Form (PIF) that Matthew Roberts Gaventa submitted, several qualities confirmed that we indeed were led to Matt and he to us. The leadership competencies that Matt identified in himself included: Preaching and Worship Leadership, Communicator, Spiritual Maturity, Teacher, Organizational Agility, Collaboration, Decision Making, Strategy and Vision, Interpersonal Engagement, and Initiative. The list was limited to 10 out of the 30 he had to choose from. In our process of getting to know Matt, it was clear that he had described many of his gifts very well.



In responding to a question to describe the ministry setting to which you believe God is calling you, Matt said: "I believe that ...I am particularly called to a church that seeks to hear the Gospel proclaimed with creativity, authenticity and theological nuance – a church that wants rigorously to connect the words of the faith we believe with the joys and sorrows of the world as it is. And I believe that nothing on earth proclaims the Gospel like music, and so I seek to serve a church that sings its faith, together, as loudly and as often as possible...Finally, I believe that the work of the church begins in worship, but hardly ends there, and so I seek a congregation with a heart for peacemaking and a thirst for justice, and I hope that together we can earn some callouses on our hands."

For me, personally, I am so very grateful to God and this congregation for the opportunity to be a part of this PNC. The experience has stretched me, challenged me, and blessed me beyond any spiritual journey I have ever had. The constant interest, encouragement, patience and prayer support of the whole UPC family has meant so much. We are so excited to introduce you to the Gaventa family so that you will understand why we feel so blessed and enthused about our future with Matt's leadership at UPC.



*Michael Dodd*

UPC is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. Our life as a congregation began in the 19th century; we now are in the 21st. One hundred twenty-five years after our congregational forebears founded this congregation and dedicated us to be “In the service of Christ at the University of Texas,” we have since recommitted ourselves to follow Jesus Christ not merely here but also in the larger world. To help us do that at this moment in the 21st century, the congregation commissioned the PNC to help find our new senior pastor. We have prayed fervently and frequently for God’s guidance in this search. We now are excited to announce that we believe God has led us to Matt – and that God has equipped and led Matt to UPC.

*Jonathan Edison*

Matt Gaventa is ready to embrace our congregation and choir as the next step in his call and career. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, Matt is a strong preacher and dedicated pastor. Matt’s last call was a small rural church. He is married to Sarah, an ordained Episcopal priest. They have a young child. Matt is thoughtful and can speak to the different generations at UPC. A new leader for a new era.



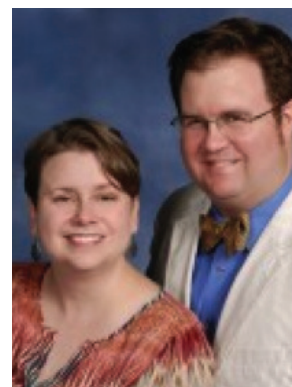
*Byron French*

What struck me first about Matt is his exceptional preaching abilities. Matt is a master storyteller that crafts his sermons to bring us, the people of God in the 21st century, into the lectionary texts, and then charges us to be the people of God in the world. But my discernment of him being the next Senior Pastor of UPC was solidified in our meeting and spending time together. I am excited for the congregation to get to know Matt and his family. He has a great heart to care for his church, he has a deep theological mind to continue the great questions and conversations that occur here, and he has a great sense of hope in the future of our church (UPC) and the bigger Presbyterian Church.

*Meg McReynold*

First and foremost, the PNC committed to finding the candidate God has chosen for our next phase as a congregation. The voice of God is not always as direct as we might like, so to ensure we didn’t overlook quality candidates, we actively sought recommendations from a wide variety of sources and deliberately remained open to the Holy Spirit’s guidance throughout our process, even (and especially) when it led to unexpected places. We kept the interests of our whole faith community top of mind as we searched. We listened to many sermons, did lots of research, and learned from a range of voices with observations and insights to the process. I am encouraged to see all the talent and energy out there serving God and the PC(USA).

Matt brings a thoughtfulness and intellectual rigor to his preaching and pastoring. While he loves the history and traditions of the Church, he is simultaneously looking to what is coming next. He cares about worship and comes from a rich liturgical musical tradition. He is at home in a university town and values both the connections we have with UT and APTS as well as serviced to the larger community. I am confident that Matt will guide us into a new and rich chapter in the UPC story, and I can’t wait to watch it unfold.



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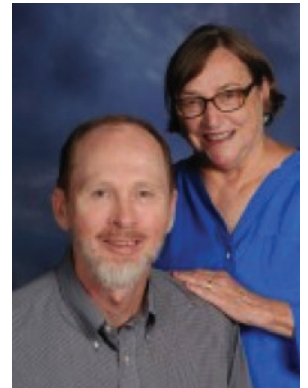


*Stephanie Morris*

First I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the congregation of UPC for allowing me to serve on the PNC. This past year has been a challenging and rewarding spiritual journey that our committee has traversed. Continuous prayers for God's guidance were asked as we considered many different individuals for senior pastor. We have been blessed with the outcome of calling Matt Gaventa to be UPC's next senior pastor. Matt lives with great spiritual maturity. His words open doors to explore God's kingdom. His compassion for others, his understated humor and his presence with grace will no doubt shine upon us all at UPC. Matt is a very thoughtful soul and has a clear desire to challenge and lead UPC into the 21st century! Please welcome Matt, Sarah and their 5 year old son, Charlie into our loving church family.

*Debbie Warden*

Sadly, at this time Debbie is not able to write her thoughts for inclusion here. Debbie was an active participant when the committee unanimously agreed to recommend Matt to the congregation. Debbie provided a firm foundation for the committee. She provided detailed administrative support. She openly (and sometimes dramatically :-)) shared her feelings about the candidates and our process. And she served as our liaison to the UPC's Staff Support Committee. She has been so loyal and dedicated. Thank you, Debbie! We pray for your speedy and full recovery.





## WHAT THE PNC HEARD FROM OTHERS

*From a PC(USA) pastor who leads a formal mentoring program for new pastors*

For four years, the pastor has met periodically with a group of six new pastors, including Matt. The pastor has done this twice now, so he has seen 12 new pastors, many really solid. By wide margin, Matt has been the superstar of the 12. The pastors being mentored bring case studies of situations to meetings, and Matt has keen insights about his own situation and the situations that the other pastors share. Matt was astute at the beginning of the four years, and grew significantly over the four years. Matt is fun, engaged, thoughtful, insightful, full of wisdom, has great inclinations about ministry, is not conceited or stuffy, super smart, committed, and everything comes naturally.

*From the president of an east coast seminary*

This person was in the Princeton community where Matt grew up. They lived three or four houses apart and Matt babysat for the president's children when Matt was in high school. They have stayed in regular contact over the years. When asked, "Who is Matt?" the president spoke about his intellectual prowess and curiosity. Matt demonstrated mental acuity, even in high school. Matt is young in terms of staff leadership; he is a solo pastor. But the president is confident that he has the gifts and instincts that will allow him grow in leadership abilities. Matt is a self-starter. He is assertive in coming up with ideas and acting on them. Matt thinks strategically. Matt is committed to his family.

*From the former Dean of Sweet Briar College and a former member of Matt's church*

While Matt was Chaplain, Sweet Briar College went through a turbulent time, first closing down and then reopening. Matt helped the students move through these wrenching times. When asked about Matt's special gifts, she mentioned several things. He works well with a range of ages and is tech-savvy. He found new ways to work within the community and bridge religious organizations. He wasn't afraid to talk about questions of social justice. She always learns from his sermons, and he clearly lives his faith. He is self-effacing and could take more credit for what he has accomplished. He has a wonderful family and is dedicated to them.

*From a PC(USA) pastor to Matt's family as he grew up, and who later had Matt as a 10-hour/week intern at her church*

As a 10 hour/week intern for the pastor, and at Matt's own initiative, Matt started a young adult group at her church, filling a void. Many years later, the church still has a strong young adult group. Matt may appear quiet but know that he is carefully listening and then will respond with great insights. He is a fabulous preacher, and is extremely competent.

*From an Associate Presbyterian from Matt's current Presbytery*

The Associate Presbyterian has had lots of interactions with Matt at the Presbytery where Matt chairs the Committee for Preparation for Ministry (CPM). Matt demonstrated leadership, integrity and sensitivity at CPM in dealing with candidates who were not ready for ministry. One candidate had a meltdown in the middle of the process, and Matt worked with her; she is now back in the program.

*From a pastor and the leader of the PC(USA) Mission Agency Peacemaking Program*

The leader met Matt during a peacemaking trip to South Africa, and has since called upon Matt to help prepare material that has been published by the Peacemaking Office. Matt's writing is very accessible and deeply insightful. He makes complicated issues teachable by weaving in stories.

Twelve people were on the trip, ages 20 to 80 years old. Some of the participants were high-maintenance. Matt got along extremely well with everyone and helped defuse tension at times, acting

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very pastoral. He stepped in and help manage problems, taking some of the load off the leader. Matt has a heart for social justice. When Matt got back from his trip, he was instrumental in getting support for the Belhar Confession, first from his Session and then from the Presbytery. Matt is bright, creative and so astute. He is so bright (a deep well of intellect) but never intimidating intellectually.

In terms of personality, he is super likeable and always acts appropriately (has appropriate boundaries). He is easy to get to know. He is also fun and playful, and is someone you would enjoy having a beer with.

## **(MOST) EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT HOW THE PNC WORKED**

The following provides a brief outline summary of the work of the PNC. If you have any questions, please speak with a PNC member.

### **Committee Personality**

- Diversity – gender, age, places in life
- Range of styles and opinions

### **Most Important Selection Criteria (what did we look for?)**

- Strong spiritual life
- Outstanding preaching
- Enthusiastic and high-energy
- Demonstrated leadership
- Commitment to PC(USA)
- Support for our music program, mission outreach, campus ministry and young families ministry

### **Our Candidates**

- Nationwide search yielded 145 candidates
- Sources: Referrals by others – 76%; PC(USA) computer match – 35%; Self-referrals – 34%
- Our focus was heavily on “Referrals by Others.” Sources included:
  - Most PC(USA) seminary presidents and several seminary professors who teach preaching
  - Former UPC colleagues
  - Retired pastors worshipping at UPC
  - APTS professors and staff
  - Members of our congregation

### **A Year’s Worth of Work Summarized in 205 Words!**

1. Regular weekly meeting for 1.5-2 hours; other ad-hoc meetings as needed
2. A Mission Study had to be completed before the PNC work could start
3. The Session chartered the Mission Study group in Jan 2016.
4. The Mission Study Group worked Jan-May 2016, collecting information from the congregation, writing the study, and getting valuable feedback from knowledgeable Session members along the way
5. The Session approved Mission Study in May 2016
6. The PNC started work June 2016
7. The PNC used Mission Study as basis for Ministry Information Form (MIF) (church info and job description)
8. The PNC educated ourselves through meetings with:
  - o Mission Presbytery Committee on Ministry liaison, Phil Barnes
  - o APTS staff and faculty
  - o Human Resource professionals
  - o Mock interview with detailed feedback
9. The PNC members did considerable homework (reading Pastor Information Forms, listening to on-line sermons, researching candidates online)
11. Our approach to talking about UPC with candidates:
  - Openness and transparency
  - We shared what is exciting about UPC
  - We shared the challenges UPC faces
12. We narrowed our list
13. For our short list, we spoke with candidates’ references, and Mission Presbytery did its checks
14. We met with candidates in Austin and attended worship in candidates’ home churches
15. We prayerfully and unanimously agreed on a recommendation

