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Jennie Robbins is a different kind of leader for Church Health

By [Aisling Mäki](#), Daily Memphian

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Jennie Robbins, Chief Executive Officer at Church Health on Monday, June 16, 2025. (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

From the outside, Jennie Robbins may have seemed an unusual choice to succeed physician and pastor Dr. Scott Morris as CEO of Church Health, the nation's largest faith-based, privately funded health clinic.

A finance expert, Robbins' resume includes commercial lending roles with Bancorp South, Bank of America and Regions Bank.

"I am not a doctor or a minister, and I don't pretend to be," she said. "I'm a champion for this cause, and as far as the philosophy of looking out for this community, that hasn't changed."

Morris founded Church Health in 1987 to provide health care for Memphis' working poor. And up until July 1, 2024, he'd been the nonprofit's only CEO and a high-profile figure in the community.

But for the past 18 years, Robbins has worked behind the scenes and played a pivotal role in Church Health's consistent growth and financial stability.

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Jennie Robbins,
Church Health CEO

transition

“I think people don’t know her because as a chief financial officer she oftentimes stays in the background,” Morris said.

In 2017, Robbins exited the banking world to serve as director of the Church Health Memphis Plan, an affordable health care plan for small businesses and self-employed individuals in lower-wage jobs.

And from 2013 until she became Church Health’s CEO in July 2024, Robbins served as the organization’s chief financial officer. She oversaw the growth, fiscal stability, financial systems, policies and procedures for the nonprofit, whose annual budget is \$26 million.

In May 2024, Morris announced he would step down as CEO, and transition to a staff physician role to focus on patient care as well as development initiatives.

And a national search for Church Health’s new leader eventually led back to the woman whose financial decisions had strengthened the nonprofit and allowed its clinicians to focus on providing affordable, high-quality care for Memphians in need.

“Many health care organizations are led not necessarily by physicians, but by those with skill sets in finance and regulations because that’s a big part of what we have to keep up with from a managerial standpoint,” said Mike Keeney, chair of Church Health’s board of directors.

Church Health sees growth with new Crosstown eye clinic

“Frankly, the internal workings of Church Health were really healthy, and that was primarily due to the actions of Jennie Robbins, so we recognized as a board that a strong internal candidate would be best,” he said.

Morris maintains a regular presence at Church Health and makes himself available to Robbins, which has allowed for a smooth transition.

“Scott has been very open to me coming into his office asking questions, and he comes in here to give me pearls of wisdom, which I appreciate,” Robbins said.

A year into her tenure as CEO, Church Health’s financial stability has allowed for continued growth amid continuous community need.

“We have a waitlist,” Robbins said. “There’s always somebody at the door. Our walk-in clinic is full. Our dental clinic is full.”

In 2017, Robbins was involved in Church Health’s decision to sell off its aging Midtown buildings and anchor itself in the newly refurbished Crosstown Concourse, which gave the nonprofit one central base from which to carry out its mission.

“The move across town allowed us to shift funds from possible repairs and maintenance on the buildings to really investing back in our staff and technologies and the ways we can operate here on these three floors at Crosstown,” Robbins said. “Being here has allowed us to not increase our budget tremendously while positioning how we’re spending the money a little bit differently.”

That’s included a slew of projects to benefit patients, including a 1200-square-foot high-tech eye clinic that opened late last year and a new 3,500-square-foot outdoor playscape for children of patients, staff and Church Health YMCA members, which is expected to open this summer.

Church Health bills Medicare and Medicaid for services, and although it doesn’t rely on government grants, it will pursue them.

“As long as they don’t dictate how we are going to treat a patient,” Robbins said.

Church Health introduces cohort of women leaders

Church Health primarily relies on private donations individuals and foundations as well as corporate support.

“To treat patients coming through our door, we’ve got to be efficient in our processes, financially responsible and good fiscal agents of our donor funds, because we are so supported by the communities in Memphis,” Robbins said.

And Keeney said Robbins has been an excellent steward of those funds.

“It’s certainly not easy to follow a founder leader, but she’s done a really good job and made some decisions to change and streamline some processes that I think have improved the organization,” he said.

Raising money for a nonprofit requires building and maintaining relationships, and Morris describes Robbins as affable with a great sense of humor.

She also oversees 220 employees, including many who’ve been with the nonprofit for a long time.

Sonia Leonard first came to Church Health in 2011, when Robbins hired her to assist her with the Memphis Plan.

“We’ve been collaborating the entire time we’ve been here, even if I did not report directly to her,” said Leonard, who is today Church Health’s development strategist. “Jennie is a hard worker. She’s the most fair, empathetic, compassionate person that I have ever come in contact with.”

Church Health has historically moved its existing longtime employees into leadership roles, a strategy that’s continued under Robbins’ leadership.

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Sonia Leonard,
Church Health’s development strategist

One of her first moves as Church Health’s CEO was to move several seasoned employees, all of them woman, into senior leadership positions.

“The staff and my executive C-suite have also come together pretty quickly to help make sure I know the right questions to ask and meet with the right people and partners internally and externally,” Robbins said.

Now, she’s leading a three-year strategic plan focused on strengthening Church Health’s existing clinical operations and expanding its wellness services and other community outreach projects.

“I want to make sure everybody has a voice in the process,” Robbins said. “There’s a place for everybody at Church Health and just a few degrees of separation between a donor and a patient.”

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Aisling Mäki

Aisling Mäki covers health care, banking and finance, technology and professions. After launching her career in news two decades ago, she worked in public relations for almost a decade before returning to journalism in 2022.

As a health care reporter, she’s collaborated with The Carter Center, earned awards from the Associated Press and Society of Professional Journalists and won a 2024 Tennessee Press Association first-place prize for her series on discrepancies in Shelby County life expectancy by ZIP code.

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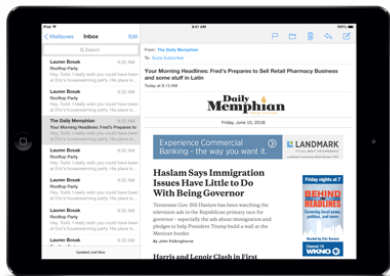
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