

The Northern Illinois Conference OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Reporter

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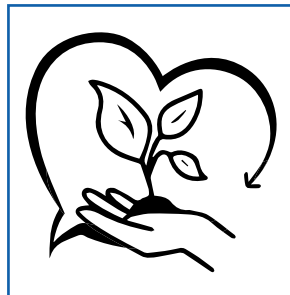
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DO NOT DELAY. DATED MATERIAL

Shelter at First UMC in Elgin warms bodies and hearts

by Lisa Smith, NIC Communication Specialist

Elgin's unhoused people are being well taken care of by the community, including First United Methodist Church in Elgin.

This winter, the fellowship hall of FUMCE is set up nightly for their guests. One Collective Elgin, a nonprofit that identifies community needs and organizes collaborative responses, oversees and facilitates the shelter. It provides services to address immediate needs, such as counseling, therapy, and case management to help people to successfully move out of homelessness.

"The biggest goal of One Collective is making sure everyone has access to food, freedom, and forgiveness," says Bobby Jackson, an OCE catalyst (coordinator).

While the local PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) helps many of the unhoused, it is not able to accommodate all who need it. The FUMCE warming shelter can house around 60 adults and has been near or at capacity since it opened.

For the past two years, FUMCE partnered with New Life Community Church to provide an emergency warming shelter for unhoused folks in Elgin on nights when the temperature sinks to 15 degrees or colder. This had worked out well, but the churches found it hard to coordinate volunteers and let guests know when the shelter was open, given the unpredictability of weather.

The City of Elgin approved FUMCE and OCE's request to keep a shelter open every night from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., Dec. 1, 2023, through March 31, 2024. Elgin's assistant city manager, fire marshal, and police department check in with the church to make sure they have everything they need.



Fellowship Hall at First UMC in Elgin is ready for guests.

"We have very good support from our community—other churches, the city, public services, everyone," says Rev. Felecia LaBoy, FUMCE's pastor. "The church is proud of the work they are doing. The world isn't looking to hear a sermon, they are looking to see one."

An ongoing priority

While the collaboration with OCE is new for the 2023-24 winter season, taking care of unhoused neighbors is a long-standing commitment of the congregation. The church was instrumental in starting the area PADS and Soup Kettle nightly meal program. This was prompted by the unfortunate deaths about 10 years ago of many unhoused people in Elgin. FUMCE's pastor at the time, Rev. Robert Sathuri, and member Jeff Small were enraged by this news and determined to open the church to unhoused people.

The Soup Kettle, which has been feeding the church's neighbors for many years. The downtown churches each have taken a night to serve anyone who needs a meal, no questions asked. Monday night is FUMCE's night to serve.

Nancy Kefauver and Jeff Benchley, FUMCE members, are instrumental in the ministry. They aim to make the diners feel like guests in their home. Usually, the ministry serves 80 each night. It also offers to-go meals (some of which the guests eat the following day). Northern Illinois Food Bank provides the food.

"At FUMC Elgin, we know that our strength in the community is to care for and love unconditionally our community," says Carol Phillips, co-chair of the FUMCE Governance Board. "Imagine the comfort of our shelter guests knowing that they have a safe place to rest their heads at night. We are truly blessed to be able to partner with the city to make this a reality."

Volunteers wanted

The warming shelter requires four or five volunteers a night. Team members work one of three shifts (6:30 to 11 p.m., 11 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., or 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m.). Volunteers assist with check-in/check-out, implement shelter guidelines, check on guests, and clean.

Volunteers may also serve as shift leaders. Shift leaders are trained in de-escalation, overdose treatment, and other safety issues. Volunteers need to be 18 years old and submit to a background check. A background check will not prevent people from volunteering, but it gives the team an understanding of the volunteer's past experiences. To volunteer, sign up at onecollectiveelgin.org/winter-shelter.

"Although we are in our first month, it's evident that this is meeting a huge need in the community," says Alex Madrid, casework collaboration coordinator for OCE. "Some of the biggest needs are recruiting volunteers, especially volunteers willing to help out on the overnight shift."



Madrid also suggests that churches might organize volunteers in a "mission-trip" to the center. Teams from churches or colleges could commit a week (probably Sunday to Sunday, with days free) to serving in the volunteer roles. Interested groups should contact Rev. LaBoy at revlaboy@fumcelgin.org.

Donations are also a great support. Financial gifts can be submitted through onecollectiveelgin.org/winter-shelter. The center also needs in-kind donations, such as bottled water and hygiene and warmth items for the guests. A full list is available at umcnic.org/news/shelter-at-first-umc-in-elgin-warms-bodies-and-hearts.

OCE also encourages people to consider walking in the Coldest Night of the Year 5K on Feb. 24. This is family-friendly fundraiser supports local charities that assist people who are experiencing hurt, hunger, and homelessness. Find more information at cnoy.com/locations/elgin.



From Your Bishop:

Yielding all things for what is to come

"I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal."

John Wesley's Covenant Prayer

Wesley's Covenant Service has been recommended for Methodists who gather on New Year's Eve to worship, leave behind a year, and cross the threshold of a new one. More deeply, Methodists were to receive new life afresh. The core petition of the prayer at the heart of the service is, "I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal."

After last year's annual conference session, I asked many what theme they might suggest for 2024. I prayed on the question on long drives and evening walks. I knew early on that I did not feel drawn to a slogan. I felt called to pray and call us to prayer.

God took me to the heart of the Wesleyan Covenant prayer. In the center of the line is a word, a practice, and a prayer: to "yield." This struck me as an appropriate theme. Please reflect on it for our annual conference session and our life together. Join me in prayer for the conference and the yielding God would call us to do.

I know to yield seems un-American—down-right un-Methodist. Practical people who built eight-sided chapels on the American frontier—inspired by the knowledge that eight-sided corn cribs held more corn—would surely be suspect. I simply believe we are in a moment for yielding. Let me explain.

You've heard me quote Susan Beaumont's observation from her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* that "the Christian story is by design an invitation to liminality" (p. 4). It's a call to yielding, letting go, and letting be so that we have hands open to grasp God's newness.

Risking something different

In my own writing, a poem starts shyly at first, and then I have a choice. I could write what I know, something safe, something I have enjoyed success with in the past. Or I could have the presence of mind to surrender to the poem that wants and needs to be written, a new emergence and risk. It may take countless unhappy drafts, but at least it is not the thing I have trotted out before—and what no longer works. I believe this is the yielding of soul required for this moment and for the work of creative ministry.

One congregation I served obtained a demographic study that indicated that very few in a ten-mile radius of the church were likely to seek out a Sunday worship service. It also told us the neighbors were multiracial, spiritual but not religious, and observers of many faiths.

We could have ignored the facts, powered through with our familiar patterns, and maligned the messenger. However, the only way we could be in ministry with our neighbors was to serve them not on Sundays but during the week. That started us on a course that led us to develop nonprofits that served children. The prayer whispers, "I yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal."

Disruption may bring opportunity

Another enjoiner from Beaumont remains with me: "In an age of disruption, healthy leaders create an environment where the new can emerge." We do not disguise the disruptions;

we create space for God's newness and we live in a Holy Saturday season, between Good Friday's losses and before Easter's rebirth.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul offers the church a living, practical Christology: Jesus "emptied himself" and "humbled himself" (2: 7-8). I invite you to empty your thoughts of the familiar and ask yourself:

- In your walk with Jesus, what wants to emerge?
- In your ministry, what wants to emerge?
- In our world, beloved community or *ubuntu* is crying out; how can we yield to achieve it?
- What wants to emerge in the Northern Illinois Conference?
- What wants to emerge in your church?

At conference session in June, we will gather after the General Conference and its successes and failures. We are also planning now for how we may share an episcopal leader with the Wisconsin Conference. Can you pray with me to engage the newness God is bringing? Even if it is not yet visible? Might that help us draw closer to God and grow as a learning organization?

Please pray for me to be open to God and lead us according to the way of the Spirit. Know that I am praying for you.

Your giving to NIC and General Church apportionments supports the Episcopal Office and the work of our Annual conference.



Bishops to call special session of general conference in 2026

by Rev. Dr. Maidstone Mulenga,

Director of Communications for the Council of Bishops

The Council of Bishops plans to call a special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in 2026 for the delegates to strategize and work toward bringing about the next vital expression of United Methodism.

Under ¶14 of The Book of Discipline and in line with Article II of the Constitution, the bishops have the authority to call "a special session of the General Conference, possessing the authority and exercising all the powers of the General Conference."

"A special session of General Conference in 2026 would allow the church to see our work as having two important next steps, the first being the regular session of the General Conference in 2024, and the second to make continued progress in 2026," the bishops agreed. "Affirming the call for a special session in 2026 for missional purposes would give the whole church a clearer sense of our path going forward."

At their May meeting in Chicago, the bishops responded to a Judicial Council decision regarding an additional regular General Conference between 2024 and 2027 by recommending that

what would be a May 2026 general session be shortened to five days. This would reduce the cost of holding three conferences in four years. A five-day conference would focus on re-establishing connection, lament, healing, celebration, recasting the mission and vision for the UMC.

In November, the Judicial Council reversed a previous ruling and declared that "the regular session of General Conference that is to be convened following the upcoming 2024 regular session, would be held four years thereafter, in 2028."

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The Northern Illinois Conference Reporter

Northern Illinois Conference OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Submissions

Please submit items at least two weeks prior to publication date. 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.

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Northern Illinois Conference prepares for its 185th session

Under the theme “Yield,” clergy and elected lay members will gather for Northern Illinois Conference’s 185th session, June 16-18, at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center, 1551 N. Thoreau Dr., Schaumburg, IL.

Bishop Dan Schwerin chose the theme from John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer, which includes the promise that “I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.” Many Methodist and Wesleyan Christians renew this covenant at the beginning of the new year. (See “From the Bishop” on p. 2.)

“As we gather for the 185th Northern Illinois Conference Session, we come ready to yield to God’s will as we offer our whole selves to the service of Christ through the work of the church,” says Bishop Schwerin.

“For the new church that is emerging, more than ‘a zipper merge’ is needed; we all need to yield to God’s newness,” he says, alluding to the yielding needed in traffic.

The ordination and commissioning service will take place on Sunday evening, June 16. The conference will honor those retiring on the next morning, June 17. Those who have died in the past year will be remembered during the memorial service on the morning of Tuesday, June 18.



Registration and more

The registration fee is \$115 for early registrations (received before April 29) and \$130 thereafter. The increase is due to rising costs of holding a conference. Registration will close on May 29. There will be NO on-site registration.

The committee is exploring different childcare arrangements, including the possibility of offering on-site care. Those who need childcare should complete a survey, which is linked at umcnic.org/AC2024, so that the committee knows parents’ preferences. Responses are due on Jan. 31.

Conference-related organizations and groups are encouraged to hold their group meals at the hotel. Plated meals, buffet, and reception style food station options are available. For more information, please contact Bri Wadlington, conference events planner, at events@umcnic.org

Annual Conference 2024 Details

Registration:

- Before April 29: \$115
- Beginning May 1: \$130
- Registration deadline: May 29
- NO on-site registration

Special observances and sessions:

- Clergy session: June 5 (location to be announced)
- Laity session: Sunday afternoon, June 16
- Ordination and commissioning: Sunday evening, June 16
- Retirement: Monday morning, June 17
- Memorial: Tuesday morning, June 18

Important Dates:

- April 3: Registration opens
- April 15: Deadline for proposed legislation and historical documents (find instructions at umcnic.org/AC2024)
- April 15: Deadline for requests for time for video and media presentations (find details at umcnic.org/AC2024)
- May 9: Deadline for submission of names and photos of annual conference lay members who have passed since May 2023. Send to ACMedia@umcnic.org.
- May 16: Proposed legislation and documents posted online

 Your giving to NIC apportionments supports our Annual Conference session.

Special NC jurisdictional conference called for Jan. 23

Delegates to the North Central Jurisdiction Conference of The United Methodist Church, of which Northern Illinois is a member, will attend a special, virtual session on Jan. 23 at 7 p.m. Central Time.

The jurisdiction’s College of Bishops called the session.

The partnered annual conferences would each remain separate annual conferences as they are now, continuing under their own governance and leadership. A bishop would oversee both conferences.

The bishops called this special session to settle the number of bishops to be assigned

to episcopal areas as of Sept. 1. If this recommendation passes, the jurisdiction will have seven areas.

The jurisdictional Episcopacy Committees assign bishops to areas. This usually happens during the jurisdictional conferences, which are held in the summer following General Conferences. The

next regular NCJ conference will take place July 10-13 in Sioux Falls, SD.

Why reconfigure areas?

Looking at membership statistics in the NCJ annual conferences—which help determine the number of bishops per jurisdiction—the committee anticipated two years ago that the jurisdiction may need to reduce the num-

ber of its episcopal areas. United Methodist membership, including in the NCJ, has been steadily declining over a number of years. Recent congregational disaffiliations across the denomination have accelerated that trend.

At the November 2022 NCJ special session, the committee recommended that the Committees on Episcopacy, extended cabinets, and conference directors of the Northern Illinois and Wisconsin conferences and the East Ohio and West Ohio conferences “begin conversations about the possibility of sharing an episcopal area, if such a sharing should be approved by the NCJ, beginning as soon as 2024.”

Election and assignment of bishops has usually been the primary task undertaken at jurisdictional conferences. Given the possible reduction in episcopal areas, it may be the case that the NCJ will not need to elect new bishops in 2024.

A few episcopal areas in the UMC already contain more than one conference. Among them are Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal Area, Northwest Texas-New Mexico Episcopal Area, and the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area. The constituent conferences remain separately governed, although they voluntarily collaborate on some ministries.

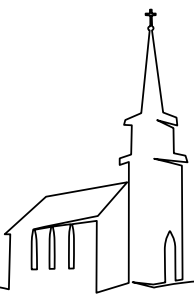
At the July conference, delegates will also honor two retiring bishops, Bishop Julius Calvin Trimble and Bishop Gregory V. Palmer.



Bishop Bruce Ough (left) presents croziers to the newly elected Bishops Dan Schwerin, Lanette Plambeck (center) and Kennetha Bingham-Tsai during the North Central Jurisdiction’s Consecration Service on Nov. 5, 2022, in Fort Wayne, Ind. Photo courtesy of The North Central Jurisdiction.

The sole item for consideration by the jurisdictional conference delegates at this session is the recommendation that four episcopal areas (regions overseen by a bishop) be combined into two. One new area would partner Northern Illinois and Wisconsin conferences under one bishop and the other area would partner East and West Ohio conferences under one bishop.

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports the Episcopal Office and jurisdictions. 



Local Church News

This monthly column highlights local church outreach ministries that are making a difference and transforming lives. We hope sharing these success stories ("it worked for us") will inspire and become learning tools for other churches. If you have a Ministry Makers story, email communications@umcnic.org.

Churches offer compassion by feeding bodies & souls

Grace UMC, Rockford, makes a record 100,000 sandwiches for the hungry

Imagine 100,000 peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. Grace United Methodist Church in Rockford has made that many over the past three years.

It started as a one-time mission project but has continued consistently since August 2020. Every Friday morning, 14 to 20 volunteers gather at the church to make and deliver 640 sandwiches to Ms. Carly's, a local service for hungry neighbors. Ms. Carly's provides the peanut butter and jelly and Grace UMC provides the bread—and, most importantly, the volunteers. The church has no sign-up sheet and makes no telephoned reminders; a reliable group shows up every week to serve others in this ministry of love. WREX-TV in Rockford featured the sandwich-making ministry on one of its recent newscasts.

Miss Carly's was started by a Rockford family who decided to welcome the hungry and homeless in the neighborhood to their dining table. They now give sack lunches to as many as 1,000 people at any time of the day, while remaining a small and intimate operation that

welcomes everyone. From time to time, they meet with people in crisis to troubleshoot their situation, directing them to resources and assistance.



New Life UMC in Machesney Park recognized as Ministry of the Month

The Friday-night cookouts that New Life United Methodist Church (Machesney Park) in October received Ministry of the Month recognition from the Epicenter Group, an organization that coaches new churches and declining churches for growth.

The church had been meeting as a very small fellowship on Saturday nights. One

week they decided to grill hamburgers and hot dogs at cookouts every Friday night. Two Saturdays a month, they offered dinner church, inviting neighbors to a worship service that takes place around a meal. Within just a few weeks, new people were flowing into worship, including enough to start a youth ministry.

Support for the prison-ministry retreat

Members of First United Methodist in Oak Park stepped up in September to assist Neville Reid's (who also is the pastor's spouse) leadership of a weekend retreat at Stateville Correctional Center, a men's prison near Joliet. For this Kairos Prison Ministry program, Oak Park UMC, Hinsdale UMC, and other churches baked over 1,000 of the 30,000 cookies served during the weekend. They also wrote letters of encouragement to the participating inmates; some attended the retreat's closing ceremony.

Other United Methodist churches that consistently assist the Kairos ministry at Stateville include Plainfield, St. Mark (Chicago), Hinsdale, and Barrington.

NIC clergy exchange ideas with other Hispanic/Latino ministers at Entre Nos

by Rev. Gustavo Vasquez, director of United Methodist News for the Hispanic-Latino audience.

After the long period of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hispanic-Latino leaders of The United Methodist Church gathered Oct. 30-Nov. 1 in Phoenix for "Entre Nos" (Among Us) to take a close look at Hispanic/Latino ministry.

The National Plan for Hispanic-Latino Ministry hosted the event, which attracted more than 130 participants.

"Our Northern Illinois Conference had the largest delegation from the connection with 15 clergy (elders, deacons, and local pastors)," said Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, the conference director of connectional ministries, who attended the event. "They actively participated in leading worship, workshops, and attending small groups."

The central objective of the event was reconnecting with each other after years of isolation, taking a deep look at Hispanic/Latino ministry and considering best ways for moving forward.

Along with partners from Wespeth Benefits and Investments, organizers sought to develop resources and opportunities for Hispanic/Latino clergy to strengthen their financial acumen and knowledge and to discover the various resources that Wespeth offers to clergy.

For many, it was an opportunity to reconnect after three years of the pandemic.

"It was a wonderful opportunity for us, as Hispanic/Latinx clergy from our Northern Illinois Conference, to pause, get together, and

listen to each other about how COVID and disaffiliations have affected our lives and ministries," Rev. Grandon-Mayer said. "This was also a wonderful opportunity to have fellowship and strengthen our relationship as colleagues."

The Rev. Giovanni Arroyo, top executive of the UM Commission on Religion and Race, said the effects of the pandemic on emotional health are not discussed enough in the Hispanic/Latino community.

"This opened the door for us to be more intentional about how to have these conversations. We talked about depression and burnout, which are realities that are too evident," he said. "But in our culture, many times we're told, 'Just suck it up' and 'God will not give you more than you can handle.' It's very hard for you to be a pastor giving it all and not also yourself to be cared for."

Disaffiliations, affecting 13.4 percent of Hispanic-Latino churches, is a challenge to Hispanic-Latino ministry, leaders said. But it is also an opportunity, as many said that this moment might create the space and the agility in the UMC to be intentional about developing more ethnically diverse congregations.

"People left renewed and hopeful that we could do this even despite the times we're not recognized by the church in our leadership," Arroyo said.

The National Plan to presented a bilingual/bicultural theological training program for lay leaders, with a special emphasis on public theology. The curriculum is designed to train lay missionaries to answer the questions that

the National Plan has always engaged in: What do we see? What do we discern? How do we respond to God to build the beloved community?



Retired Bishop Elías Galván, the first Hispanic/Latino to be elected a bishop of The United Methodist Church, receives a surprise greeting from a mariachi, upon his arrival at First United Methodist Church of Phoenix. Photo by the Rev. Gustavo Vasquez, UM News.

In the final session, participants made a number of recommendations to strengthen Hispanic-Latino ministry in the denomination, including:

- the creation of specific programs for children
- the establishment of a national directory of Hispanic-Latino churches
- the alignment of the work plan of the church with the legislation established by the General Conference
- the search for theological unity
- the development of a contextualized curriculum adapted to the specific needs of the community

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports the National Plans and ethnic ministries.



Stronger Together



by Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer,
NIC Director of Connectional Ministries
I was born and raised in Methodism and constantly heard the words “connection” and “connectionalism.” I didn’t

understand what it meant at first, but when I started to get involved in the life and mission of the church, I realized that we are a connectional church, a church that works together to support one another, share resources and carry out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is a historic core value of our denomination, yet one of the hardest to define.

The United Methodist Book of Discipline ¶1608 calls the director of connectional ministries to work with the bishop, cabinet, and elected conference leaders to fulfill four primary responsibilities:

- to serve as steward of the vision of the annual conference, including the development, clarification, interpretation, and embodiment of the vision;
- to serve as leader of the continuous process of transformation and renewal necessary for the annual conference to be faithful to our Christian identity in a changing world;
- to ensure alignment of the total resources of the conference to its vision;
- to ensure the connections among the local, district, annual conference, and general Church ministries for networking, resourcing, and communicating their shared ministry.

To live out our connectionalism means that every local church is linked to each other and an interconnected network of organizations that join in mission and ministry, allowing us to accomplish far more than any one local church or person could alone.



Your giving to NIC apportionments supports Connectional Ministries.

Connection creates transformation

In our Northern Illinois Conference

- We experience our connectionalism when the Fellowship of Asian-American Pastors gather to celebrate their ministries, support each other, and pray together.
- We experienced our connectionalism when Hispanic/Latinx pastors traveled to Phoenix, AZ, to attend “Entre Nos” (“among us”), a national gathering where participants shared ideas and discussed how the COVID pandemic and church disaffiliations affected their lives and communities.
- We experienced our connectionalism when clergy in cross-cultural/cross-racial/multicultural ministries attended “Facing the Future,” a denominational gathering in Atlanta that affirmed and equipped those clergy to be effective change agents in their ministry in the world.
- We experienced our connectionalism when 200 people from 53 US conferences joined at the U.S. Mission Partners Consultation organized by Global Ministries to reflect about our practices of mission.
- We experienced our connectionalism when Northern Illinois United Methodists from across the conference got together at five different sites to discuss a film that addressed an aspect of racism in America. The series helped to increase our cultural competency and provided opportunities for dialogue about the contexts, causes, and impacts of racism.
- We experience our connectionalism when churches offer other churches help with ministries with migrants and refugees.

Through these interactive relationships and connections, we strongly prove that we can do so much more together than we can alone.

The United Methodist Church is connectional. Your congregation can live out this connectionalism when you join your efforts with others to carry out our shared mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.



Fellowship of Asian-American Pastors gathering



NIC Hispanic/Latinx Pastors at the “Entre Nos” gathering in Phoenix, AZ.



Cross-Cultural/Cross-Racial/Multicultural Pastors from Wisconsin and Illinois shared experiences at the Facing the Future gathering in Atlanta.



Many UMC leaders, including the Directors of Connectional Ministries, Global Ministries Secretaries, Disaster Response Coordinators, and several Bishops, gathered at the US Global Ministries Consultation in Atlanta to discuss the mission work in our denomination. Photo by Adam Bowers.

UMC resources for observing Black History Month

February is Black History Month, an opportunity to learn and celebrate how Black Americans have contributed in many ways to our shared nation’s culture, arts, sciences, social-service leadership, and more.

Black History Month is for everyone. Black history is part of American history, so it is a part of our shared American heritage and experience.

Bishop Forrest Stith (retired) suggests three reasons why it this annual observation remains important.

“First, African Americans need to have their identity strengthened,” he says in his article “Why We Need a Black History Month: A Perspective,” found on unitedmethodistbishops.org. “African descendants in America were exiled from their sophisticated culture, family, religion, and way of life.”



The second reason is, he says, is to make sure the story of the Black experience in America is told accurately. Finally, exploring Black history can alert us to the threat of worldwide racism. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that membership in white supremacy and far-right hate groups has grown exponentially in the U.S. since 2018.

We have many resources for celebrating this month. The UMC’s commitment is stated in the Social Principles: “Racism, manifested as sin, plagues and hinders our relationship with Christ, inasmuch as it is antithetical to the gospel itself. . . . We commit as the Church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.”

On its resource website r2hub.org, the UM Commission on Religion and Race offers a list of “29 Ways You Can Participate in Black History Month” as well as an explanation of “the do’s and don’ts of Black History Month.”

In its Dismantling Racism section, the denomination’s resource umc.org website has many resources, including a seven-session discussion group guide.

Recommended UMC budget is 40 percent smaller

by Heather Hahn, assistant news editor UM News

The United Methodist Church will look and operate very differently going forward.

That was the frequent refrain at a May 2023 meeting that saw the denomination's financial leaders shrink an already record-low proposal for the denominational budget in the wake of new projected losses from church disaffiliations and closures. The leaders also heard input on reducing the number of United Methodist bishops.

Yet even while grieving church departures, the leaders also discussed the UMC's opportunities to revitalize and share God's love with renewed vigor.



Council of Bishops President Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton addresses a joint meeting of the Connectional Table and the General Council of Finance and Administration board on May 18 in Nashville, Tenn. He said United Methodist bishops want to join in the conversation of how to reduce the number of U.S. bishops strategically without damaging the church's mission.

Photo by Heather Hahn, UM News.

The board of the UM General Council on Finance and Administration, which recommends a budget to General Conference, is proposing a 2025-2028 denominational budget of about \$370.5 million. That's about \$3 million less than the budget the finance agency began working on last fall.

The new bottom line also marks a nearly 40 percent reduction.

The proposal requires significant cuts to all funds that support denomination-wide ministries—including UM general agencies and bishops.

Lowest budget in 40 years

It also will be the lowest budget to come before General Conference since 1984, when the international denomination had far fewer members on the African continent and had yet to establish Africa University, now supported with denominational funds.

Both the GCFA board and Connectional Table (charged with serving as "a steward of the vision and resources for mission and ministry") long agreed the denomination-wide budget should be significantly reduced. But they differed on how low to go while still sustaining ministries at all levels of the denomination.

Through conferences' apportionment giving, the U.S. provides the bulk of funding for denomination-wide ministries. In the U.S., the formula for determining an annual conference's apportionments is its total local church


net expenditures multiplied by a General Conference-approved base percentage.

The GCFA board and Connectional Table disagreed about how much to decrease the base percentage proposed to General Conference. The GCFA board initially supported reducing it by 25 percent, while the Connectional Table supported an 18 percent base-percentage reduction. Ultimately, the GCFA board decided to reduce the base rate by 22.9 percent.

Still, the denomination's bishops, agency staff and other church leaders are already adjusting to a new reality. Since before the pandemic, the denomination's general agencies have been budgeting each year with lower giving in mind.

In a reflection that opened the meeting on May 18, Bishop Mande Muyombo, the Connectional Table's chair, acknowledged that church finances are not just about numbers but about lives being transformed.

"That's the power of The United Methodist Church, a church that has given some of us hope, taken us from a place of scarcity and hopelessness to a place of experiencing God's love and grace," prayed Muyombo, who leads the North Katanga Area, which encompasses parts of Congo and Tanzania.

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports the World Service Fund and the denominational budget. 

What does 'regionalization' mean for the UMC?

by Rev. Victoria Rebeck, NIC Director of Communications

You may have heard over the past few years that the United Methodist General Conference will be voting on regionalization. What does that mean? What's the United Methodist interest in this?

A group of significant leaders in the UMC—the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, the Connectional Table, and the Christmas Covenant team (a group of delegates and other UM leaders from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines)—are supporting a proposal that would create four regional conferences that will each have equal power to pass legislation within their prospective regions. These would be Africa, Europe, Philippines, and the United States.

Why this configuration?

You may know that the denomination's General Conference, which meets every four years, makes decisions for the entire worldwide UMC. Delegates from the U.S. and the "central conferences"—those in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines—all have the same voting rights to determine United Methodist policies and requirements (most of which appear in the UM Book of Discipline).

Recognizing that some of these are more practicable in the U.S. and would not be possible or relevant in other regions of the world, the UMC constitution allows the central conferences to reject or alter decisions of the General Conference, including items in the Book of Discipline, to fit their contexts better. Thus, even though delegates from all over the world vote on official United Methodist

matters, only general conferences may adapt them. Jurisdictional and annual conferences in the U.S. may not.

However, the regionalization proposal would allow each of the four regional conferences to establish policies and procedures that fit their own contexts, without enjoining United Methodists in other regions. United Methodists in the U.S. would have, for the first time, authority to adapt the Discipline in the same ways that every other regional conference has been able to do.

Missional contexts

Certain parts of the Book of Discipline could not be independently adapted by a regional conference. Paragraph 101 in the Discipline identifies these sections as parts I through V, which contain the constitution, paragraph 101 itself, the Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task, the Ministry of All Christians, and the Social Principles.

These are the foundational elements of United Methodist polity and belief. Because "the General Conference shall have full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional," as the Book of Discipline says, only General Conference—delegates from all the regions—may alter parts I through V, following to the rules that now apply.


Bishop Tom Berlin explains in a video, "We can trust each other to handle our ministry and center our priorities in ways that are relevant for the culture in the context that

we're in. When we come together as a general conference, we want to come together and do the work that benefits the whole and not waste time dealing with business and other matters that are just really focused on one part of the world."

Adding more information, the Connectional Table section on resourceumc.org explains a deeper reason for the proposal: it "reflects the strong values of equity, respect for contextual mission settings, effective mutuality in mission, and legislative equality for regional bodies of the church. Recognizing the effects of colonization, the guiding principle for the regionalization legislation is to empower each region to make certain context-specific decisions in real-time, without being dependent on General Conference, as well as de-centralizing the influence of the United States on General Conference."

The explanation adds that "the regionalization legislation puts an end to imposing cultural views of one region of the world onto another, fostering a sense of identity and belonging that's essential in our global connection. By celebrating the diversity of our respective mission settings, regional governance offers a vibrant and hopeful vision for The United Methodist Church now and into the future" (resourceumc.org/en/content/values-and-purpose-of-worldwide-regionalization-legislation).

Information for this article came from *Ask the UMC* and *Resourceumc.org*.

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports General Conference. 

Leading the Laity

No room for distractions



by Eugene Williams,
Conference Co-Lay Leader
Sisters and brothers, what a privilege it was to experience anew another season of Advent. We celebrated the coming of the Christ Child and enjoyed all the gifts, presents and love that were shared.

And now we embark upon a brand-new year; one that we never saw before and did nothing to merit. But God! Indeed, but God; whose grace and mercy endureth forever. But despite these blessings, we enter 2024 with all of its challenges and uncertainty. We continue with our efforts to recover from the grief of disaffiliation and to plan for the yoking of conferences and assignment of a shared bishop. Add to that the General Conference delegates' consideration of a proposal for regionalizing The United Methodist Church (see story on p. 6) and the Council of Bishops' recommendation for a special session of General Conference in 2026 (see story on p. 2).

Stay focused

There is a lot coming our way in 2024. But we can make no room for distractions. Above all, we must stay true to the mission before us. We are to follow Jesus and love each other as we endeavor to add daily to His church by making disciples for Christ.

There is no room for the distractions of the ongoing trials and prosecutions or the upcoming elections. We can't be distracted by wars and rumor of wars, nor the proliferation of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. No room for distractions of hate, racism, and disrespect or anything that separates us from the love of God.

Let us embrace the Rule of Christ and take everything to the Lord in prayer. (For a description of the Rule of Christ, developed by United Methodist Deacon Terry Gladstone, visit eocumc.com/resources/rule-of-christ.html.)

The Board of Laity will be hosting Laity Convocation on Feb. 10 at First United Methodist Church in Belvidere. The theme is "Growing Together in Love: Learning to Have Courageous/Respectful Conversations."

This will be an in-person event only. Please join us as we embrace the intentionality of unity through prayer, communication, and interactions with each other.

We must stay true to the mission before us.

Let us lean into 2024 with the Light of the World, that we might illuminate the darkness of divisiveness, despair, and uncertainty. Jesus is the light of the world and there is no room for distractions. The Board of Laity continues to pray for a year filled with good health and prosperity of Christ for all. Blessings.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Board of Laity.



Laity Convocation 2024

Growing Together in Love

LEARNING TO HAVE COURAGEOUS RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS



Sat., Feb. 10, 9 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Belvidere: First UMC
610 Bonus Ave. Belvidere

For further details and registration visit umcnic.org/calendar/laity-convocation-2024.

KIDS ABOVE ALL

Holiday Gift drive blesses children

Kids Above All's 2023 Holiday Gift Drive was a great success! They thank their many mission partners, including congregations, United Women in Faith units and members, United Methodist Men, Girl Scout and Cub Scout troops, North Central College Breakaway Club, Main South High School Key Club, E-Kiwanis, and many others. "People were VERY generous by sponsoring kids, online orders, church collections and volunteers," says Catherine Inserra, KAA's manager of faith and community relations. The children enjoyed happy holidays because of this' generosity and kindness.



Your giving to Mission Links supports Kids Above All.



First United Methodist Church of Antioch were the first to donate gifts. They generously delivered presents for 32 children.

Art, culture, and American diversity to be featured in 2024

by Tim Alexander, NIC Anti-Racism 2023 Film Series Chair

The Northern Illinois Conference Anti-Racism Task Force is initiating a new series to engage people in learning about diversity and challenging their own assumptions—all toward building the Beloved Community.

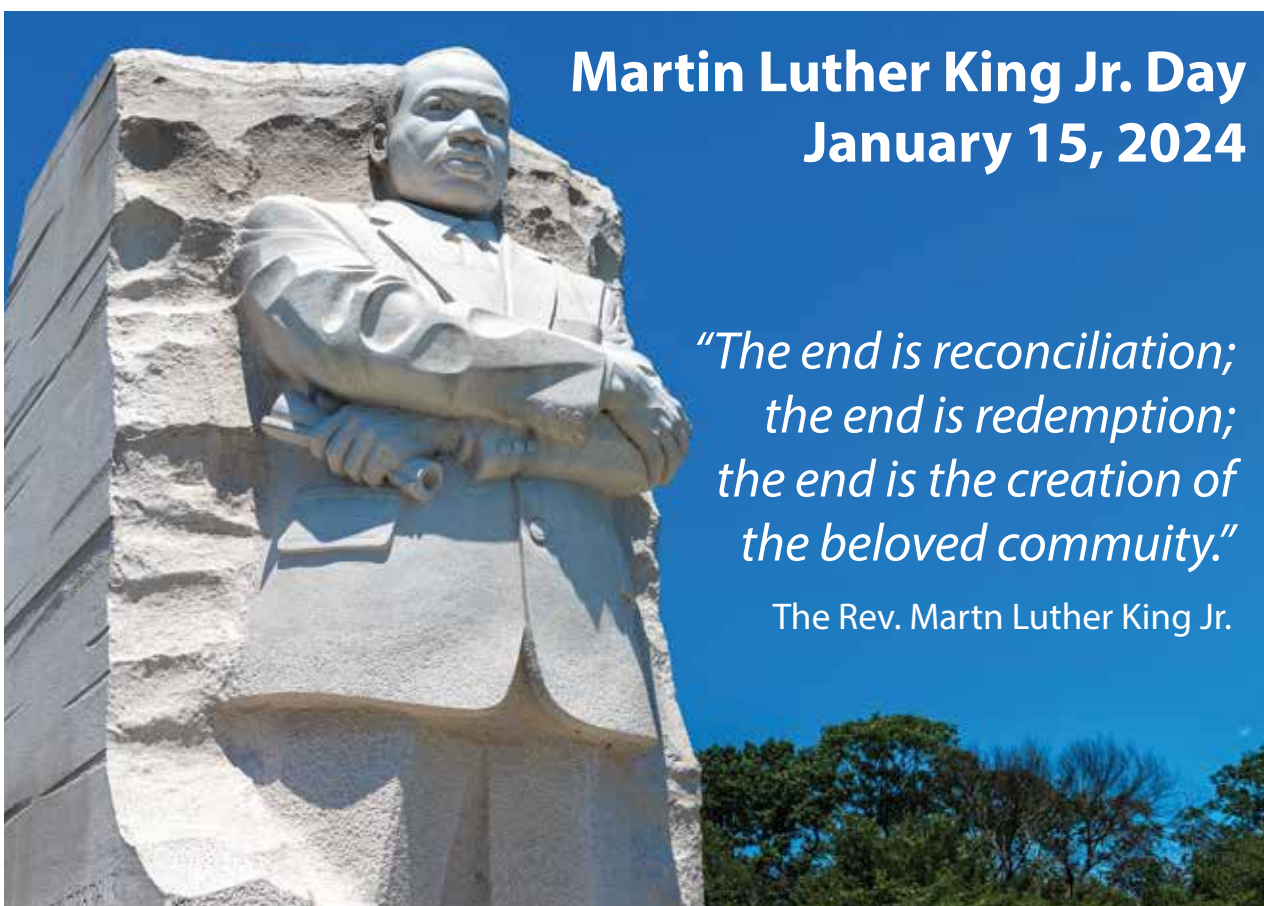
The theme for 2024 is Art & Culture—The Quilting of America: Celebrating and Appreciating the Diversity of America. The series will bring participants into a deeper understanding of how American art has contributed to our nation's drive toward being a "melting pot" where all cultures have contributed. Events will take place around the conference to showcase the art and diversity of the cultures that make up the cultural quilt of the Northern Illinois Conference.

Follow the conference Reporter and weekly eNews for information about each event as they draw near.

You can catch up on any of last year's film series discussions at umcnic.org/2023filmseries.



Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Anti-Racism Task Force.



Martin Luther King Jr. Day January 15, 2024

*"The end is reconciliation;
the end is redemption;
the end is the creation of
the beloved community."*

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.



The Power of Connecting

by Rev. Arlene Christopherson,
Assistant to the Bishop

When I was in seminary, Pope John Paul II visited Chicago. I went to great lengths to be part of the moment: skipping class, walking miles from the train station, standing for hours with a crushing crowd at Grant Park. That gathering still holds the record as the largest Mass ever celebrated in Chicago. In the end, I only saw a glimpse of Pope John Paul II. He was a white dot far from where I stood. The day was hot, the wait was long, but I do not regret being part of that moment. I wasn't Roman Catholic, but I was encouraged by the witness of so many faithful Christians. I experienced a crowd that was polite, overjoyed and drawn together by a common bond that gave them a sense of hope.

One of the strengths of the United Methodist Church is our connectal nature. We are a denomination that values the strength of the whole, knowing we can do more to the glory of God when we combine our prayers and resources then we could ever do alone. That sense of community, support, and strength for the mission is part of our ethos. As a conference we come together with members from our congregations each summer for annual conference, but we have few opportunities to

gather outside that setting to feel the joy and energy of our community.

This year we continue to give witness to the connectal identity of United Methodism as Bishop Schwerin offers "Days on the District." From Feb. 1 through 13, the bishop will schedule a day with clergy and an evening with laity on each district. (You can see dates, locations, and times to the right). These gatherings are a time to fellowship with others, hear from the bishop, and remember our common bonds and our call to make disciples. These gatherings give us an opportunity to learn more about our bishop, share our joys and concerns, and remember that we are not alone as we work to build God's kin-dom.

Our conference's relationship with an episcopal leader is changing. In mid-January the North Central Jurisdiction will hold a special meeting to determine how annual conferences will be yoked in sharing bishops. Northern Illinois and Wisconsin are two of the conferences that will be voted on to become one episcopal area. Our conferences are not merging but may be sharing a bishop by fall.

As we move further and further into a conversation about sharing a bishop beginning in September 2024, our "Days on the District" are a precious moment to get to know our episco-

pal leader and for Bishop Schwerin to continue learning about us.

If you cannot make the date that the bishop will be in your district you are invited to attend any one of the five events so you too can be a part of our Methodist movement and the energy of claiming Christ in our communities.

I look forward to seeing many of you in the months ahead.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports connecting and the Bishop's Days on the District



BISHOP'S DAYS ON THE DISTRICT

- Lake North - Thurs., February 1
- Prairie South - Wed., February 7
- Prairie North - Thurs., February 8
- Lake South - Mon., February 12
- Prairie Central - Tues., February 13

Clergy Conversation (9:30 a.m. - lunch)
Laity Conversation (6:30 to 8 p.m.)
For further details visit umcnic.org/calendar/2024-bishops-days-on-the-district.

Statistics tell your church's story

It's the time of year for churches to enter their statistics for 2023. These numbers not only help answer the question, "How are we doing right now?" but also, "How are we doing in the long run?" Church leaders can review this data to interpret underlying influences and help the congregation help the congregation see where growth is happening and where change may be necessary.

Not only is it a way to understand how the church is doing, it also indicates how active we are as an annual conference and jurisdiction. The district superintendents use these indicators to identify churches enjoying extraordinary success in certain ministries and to see where churches could use some resources to build up their ministry.

The conference office also uses the statistics to calculate your church's apportionment figure. You will want us to have accurate, up-to-date information so that your apportionment accurately reflects your church's ability to contribute to our shared ministries.

Look for an email the first week of January that will explain how to enter your 2023 statistics. Deadline for completion is Feb. 28.

For resources and more information, visit umcnic.org/statisticalreporting.

If you have questions, contact David Quinn, apportionments administrator, at dquinn@umcnic.org.



Your giving to NIC apportionments supports reporting and assessing the data.



Become a Net-Zero advocate

by Richard Alton, NIC Net Zero Team

The United Methodist interagency commitment to just and equitable net-zero emissions is the most systematic, comprehensive, global emission reduction effort in the denomination's history. This commitment, established in 2021, seeks to ensure that the ministries of the present support the flourishing of God's creation in the future.

The Northern Illinois Conference established a Net-Zero Task Force to take bold steps and move our congregations to net-zero emissions. Reducing our carbon footprint to net-zero means that we will strive to balance the amount of greenhouse gases we emit with an equivalent amount removed from the atmosphere. This includes energy conservation, renewable energy adoption, waste reduction, and sustainable practices.

As a faith community, Northern Illinois Conference can bring about significant change and each congregation can join in this important endeavor.

Advocates help churches

The Net-Zero Task Force invites congregations to name a net-zero advocate (or advocates). The advocates would work with the congregation's trustees and members to adopt sustainable practices.

The conference task force will provide advocates with a "List of Sustainable Actions for Congregations to Implement" to begin their work. The first step is to invite a task-force member to lead a presentation on "Leaping to Net-Zero," which introduces steps a congregation can take.

The task force will also offer resources and assistance to congregational advocates, including but not limited to webinars; suggestions for forming a Green Team and/or arranging an energy audit;

connecting with other congregations making similar efforts; finding ways to help the congregation make the leap to solar, geothermal or other green energy sources; and recommending curricula and presentation materials to support these efforts.



The congregational advocate will:

- Stay in communication with the NIC Net-Zero Team and Net-Zero Advocates from other congregations to share tips, knowledge, and encouragement.
- Report annually to the charge conference and to the Net-Zero Team on the congregation's progress and the amount of energy usage the church reduced and how much money it saved.

To become a part of the Net Zero Advocate Network, email Richard Alton at richard.alton@gmail.com

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Net Zero Team.

