

Northern Illinois Conference 2019 One Matters Award

Chicago: United Church of Rogers Park (Chicago Northwestern District)



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

United Church of Rogers Park is a diverse congregation of the Northern Illinois Conference, and its mission statement focuses on Micah 6:8:

“What does God require of us? But to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” The church seeks to share God’s love and in doing so, make life better for people of all ethnic-racial backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations, gender identities and physical or mental abilities in our neighborhood.

The ministry of United Church tries to be comprehensive in serving the real needs of the Far North side of Chicago. This region of the city has an ever-growing gap between low and high incomes. Poverty and lack of opportunities for youth enable violence and gang activity. People are constantly priced out



of homes they’ve lived in for decades. Many people struggle with the economic trauma of working and yet not making a living wage. Many are experiencing homelessness. However, the richness of Rogers Park’s many cultures calls neighbors together in mutual support.

United Church has long practiced the risky and terrifying discipline of trusting God; namely, showing up to help and trusting that God would provide the resources necessary. When the

community asks for help, United Church has always said yes and figured out what that looked like along the way. Through decades of this discipline, United Church has become known as a place of support, love, and safety. People of all faiths or no faith call United Church their neighborhood church and experience the witness of God’s love on the corner of Morse and Ashland.

The discipline of saying yes began more than 90 years ago when the church began serving the community through what is now called the “New-to-You” Thrift Shop, providing affordable clothing and home goods to our neighborhood. More than 34 years ago, Community Feast began offering a free, hot, nutritious meal to the community every Sunday evening and they have never missed a week. The Peace Center of Rogers Park is an ever-expanding outreach ministry of the church, drawing children and youth into a summer day camp, an after-school program, informal gatherings, and partner sponsored activities. Circles & Ciphers, a hip-hop-infused restorative justice organization led by and for young people impacted by violence has continued to grow as they work through art-based peace circles, education, and direct action to bring about the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. Creative Circle meets twice a week and provides space and resources for people to express themselves

and fellowship through craft. All of these programs support each other and help bring healing and peace to our neighborhood. But these are just some of the ministries the church supports.

ESL classes and support groups are offered weekly. The church has functioned as a teaching site for Loyola, Northwestern and Garrett-Evangelical seminar students and mission teams who want to serve. It provides a place for local community organizing groups to gather and hold our political leaders accountable to those Jesus loved best: the poor and the marginalized.

And this practice of saying yes, showing up and trusting God has not been in vain. Since Peace Center programming reached its full capacity, violence in the church's corner of Rogers Park has dropped by 50%. It is a blessing and a somber responsibility to know that the presence of this church in the Far North area is crucial to the wellbeing of the region.

While, in many ways United Church of Rogers Park functions like a community center, the heart of all this work is Sunday morning, where they remember that as a church we are called to make life less cruel for our neighbors. Sunday morning worship includes people from different theological and cultural backgrounds, and honors their commitment to Scripture and their sacramental identity as Christians as well as their commitment to justice.

Sunday morning is where they make meaning out of life and work, remember they need God and each other and do their best to heed the Wesleyan call to first do no harm, do all the good they can and stay in love with God. Our Sunday morning worshipping community is growing and, while the church still has the financial challenges of a poor church committed to saying yes when the community seeks us out, the congregation at United Church of Rogers Park is often in awe of the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of God that pour forth from this place, beckoning all who are weary to enter and find rest.



United Church of Rogers Park's Peace Center Summer Program



Community Members are served at United Church of Rogers Park's weekly Community Feast



Community Members at a Circles and Ciphers event



Pastor Lindsey Joyce commissioning Deacon Mary Rawlinson on Sunday Morning