

# The Northern Illinois Conference OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Reporter

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**DO NOT DELAY. DATED MATERIAL**

## Dr. King Wanted to Build a Better World, Not a Monument

by Rev. Dr. Charles A. Woolery Sr., pastor of Wesley UMC in Chicago

The drum major for justice, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., preached until his assassination in 1968 that America was—and still is—threatened by a three-headed monster: militarism, racism, and poverty. Were Dr. King alive today, he would refuse to be reduced to a yearly sound bite, endlessly recycled and safely centered on his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech. That speech is celebrated because it is inspiring without being disruptive. Yet Dr. King’s later message—especially his critique of war, economic exploitation, and systemic injustice—remains inconvenient and largely ignored.

Dr. King was ahead of his time. As with most prophets, he was not fully appreciated while he lived. His theology and moral philosophy continue to resonate most deeply with those committed to truth, justice, and love. They also trouble a nation that prefers comfort over conversion.

A powerful poem often used to memorialize Dr. King captures this tension. Carl Wen-

dell Hines Jr.’s “A Dead Man’s Dream”—originally written in honor of Malcolm X—includes these powerful lines:

Now that he is safely dead,  
Let us praise him.  
Build monuments to his glory...  
Dead men make such convenient heroes...  
It is easier to build monuments  
Than to build a better world.

The poet exposes a sobering truth: America has a habit of honoring its heroes symbolically while refusing to live by their convictions. It is easier to establish holidays and erect monuments than to embrace the radical moral demands those leaders placed upon society. There is a deep hypocrisy in celebrating Dr. King with a national holiday while resisting the very vision for justice that made him a target in the first place.

Dr. King dreamed of a nation where a person’s worth was not determined by skin color or economic status but by character and humanity—where America’s caste system would be dismantled rather than defended. His words still challenge us because the work remains unfinished.

The church must claim Dr. King unapologetically because he was shaped by the Black church and spoke from its prophetic tradition. It is the church’s responsibility to protect his legacy from being diluted, sanitized, or co-opted by corporate and political interests. Dr. King’s witness remains disruptive because it calls us not to admire monuments, but to do the hard work of building a better world.



### Northern Illinois Conference Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Celebration January 18

2:30 p.m.  
Trinity UMC in Mt. Prospect  
605 W. Golf Road, Mt. Prospect  
Cost: Free  
Theme: **Voices from the Past,  
Leading us into the Future**

Join us in celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with prayers, testimonies, music, guest speaker Rev. Dr. Charles A. Woolery Sr., and a light supper afterwards. For further details and registration, visit [umcnic.org/calendar/nic-mlk-celebration-2026](http://umcnic.org/calendar/nic-mlk-celebration-2026).

## Interfaith Gathering Encourages Action for Peace

by Lisa Smith, NIC Communications Specialist

Over a shared meal and meaningful conversation, United Methodists and Muslims came together in a spirit of unity to explore what it means to live as peacemakers in today’s world. The gathering took place on Nov. 11 at Journey of Hope UMC in Elgin under the theme “United in Solidarity and Peace.”

The evening highlighted the struggles and resilience of immigrants in local communities while reaffirming a shared call to seek peace and justice in both the U.S. and Gaza. Coordinated by the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church and the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago,

this series of twice-yearly gatherings is in its third year since resuming after COVID-19.

“This dinner serves as an important platform to raise a shared voice for peace in response to the challenges our society and world face,” said Rev. Hye-won Sophia Hyon, chair of NIC’s Committee on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

The event builds on a longstanding commitment made on April 6, 2006, by Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, then NIC’s resident bishop, and Abdul Malik Mujahid, CIOGC chairman.

“Justice is not bound by creed,” said Dr. Abdulghani Hamadeh in his welcome. “Mercy is not limited by faith.”

A catered halal Middle Eastern meal from Shawarma Stop in Elgin



Rev. Jane Eesley listens to Meryem Ray.

*continued on page 2: see Gathering*



From Your Bishop:

# A Year of Practicing Hope

by Bishop Dan Schwerin

You know I like to begin with gratitude, because gratitude reminds us of the good work

God is already doing among us.

Thank you for your faithfulness in the care and support of the immigrant communities and persons facing the loss of due process during ICE's visit to the deep-dish city. Thank you for the courageous resistance to injustice I see as you live out your baptisms.

Thank you for the gutsy commitment to you who are being trained to turn around ministries. Thank you to you who have said yes to taking a test to see if you might be wired to be a church planter.

Thank you to the countless people who have stepped into the challenges of paying apportionments and leaving us ahead of where we were in the past years. Thank you to the many SPRCs who have created safe and supportive environments for our immigrant clergy in a moment when vile things are being said about and done to immigrant communities.

Thank you for your gifts to the Emergency Solidarity Fund, which is helping immigrant communities whose work has been interrupted by the dynamics at play now. (See p. 6 for more information about the fund.) Thank you for those of you retired clergy who have stepped into supportive roles.

Thank you to you who mentor or work for our board of ministry as it credentials and supports vocational promptings. Thank you who have stood in important moments while we grieve. Thank you to those leading anti-racism work that will be our healing. Thank you for

your faithfulness. I am humbled and grateful to be in ministry with you.

The prophets seized on a powerful image for God's people, that of a remnant, a small, scrappy group living faithfully amid the moral incongruence of empire.

I don't know what your experience of a remnant is, but I first learned this word from my great grandma Rosy. She never threw away a dress or shirt that could be used again. She made beautiful quilts from the remnants, all the little squares that look useless, too small to be of any value, something someone might throw away, became useful.

According to the prophets, a remnant in God's hands can be useful! In God's hands, the remnant can quickly become something new.

Yes, our churches are smaller, turning toward innovation, but we are not too small to steward the moral imagination of Jesus. We are not too small to feed or advocate. We are not too small to bear witness to interfaith and ecumenical bonds. We are not too small to practice hope.

You have heard me say that time is fractured now. We cannot cast vision across easy years of certainty; we don't know enough to plan what will be needed five years from now.

In this fractured time, no one knows what life will be like in two months or two years. So, for this moment of rising prices, food insecurity, immigrant backlash, and innovation that may frighten some, I would invite us to pray and consider how 2026 could be a year of practicing hope.

For this moment, we need to be clear to the world about the hope we have in Christ. I believe we will innovate better and bear witness more resolutely if we are people of hope. We

may be smaller than we once were, but I believe we are not too small to steward the moral imagination of Jesus.

I believe hope is an outpouring of God's creative freedom at play in each moment. I believe hope knows the present is held with a comma, and that God's word is always breaking in for the common good.

"Practicing Hope" will be our theme at the 2026 annual conference. Last year our guests and speakers remarked to me what a great spirit this group has. Yes! I see it every day I witness your ministry.

How is your congregation practicing hope? How is your yes to Jesus not just hope on a shelf but a regular practice, a growth in love that practices hope?



Your giving to General Church apportionments support the Episcopal Office.



## Gathering (continued from page 1)

further enriched the fellowship, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere for dialogue and connection.

In a heartbreaking keynote speech, Claudia Marchan, executive director of Immigration Law and Justice of Northern Illinois, shared updates on their ongoing work supporting the immigrant community.

"The world is waiting for us to act more than ever," said Imam

Hassan Mostafa Aly, director of Humanitarian Faith Initiative at MedGlobal, in his keynote speech. "Peace must begin with the faithful."

After the keynote addresses, participants engaged in table discussions. Many emphasized the need for action to accompany prayers and dialogue.

The evening concluded with

inspiring remarks and shared calls to action. "Our coming together is not symbolic; it is strategic," said Zulfie Khan, CIOGC's Interfaith Committee chairman.

"In these terrible times, we are called to live by the best of our faiths: justice and love," added Rev. Jane Eesley.

"Gatherings like this remind us that building relationships deepens our understanding and shared commitment to peace and justice," commented Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, NIC's director of Connectional Ministries.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports dinners like these and the Committee on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.



Bishop Schwerin in conversation over dinner.

Photo by Lisa Smith

## The Northern Illinois Conference OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Reporter umcnic.org

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### Submissions

Deadlines for submissions are Feb. 5, April 5, June 5, Aug. 5, Oct. 5, and Dec. 5. Include your name, address, email, phone number and name of local church. Space is limited. Electronic submissions are preferred with high-resolution attached jpegs. Submissions will be edited at the discretion of the communications staff.

### Job Openings

For the latest job openings in the Northern Illinois Conference and across the connection, visit [umcnic.org/jobs](http://umcnic.org/jobs).

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports this publication.



# Gathering in Hope Together

by Lisa Smith, NIC Communications Specialist

Under the theme “Practicing Hope,” clergy and elected lay members will gather for the Northern Illinois Conference’s 187th Annual Conference session, June 14–16, at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center, 1551 N. Thoreau Dr., Schaumburg, IL. The theme invites participants to explore how hope shapes ministry, mission, and the future of the church.

*“How is God calling us to be people who are practicing hope?”*

*Bishop Dan Schwerin*

“Hope allows for newness. Hope allows that God will call us forward. Hope allows us to say yes to whatever call is placed on our lives,” said Bishop Schwerin.

Grounded in Romans 5:3–5, this year’s theme encourages us to remember that endurance

builds character, and character builds hope, pouring love to us through the Holy Spirit. Guided by this spirit, participants will engage in opportunities to practice hope, build stronger bonds, and discern God’s call in their lives.

“As we gather this year, my prayer is that we rediscover hope not as an idea, but as a discipline that shapes how we love, lead, and serve in every corner of our Northern Illinois Conference,” said Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, Director of Connectional Ministries.

Rev. Jacob Tipantasiq-Wolverton and the worship team are preparing services that reflect the vibrant diversity of our conference



while weaving together music and liturgy storytelling to reflect the many ways God is at work across Northern Illinois. Three major services will anchor the gathering: the Celebration of Ministry on Sunday evening, June 14; the Memorial Service on Monday afternoon, June 15; and the Retirement Celebration on Tuesday morning, June 16. The mass choir will return for the Celebration of Ministry, with more information about participation coming soon.

Back by popular demand, the Lunch-and-Learn sessions offer a chance to enjoy a meal while connecting with others around meaningful topics in mission and ministry. On Monday, all registered participants will receive a box lunch and choose a sessions highlighting a particular ministry area or emerging topic within the conference.

Childcare, which received overwhelmingly positive feedback last year, will once again be offered during session times. This ministry is hosted by Schaumburg: Our Saviour’s UMC in collaboration with Schaumburg: Our Redeemer’s UMC, providing a safe and welcoming environment for children so parents can fully participate.

A block of hotel rooms will again be available with a group discount at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center Hotel. Rates and registration link to come.

**Find updates online at [umcnic.org/AC2026](http://umcnic.org/AC2026).**



**BISHOP'S APPEAL**  
Giving Abundantly, Generosity Overflowing

The 2026 Bishop’s Appeal is for Education for Central Conferences, supporting two key initiatives: a high school in Tanzania led by NIC missionary Christina Kim, and broader theological education efforts identified by the Council of Bishops. This year’s appeal is not about charity; it is about justice, empowerment, and partnership. As a connectional church, we believe that every child deserves an education, and every community deserves well-trained spiritual leadership. More information including how to give and resources for sharing to come.

## Make Your Dollars Grow: A Call to Cultivate Church Finances

by Rev. Chris Walters, President & CEO of Midwest Methodist Foundation

It is a new year! How did your church do with its 2025 budget? Did you see extra money in your account? What will you do with the extra from 2025?

Some churches benefited from year-end and new year giving and realize they collected more money than they spent. Leaders breathe a sigh of relief.

Born from a spirit of prudence and a conservative nature, many churches keep funds—from general savings to dedicated accounts—sitting idle in no- or low-interest checking and savings accounts. While this ensures immediate access, it also means the churches doesn’t benefit from interest.

If your church finished 2025 with more cash than is necessary for operational cash flows, or if you have specific reserve funds, the new year is the perfect time to ask a critical question: Is our money growing? Is it working for our church?



### Cultivate Your Financial “Pots”

Local churches often maintain several distinct financial “pots,” and each “pot” deserves cultivation of the funds planted in them:

- **General Savings/Operating Reserves:** Money set aside for emergencies or future projects. Is it earning less than 1%?
- **Memorial Funds:** Dedicated funds given in remembrance of loved ones. These funds often sit untouched for years, waiting for the right project.
- **Trustee/Building Funds:** Capital designated for maintenance, repairs, or future expansion. These funds can grow substantially over time but often sit in non-interest-bearing accounts or low-yield CDs.

- **Endowments or Long-Term Reserves:** Money intended for perpetual growth to support ministry for generations. “True” donor-restricted endowments are to be invested for total return in diversified portfolios, according to state law.

Letting funds sit in low-yield accounts or no interest account (i.e., checking accounts) means losing out on the power of compounding investment returns, essentially diminishing the purchasing power of those dollars over time due to inflation.

For churches seeking more growth-oriented options, consider Midwest Methodist Foundation, which has been growing funds for ministry since 1949!

If your church is holding funds in low-yielding CDs, consider transferring the funds to the Foundation when they mature. The Foundation offers pro-

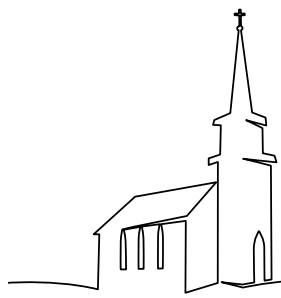
professionally managed investment options that align with United Methodist values, providing significantly better returns than local bank deposits and CDs over the long haul. Withdrawals from church accounts are fulfilled and received by the church typically within just 2-3 business days.

Make the hard-earned gifts and tithes of your congregation grow for your church’s ministry. This new year, take the crucial step of engaging your leadership to explore how your church’s money can be cultivated and grown in their pots for a greener future!

For more information, please contact Chris Walters at [cwalters@midwestmethodist.org](mailto:cwalters@midwestmethodist.org) or visit [midwestmethodist.org](http://midwestmethodist.org).

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Annual Conference Session.





# Local Church News

## Sewing Comfort for Foster Children

by Leanne Stortz, member of Erie United Methodist Church

On a recent crisp October day, the fellowship hall at Erie United Methodist Church buzzed with the hum of sewing machines and the laughter of volunteers. Almost a dozen church members and friends worked together to sew 165 handmade pillowcases for children in foster care.

The project, benefiting Raising Hope, Erie, and My GEAR Outreach (Clinton, Ia.), brought together people of all ages with a shared purpose: to provide a small source of comfort to children entering foster homes across the area.

Raising Hope and My GEAR are local foster-care closets providing essential items—such as clothing, bedding, hygiene products, and comfort items—to children who may arrive in new foster placements with little more than the clothes they're wearing.

"Each pillowcase was sewn with love," said Pastor Tiffany Garcea, who spearheads Raising Hope. "We want every child to have something bright, cheerful, and truly their own. It's something simple, but it can mean a lot during a difficult time."

Volunteers transformed donated fabric into colorful pillowcases featuring playful patterns, animals, and vibrant designs. They work throughout the year to help reach the yearly goal of 100 pillowcases. Some participants sewed at home, while others gathered at the church fellowship hall for a sewing day filled with fellowship and purpose.

"These pillowcases are more than fabric and thread; they're a message to each child that they are seen, valued, and loved," said one volunteer.

In 2019, the Erie United Methodist Church's sewing group, The Sewing Saturday Ladies, volunteered to sew 100 pillowcases for My GEAR. The project was completed during their

Mission Week that summer. The women greatly enjoyed the project.

In 2021, when Pastor Tiffany created the local Raising Hope, the women added to their efforts to include her ministry. Once a year, they gather to sew, fellowship and pray for those receiving the pillowcases. Since 2019, they have donated over 1,000 pillowcases between the two foster-care closets.

For 2026, they have decided to host two community sewing days. The decision was made when they realized some of their volunteers missed out on the fellowship because of their school schedule--the youngest volunteer is seven years old!

The sewing group has also added Christmas stockings for Raising Hope's Angel Tree gifts to their community sewing outreach.

Before organizers delivered the pillowcases to the foster care closets, members of Erie UMC blessed the 165 pillowcases during a worship service.



Foreground: Leanne Stortz Middle: Lisa Smith, Julie Wolbers and Margo Brooks Background: Marilyn Murphy, Barb Bell, Laura Steffes and Cindy Drummond NOT PICTURED: Thelma Roloff, Deb Stortz and Colleen Edgerton Photos courtesy of Erie UMC

"It's amazing to see what can happen when people come together for a common purpose," said Deb Stortz. "Every pillowcase was made with love—and that's something every child deserves."

## Wheatland Salem Welcomes Ukrainian/Slavic Immigrants

by Rev. Dr. Zaki L. Zaki, pastor of Wheatland Salem UMC

Reaching out to significant Ukrainian and Slavic population in DuPage and Will Counties, Wheatland Salem United Methodist Church in Naperville offers a youth and children's ministries and worship for those neighbors. A \$2,500 grant from the Bishop's Appeal for Migrant Needs helps support the ministry.

The grant has greatly helped the congregation extend its reach and expand its heart.

Together, DuPage and Will counties are home to more than 19,000 Ukrainian and Russian immigrants. Pastor Zaki organized a ministry team that includes Ukrainian/Slavic community leaders and representatives from local organizations that provide support to Ukrainian/Slavic refugees and immigrants.

WSUMC now has a dynamic weekly program for children and youth on Wednesdays that has attracted over 33 Ukrainian/Slavic children and teens.

On Wednesday evenings, neighbors can attend a weekly worship service in Ukrainian, Russian, and English from 7:45 to 8:30 p.m. The church has also incorporated Ukrainian and Russian songs and prayers into its main worship service on Sundays at 10 a.m.

During a recent Sunday worship service, the congregation prayed with Marria, a Ukrainian/Russian asylum seeker, and her two sons, Elia and Daniel, as they faced a challenging situation. Marria's 20-year-old son, Alexander, was recently detained by ICE agents at his workplace and transferred to a detention center in Texas. The church is mobilizing to provide advocacy and support.

Nearly 200,000 Ukrainians in U.S. are in legal limbo as of March 31, 2025, due processing delays on the humanitarian program for Ukrainians launched by former president Joe Biden, according to internal U.S. government data reviewed by Reuters (Nov. 23, 2025).

The congregation has also recently held a Know Your Rights training and shared resources in Ukrainian, Russian, and English.



Children share their joy in a performance. Photos courtesy of Wheatland Salem UMC

## Showcasing Indian Christmas Decorations



A canopy of hand-cut paper decorations fill the sanctuary.

Photos courtesy of Emmanuel UMC

Emmanuel UMC in Evanston is celebrating Christmas with a stunning display of traditional Indian Christian decorations, featuring thousands of individually hand-cut paper elements crafted from special decorative paper imported from India.

Suspended across the sanctuary ceiling, the installation forms colorful geometric patterns, symbolic motifs, and large circular designs—each piece placed together one by one by volunteers.

"In Indian churches, decorations are expressions of faith, love, and hope," said Rev. Scott (Sanjay) Christy, pastor of Emmanuel UMC. "This display reflects our cultural heritage and our unity as a community."

## 2025 Grant Recipients

### Keagy/Town & Rural Grants

1. **Apple River UMC:** Summer Kids, Creation & Creativity
2. **Argo Fay UMC:** TACO Brown-Bag Lunches
3. **Ashton UMC:** Youth Expansion, Essential Pantry
4. **Cedarville UMC:** Food Pantry
5. **Creston UMC:** Keeping Kids Healthy
6. **Dixon: Grace UMC:** Kinship Table, Generations, God Loves Everyone
7. **Durand UMC:** Take Me to the Ballgame
8. **Elizabeth UMC:** Soul Purpose Meals
9. **Erie UMC:** Messy Church, CARES Closet
10. **Forreston: First UMC:** Adult Craft Night
11. **Hinckley: First UMC:** Back to School Blessing
12. **Leland UMC:** Food Pantry
13. **Lanark UMC:** Summer Fun Bags for Kids
14. **LaSalle: Grace UMC:** Winter Clothing Drive, Safety Fair
15. **Leaf River UMC:** Brewed Connections
16. **Lena UMC:** Kids' Night Out, Community Outreach Dinner
17. **Orangeville UMC:** Acts 2:45
18. **Pearl City UMC:** Christian Athletes
19. **Rochelle UMC:** 3rd Grade Pillow Cases
20. **Savanna UMC:** Various Projects
21. **Scales Mound UMC:** Young at Heart, Family Game Night
22. **Serena UMC:** Comfort Quilts
23. **Shannon: Bethel UMC:** Senior Meals
24. **Sheridan UMC:** Building Loving Community
25. **Sterling: First UMC:** Community Breakfast, Food Pantry
26. **Stockton: Wesley UMC:** New Seekers Group
27. **Tampico UMC:** Food Pantry, Sewing Group, Buddy Bags, Supplies
28. **Warren UMC:** Warren Outreach
29. **Winnebago UMC:** Wacky Wednesday

### Creative Ministry Grants

1. **Lansing: First UMC:** Multicultural Contemporary Worship
2. **FREE Recovery NFC:** Partnership between FREE Recovery Community and Lutheran Social Services
3. **Lake Bluff: Grace UMC:** Innovate Outreach Initiative with Podcast "Say Grace"
4. **Morris: First UMC:** HOPE House
5. **Morrison UMC:** Dinner Church
6. **Oak Park: St. John UMC:** Love Is

### Social Reform Grant

- Oak Park: Euclid Ave UMC:**  
Justice Library at Euclid

### Turtle Award

**Glencoe: North Shore**

Your church can be considered for a grant by applying early this year. Applications for Keagy and PACK grants will be accepted in January and are due March 31. Creative Ministry grants are due May 15. Most other grants receive applications in the fall.

Learn more at [umcnic.org/grants](http://umcnic.org/grants).

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports grants.



## Stronger Together

## Grants Make a Difference

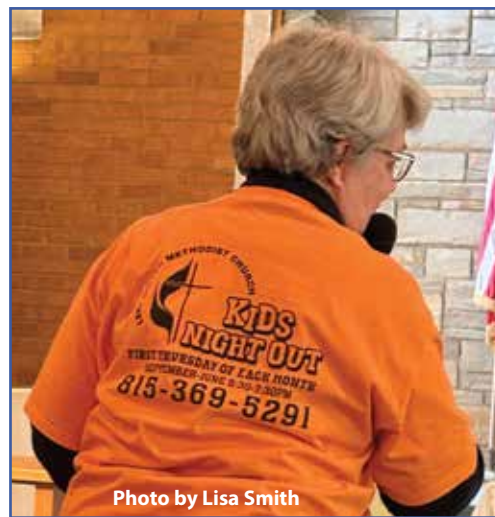


by Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, NIC Director of Connectional Ministries

Over the past year, our Northern Illinois Conference has been blessed to support local churches through several grant initiatives designed to strengthen ministry, deepen community impact, and nurture innovative leadership across our connection. These grants reflect our shared commitment to equipping congregations of every size and setting as they live out the Gospel in relevant and transformative ways.

The P.A.C.K and Keagy/Town and Rural Grants have strengthened congregations in less-populated areas, helping them sustain vital ministries that serve as life-lines in their communities.

The Creative Ministry Grant has empowered churches to launch new and imaginative ministry models—programs that reach emerging communities, engage new generations, and reimagine how the church can be present in a rapidly changing world.



Member from Lena UMC shows off the back of her shirt showing advertisement for their Kids Night Out which is supported by a Keagy Grant.

Our Social Reform Grants have supported churches working at the forefront of justice and compassion, addressing systemic inequities and responding to the pressing needs within their neighborhoods.

The Turtle Award is given to churches that try new ministries that don't work out the way they had hoped, but who also learned a few things in the process so they could try something else in the future. It honors churches that stick their necks out (like turtles) in order to move forward.

Together, we have granted over \$55,000 in grants in 2025. These grant programs reflect our ongoing dedication to building vibrant, mission-driven churches across our conference.

The conference groups that oversee grants extend their heartfelt thanks to all the churches that faithfully contribute their apportionments. Our churches' giving, when added together, sustains our shared mission and spreads hope.

## Grace Shines in Town and Rural Churches

by Lisa Smith, NIC Communications Specialist

Twenty-nine rural and small-town churches showed off their grant-winning outreach ministries at the Town and Rural Church Festival on Nov. 8 at Grace United Methodist Church in Dixon. These churches had received a PACK (Planned Act of Christian Kindness) Grant or a Keagy Grant, which fund ministries that help churches transform their communities through creative, compassionate, and committed action.

"These grants help small-town churches make a big impact in their communities," said Rev. Libby Rutherford, chair of the Town and Rural Committee. "All the grant recipients showed amazing creativity in finding new ways to reach and love their neighbors in the name of Jesus Christ."

Each year, the conference awards the two types of grants to empower churches outside metropolitan and suburban areas to expand their outreach and ministry.

PACK Grants, ranging from \$100 to \$500, support short-term community outreach projects that offer simple, heartfelt ways for churches to share God's love. Keagy Grants, which range from \$500 to \$5,000, fund larger ministry efforts that promote evangelism, discipleship, justice, and compassion within local communities.

The grants distributed this year help support a wide range of projects such as children's programs, food and essential pantries, senior activities, game nights, and community evangelism efforts.

The festival began with worship, featuring Rev. Rosa Lee on the organ and a devotion from Prairie North District Superintendent Rev. Hwa-Young Chong. She reminded the group that Jesus often carried out his ministry in small towns. Rev. Christian Coon, NIC Director of Congregational Development, followed with an encouraging presentation on "Grace is No Sweat."

"The ministries you share in your communities are symbols of God's grace—unexpected, surprising, even daring," said Rev. Coon. "As you continue to be living symbols, remember to keep your hearts and hands open to receive grace as well. It will often come when you least expect it, but we need grace just as much as those we offer it to."

Grant recipients then shared brief reflections on their ministries before the day concluded with a networking lunch—a time to exchange ideas, stories, and encouragement.



Exchanging ideas and sharing encouragement is one of the highlights of the festival.

Photo by Lisa Smith

# NIC Delegation Celebrates Amendments Adoption

by Rev. Alka Lyall, chair of the 2020/2024 delegation

For many months, United Methodists around the world have worked to design a denominational structure that would reflect the equality of conferences internationally.

Last year's General Conference and the votes of United Methodist members of each annual conference's sessions this year confirmed a new structure, increased its inclusiveness in welcoming all people, clarified the educational requirements for those who would elect delegates to the General and Jurisdictional conferences, and strengthened the denomination's commitment to racial justice.

The constitutional amendments are first approved by General Conference, and next go to the annual conferences for ratification. Members of annual conferences overwhelmingly confirmed these amendments by over 90 percent.

On behalf of the Northern Illinois Conference delegates to the 2020/2024 General Conference, I celebrate the ratification of the four constitutional amendments that affirm our commitment to becoming a fully inclusive church that celebrates diversity and condemns racism, as United Methodists.

The ratified amendments:

- Regionalization, which will reorganize the denomination into regions based on our geographical locations, thus providing freedom to create and develop contextually relevant decisions while continuing to be a global connection. Until this point, United States

matters dominated the General Conference agenda, yet delegates in other parts of the world voted on these—and could adapt them for their own contexts. Amendments that enable this change appear across the Book of Discipline.



- Inclusion in membership, which adds "gender" and "ability" to the list of identifiers that cannot be used to bar folk from church membership or ministries. This change appears in ¶ 4, Article IV, of the UMC constitution.
- Educational requirements for clergy voting rights, which changes ¶ 35, Article IV. It specifies the educational requirements for clergy who may vote for delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conferences. These requirements will allow some licensed clergy to vote for delegates—which had been limited to full-member clergy and elected lay members of conferences.

- Racial justice, which revises Article V to strengthen the denomination's commitment to racial justice. It moves the church from acknowledging the sin of racism to taking action to eradicate it

It indeed is a new day in the life of our denomination, and this ratification is an indication that United Methodists are ready to work towards living into our commitment to equity, justice, and inclusion.

It is time for us to put the other policies into practice and live out these amendments into our daily lives by loving boldly, serving joyfully, and leading courageously, as our UMC vision statement says.

We invite prayerful support to those who will begin the work of restructuring and creating resources to assist our work of racial justice and full inclusion.

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports General Conference.



## Next Steps for Making Regionalization a Reality

by Heather Hahn, assistant news editor for UM News Service

Perhaps the most work facing The United Methodist Church now is forming the regional conferences and determining how they make decisions and interact with other regional conferences.

For the eight United Methodist bodies in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines (formerly known as central conferences), the only immediate change is that they will be renamed regional conferences. They will meet as usual after the 2028 General Conference.

The biggest change will be creating a U.S. Regional Conference. The Council of Bishops will name 20 to 25 U.S. General Conference delegates to form the Interim Committee on Organization that will organize the U.S. Regional Conference.

The amended ¶ 507 establishes an interim U.S. Regional Committee that will act as a General Conference legislative committee dealing with only U.S. legislative matters. The committee, which will meet immediately prior to the 2028 General Conference, will include all U.S. General Conference delegates and one lay and clergy from each former central conference.

Once the U.S. Regional Conference convenes after General Conference, this legislative committee will cease to exist.

The new changes also charge the denomination's Connectional Table and what is now renamed the Standing Committee on Regional Conference Matters Outside the USA to hold a

joint study on ways to perfect regionalization and present a report, including any recommendations, to the next General Conference.

Chief among the study's mandates is exploring whether a regional conference should have jurisdictions. At present, only the U.S. has jurisdictions. The five bodies, like central conferences, each consist of multiple annual conferences and elect bishops. But unlike central conferences, jurisdictions cannot adapt the Discipline.

Jurisdictions first formed in 1939 to segregate Black church members and prevent U.S. Northerners and Southerners from having a say in electing each others' bishops. Given that history, grassroots efforts have developed to eliminate jurisdictions. Doing so also would require amending the denomination's constitution.

"Even though there are still questions that we need to answer about regionalization, there is a lot of enthusiasm," said Judi Kenaston, chief connectional ministries officer for the Connectional Table. "People are willing to live in some ambiguity while we figure it out, and I think that is exciting and an example of how hopeful people are for this change."

*This article is excerpted from "New United Methodist Church structure ratified," published on Nov. 5, 2025, by the United Methodist News Service*

Your giving to General Church apportionments support General Conference, the work of the denomination and the UM News Service.



**SPECIAL SUNDAY**

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"  
—REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

**HUMAN RELATIONS DAY**  
**January 18, 2026**  
Find resources, graphics and more at [resourceumc.org/hrd](https://resourceumc.org/hrd).

## Give to the Emergency Solidarity Fund

This fund, established by Bishop Dan Schwerin in October 2025, is assisting primarily Hispanic/Latine people (but also other immigrants)

who are increasingly vulnerable. Gifts from this fund will help people with whom our churches directly minister and those in our towns and neighborhoods.

The conference will be collecting donations through Jan. 16. Find information on how to give at [umcnic.org/SolidarityFund](https://umcnic.org/SolidarityFund).



## Leading the Laity

# Moving Forward With Hope



by Eugene Williams, Conference Co-Lay Leader

Siblings in Christ, we have once again enjoyed and re-lived the blessing of the Advent Season of peace, love, joy and hope. With the lighting of these candles and the Christ Candle we renewed our focus on these extremely important tenets that represent what the coming of the Christ-child calls us to exemplify. Yes, peace, love joy and hope! Given the unprecedented events that we have experienced during 2025, let us lean into 2026 with a radical abundance of hope. Believers have had to contend with distractions, cruelty, hatred and divisiveness by spiritual forces of evil in high places. Yet, there are many reasons to practice hope in 2026.

As believers, we should stand firm in God's armor and authority because Christ has already triumphed over and disarmed the evil forces with his work on the cross. We have likewise been given the authority, ability and assignment to carry out the Lordship of Christ with the clear understanding that no opposition to the authority of Christ will ever be successful. Courage and strength in difficult times requires hope, which is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and



righteousness. We will always have hope because our hope is in the Lord.

You are invited to join us for Laity Convocation 2026. Our theme is, "Moving

Forward With Hope." See the details below. Please join us with the authority that Christ has given each of us to persevere.

The Board of Laity is sending up prayers that we might all stand firm in our hope with the courage and strength to face the uncertainties of 2026. Go with God and be well.

## Laity Convocation 2026 "Moving Forward with Hope" March 21

9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
First UMC of Glen Ellyn,  
424 Forest Ave.

For further details and registration visit [umcnic.org/calendar/2026-laity-convocation](http://umcnic.org/calendar/2026-laity-convocation).

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Board of Laity.



# Upcoming Events

See the full calendar at [umcnic.org/calendar](http://umcnic.org/calendar)

## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TRAININGS 2026

**Lake South: Sat., Jan. 24,**

9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., First UMC, Oak Lawn

**Prairie North: Sat., Jan. 24**

8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., Christ UMC, Rockford

**Culture Shift: Cultivating Healthy Congregations, Prairie Central Training: Sat., Jan. 31**

8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., Christ UMC, Rockford

**Lake North: Sat., Feb. 1**

8 a.m. to 12:45 p.m., UMC of Libertyville

**Prairie South: Saturday in March**

Location and other details to be determined.

District trainings are designed to share practical information and resources to help strengthen and support the vitality of your church. Offerings will vary by district, and you are welcome to attend any session that fits your schedule or ministry needs, not just those in your own district.

For further details and registration visit the calendar at [umcnic.org/calendar](http://umcnic.org/calendar) and click on the individual events.

## Reimagining Church The Neighborhood is My Parish



by Rev. Christian Coon, NIC Director of Congregational Development

Like many of you, I have a few John Wesley-isms in my vocabulary that I can trot out at a moment's notice. Phrases like "heart strangely warmed" and "do all the good you can" are forever written in our hearts. There's another one, though, that I'd like for us to consider and, with all apologies to John, add to.

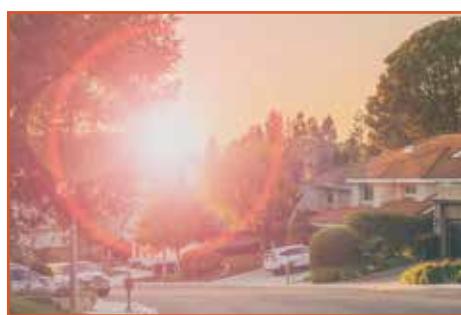
How many United Methodist pastors have reminded their congregations that "the world is our parish!" as a closing remark in a sermon or as part of a benediction? It reminds us of Jesus' Great Commission and hopefully inspires our people to live God's mission out to the ends of the earth. Wesley used it as a reminder to himself and others that the Gospel is to be preached anywhere at any time. But I wonder if it has lost its oomph a bit over the decades and is a little vague. When we say that the world is our parish, we may think immediately about an

impact we can have in a particular part of the world. And this is a good thing! But what if we created alternative versions of this well-known Wesleyanism? What effect would it have if our churches in 2026 said things like, "The block is our parish!" or "The township is

our parish!" or "The zip code is our parish!?" Now things get more personal. It means we have to be more focused on our literal neighbors and learning what their needs, fears and hopes are. Our Tuesday Teaching on January 20 at 11 am will feature Rev. Stacy Walker, an Episcopal priest and organizer with DuPage County United. She will share tools that church leaders can use to go deeper in their knowledge of their communities and build relationships with residents who might otherwise go nameless.

I'm grateful for John Wesley's challenge for us to go out of our comfort zones and share the good news beyond our church walls. But before looking at a globe as a metaphor for your parish, maybe get out a city or town map. Pray over each of the blocks and use as a constant part of that prayer, "This community is my parish." Maybe set as a goal a particular number of new relationships you can build in 2026. By doing so, we are true to another Wesley quote: "Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports Congregational Development.



## Finance and Administration Trainings

Online via Zoom

- **Prosper** Jan. 13  
Learn how to make the most of the NIC Billing System
- **What is Your Money Doing?** Jan. 20  
Learn about church finances, how to best manage them, and how you can invest your church's funds for greater impact.
- **Pastoral Transitions 101** Feb. 3  
A practical and informative webinar designed for SPRC members and anyone in the local church who wants to better understand pastoral transitions.

For further details and registration, visit the calendar at [umcnic.org/calendar](http://umcnic.org/calendar) and click on the individual events.

For resources and recordings of past Finance and Administration Trainings visit [umcnic.org/financeadministration](http://umcnic.org/financeadministration).

Save the Date: **June 25-28**

## NIC CORR Illinois Pilgrimage

Join others on a three-day, two-night tour through Illinois, embarking on a spiritual pilgrimage that confronts the deep-seated ironies of Illinois history. You are invited to intentionally engage in Illinois' complex past, both revered and reviled, recognizing that genuine reconciliation and healing require an honest reckoning. For further details, visit [umcnic.org/calendar/nic-corr-illinois-pilgrimage](http://umcnic.org/calendar/nic-corr-illinois-pilgrimage).

# Hope for What Comes Next

by Rev. Danita R. Anderson, Assistant to the Bishop



As the calendar pages roll ahead to a brand new year, we wonder what our future holds. I mentioned in my previous column that what we are living in is the reality of the remnant. Those left behind by the death of loved ones, the death of systems and structures that no longer serve us well, broken relationships and promises and on and on and on. So how do we live in this new reality and what does our future hold for us?

I would propose that this is the ideal time for practicing a new hope! Ahhh ... maybe you have heard that before! (Just take a look through the pages of this issue of the Northern Illinois Conference Reporter.) Ways to find renewed hope in places that have appeared to be so desolate. Maybe you heard the words from Isaiah or Luke about preparing a way in the wilderness/desert for something new to

happen? Our lives should always exemplify this notion of practicing hope and not just during the Advent season.

We live with, worship, and serve a God that always presents us with new opportunities and new challenges. The opportunity to look at all that life gives us from a new perspective ... with hope and not despair. Our everyday living and breathing and encountering of others present to us new opportunities to be in relationship with God's creation. When we practice hope, we see the possibilities of newness, no longer stuck in a place that feels depressing and desolate. Practicing hope means that we begin to look with new eyes at our everyday encounters and see new possibilities.

Where are the places that you have felt "stuck" with no way out? Begin to practice hope. When are the times you have felt alone or hurt by others? This is a time to practice hope. What will become of our churches and/or our homes as well as what we experience as worship and service to others? This is definitely a time to practice hope.



Practicing hope means seeing in new ways with new eyes through a new lens. This is the promise

we receive and are reminded of in the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness: "Morning by morning NEW mercies I see." The "newness" the day offers is for all of us! How will you join me in practicing hope?

## Newly Released Directories

The Northern Illinois Conference is pleased to share the updated 2025–2026 Annual Directory and the newly released 2025 Photo Directory. These are two valuable resources designed to strengthen communication, support ministry, and help our connection thrive.



The Annual Directory provides a comprehensive snapshot of the Northern Illinois

Conference for the 2025–2026 appointment year. It serves as an essential tool for NIC churches, related groups, clergy, laity, and staff. Updated annually the directory is divided into three downloadable PDF sections: Church & Conference, Clergy, and Laity. A full printed copy is also available through Amazon for \$7 via print-on-demand, ensuring cost efficiency, reduced waste, and the convenience of ordering.

The Photo Directory is produced every quadrennium and offers a visual snapshot of our Conference by helping put faces with names. The 2025 version includes photos, roles, and emails for clergy and laity who were photographed at Annual Conference 2025. It can be downloaded as a PDF or ordered in print on Amazon for \$8.50.

Both directories are available online at [umcnic.org/directory](http://umcnic.org/directory), along with helpful tools such as the searchable church directory, an interactive Google map of NIC churches, and links to the UMC's Find-A-Church. These digital options make it easier than ever to locate information, connect with colleagues, and support local church ministries.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports directory publication.



## Join Others and Read the Bible in a Year

Read the entire Bible in one year with other Northern Illinois United Methodists and join them in making daily Scripture reading a shared spiritual practice in the coming year.

The conference Committee on Discipleship and Spiritual Formation invites lay and clergy to follow a plan for daily readings and participate in a small group to talk about the significance of the texts in their spiritual lives.

"Our goal is to offer a simple plan and supportive environment to help people engage the whole of Scripture over one year," said Rev. Seamus Enright, CDSF chair. "We are trusting God to deepen our faith as we do this together."

The committee's reading guide follows a chronological plan—the order in which biblical events are believed to have occurred. For example, readers will move from Genesis to Job and then return to Genesis as the story unfolds.

Unlike a Bible study, these small support groups will focus on offering encouragement, accountability, and space for reflection on how the practice of daily reading is shaping faith and life. Facilitators will guide conversations about insights gained, challenges encountered, and the spiritual impact of engaging scripture regularly.

The gatherings will meet on the second Wednesday of each month from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Zoom, and recordings will be available for those who cannot attend in real time. (It is not too late to join!) The CDSF will help individuals find congregations that will welcome others to their group.

For questions or additional information, contact Amania Drane, [adrane@umcnic.org](mailto:adrane@umcnic.org). To sign up, please complete the online registration form at [umcnic.org/news/read-the-bible-in-a-year-with-us](http://umcnic.org/news/read-the-bible-in-a-year-with-us).

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports committee work.



## Clergy Appointments

Bishop Dan Schwerin announces the following clergy appointments and retirements for the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church:

- Noemi Elsa Meza** (Full Elder) to Lamoille Community (Prairie South), effective Dec. 1, 2025. Noemi follows Dave Jungnickel (Retired) from Chicago: El Redentor del Calvario/ The Redeemer of Calvary (Lake North).
- Brian LeBaron** (Retired Associate Member) to Freeport: Harmony (Interim, 1/2) (Prairie North), effective Dec. 1, 2025. Brian follows Eddie Eddy, whose appointment ended Oct. 30.
- Sam Stephen Raj** (District Superintendent Supply) to Chicago: The Redeemer of Calvary / El Redentor del Calvario UMC (Interim, 1/4) (Lake North), effective Dec. 1, 2025. Sam follows Noemi Meza.

Your giving to NIC apportionments support clergy appointments, moves and retirements.



**THANK YOU, NIC UMC & UW IN FAITH, FOR ALL THE WAYS YOU CONTINUE TO STEP UP FOR OUR KIDS YEAR AFTER YEAR.**

Happy and healthy 2026 from Kids Above All!

