

ILLINOIS PILGRIMAGE

REFLECTION
PRAYERS



REFLECTION PRAYERS INTRODUCTION

From June 25–28, 2026, almost thirty pilgrims from the Northern Illinois, Illinois Great Rivers, and Wisconsin Conferences of The United Methodist Church journeyed across the state of Illinois. Together, we visited communities, churches, museums, historic landmarks, and sacred places, seeking to better understand the people, stories, and histories that have shaped this land. Throughout the pilgrimage, we wrestled with a guiding question: What does it mean to be United Methodists living in the "Land of Lincoln"?

Along the way, we listened to stories, encountered both beauty and brokenness, and were invited to reflect, pray, lament, give thanks, and imagine more fully the kin-dom of God.

But pilgrimage does not end when the bus returns home.

The prayers that follow were written by fellow pilgrims in response to what they experienced and discovered along the journey. Each offers a unique perspective, yet together they bear witness to a common hope: that God would continue transforming our hearts as we seek justice, extend mercy, and walk humbly with one another.

May these prayers remind us that pilgrimage is not simply about where we have been, but about who God is calling us to become. As we continue the journey, may we love God deeply, love one another generously, and bear witness to Christ's grace and peace in every place we call home.



A MESSAGE FROM BISHOP KENNETHA BIGHAM-TSAI

“For God so loved the world...” John 3: 16

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we do so at a time when our democracy is under threat and when dangerous forms of nationalism threaten the world. How are we to faithfully celebrate at such a time as this?

I think we celebrate by reflecting upon ways that the values of our Christian faith undergird the values inherent in our democracy. Along that line, I recently took part in a Commission on Religion and Race pilgrimage with members of Illinois Great Rivers Conference (IGRC) and the Northern Illinois Conference. I joined the Chicago part of the pilgrimage. We centered ourselves in prayer, then engaged in experiences that highlighted the diversity of our country and the ways in which so many have fought for equality.

We visited the Pullman National Historical Park and recognized the ways in which Pullman Porters fought for the equality of Africans Americans. These porters, and the maids who worked with them, were instrumental in the formation of a Black middle class. We engaged in learning about Indigenous claims to the land and visited the National Museum of Mexican Art as a way of honoring that culture. We viewed exhibits at the Obama Presidential Center and visited the historic Greenstone United Methodist Church on Chicago’s South Side.

We heard the testimony of recent immigrants to this country who worship at a local United Methodist Church. The rest of the group proceeded to visit sites associated with Abraham Lincoln, a president who brought our country through the Civil War for the sake of unity and equality. That part of the trip included visits to Lincoln’s Presidential Library, the Springfield African American History Museum, and the Project XV Museum in El Paso, Illinois, a museum focused on voting rights.



BISHOP'S MESSAGE CONT.

Throughout our trip, we highlighted the ways in which our democracy and our way of life have been founded upon principles of equality, shared participation and common wisdom. These are values that comport with our Christian faith. Indeed, the trip used the book *Building Beloved Community: The Courage to Love in the Face of Tyranny*, as a primary focus. As the book notes,

“The equality that democracy seeks reflects our conviction that all people are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). The broad participation democracy requires honors our belief that God “so loved the world” that divine grace extends to all people (John 3:16). The shared wisdom democracy assumes recognizes that each person, as an image-bearer of God, has insights to contribute to the common good.”¹

These are Christian ideals based in biblical accounts of a God who created us as equals and loves us equally. These ideals witness to a Jesus who healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead without any regard to race, ethnicity, sexuality or gender. These are the ideals that God calls us to live by through the power of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to resist evil, oppression and injustice in all the ways they present themselves. These ideals speak to the importance of living out our vision to love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously.

These ideals also speak to our commitment to upholding our democracy, especially as we celebrate the 250th year of our founding. Again, what will you do to celebrate this historic Fourth of July and 250th anniversary?

For my part, I had the distinct honor of taking our 18-year-old son, Camden, to register to vote. At a time when voting rights are under threat, what a joy to watch a young bi-racial man affirm his commitment to citizenship and his rightful place in this country. I give all thanks to God.

Happy 4th of July! Happy 250th!

Blessings and Peace,
Bishop Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai
Iowa and IGRC Annual Conferences



Creator of All People and Landscapes,

We come before You with hearts stretched wide by the things our eyes have witnessed across this land of Illinois. From the soaring shorelines of Lake Michigan to the vast expanses of the central prairies, we have traveled not just through geography, but through the painful, sacred, and enduring stories of our siblings.

For the Sights of Struggle and Grief

Lord, we remember the shadows we encountered.

- We think of the sacred, heavy ground where the cries for justice have echoed for generations—from the legacy of the Pullman neighborhood in Chicago to the historic scars of Ottawa El Paso, Springfield and the East St. Louis area.
- We hold the memory of the monuments and street corners where the devastating realities of racism, segregation, and violence were made visible to us.
- Do not let us look away from these sights. Break our hearts for what breaks Yours, and transform our discomfort into a holy, unyielding commitment to truth.

For the Sights of Resilience and Courage

We give You thanks for the beacons of light we witnessed along the way.

- We praise You for the homes and secret sanctuaries of the Underground Railroad that stood as brave defiance against oppression.
- We thank You for the vibrant communities, the legacy of Indigenous, Latinx and Black art, faith, and leadership that have continually shaped, revived, and beautified this state despite systemic barriers.
- For every museum, historical marker, and activist's space that testifies to the truth that joy and resistance cannot be erased—we offer You our profound gratitude.

A Petition for the Road Ahead

As we return from this pilgrimage, let the sights we have seen become an indelible map upon our souls.

- May the dust of Illinois on our shoes remind us that the ground where justice is sought is always holy ground.
- Do not allow us to leave these lessons behind at the final stop. Turn our observation into action, our sorrow into solidarity, and our learning into a lifelong pursuit of dismantling racism in our churches, our towns, and our own hearts.

Guide our feet as we walk forward, bound together in the vision of Your Beloved Community. Amen.

~Tim Alexander, NIC

Holy and Divine Spirit,

We are living in troubling times. Yet, our faith and hope are in You. We realize that the current struggles of this world are not new. There have been worse days and yet You allow us to live a life with purpose and meaning.

We are living in troubling times. Yet, joy is still in our hearts. We realize that our joy in You is different from being happy. Being happy is based on our circumstances. Having joy is based on Your promises, a peace that surpasses all understanding, and gratitude for who You are in our lives.

We are living in troubling times. Yet, more importantly, we are living in a wonderful time of opportunity. An opportunity to learn and discern and put our faith into action. I pray that each person reading these words will strive to live a life of love, justice and righteousness toward all humankind and creation so that we can act on Your promises to build the beloved community. Let the people of God say “Ashe.”

~Amania Drane, NIC

Most Holy and Merciful Yahweh,

You know that if you stoke my righteous rage, I might overturn tables. If I must feel this rage, may it always be directed toward injustice and oppression, and rooted in love for your children and creation.

When I’m tempted to fall into rage at oppressors, the willfully blind, and those who only care about “Just US,” help me to remember they, too, are your children; that they are afflicted, and you are the great physician.

Can I lay the harm at your feet? How long will you allow the harm? How long will I allow the harm, not just against others, but myself as well?

Help me to stand firm in your love and to love myself enough to remove myself from harm, microaggressions, and colorblindness from well-meaning church people. I know that if I can love myself as you love me, I can love your children the way they should be, and together, we will win justice and liberation.

Keep me on your path. Amen.

~Nadia R. Kanhai, NIC

How long, O God? How much longer will racism thrive while you stay silent?

Every time we think we have progressed, we are brutally reminded that it is alive, festering in hearts, poisoning communities, destroying lives. The same patterns, the same hatred, the same violence, over and over. Not one city, not one age, but the same wound everywhere we look. Why do you let this cycle continue? Where are you when your children suffer, when families are torn apart?

You made a promise, God: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

You said "I WILL." Not maybe, not someday, but I WILL transform hearts. Stone hearts breed racism, hatred, the violence that destroys your image-bearers. Flesh hearts would bleed for justice, ache for the oppressed. So where is this transformation? Where are the new hearts? Change our hearts, you promised.

If you will not transform the whole world, then transform your church. If not the whole church, then those who call themselves disciples. If not all of them, then even a few. We are tired of waiting while people suffer.

How long will racism poison the air we breathe? How long will your people choose comfort over your kingdom? How long will stone hearts break what flesh hearts could heal?

Where are you, God?

We will not stop demanding. We will not accept your silence. We will not settle for glimpses of justice when you promised transformation. Act now. Your reputation depends on it. Your people are dying while you wait.

How long?

~Curt Franklin, IGRC

God of all creation— I give you thanks for the knowledge I have received this weekend from so many sources. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to hear other voices and to examine my own thoughts from the "other side of the door." Amen.

~Camilla Hempstead, IGRC

Creator God,

You made each and every one of us in your own image. You knit each of us together individually in our mother's womb and planned your desires for our life before we were born.

Your only command was for us to love our neighbors. You did not have any exclusions or exceptions. It does not matter if we look, act, or think differently. Your love is limitless and includes everyone. You ask for no less from us. Please forgive us when we fail to show love.

Please forgive us when we stray from the path of your desire for our life.

And continue to guide us along the journey of our life. Amen.

~Alice Staley, IGRC

God,

We weep by the rivers knowing not so much that we have lost a perfect past that never was but rather that so many have suffered, and that the pain goes on.

Loving God we lament, and we look forward for we are people of the Resurrection, people who hear the words of the prophets, above all people of love.

God please give us strength, wisdom, humility, and love as we co-create with you the Kingdom, where all your children are loved and have what they need for life abundant.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!

~Jeremiah Thompson, NIC

**God of Creation, God of Righteous Wrath, God of Forgiveness,
God of Love & Joy –**

We hold in our hearts, in our actions, in our churches and communities these vital words, your ultimate call to justice and equality: “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

We continue to learn of years and centuries of injustice, in which some of your beloved children have been made less than – stolen, enslaved, marginalized, victims of violence and poverty. Although the deeds were not ours, we carry some of the pain as we learn of these sad events and times. Let us never forget.

Give us the passion to work actively towards righting these wrongs.

Let your spirit give us courage, words, actions to speak out, act up, and boldly, change the world. Let your spirit guide us to build beloved community and bring your kin-dom on earth.

Let your spirit give us the ability to persuade and bring others into an ever-widening reality of justice and joy, in which all humans are our brothers and sisters – beloved, supported, and equal.

In your mighty and precious name, Amen.

~Susan Wakefield Dal Porto, NIC

All-encompassing Creator,

Forgive us when we pretend there are not lessons to learn from the time before us.

Continue to be with us on our life journey as we deepen our understanding of the diversity of your children.

Grant us insight when we experience conflicting perspectives on how you hope our life together on this planet is to be lived.

And may the Spirit's presence grant us strength and peace when we are called to be witnesses to your guidance through our words and actions. Amen.

~Jane & Steve Zekoff, WIC

For the beauty of this land, O God, we give you thanks:

For the first peoples who called it home, who fished its rivers, tended its soil, and whose enduring presence reminds us to listen to the stories this place still tells;

For knee-high cornfields, vibrant street art, soybeans stretching as far as the eye can see, towering buildings, bustling people, and gray-blue skies that span it all;

For small towns with big missions and great cities with small neighborhoods—each carrying lasting legacies and beating with determined hearts;

For the people who decorate church basements with floral centerpieces and plastic tablecloths, who prepare fried chicken, lemonade, and Cool Whip salad (the very best kind);

For the people who share their stories though their voices shake and their eyes well with tears, who offer hard histories and painful present realities because we need to know—so that we can act;

For imperfect leaders who strive for something good, something true, something like “thy kingdom come,” and who suffer for it because moving from oppression toward liberation costs something;

For those who pay the cost,

O God, we give you thanks.

By the power of your Spirit,

Make us agents of your grace and peace—not a cheap grace or an empty peace, but one rooted in justice, shaped by mercy, and strong enough to endure.

Make us the body of Christ for the world, yes, and for *this land*—this Land of God.

In the name of your Son, the Holy One who shows us the way, we pray. Amen.

~Carey Williams Bebar, NIC

God Bless America:

The US flags unfurled in the gentle breeze
And the sign said God Bless America
The banner said Lincoln is our Savior
God Bless America
Men stacked on shelves in bowels of a ship
God Bless America
Lincoln dreaming of how to revenge his enemies in a political
cartoon
God Bless America
Preserving the history of Springfield black churches
God Bless America
KKK gowns
God Bless America
I have the power
God Bless America
Don't let them kill us
God Bless America
Monuments to the great white men
God Bless America
Treading on the lands of ancient generations
God Bless America
Hate divides, love unites
God Bless America
Leaving a lasting legacy
God Bless America

~Martha Blumer, NIC



Love Boldly
Serve Joyfully
Lead Courageously

