

ASSESSMENT REPORT

MARCH 2024

# PRESBYTERY OF ARKANSAS



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY



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## BACKGROUND

The Presbytery of Arkansas includes 72 churches in the northern two-thirds of the state, with 14 of those churches situated in the larger metro area of Little Rock. As one of the largest presbyteries in the Synod of the Sun (Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas), the presbytery has over 8,000 members that live between the Mississippi Delta and the Oklahoma and Missouri borders. It is estimated that, in the last 30 years, 24 churches in the presbytery have closed.

The Presbytery of Arkansas meets three times per year: Spring, Summer and Fall. These meetings are a combination of in-person meetings with Zoom options, and solely Zoom. The Spring meeting is planned intentionally with youth in mind, encouraging opportunities for youth leadership and education. The presbytery is known for their long standing emphasis and inclusion of youth, as evidenced in the structure of its meetings.

The presbytery is divided into four regions with each region having a representative on the coordinating team, which serves as the coordinating body of the presbytery. Members describe the presbytery as “supportive,” “connectional,” and “healthy,” with less than half the presbytery’s congregations able to afford a full-time, installed pastor.

Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center is a deeply loved covenant partner of the presbytery. The presbytery also has close relationships with Lyon College and University of the Ozarks, along with Vera Lloyd Presbyterian Services whose mission is “to heal, prepare and empower children, youth and families in need.”

The presbytery is debt free and financially healthy, with just under \$8,200,000 in available financial resources, with approximately \$85,000 in designated funds, and a general understanding that \$1,600,000 of those funds would be available for new church development projects. The presbytery had a 2023 operating budget of just over \$765,000, roughly a quarter of which came through endowment proceeds. The presbytery office is located in Little Rock and previously housed the “Resource Center,” which now offers online resources for churches to utilize as needed.

The Rev. Stewart Smith has served as the full-time general presbyter for over eight years, leading a part-time staff of four: the stated clerk, the transitional youth and young adult developer, the presbytery connector, and the presbytery administrator. All staff currently work remotely except Stewart, who plans to transition out of his role in August of this year. Approximately 150 volunteers serve in official presbytery roles on 11 committees, three sub-committees, three administrative commissions, and one task force.

Between 2013-2015, the presbytery engaged in its last visioning/strategic plan process, resulting in naming three priorities:

1. Building strong congregations that faithfully and effectively share the gospel
2. Connecting congregations with resources and expertise
3. Developing and supporting ministries with youth and young adults.

These priorities were re-visited again in 2017-2018, resulting in the current staffing model with two new positions—a presbytery builder and a presbytery connector. As the presbytery was beginning the implementation of the results of the 2017-2018 process, those efforts were sidetracked by the pandemic. The staff and volunteer leaders found themselves responding primarily to the urgent needs created by the pandemic, leaving little time to give attention to implementation efforts. In August 2023, a new youth & young adult developer was hired to fill this position at 15 hours per week.

Recognizing the need for the presbytery to adjust to the new realities of the post-pandemic and post-Christendom world, the coordinating team reached out to Ministry Architects to explore consulting possibilities for the presbytery. With the transition of the general presbyter position this summer, the time is ripe to reassess and recalibrate the presbytery's structure, strategy, and staffing to ensure its long-term effectiveness.

Ministry Architects has been invited to guide the presbytery through a strategic recalibration design and implementation process, as the presbytery seeks to redefine its identity, purpose, and structure in the changing landscape of the post-pandemic church. Ministry Architects met with 12 focus groups that included 81 people. This report is based on those listening conversations. Work on the presbytery's vision will be further developed at an upcoming Vision Summit led by Ministry Architects in April 2024.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

Over the last 25 years, about 40 million Americans have left churches of all theological and demographic stripes.<sup>1</sup> The PCUSA itself has seen a precipitous 55% drop in membership, from just under 2.5 million members in 2001 to 1.14 million members in 2022.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, the PC(USA) reported a loss of 53,105 members, nearly 2,000 more than reported the year before.<sup>3</sup>

Churches and judicatories throughout the country are realizing that trying harder at doing the things they have done in the past will not be sufficient to lead into a more healthy, sustainable, and faithful future. Some are suggesting that this moment in church history calls for tabernacles, not temples; experiments, not edifices.<sup>4</sup> While we don't yet know what the structure or appearance of the future church will be, most recognize that this should be a season for experimentation, not just a time of relying heavily on traditional approaches.

It is becoming clearer that many of the organizational patterns and practices of our churches have been inherited not from the Gospel, but from cultural imperatives, sometimes from a fearful hunger for institutional stability. In an age of increasing polarization when the world seems incapable of re-gathering around a common set of values and principles, the church has something wildly important to offer. Authentic, steadfast community is the church's stock-in-trade and is coveted and longed for by many, making a focus on relationships, deeply embedded in our reformed tradition, an invaluable currency today.

There is, of course, a gift in this time of uncertainty. God's people have always been formed in the wilderness, the place where we are most open to revelation and our own transformation. The gift embedded in a multi-year pandemic and a wave of shrinking church participation is that the cultural and institutional foundation beneath our feet has been cracked wide open, offering an opportunity to honestly assess and renew our mission together.

The average membership for a PCUSA presbytery is only 5,231, almost two-thirds the size of the Presbytery of Arkansas.<sup>5</sup> With this presbytery's relative health, both relationally and financially, some wondered if it might be possible for this presbytery to serve as a model for other presbyteries in a season when the need for intentional, strategic, innovative thinking is so imperative.

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<sup>1</sup> "The great dechurching": Why so many Americans are leaving their churches." *NPR Illinois*. Date accessed: February 20, 2024. ["The great dechurching": Why so many Americans are leaving their churches | NPR Illinois](#)

<sup>2</sup> "PCUSA Congregations and Membership" *PCUSA*. Date Accessed: February 20, 2024. [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2012-cs-table1.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2012-cs-table1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Jones, R. (2023, May 1) "PCUSA Membership Still in Decline" *PCUSA*. Date accessed: February 20, 2024. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2023/5/1/pcusa-church-membership-still-in-decline/>

<sup>4</sup> Language borrowed from the report of the New Wesleyan Ecosystem work that Wesleyan Impact Partners did, report authored by Sacred Design Lab. <https://sacred.design/who-we-are>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*.



# ASSETS

## STRENGTHS TO PROTECT

### Supportive Community

Despite being such a large presbytery both geographically and in membership, the Presbytery of Arkansas is marked by a strong sense of community. Several participants commented on the hospitable culture of the presbytery. One participant commented: “We’re kind to each other. Folks are respectful of one another even if they disagree.” Another remarked: “We like each other! It’s a huge strength. Our moderators set a tone of respect and kindness so there’s no conflict on the presbytery floor.” Several others commented on the “health” of the presbytery, and how this was a marked difference from their experience in other presbyteries.

### Spectacular Staff

Throughout the listening groups, people repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the presbytery staff. Members of the presbytery recognize that the staffing model is small but strong, and the people filling these positions work hard to share resources and offer pastoral support. As one participant put it, “the greatest resource we have is our faithful and innovative staff.”

Several participants commented on the presbytery’s ability to resource congregations, from assistance with searching for an interim, finding pulpit supply, and providing seasonal resources for worship and programming. One participant noted, “I appreciate the in-person planning... opportunities to gather together before big seasons like Lent and Advent to touch base, and resource one another... and the creative energy that happens when you gather people together to share ideas.”

### Well Resourced / Financial Health

At a time when many of the country’s presbyteries find themselves in precarious financial situations and regularly facing budget deficits, the Presbytery of Arkansas finds itself in a much more stable position. An indication of that health is the variety of grants the presbytery has available, such as the Mission Initiative Grant and Future of the Church grants. These grants enable congregations to think creatively about outreach, growth, and mission to their communities and beyond.

### Willingness to Move Forward and Take Risks

It is clear that despite current challenges, the presbytery has demonstrated a commitment to adapt and thrive. One participant described the presbytery like this: “I do think our presbytery is one that has the temperament to be a real leader in reform and revisioning what it means to be a presbytery and doing ministry in the world.” Another remarked: “Our church leadership is open and willing to try new thing.”

### Heritage of Deeply Impactful Youth Ministry

When asked about strengths of the presbytery, participants repeatedly noted the long-time emphasis on youth. The fact that the presbytery intentionally structures its meetings in a way that encourages youth to participate speaks volumes. One participant said, “I do think there’s an incredible amount of youth and young adult ministry that’s happening. We have events. We have connections where we are forming young people and including young adults in faith in ways they aren’t necessarily able to do in their congregations.”

### Ferncliff Camp

It is clear that Ferncliff has been an important partner in ministry with the presbytery. In many ways, Ferncliff serves as an extension of many congregations' ministries for children and youth, hosting retreats, camps, and various mission and outreach programs. Many participants referenced positive experiences at Ferncliff - attending as a camper when they were younger, or more recently, for a pastoral retreat.

Over the years, Ferncliff has expanded its ministry to include programming for all ages, along with missional programs like Sharing the Goods and the Disaster Assistance Center. When asked the question, “What would you like to protect within the presbytery?” participants answered resolutely, “Ferncliff!” And continued, “Ferncliff has been a healthy, creative partnership for our presbytery. I think we could follow this model to form other partnerships.”

### Deep Roots

In talking with focus groups, many participants commented on the many and varied roles they have served within the presbytery. We heard from members who grew up attending presbytery as youth, members who had moved away from the presbytery and have since returned, and others who have generational ties to presbytery dating back decades.

# CHALLENGES

## OBSTACLES TO MOVING STRATEGICALLY FORWARD

### History of Stalled Plans

Many participants referenced previous strategic plans that never materialized into concrete action. One person remarked, “We have had great goals and objectives over the years, but, for whatever reason, they were not executed.” Another noted, “I have a concern that this process will be another binder on the shelf. We have a track record of not taking action at the end of the process.” A third said: “Sometimes the presbytery process can slow things down and keep things from happening when they need to happen. Sometimes we as Presbyterians are deep thinkers... [and] over-process to the detriment of timely action.” Another noted, “Lack of capacity to implement, short-term solutions, and the same voices in the room leads to the same outcomes. Always.”

### Lack of Vision

Many members commented on a lack of vision for the presbytery. While the presbytery is intentional about resourcing and equipping members/churches, a unified “why” is not always clear. One participant noted, “It would be helpful to have a shared vision so that we can celebrate where we are going.” Another put it this way, “We need to move beyond survival mode.” Many talked about connecting the dots between strategic plans, presbytery meetings, visioning, and next steps. One participant put it like this: “As a presbytery we need to figure out who we are, what we want to do, and what kind of staffing we need to make that happen.”

### Representation

The presbytery has a strong aspiration toward ethnic diversity, evidenced by their desire to be a Matthew 25 organization and having a committee of representation in their organizational chart. However the committee on representation is inactive and some members of focus groups also raised the question as to how the Matthew 25 initiative is actually being lived out. It was also acknowledged that there is much work to do in ensuring that the voices of all members of the presbytery are heard in ways that are meaningful and intentional. As one member stated, “I have concerns about leadership that are not as diverse as I would like it to be. Few people hold a lot of power in our presbytery.....there is not enough variety of voice.” Another stated, “When I look at the website, I don’t see myself represented.”

### A Shrinking Pond

As the size of PCUSA churches continues to shrink, the number of churches able to support a full-time ordained minister has dramatically dropped. As one participant noted, “[We’re] trying

to find a minister right now and it's really hard not to have a preacher... It's a lonely process. We've had pulpit supply for nine months."

Many churches in the presbytery do not have dedicated staff (or even consistent volunteers) to lead worship, moderate meetings, and oversee day-to-day administration. Additionally, those who are in place are often stretched thin. It appears the presbytery is aware of this need but there continues to be significant barriers to empower volunteers and laity. When asked the question, "How can the presbytery be more effective in serving congregations?" one participant answered: "[By] providing opportunities for elder/leadership training for small[er] congregations, where little or no travel is involved."

### Emphasis on "Dying" Churches

Several listening groups commented on what they perceive as the presbytery's disproportionate focus in recent years on "dying churches": "This has been a hard and painful thing in our presbytery. We have devoted an extraordinary amount of energy to churches on hospice care. This has been a drain on our resources but also emotionally." Another said, "It does feel like we spend a lot of time and energy on the things that are not going well." Many others commented on how this focus may have taken away from investing in ministries that are viable or thriving. One wondered, "What would it look like for the presbytery to put energy where we do see signs of life, to fan that flame?"

### Institutional Limits

Despite the shifting landscape of churches, the structure of the presbytery has not changed significantly over the last 20-30 years. There seems to be an acknowledgement that current committee structures may not be providing the necessary foundation or support for churches.

Despite an openness to change, much remains the same. "I worry sometimes that we don't have a presbytery structure in place that can pivot." Or as another person put it, "We know that the old ways of doing things aren't serving anymore."

An additional concern was the desire to structure in ways that allow for more shared leadership and responsibility:

- "We are not organized in a way that empowers churches."
- "Our structure puts too much burden on the general presbyter."
- "Historically duties of general presbyter have been overwhelming and so to restructure the staff would be a gracious and kind activity for the presbytery to do moving forward."

### Small Church Disconnect

Members and leaders of smaller churches within the presbytery seem to feel less connected and less clear about their relationship with the presbytery. One focus group member said, "There's no system in place to check on churches, especially small churches. As a small church,

it feels like we're always having to ask; tugging and pulling and asking questions." Another from a small church described their experience as "alone and isolated." Despite the presbytery's efforts to resource congregations, smaller churches seem to feel less supported. One person's goal for the presbytery is that, "small churches and their leaders feel better connected to the people and resources of the greater church."

### **The Weight of Property**

One of the realities felt locally, as well as on a presbytery level, is the weight of underutilized space. For many churches, their buildings are significantly larger than needed for the current number of members and attenders. This weight is especially felt in the costs associated with the upkeep and maintenance of buildings that are oftentimes only used for an hour or two on a Sunday. As focus group members stated, "Facilities are old and require a lot of maintenance." and "Buildings are a barrier to doing the ministry that we want to do."

Many focus group members spoke about the need to reconsider whether a physical building was needed to house the presbytery office. As one member stated, "It is used so little these days; it seems like poor stewardship to keep it, especially when there are plenty of churches with extra space that could share a little space with the presbytery, either permanently or as needed." While space is important, as the presbytery looks to the future, it will need to discern a plan for how to continue to address the challenges felt by buildings that are not being used and utilized to their full potential.

### **Missed Opportunities**

Focus group members also spoke about lack of engagement from churches and support of the presbytery in the Thriving in Ministry program, funded by the Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations' initiative. This nearly one million dollar grant focuses on expanding the work of churches in the presbytery, specifically resourcing rural congregations, and was originally geared towards Ministers of Word and Sacrament but now can also engage more elders/CREs. This program is a potential resource for churches' needs, but there seems to be a disconnect with engaging churches in the presbytery.

### **Invisible Young Adults**

Developing and supporting youth and young adults was the one of the three priorities from the previous strategic plan that seems to have received the least attention. Almost each focus group noted the historical and continued intentional involvement of youth ministry in the presbytery, but intentional ministry for young adults seems to be lacking. Additionally, despite the presbytery having two colleges within the presbytery, and three campus ministries, there was little to no mention of campus ministry in focus groups.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reframe the next 14 months as a time focused on building the foundational infrastructure for ensuring the long-term health and integration of the presbytery's multifaceted ministries. Name April 2025 as the target date for the presbytery to have sufficient systems in place to begin seeing significant results, while enjoying incremental successes along the way.
2. Utilize the newly formed strategic planning leadership team (SPLT) to recommend updates to this report and track and troubleshoot the implementation of this strategic process, in consultation with Ministry Architects.
3. Invite a diverse group of people to serve as a prayer team to meet (ordinarily remotely) and pray for this important process, sharing this timeline with them.
4. Seek ways to infuse this strategic planning process with a spiritual and theological grounding to inform the implementation process.
5. Complete an intentional visioning process to more clearly affirm the presbytery's mission, values, agreed-upon three-year goals and one-year benchmarks.
6. Iteratively develop and begin to implement an updated staffing plan, aligning the presbytery's priorities with its investment in staff.
7. Make a decision about the future of the current presbytery offices, considering selling that property and utilizing underutilized space in one of the presbytery's churches.
8. Explore possibilities for engaging the resources of the University of the Ozarks' Thriving Ministries grant program to support clergy and church leadership, particularly for the smaller and rural churches.
9. In consultation with Ministry Architects, fortify the following systems to make predictable and integrated what has been largely unpredictable and episodic:
  - Complete an audit of the presbytery's fundraising systems and develop and begin to implement appropriate game plans for each of those areas
  - Complete a marketing and communications audit, and design protocols for communication that more effectively achieve the presbytery's priorities
  - Establish a system for each congregation of the presbytery to experience a personal, relational touch from presbytery staff at least once a year.



- Develop an annual preventative maintenance plan to prompt presbytery leadership to tend to its foundational systems on at least an annual basis.
10. Develop and begin the implementation of the following game plans:
- Repurposing underutilized church property in the presbytery, exploring pathways to unburdening small churches of heavy operational loads that keep churches focused on survival more than ministry and community
  - Creatively cultivating and deploying leadership for churches that cannot afford a full-time, installed pastor
  - Expanding the agency of young adults for ministry and mission
  - Building a laboratory for launching new worshiping communities and new experiments in incubating church
  - Exploring opportunities for connection and resourcing between congregations and leadership throughout the presbytery
  - Living more faithfully into the presbytery's commitment to diversity and inclusion, creating systems for revitalizing trust and listening to voices that currently feel marginalized (aligned with the presbytery's existing commitments as a Matthew 25 entity and to the committee of representation)
  - Creating a predictable process for churches desiring to reimagine their ministries and strategically invest in plans for their next chapter in a post-covid landscape
  - Expanding plans for sustaining excellence in youth ministry throughout the presbytery
  - Examining the presbytery's organizational structure, and consider making recommendations for streamlining current systems to honor volunteer investment and deepen the impact of each presbytery team
  - Considering ways Ferncliff and the presbytery can continue to strengthen their covenant relationship and clarify informal expectations of how these two entities might best support each other as both look to what's next
  - Building a leadership cultivation plan, designed to expand the pipeline of lay leadership throughout the presbytery

# PROPOSED TIMELINE

*The following timeline outline offers a staged approach to achieving the results outlined in the recommendations above. It is understood that this timeline provides direction for sequencing the implementation process and that some outcomes may not be completed in the exact order and during the exact month outlined below.*

## Month #1 – March 2024

### Outcomes

- Complete revisions to this report and timeline (SPLT).
- Invite and confirm a diverse team who will meet (usually online) regularly to pray for the presbytery and its leaders during this strategic process (Stewart and SPLT).
- Complete invitations and collect RSVPs for the presbytery visioning gathering, April 15-16 (Presbytery Staff).
- Review all current presbytery staff job descriptions and make updates to more faithfully reflect current realities (Ministry Architects with presbytery staff).
- Create first-draft game plans for upgrading each of these systems (Ministry Architects)
  - Repurposing underutilized church property
  - Creatively cultivating and deploying leadership for churches that cannot afford a full-time, installed pastor.
  - Living more faithfully into the presbytery's commitment to diversity and inclusion, considering prioritizing initiatives related to underrepresented groups in the sequencing of this plan.

## Month #2 – April 2024

### Outcomes

- Complete a visioning summit resulting in a draft of the church's mission, values, and goals (Ministry Architects and stakeholders).
- Begin conversations with key stakeholders and the future of the presbytery office (Ministry Architects and SPLT).
- Continue developing the following game plans (Ministry Architects and SPLT):
  - Living more faithfully into the presbytery's commitment to diversity and inclusion
  - Repurposing underutilized church property
  - Creatively cultivating and deploying leadership for churches that cannot afford a full-time, installed pastor
- Develop first drafts of the following game plans (Ministry Architects):
  - Expanding the agency of young adults for ministry and mission

- Building a laboratory for launching new worshiping communities and new experiments in incubating church
- Creating a predictable process for churches desiring to reimagine their ministries and strategically invest in plans for their next chapter in a post-covid landscape
- Based on progress achieved to date, update this implementation timeline through September 2024.

### Month #3 – May 2024

#### Outcomes

- Confirm the presbytery's visioning documents, including its mission, values, three-year-goals and one-year benchmarks (SPLT).
- Prepare for a strategic plan update for Presbytery at its June meeting (Ministry Architects and SPLT).
- Finalize the following game plans (Ministry Architects and SPLT):
  - Living more faithfully into the presbytery's commitment to diversity and inclusion
  - Repurposing underutilized church property
  - Creatively cultivating and deploying leadership for churches that cannot afford a full-time, installed pastor.
- Continue Developing the following game plans (Ministry Architects and SPLT):
  - Expanding the agency of young adults for ministry and mission
  - Building a laboratory for launching new worshiping communities and new experiments in incubating church
  - Creating a predictable process for churches desiring to reimagine their ministries and strategically invest in plans for their next chapter in a post-covid landscape
- Complete a communications and marketing audit, resulting in specific recommendations, with a particular focus on (Ministry Architects and staff)
  - Creating a narrative of gratitude and momentum
  - Prioritizing a limited number of priorities to create a cohesive story of the presbytery
  - Shining light, as much as possible, less on the church and more on the impact of its members and ministry partners

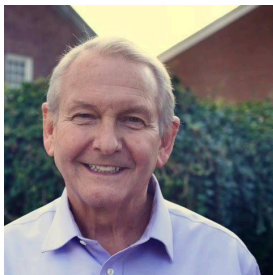
### Month #4 – June 2024

#### Outcomes

- Provide strategic plan update at the June presbytery meeting, including (SPLT)
  - Revised visioning documents
  - Outcomes achieved since the last presbytery meeting
- Create a first-draft staffing plan and timeline, based on the priorities outlined in the visioning documents (Ministry Architects



The following Ministry Architects' team members will be serving the Presbytery of Arkansas over the next 14 months:



**Mark DeVries, Founder**

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Mark is the founder of Ministry Architects, the co-founder of Ministry Incubators and the Center for Youth Ministry Training. Mark served as the Associate Pastor for Youth and Their Families at First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee from 1986 through 2014. Mark is the author of a number of books, including *Sustainable Youth Ministry* and *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, and the co-author of *Sustainable Children's Ministry* and *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*. Mark is a graduate of Baylor University and Princeton Theological Seminary and has taught courses or been a guest lecturer at more than 20 different colleges and seminaries, including Duke Divinity School (Durham, NC), Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton, NJ), and Vanderbilt Divinity School (Nashville, TN). Mark and Susan have been married since 1979 and make their home in Nashville, TN. They have three grown children: Adam, Debbie, and Leigh, and four grandchildren: Parish, Nealy, Liam, and Jack.



**Lesleigh Carmichael, Lead Consultant**

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Since 2004 Lesleigh has been serving as a consultant with Ministry Architects. She is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). From 1998-2005, Lesleigh served as an Associate Minister at Woodmont Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Nashville, TN. In 2006, she was part of the original staff in launching The Center for Youth Ministry Training (CYMT) where she served on staff for over 17 years wearing many hats, including Associate Director where she oversaw the Residency program and its team. Lesleigh holds a B.S. from Auburn University and a Masters of Divinity from Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Lesleigh lives in Brentwood, TN.





**Hayley O'Connor, Lead Consultant**

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Hayley O'Connor is an ordained PC(USA) minister living in northern New Jersey. She has recently returned to the States after spending seven years as an Associate Minister in Edinburgh, Scotland. In addition to working with Ministry Architects, Hayley serves as the Associate Minister at First Presbyterian Church New Vernon. She is also a graduate of the Shalem Institute's Spiritual Guidance Program and has helped to organize and lead pilgrimages to Edinburgh, Iona, and Paris.



**Caroline Sell, Project Manager**

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Caroline's passion for ministry leadership began while serving in youth ministry during her college years at UNC Chapel Hill (Go Heels!) and has continued in a variety of roles within several denominations and traditions. She holds a M.Div and a Master of Arts in Christian Education & Spiritual Formation from Princeton Theological Seminary and is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). She and her family live on campus at Asheville School, a boarding high school in Asheville, NC, where her husband, Nate, serves as Chaplain. In her free time, Caroline loves exploring a farmer's market, hiking, and searching for the best baked goods the area has to offer!