

The Pastoral Nominating Committee Presents



Rev. Michael Jones
As candidate for Lead Pastor/Head of Staff of
First United Church of Oak Park



FIRST UNITED CHURCH OF OAK PARK
Living God's All-Inclusive Love

November 16, 2025

Meet Michael Jones

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After 14 months of thoughtful discernment and prayerful work, the Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC) is excited to present its recommendation for our next Lead Pastor and Head of Staff — **Rev. Michael Jones**.

Michael comes to us as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC) and currently serves as Associate Conference Minister for the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC. In addition to his conference leadership, he has recently provided temporary pastoral support at Plymouth UCC in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

A native of Louisville, OH (just outside Canton) who spent his teen years in Akron, Michael earned his bachelor's degree in religious studies (after beginning in music education) from Indiana University, where he was also a member of the Big Ten Champion swim team. He went on to receive his Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School, while serving as a seminarian at Second Congregational Church in Beverly, Massachusetts.

Michael's 18+ years of pastoral experience includes five years as senior pastor at East Canton Church of God in Ohio, three years as associate pastor at New Goshenhoppen UCC in East Greenville, Pennsylvania, and seven years as pastor at St. John UCC in nearby Arlington Heights.

Throughout its interview process, the PNC found Michael to be calm, collaborative, and a natural consensus builder — qualities that align beautifully with our church's values and spirit. His ministry experience, combined with the insights gained from his work guiding and supporting multiple congregations as a conference minister, will bring tremendous value to his leadership at First United.

Michael, his husband Blake, and their two daughters, Lucia (6) and Paige (8), are eager to return to the Chicago area and join the First United family. In addition to raising a family, his interests include traveling, indoor plants, reading history and classic novels, and walking the family's Siberian Husky.

We look forward to warmly welcoming Michael as we begin this new chapter together.

From the Candidate:

Why First United Church?

Dear First United,

I am honored to be nominated by the Pastoral Nominating Committee for the position of Lead Pastor at such a wonderful, active, and historic congregation!

My time with the Pastoral Nominating Committee made it clear to me that not only would First United be an amazing setting in which I can use my gifts in ministry, but also that you chose a well-grounded, friendly, and engaging group to represent you in your search for a new lead pastor. I enjoyed our conversations, their questions, and getting to know the congregation through them. I also was impressed with the dedicated and talented staff of First United, and look forward to the possibility of working with them.

First United has a long history and vibrant story as a vital church in the heart of Oak Park that lives its faith dynamically and in a variety of ways. You have done the work to ask hard questions about the future while dreaming big dreams, being open to where God is calling, and seeking a spiritual grounding through it all. Whether it has been advocacy work, engaging worship and music programs, or the physical presence of a beautiful building that is used in so many ways to support the community, I feel that First United is ready for its next chapter, and I hope to be part of it.

You will be learning more about me and my background, and I look forward to meeting you the weekend of November 16. May God be with us as we discern our future together!

Peace,

Michael

Excerpt from the Candidate's Statement of Faith

"I felt called to ordained ministry the summer after my sophomore year of college. I began college as a music education major and enjoyed my coursework and looked forward to my future career path. Although my gifts and talents went well with the role of pastor, sensing a call to ordained ministry wasn't something I was considering at the time due to my fundamentalist, religious upbringing. I didn't think that God would call someone to be a minister who was gay, open to other people's understanding of religion and the Bible, and more interested in religious community than rigid doctrine. When I felt a sudden and strong call to ministry, most of those in my life at the time were not surprised.

I was not familiar with the United Church of Christ until I saw one of the "God Is Still Speaking" commercials while watching TV in my dorm room. For the first time in my life, I heard the words, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," in what was a clear, LGBTQIA+-affirming message. My life would never be the same. I had always been fascinated with God, the Bible, religion, spirituality, and the church, but when I began training for ministry, all of these coalesced into my newly discovered passion for the way that the above represent, shape, and work in the life of a group of people; a spiritual community.

I'm thankful to God that over the past fourteen years of ordained ministry, I have had the opportunity to be part of serving, leading, and growing with communities of seekers we call a church. My call to ordained ministry has been located in local church ministry until a year and a half ago, when I accepted a call to be an Associate Conference Minister in the Wisconsin Conference. I have enjoyed my work in the Conference, partnering with and resourcing local churches and pastors, but I have missed being a pastor in the local church. I am glad that I took this path, as it has only solidified my sense of call into local church ministry."

What the PNC Was Looking For

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The Pastoral Nominating Committee

Tim Dull (co-chair)
Jim Heininger (co-chair)
Jackie Eckholm
Marilee Castañeda
Tammy Meyer
Katie O’Shea
Christina Ricordati

Rev. Phil Price and
Council Moderator
Susan Swords Steffen
(ex-officio)

The committee sought out a candidate to lead us into a new chapter in our proud history as the hands and feet of Christ, shining as an even greater light in our community and beyond. We searched for a pastor who:

- Will lead us in spiritual growth and bold transformation.
- Preaches Christ’s radically inclusive love with intellect and passion, guiding us on our faith journeys.
- Is a dynamic and skilled leader (and engaged staff manager) ready to collaborate with lay leadership to envision our future, and help us connect with younger generations and those seeking renewed faith.
- Can be a high-profile and engaging community presence.

The Pastor’s Responsibilities

- preparation and leadership of Sunday worship
- faith formation and vitality, identifying resources and opportunities for the congregation to utilize
- leadership development by working with the congregation to create ministry and programs
- pastoral care in collaboration with lay persons
- community engagement and leading the church to be an ambassador of God’s love
- weddings and funerals for participants in the worshipping community
- strategic planning for current and new directions in ministry
- provide leadership as needed to church programs, in collaboration with lay leadership
- participate in wider church activities such as Conference and Association meetings
- administration responsibilities (unless delegated)
- faithful financial development and stewardship
- responsibility for supervision of staff
- availability to wider community for funerals, weddings, special worship programs, and as a representative of the church to local organizations
- counseling, listening and referral
- study and prayer to increase pastor’s own faith and to improve skills in ministry
- energizing and deepening the spiritual connections and faith understandings of adherents

Testimonials

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“I am so excited to welcome Michael Jones as lead pastor of our congregation! What you notice on first meeting Michael is his warmth and calm demeanor. He is easy to talk to and makes you feel comfortable in his presence. As you get to know him more, you learn that he is a talented administrator and has a wealth of knowledge from not only his church experience, but his time at the UCC Conference. He is a thoughtful preacher, passionate about pastoral care, and I can’t wait for him to share his talents with First United!”

Christina Ricordati,
PNC Member

“Michael has a gentle and steady presence. He leads with warmth and humility. His calm, pastoral spirit has consistently built trust and strengthened the communities he has served. He listens more than he speaks, and when he does speak, it’s with the calm assurance of someone who has seen the wide map of things—his time with the Wisconsin UCC District giving him that broader view. His gentle strength, collaborative spirit, and pastoral heart feel right for a congregation like ours: progressive, inclusive, and rooted in social justice.

With Michael’s guidance, our church can continue to be both a sanctuary and a catalyst—a place where faith is renewed, new generations are welcomed, and the next chapter of our ministry is written with grace and hope. Under his leadership, I am confident our church will become an even more welcoming congregation -- ready for spiritual growth and bold transformation.”

Tim Dull, PNC Co-Chair



“The day we interviewed Michael in person left a lasting impression on me. From the very beginning, I felt an overwhelming sense of warmth, comfort, and a feeling of being at home. Michael radiated a welcoming presence that made everyone feel included and truly heard. Engaging in conversation with him was effortless; he was approachable, open, and put us all at ease.

Reflecting on our time with Michael, I am optimistic for what lies ahead. My hopes for our future as a church, guided by Michael’s compassionate leadership, are rooted in a desire that we continue to grow together—drawing closer to God and to one another. With Michael as our pastor, I trust that we will be inspired to further God’s work with hearts full of love, minds open with understanding, and spirits ignited with passion. May our community flourish, united in purpose and strengthened by the warmth and inclusiveness that Michael so naturally shares.”

Marilee Castañeda, PNC Member

Testimonials

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“Michael's strengths are many and genuine. His ministry and presence reflect his integrity, faith, commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ, sense of humor, preparedness, and generosity of spirit. He is authentic, down-to-earth, and brings both curiosity and joy to his work. I admire Michael's attentiveness to each participant in our meetings as well as to the issues at hand, and I'm consistently impressed by his communication which is clear, precise, and timely.”

Kathy Lawes, UCC Illinois Conference



“Michael has a deep love for Christ's church, and for the UCC in particular. He works hard to craft sermons that are challenging, yet supportive, delivered in a style that communicates well to his hearers. His pastoral care skills are superb. While some pastors who are adept at preaching and pastoral care possess only adequate administrative skills (myself included), Michael is an exception. I marvel at his ability to set goals and guide individuals, committees, and ministries to buy into the vision and work to make it come to pass. Michael is also very approachable. He never talks down to anyone, but always makes people feel important and cared for.”

Paris Donehoo, UCC Pastor and Reference

Special Congregational Meeting

November 16, 2025



Agenda

Call to Order	Susan Swords Steffen, Council Moderator
Opening Prayer	Pastor Lydia Mulkey
Declaration of Quorum & Statement of Purpose	Kari Abboud, Council Clerk Susan Swords Steffen
Pastoral Nominating Committee Report	Jim Heininger & Tim Dull, PNC Co-Chairs
Motion to Call the Candidate	Tammy Meyer, PNC Council Member
Congregational Vote to Approve the Call	
Announcement of the Vote	Susan Swords Steffen
Motion to Dismiss the Pastoral Nominating Committee	Susan Swords Steffen
Adjournment & Closing Prayer	

First United Church of Oak Park Staff

Rev. Philip Price, Intentional Interim Lead Pastor
pprice@firstunitedoakpark.com

Rev. Lydia Mulkey, Associate Pastor of Education
lmulkey@firstunitedoakpark.com

Sally Sloane, Choir Director
ssloane@firstunitedoakpark.com

Bobby Nguyen, Organist
bnguyen@firstunitedoakpark.com

Heather Vanderberg, Church Administrator
hvanderberg@firstunitedoakpark.com

Shirley Kyle, Financial Administrator
skyle@firstunitedoakpark.com

Jésus Santiago, Custodian

Jesse Tijerina, Custodian