

# Northern Illinois Conference 2025 One Matters Award

*Grace United Methodist Church*

Rockford, IL – Prairie North



In 2023, following the General Conference’s decision regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion, Grace UMC

entered a challenging season. We experienced the departure of a significant number of committed members due to theological differences. These losses deeply affected both our spirit and financial stability, leaving noticeable gaps in our pews on Sunday mornings.

Rockford, a spiritually conservative area with churches on nearly every block, has very few openly affirming congregations. We recognized a deep need: LGBTQ+ individuals and their families were searching for a safe, welcoming space to worship and belong. We discerned that Grace UMC was being called to become such a church.

At the end of 2023, we took a bold step by hiring a full-time musician and youth director who is openly gay—an unprecedented move in our church’s history. He moved from Arkansas to Rockford to join our ministry. In early 2024, we launched Rev. Rob Fuquay’s “Faithful and Inclusive” study with four weekly class options.



We also introduced a new slogan: “**GRACE IS FOR EVERYONE.**” We displayed this message on a banner outside our church, alongside a Pride flag. The response was mixed. We

received hateful phone calls, emails, in-person confrontations, vandalism, and even YouTube videos publicly attacking pastor’s messages. Yet, we remained committed to our vision.

In June, we celebrated Pride Month for the first time with testimonies in worship and participation in Rockford's Pride Parade. We also hosted a summer film series on "Unconscious Bias," tackling issues like LGBTQ+ inclusion, racism, and income inequality during summer and fall.



Throughout the year, pastor continued to communicate our mission of radical inclusivity through sermons, newsletters, and meetings. To enhance hospitality and connection, we added high-top tables and stools, a



coffee bar in the sanctuary, converted a restroom into a gender-neutral bathroom, and set up a game room for youth.

By late summer, visitors started walking through our doors—many drawn by our banner and the flag. By the end of 2024, we welcomed 14 new adult members and baptized a child. These new faces didn't just visit—they found a home.

Grace UMC has become more than just another church in Rockford. We are a vital, vibrant faith community—a safe space for healing, belonging, and God's radical love. Though the journey continues, we are confident that we are faithfully following God's call.