

Meet Pastor Brian

By Margaret Doane

From all indications, our new pastor Brian Symonds will provide remarkable leadership for First Pres, continuing the excellence in ministry offered by recent pastors Jim Huffstutler, Sandy Tice, and Wendy Lamb. I talked with Pastor Brian, when he had been here for a mere five weeks, to find out more about his life, as well as his first impressions and tentative plans for First Pres.

Pastor Brian has deep Presbyterian roots: his parents met when both sang in the choir at Downey Presbyterian Church. The original family included his parents (Dennis and Bonnie) and Brian and his brother, Rob; much later, while not biologically related, they welcomed sister Candy into the family in early college. Growing up, Brian was very active in the Church, attending youth groups, Vacation Bible School, and just altogether spending major amounts of time and energy in Church life. He graduated from Warren High School in Downey; briefly attended Texas Lutheran University, and then returned to California to attend Cerritos College. He went on to Cal State Fullerton, where he was a Communications major and was active in student government, and also worked at Disneyland. He enrolled at San Francisco Theological Seminary but "didn't go to become a pastor" but rather because he "had lots of questions of faith."

He realized he was called to parish ministry because of a meaningful comment, someone telling him they "saw something" in him and would like to "see him on the other side of the Communion table," extending Communion rather than simply receiving it.

Pastor Brian has ministered to many in a variety of capacities. Before he was ordained, he served as a chaplain resident at Children's Hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit. He was ordained at United University Church at USC where he was Minister for Campus Engagement. He then worked at the Claremont Presbyterian Church in Outreach from 2018-2024; then at All Peoples in Cathedral City from 2024-2025; and now he is -- happily, we hope -- here at First Pres.

Pastor Brian adopted biological brothers Victor, Nathan, and Axel in 2016. Victor returned to biological family members "after a couple of years." Nathan, now 21, is studying Biology at Citrus College and works at Dutch Bros Coffee. Axel is 14, attends Claremont High School, and plays basketball and soccer, as well as being a dog walker. Brian lists eating as a hobby and enjoys trying new restaurants, and he also enjoys watching movies, both at home and in theatres. What little free time he has left after being a dad and a minister he spends as a student, working towards completing a Doctor of Ministry degree this coming Spring at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, with a dissertation on discerning missional vocation.

Pastor Brian lists his personal strengths as his love of preaching and "being an engaged pastor." He says he is "an extrovert" and loves "getting out in the community and meeting new people." He says others say he "is charismatic," someone "others trust and come to," and that he "plays well with others." He "likes to be in the know," and plans to go to all committee meetings. He has spoken to Laurie about partnering in pastoral care and visitations.

Pastor Brian says he was attracted to First Pres because we are a stable congregation with faithful volunteers, a congregation that is "alive and well." The neighborhood and city offer a positive challenge; he believes we can "meet people where Christ met people," among the "poor and disenfranchised." We have a "place to be relevant" in real and genuine ways. He believes we can build on the strengths we have rather than going in entirely new directions and wants to see how music, our relationship with San Bernardino High School, and food might be extended and developed. As an example, he cited our strong High Church music and said we might develop it by inviting musicians for services and concerts. He wants to "discern our relevancy" and work at extending what we have so that "God can continue to speak and be revealed" in our lives and the lives of our neighbors.

Pastor Brian brings a rich and varied background, exciting ideas, and a great enthusiasm for us and our Church and city. We are delighted he has joined us!



Pastor Brian with lectors Rachel Garvin and Valentina Valenzuela on the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Save the Date: Sunday, January 25, 2026 at 3:00 p.m. for the installation service for Pastor Brian. The Presbytery of Riverside will install Rev. Brian S. Symonds as Minister of Word and Sacrament for First Presbyterian Church of San Bernardino. Reception to follow.