

The Northern Illinois Conference OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Reporter

NON-PROFIT
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #583
Schaumburg, IL 60173

January/February 2025

Volume 25 | Issue 1

umcnic.org

Postmaster:
Send address changes to:
303 E. Wacker Dr., Suite 2020,
Chicago, IL 60601

Key:  Supported by Apportionment dollars  Supported by Mission Links dollars | Learn more about Apportionment & Mission Links dollars at umcnic.org/apportionments and umcnic.org/misionlinks

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DO NOT DELAY. DATED MATERIAL

Disaster Response Team 'lumberjacks' helped clear hurricane-hit town

More people of Valdosta, GA, can get around town and repair their homes after Northern Illinois Conference's early response volunteers removed fallen trees in that area during a Nov. 12-21 work trip.

Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida as a Category 4 storm on Sept. 26 and continued north. Historic rainfall, flooding, power outages, and 140 mph winds plagued the Southeast, with the mountains of western North Carolina being particularly hard hit. According to the Associated Press, at least 179 people over six states died as a result of the storm.



NIC disaster response workers built a temporary electrical service pole.

Photo from Colin Monk.

Hurricane Milton followed on Oct. 9.

Many affected areas still needed a lot of recovery help in November, when NIC's team was invited to help.

The team cut up trees that damaged homes, blocked roads, and took out power.

Colin Monk, the conference disaster response coordinator, reported daily on the ministry's Facebook

page. They worked with Bemiss United Methodist Church in Valdosta and a local resident joined them. West and East Ohio annual conferences also sent 10 people to the region.

"It is always a great feeling when we complete a job and the homeowner sheds a few tears of joy," Monk said. "God is good!"

On the second day of work, the team observed the number of roofs that had been damaged (and have been given some temporary covering) by falling trees. This meant there were still plenty of downed trees to cut up and move.

"The crew worked like lumberjacks," Monk observed.

In addition to the much-needed tree removal, other problems emerged. In the afternoon of the third day, a neighbor asked the team to check the damage to her house, which had been hit by a large tree.

"The good news was the tree was removed but the bad news was that the woman's home lost electrical power," Monk said. The point at which electrical service is wired into her home had been heavily damaged.

The team took the initiative to contact the city's building code supervisor and the electrical system director. They approved the



The hurricanes that devastated much of the Southeast destroyed this house in Valdosta, Ga. *Photo from Colin Monk.*

team's plan to install a temporary electrical service pole for her, as she was in dire need.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief reports that it is offering consultation and coordinative support to all affected conferences as communities begin to assess their needs. So far, grants have been awarded to the North and South Georgia, Western North Carolina, and Holston conferences.

Generosity is a crucial way to participate in compassion ministry, such as disaster response.

"What a great way to see how generous donations can bring hope and joy to others," Monk said. "Thanks so much to all that have donated!"

They ask Northern Illinois United Methodists to continue to pray for those still needing hurricane relief help.

 Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the disaster response team and your giving to General Church apportionments supports UMCOR's relief efforts. 

Annual Conference Shepherding Team will assist churches

by Mark Manzi and Rev. KyungHae Anna Shin,

co-chairs of the Annual Conference Shepherding Team Northern Illinois Conference's Annual Conference Shepherding Team is committed to helping local churches thrive by connecting them with vital resources and support, including conference staff or neighboring churches. The team, composed of dedicated clergy and lay leaders from across the conference, is specifically designed to respond



to the challenges and opportunities of sharing an episcopal leader with the Wisconsin Annual Conference. (Find our role statement here: umcnic.org/shepherdingteam.)

Our mission is to build trust, foster collaboration, and ensure accountability as we work together to live out the NIC vision of "making and supporting vital Christians in vital congregations that engage with their communities and the world for peace, justice, and mercy."

Connecting churches to resources and support

The ACST is here to help local churches connect with tools and resources that can empower them to meet their goals. District Shepherding Teams, which are attuned to the specific needs of their local communities, are also ready to offer direct support. DSTs are a primary point of contact for local churches, equipped to provide guidance, resources, and connections to help each church reach its potential.

see ACST, p.5

 Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Annual Conference Shepherding Team and local churches.



From Your Bishop:

Can 2025 be a year of grace?

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."—2 Corinthians 12:9

When I was a teenager, a United Methodist pastor explained grace to me. It changed my life. That same grace continues to change my life. How has grace shaped your life? How do you continue to struggle with grace?

Grace is the unmerited, up-building, unconditional love God extends to all people and to the whole creation. United Methodists have an expansive view of grace. We know that grace is always among us, working in love.

United Methodists are a Baskin-Robbins of grace. We proclaim the grace that God gives us before we even know we need it or know how to ask; this is prevenient grace. We proclaim the grace of God for us and for our healing with God; this is justifying grace. The upbuilding grace that attends to growth in love within us is sanctifying grace.

Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Our whole lives are a response to grace. I write today to invite you to observe 2025 as a year of grace.

It is a basic truth of ministry that what you pay attention to grows. If we pay attention to mission, mission grows. Attend to Christian for-

mation and knowledge grows. How might we be changed if we focused our lives more and more on grace? What if we used grace sightings in our devotionals and sermons? Or how might we be renewed if we sing about grace?

What if we practiced a grace that allows us to demonstrate our unity in Christ as a faith community? Currently, we live in a moment when



powerful moneyed forces have divided this country. I believe this is an opportunity to make grace greater than our differences. I would want us to be clear that we are not proffering cheap grace for bullying, manipulation, or accommodating bad behavior that is harmful or abusive. Grace and repentance are sisters and should travel together, for grace without authentic repentance is abuse.

What if our personal anti-racism work featured grace-grounded reflection and honest conversations about blind spots and grace for others, and grace for deeper conversations and then action? What if grace called us all to grow in cultural competency so that we might grow in faith together?

What would happen to us if we framed mission by showing grace in our communities and world? Instead of focusing only on business at our council meetings, we might ask,

Where did we see grace today? How might we practice grace and extend grace to more and more in our community? Or where is grace leading our congregation now?

I will be keeping a grace journal just to see what God will do.

For the days ahead, I will remind us that grace is also for the stranger and sojourner in our land. Leviticus 19:33-34 reminds us, "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Next year we will enjoy a year of experimentation for mission as we try new forms of ministry to make a difference. We will need to offer support to local churches for their ministry as they try to respond to their post-COVID context. We need to turn our systems toward learning and sharing so that we can support local church vitality as fully as possible. What will be the impact of having two conferences—the whole episcopal area—attend to a focus on grace?

My life was changed by grace and it continues to be changed. I believe people are looking for grace and bearers of a God working in love. I pray that a year of grace will deepen and strengthen us. Let's try it!

Your giving to General Church apportionments supports the Episcopal Office.



Benefits changes and opportunities for 2025

by Rev. Cheryl Weaver, NIC Benefits Officer

As we welcome in 2025, the Northern Illinois Conference Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, along with the benefits staff (Lameise Turner and Rev. Cheryl Weaver), want to let participants know about health and retirement options for the coming year.

Virgin Pulse name change

Virgin Pulse users will now see some changes to the program—including its adopting a new name, Personify. Wespeth will soon tell users what they will need to do for the transition. Please note that all rewards and statistics will transfer.

Monthly education about benefits

This fall, NIC's benefits staff began offering Northern Illinois and Wisconsin Conferences a monthly education session on benefits, called Lunch and Learn. These take place one

Wednesday per month via Zoom and start at 11:30 a.m. They focus on all aspects of clergy well-being, including physical, mental, spiritual, and financial. The schedule for the first quarter of 2025:

- Jan. 15: New Year, Same You! Non-resolutions for Better Mental Health
- Feb. 12: Heart Health
- March 19: Lenten Retreat

Find the registration links online (umcnic.org/calendar/benefits-lunch-and-learn) or by contacting the conference benefits officer, Rev. Cheryl Weaver, at cweaver@umcnic.org.

Financial and Retirement Benefits

United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (formerly known as UMPIP and now PIP) is a 403(b) retirement savings plan for United Methodist clergy and lay employees. Participants can contribute through payroll deduc-

tion. It is an individual account plan, meaning participants can make contributions as a percentage of their pay or a flat-dollar amount. They can choose before-tax or after-tax contributions, and control how to invest PIP contributions through LifeStage Management or by choosing your risk tolerance.

As participants set goals for the new year, they should consider their overall financial wellness. Wespeth partners with EY Financial Planning Services, a leading global financial services firm, to offer confidential, objective financial counseling at no additional cost to eligible participants. Financial planning services are available to all active participants and surviving spouses with an account balance in Wespeth-administered plans, as well as to terminated and retired participants with an account balance of at least \$10,000.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Benefits office.



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Sign up for the weekly NIC eNews, Appointment Announcements and Sympathy notices. Visit umcnic.org and scroll down and click on "Sign up for our Newsletter" to enter your name and email.

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.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports this publication.



Plans are shaping up for 2025 Annual Conference

by Rev. Victoria Rebeck, NIC director of communications

Under the theme “Grace is Sufficient,” clergy and elected lay members will gather for Northern Illinois Conference’s 186th session, June 9-11, at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center, 1551 N. Thoreau Dr., Schaumburg, IL.

Bishop Dan Schwerin chose the very Wesleyan theme.

“I prayed about it, wondering what has the capacity to change us?” Bishop Schwerin explained. “Those who lead in the church know that what you pay attention to grows, whether that is carpet print battles or mission projects. I believe that if we understood grace, lived grace, sang about grace, and taught grace, that if we used grace stories in our life together, it would be a better focus than on bricks and budgets.”

He recommends Eph. 2:8 and 2 Cor. 12:9 as scripture passages that illuminate grace.

Services will express cultural diversity, according to Pastor Jacob Tipantasing-Wolver-

ton, who is overseeing worship planning. The ordination service will include a liturgical dance group.

There will be three worship services:

- Celebration of Ministry: June 9, evening
- Memorial service: June 10, late afternoon
- Retirement celebration: June 11, mid morning

A mass choir, which many enjoyed last year, will be organized again.

The conference committee will again make scooters available for those with mobility limitations. These must be reserved in advance. No extras will be available on site. If you or someone you know might benefit from a scooter, please make sure they reserve one when registering for annual conference.

If your conference-related organization or group is planning a meal

during the conference, please consider holding your meal at the hotel. Plated meals, buffet, and reception style food station options are available. For more information, please contact Ariel Alonso, conference events planner, at events@umcnic.org.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the Annual Conference session.



Meet the conference speakers



Rev. Dr. Reginald Blount, Bible study leader

Dr. Blount is Murray H. Leiffer Associate Professor of Formation, Leadership, and Culture and director of the Center for the Church and the Black Experience, both at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He earned a bachelor’s degree from Tuskegee University, a master of divinity degree from Candler School of Theology, and a doctor of philosophy degree from Northwestern University in cooperation with Garrett-Evangelical.

Bishop Karen Oliveto, ordination preacher

Bishop Oliveto was consecrated as a United Methodist bishop in 2016. She retired in 2024. Her educational background includes a bachelor’s degree from Drew University, a master of divinity degree from Pacific School of Religion, and a master of philosophy and doctor of philosophy in the sociology of religion, both from Drew.



Preparing for “Grace Is Sufficient”

Bishop Dan Schwerin selected the theme to encourage conference members to focus on something that nurtures our spirits before turning to business matters. In fact, it complements his theme for all of 2025: “A Year of Grace.” (See his column on p. 2.)

“The number-one thing I hear when I talk about grace is, ‘What is grace?’ That tells us we have teaching to do,” the bishop observes.

One need not use a theological exposition to explain the concept.

“How can we teach this? By telling a story about how grace impacted you,” he says.

Grace is Sufficient

“How many of us would be changed if we told our grace stories?”

Both Northern Illinois and Wisconsin conferences will delve into this theme, and he looks forward to what those explorations will inspire.

Let’s build a Brainbox

by Rev. Hope Chernich, Des Plaines: First UMC

Over the course of the past year a group of clergy has gathered periodically to talk about the challenges facing our churches in the Northern Illinois Conference. We talked about clergy burnout and “zombie” churches: congregations that have no real life left. In a congregation’s life cycle these churches are often extremely small. There may be only a small group of members remaining, but they often require a lot of time and energy. “Zombie” churches mindlessly devour resources and repeatedly wear out or even destroy pastors.

After one of our conversations, I started googling “zombies” and discovered the word “brainbox.” This word came up in my search as an antonym to zombies. Brainbox has several meanings: it can refer to the skull protecting the brain, someone who is intelligent, or, in a computer, the microprocessor that contains all of the information necessary for a computer to function.

This got me wondering. What if instead of focusing on trying to diagnose whether or not a church has life left, we put resources into a “brainbox”? How might things change if instead of looking for “zombies”, we looked for solutions?

Maybe as a conference we could focus on creating ways to share our learnings, support each other, and protect innovation. What if we used our resources to create a place or a space to col-

lect wisdom, knowledge and expertise from across our connection? Maybe we would be better able to protect our clergy and other resources from mindlessly being devoured.

How can we build a brainbox to protect and support those doing ministry in local churches? Here are some initial ideas.

Pray for our clergy. All of them. Those discerning their ordination. Those who have retired, as deacons, local pastors, and elders; those in extension ministries and those on leave. Let’s cover all of our clergy in prayer, that God would sustain and guide them. That their gifts and callings would be received and bear fruit. That their families would be supported and loved.

Lean into our connection. We have amazing and gifted clergy in NIC. We need to explore ways for us to resource each other. Ways to learn from what other clergy and churches are doing. There are a number of platforms we could use to connect on a deeper level; praying for one another and sharing learnings and experiences.

Support people in their unique callings. Throughout the ordination process the con-



ference Board of Ordained Ministry guides people to discern their gifts and graces for ministry. As an annual

conference, we bear witness to their ministry and vote to affirm their callings. We must also support them!

A majority of those ordained in the last 20 years entered ministry with their eyes wide open to the challenges facing the Christian church. They did not expect it to be easy or anything like what pastors did for decades. However, they did not expect the biggest challenge to be the systems and institutions that they set out to serve.

The local church remains God’s primary way to bring salvation and transformation to the world and God is still calling people to ministry. But we must find new ways to support clergy and local congregations. We must be willing to tear apart old ways of doing things to create new and vibrant structures to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

If you would like to be involved in further conversation about how we might move into this new season as local churches, as pastors, and as a conference, please take a moment to complete this form: forms.gle/i5QnMQeg66GF9Wpw7.

NIC grants boost church ministries to communities

by Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, director of connectional ministries; Lisa Smith, communications specialist; and Rev. Victoria Rebeck, director of communications

Northern Illinois Conference's grants for churches provide financial and resource support for particular ministries undertaken by congregations and related organizations. Among these grants' purposes are empowering churches to expand their ministries, address community needs, and strengthen their mission mindset. The ultimate goal is to enhance churches' ability to fulfill their mission of making disciples and serving others, in accordance with United Methodist principles.

More than \$100,000 was distributed in 2024 through the Creative Ministries, Social Reform, Volunteer in Mission, Accessibility, Keagy/Town & Rural, and Migrant Needs Assistance (2023 Bishop's Appeal) grants. These enabled congregations to remain vibrant centers of worship and service in their communities and beyond. They align with our United Methodist values by fostering social justice, inclusivity, and community engagement.

Keagy and PACK grants

On Nov. 2, Grace UMC in Dixon hosted the Town and Rural Festival, where representatives from 27 churches gathered to celebrate 31 grant-supported projects that are making a

difference in their communities. The NIC awards two grants each year — the PACK (Planned Act of Christian Kindness) Grant and the Keagy Grant — to empower small-town and rural churches in their community outreach.

The PACK Grants support churches' work to bless their neighbors to demonstrate Christ's

love. This year, 15 PACK grants totaling more than \$7,300 were awarded in amounts ranging from \$100 to 500.

The Keagy Grants, which have a 50-year history, are funded by a bequest from Martin Keagy, who had a big heart for small-town and rural churches. Larger ministry projects that benefit the community and strengthen churches engaged in evangelism, discipleship, justice, and compassion are eligible. This year 16 Keagy grants of more than \$37,450 were awarded in amounts ranging from \$500 to \$5,000.

Rev. Libby Rutherford, chair of the Keagy Town and Rural Committee, expressed gratitude, saying, "It is so good to see where God is working in and among us, by directly connecting us to our communities to the love of God and for the common good. These grants ensure that NIC churches in small towns and in rural areas can support and value people of all ages and all walks of life."

This year, grant-supported projects made a significant impact in four areas: seniors, outreach, resources, and children and youth programs. The projects that supported seniors

brought joy and connection through fellowship gatherings and enrichment activities. Funded outreach efforts serve their neighbors through community

meals, Pridfest support, and seeker groups, all promoting inclusivity and spiritual growth. Multiple projects focused on providing essential resources to meet vital community needs. Children and youth were the focus of many projects, such as vacation Bible schools, Easter events, youth rooms, and mission trips.

"Not only did the grants help start new programs, but they also provided, sustained, and supported programs where God was already working," explained Nancy Pitsch of Wesley UMC in Sterling, which used the money to expand its confirmation classes.

Migrant Needs Assistance grants

New neighbors in Northern Illinois who came from other lands are experiencing God's love through God's people, thanks to the 14 churches and organizations that received conference Migrant Needs Assistance grants.

"God has called us for such a time as this," said Rev. Ayla Samson, who led prayer and a reflection at the beginning of a celebration of the ministries, held on Nov. 9 at Our Saviour's UMC in Schaumburg. "God has brought us this far and will continue to provide for the ministry. Our desire has not changed."

Churches and organizations that received the grants, which were funded by the 2023 Bishop's Appeal, offer a breadth of ministries that address almost all aspects of a migrant family's experience. Food, weather-appropriate clothing, legal assistance, English-Language Learners classes, and more are helping migrants adjust to a new place. The ministry of hospitality, which the Bible repeatedly emphasizes, came through the relationships built and the needs addressed by these projects.

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

These churches are ready to act as God's love for their neighbors. 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. Most other grants receive applications in the fall. Learn more at umcnic.org/grants.



Connection and networking among the church communities is an important part of the Town and Rural Festival.

2024 Grant Recipients

Creative Ministry Grants \$16,000 distributed

1. Bensenville
2. Cedarville
3. Chicago: South Shore
4. Des Plaines: Nuevo Amanecer
5. Des Plaines: First
6. Evanston: First
7. Forreston: First
8. Leaf River
9. Oregon
10. Park Forest: Grace United Protestant
11. Rochelle
12. Rockford: Aldersgate
13. Rockford: Beth Eden
14. Rockford: Grace
15. Waterman
16. West Chicago: New Hope

Accessibility Grants \$3,500 distributed

1. Aurora: Wesley
2. Chicago: Gorham

Volunteers in Mission Grants \$2,000 distributed

1. Dixon: Grace
2. Evanston: First

Social Reform Grants \$5,000 distributed

1. Chicago: Broadway
2. Evanston: First
3. Glencoe: North Shore, and Pan-African Rural Health and Social Services
4. Morrison
5. Pecatonica

Migrant Assistance Grants \$36,500 distributed

1. Aurora: Nueva Vida
2. Blue Island: La Gracia de Dios
3. Care for Real
4. Chicago: Chicago Lawn
5. Chicago: Granville
6. Chicago: Humboldt Park
7. Chicago: Lincoln
8. Chicago: Redeemer of Calvary
9. Chicago: South Shore
10. Franklin Park
11. Hinsdale
12. Kids Above All
13. Mt. Prospect: Trinity
14. Naperville: Wheatland Salem
15. Oak Lawn: First
16. Park Ridge: First
17. Rockford: Victory New Faith Community

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports grants.



Keagy/Town & Rural Grants \$44,750 distributed

1. Apple River UMC
2. Ashton UMC
3. Brookeville UMC
4. Cedarville UMC
5. Creston UMC
6. Dixon: Grace UMC
7. Durand UMC
8. Elizabeth UMC
9. Esmond UMC
10. La Salle: Grace
11. Leland UMC
12. Lena UMC
13. Mendota: First UMC
14. Morris: First UMC
15. Norway UMC
16. Orangeville UMC
17. Oregon UMC
18. Pearl City UMC
19. Prophetstown UMC
20. Rochelle UMC
21. Savanna: First UMC
22. Scales Mound UMC
23. Shannon: Bethel UMC
24. Sterling: First UMC
25. Sterling: Wesley UMC
26. Stockton: Wesley UMC
27. Tampico UMC



by Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, NIC director of connectional ministries
In our United Methodist Church, the concept of grace is central to our theology and practice.

Grace represents God's unmerited favor, a gift freely given to all. We have been invited by Bishop Dan Schwerin to observe 2025 as a Year of Grace (see pg. 2). This will be the theme of our 2025 annual conference session (see pg. 3).

Within the connectional ministries framework, a Year of Grace offers a powerful opportunity to deepen discipleship, nurture congregational vitality, and engage in mission that reflects Christ's transformative love. It can be seen as a collective journey of spiritual growth and active ministry. Rooted in John Wesley's understanding of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, observing a Year of Grace invites all Methodists to embrace grace as a dynamic force that informs both personal faith and communal action.

A Year of Grace provides congregations and individuals the opportunity to intentionally reflect on and live out this core aspect of Methodist theology in practical ways.

Here are some practical steps to embrace a Year of Grace in your local church or community.

1. Start with prayer and worship. Grace begins with God, and a Year of Grace should be rooted in prayer and worship.

- Incorporate grace-focused themes in worship
- Encourage personal prayer
- Hold special services

2. Equip Leaders with Grace-Centered Training. Leadership development is key to fostering a culture of grace in the church. Training might include:

- Workshops on Wesleyan theology
- Conflict resolution training



3. Practice radical hospitality. Prevenient grace teaches us that God extends love to everyone, even before they realize they

want it. Churches can reflect this by:

- Welcoming newcomers
- Reaching out to marginalized groups

4. Offer opportunities for spiritual renewal. Justifying grace focuses on the transformative power of faith. To nurture awareness of this expression of grace, consider providing:

- Discipleship classes
- Personal testimonies
- Retreats and quiet days

5. Engage in community missions. Sanctifying grace moves us toward action. Organize activities that demonstrate grace in tangible ways, such as:

- Feeding the hungry
- Environmental stewardship
- Support for vulnerable populations

6. Build connectional relationships. The United Methodist Church thrives on its connectional nature.

Strengthen bonds with other churches by participating in:

- Collaborative mission projects
- District or conference-wide events
- Sharing resources

7. Reflect and celebrate. At the end of the year, take time to:

- Evaluate progress
- Celebrate milestones
- Share stories

A Year of Grace is more than a theme; it's an invitation to align our lives and ministries with the boundless love of God. By taking practical steps to reflect and act on grace, the UMC can empower individuals and communities to experience the transformative power of God's gift and share it with the world.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports Connectional Ministries.



Conference task forces become permanent committees

by Rev. Victoria Rebeck, NIC director of communications

Two task forces are folding into existing committees or transitioning to committee status.

The Discipleship Task Force and Anti-Racism Task Force are joining their work to the Discipleship Committee and the Commission on Religion and Race, respectively, on Jan. 1.

In 2022, a third task force, assigned to work toward growing vital congregations, merged with the Committee on Congregational Development and Redevelopment and took the name Committee on Development and Redevelopment (CODE RED).

These task forces emerged in 2019, following a restructuring of Northern Illinois Conference ministries in 2018. At that time the Annual Conference Shepherding Team proposed three conference priorities that would be implemented by new task forces.

The Discipleship Task Force was formed to lead the conference toward achieving goal one, to grow and reach new disciples of Jesus Christ. The Anti-Racism Task Force has been overseeing work toward goal two, to live out the conviction that racism is incompatible with Christian teaching. The Vital Congregations Task Force has strategized progress toward goal three, to increase the number of highly vital congregations.

"The goals have been embraced by the permanent committees," explained Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, NIC's director of connectional ministries. Moving the goals to the oversight of permanent committees signals that the conference is committed to the goals for the foreseeable future.

Funds delegated to the task forces will now be joined with the committees' budgets.

Although the transition to permanent committees began on Jan. 1, these committees and their corresponding task forces began meeting in 2024 to identify and organize their work.

Project manager Amania Drane has been assisting the Discipleship and Anti-Racism task forces. In 2025, she will concentrate on helping four NIC committees: the Committee on Discipleship and Spiritual Formation (a new name for this group), the Commission on Religion and Race, the Council on Young People's Ministries, and the Commission the Status and Role of Women. She will offer guidance on how these groups can implement their plans.

Ms. Drane, who is a consultant contracted to work with the conference, provides help that otherwise would have been offered by staff.



The NIC Commission on Religion and Race has been meeting with the Anti-Racism Task Force.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the NIC committees.



ACST *continued from p.1*

Key insights from 2024 Annual Conference session

At the 2024 Annual Conference, we invited members to share challenges they've faced over the past two years and discuss how the ACST can support them. Here's what we've done to respond to these expressed needs:

1. Stewardship and finance: Many churches noted challenges in stewardship and budgeting. In response, Elaine Moy, conference treasurer/director of administrative services, held two training sessions in October focusing on these essential areas. She is offering one on Jan. 9, "Ministry with the Houseless: Hospitality and Liability", and another on Jan. 16, "Human Resources and Finances." Check the NIC calendar (umcnic.org/calendar).

2. Difficult conversations: To equip leaders with skills for navigating difficult discussions, we hosted a seminar in October dedi-

icated to "disagreeing better" and handling challenging conversations.

3. Diverse ministry support: Whether your church seeks assistance with reaching young families, launching new ministries, merging with neighboring congregations, or addressing other unique needs, we're here to connect you to resources and staff who can help.

If you're not sure where to begin, reach out! Start a conversation with ACST co-chairs Mark Manzi (mmanzi@sbcglobal.net) or Rev. Anna Shin (pastor@friendshipbolingbrook.org). We're here to help you take the next steps, whether that means working with ACST, DSTs, or conference staff, who are passionate about supporting local churches across our region.

Together, let's build vibrant, engaged communities in the Northern Illinois Conference.

Apportionments unite us and strengthen our ministries

by Kim Emery, chair of the conference Council on a Finance and Administration

Being United Methodist means being connectional, which means all local United Methodist churches working together. The main way we can be connected is by paying apportionments to support the Northern Illinois Conference and the worldwide United Methodist Church.

Do you know that in the 2025 budget (which was passed unanimously by the members of the annual conference in session):

- 16 percent benefits local churches and districts through equitable compensation, creation of new faith communities, and congregational redevelopment
- 30 percent funds programs that support the NIC's ministries, including the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Annual Conference Shepherding Team
- 29 percent supports clergy leadership for conference, districts and local churches
- 25 percent makes possible conference services, including the Board of Trustees, Archives and History, and Finance and Administration

The ministries that these funds support help to keep our conference working together to grow, supporting and helping local churches to become vital congregations as well as to develop new leaders and make new disciples of Jesus Christ.

Your apportionment giving is essential to keeping our churches connected and growing so we can keep the future of the UMC vital.

Please visit umcnic.org/apportionments to view Bishop Dan Schwerin's video "Run the Race" and more detailed information on how our shared giving strengthens ministry in our churches.

Our apportionments to the worldwide UMC (sometimes called "the general church") contribute to the World Service Fund, Episcopal Fund, Ministerial Education Fund, Black College Fund, General Administration Fund, Africa University Fund, and Interdenominational Cooperation Fund. These funds support ministries that benefit our churches and our shared witness across the globe. To learn about general-church apportionments and stewardship, visit resourceumc.org/en/church-wide/umcgiving/apportion-funds.



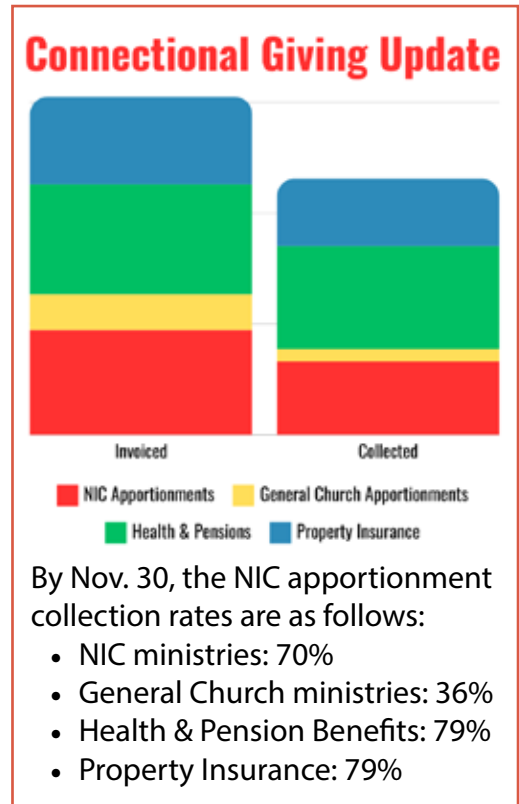
in full pass their responsibility to other churches in the conference. This is how a connectional system works.

Churches that paid their apportionments in full have additional opportunities to transform the world through generous giving to UMC missions. Seven categories of ministries are listed as NIC Mission Links opportunities (umcnic.org/MissionLinks): Special Sundays, Global Advance Projects, Missionary Support, UMCOR/Emergency Relief Projects, U.S.-Based Advances, NIC Conference Projects and NIC District Projects.

Churches that pay their apportionment in full and contribute to Mission Links are recognized as a Mission Link churches by paying 100% Apportionments and contributing to Mission Links.

In the past three years, NIC churches have remitted 75 to 79 percent of their conference apportionments and 34 to 38 percent of their general-church apportionments. This year, the conference will return to its previous practice of combining conference and general church support in one apportionment figure. All annual conferences support their own and our shared general church ministries. UM general church funds offer resources and consultation to churches and help represent the denomination around the world.

Local churches, please pay your apportionment at 100 percent, if possible. Your faithful contributions benefit all NIC churches. By working together, we are much stronger than we would be as an individual church. This helps all of our sibling churches grow and make new disciples of Jesus Christ.



Conference Members: Your responsibility to the budget

Members of the 2024 annual conference session, which includes all clergy and an equal number of lay people, voted unanimously to approve the 2025 NIC budget. Approving the budget entails agreeing to fund the budget. Members, please lead your churches to pay their apportionment in full. It is only by churches' paying their apportionment at 100 percent that we can strengthen NIC churches and support the UMC's transforming presence here and around the world.

When budgeting for ministry, churches should plan for their apportionment first. Apportionments—"a portion meant for others"—is the priority for all UMC churches. Churches that don't contribute their apportionments

Pastors serving Cross-cultural or Cross-racial appointments build resilience

by Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, NIC director of connectional ministries

Sixty pastors serving the Northern Illinois Conference in cross-cultural and cross-racial appointments gathered Dec. 9-10 in Woodstock to address the pressing ministry skills of navigating trauma, building resilience, and fostering hope.

The retreat, hosted by the episcopal office and Connectional Ministries office, gave clergy a safe place where, through open and honest dialogue, they could share their experiences, strengthen their sense of community, and equip themselves with tools to lead through challenging times. The discussion and presentations emphasized the importance of unity and understanding in a time when many leaders are dealing with racism, social tensions, and personal hardships.



Bishop Schwerin offering a benediction during one of the worship services.

"Our baptism affirms we are never alone. We have a community of faith with us," said Bishop Dan Schwerin, resident bishop of the Northern Illinois-Wisconsin Episcopal Area, during the opening worship session.

During his keynote speech, Rev. Dr. Ronald Bell, director of healing and resilience for Discipleship Ministries and The Upper Room, highlighted the critical role that pastors play in fostering resilience within their communities and underscored the need for self-care among ministry leaders.

About 40 percent of Northern Illinois Conference appointments are cross-cultural/cross-racial; that is, the pastor serves a congregation consisting mostly of people of a different cultural or racial group. Though the NIC is a diverse conference, not all of its churches and communities are prepared to receive a pastor of another culture or race. Several clergy serving these churches face challenging times in ministry.

Participants engaged in small-group discussions that fostered empathy and mutual learning. These conversations revealed shared difficulties, providing valuable insights into how different communities experience and process trauma.

"In the midst of the struggles and challenges, we shared our strategies to overcome those by finding safe spaces," said Rev. Hyo-Sun Oh, pastor of Roselle United Methodist Church.

The event concluded with a collective commitment to foster ongoing collaboration and support. Pastors expressed their desire to maintain the connections formed during the gathering and to continue sharing resources and encouragement.

As the pastors returned to their communities, they carried with them not only tools and strategies but also a renewed sense of purpose. In the face of trauma, they are determined to stand as beacons of hope, bringing healing and strength to those they serve.

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports CCCR work.

NICUM insurance puts churches' needs first

by Jeff Ludwig, chair of NICUM Insurance Board

Many churches choose their own insurance coverage for their property and liability and find that premiums are expensive for the first year and annual increases are astronomical.

To help churches obtain reliable and more economical insurance, Northern Illinois Conference offers NICUM property insurance. Its mission is to provide a long-term, sustainable insurance program for all participating churches in the conference.

NICUM is much more affordable than most policies offered by other carriers. Church leaders may have even heard that many religious organizations, even those with favorable claims experience, are being dropped by their insurance carriers and cannot find alternatives. NICUM will not drop member churches.

Others have experienced excessive premium increases (some at 25, 50 or 100 percent or more, year after year). Many churches are unable to buy critical coverage (sexual misconduct and molestation liability) or adequate limits at any cost.

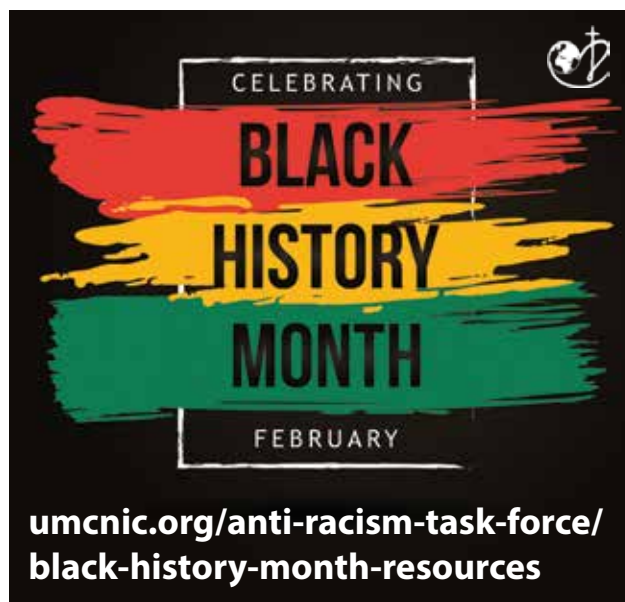
The chart below demonstrates how over the past four years, NICUM has outperformed the insurance marketplace for religious organizations. It has saved costs to member churches in every area by over 50 percent. The data below represents 2020-2024 rates.

Line of Coverage	Cumulative Rate Increase for Religious Institutions	Cumulative Rate Increase for NICUM Member Churches
Property	71%	32%
Liability	50%	19%
Workers' Compensation	55%	12%
Auto	64%	25%

Because NICUM covers a group of churches, it spreads the cost and risk across a group. This enables NICUM to negotiate better rates than can an individual church. It obtains a strong renewal because of favorable loss experience and its commitment to risk-management practices such as Safe Sanctuaries training and ongoing property appraisals.

NICUM's board works to keep costs as low as possible while maintaining current coverage and keeping limits the same. Considering today's extremely limited insurance market and challenging rate environment, NICUM provides churches reliable insurance at very competitive rates.

Please direct questions to Elaine Moy, NIC treasurer and director of administrative services, at emoy@umcnic.org.



CELEBRATING
BLACK HISTORY MONTH
FEBRUARY

umcnic.org/anti-racism-task-force/black-history-month-resources

Leading the Laity



by Eugene Williams,
Conference Co-Lay Leader

On behalf of the laity of the Northern Illinois Conference, I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ!

We recently celebrated the secular holidays of Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. And we were especially enraptured once again after experiencing the "thrill of hope" that the Advent season offers. But through it all, we must continue to recognize the reason for the season; and the reason is Jesus Christ! Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and his righteousness!

May the grace of God continue to fill us and guide our actions, for his grace is sufficient for all our needs. As we embark upon this season of expectation, experimentation, and challenges in the year 2025, I pray that we will do so with our minds stayed on Jesus. We cannot afford to be distracted by the vicissitudes of daily life. Worry about nothing, pray about everything. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, and with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7 NIV).

The terms "faith" and "hope" are often used interchangeably. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence

Renew hope, strengthen faith

of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1 KJV). Faith in Jesus Christ is the entire essence of our being as Christians. Amid all of the chaos in the church and the world today, this is a great time for us to renew our hope and strengthen our faith.



Episode MMXXV:
A RENEWED HOPE
May God's Grace Be With You
Laity Convocation 2025

Laity Convocation will be held on Feb. 8 at New Lenox United Methodist Church. Our theme is, "A Renewed Hope—Episode MMXXV: May God's Grace Be with You." Our time together will include a Star Wars perspective of good versus evil as we embrace what lies ahead in 2025 (MMXXV) and beyond. Please join us on Feb. 8 and wear your favorite Star Wars attire.

Mark your calendars accordingly and look for more information in the coming weeks. May the force (faith) be with you! Go with Christ, go with hope, go with grace and be well. Amen!

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports the work of the Board of Laity and Laity Convocation.




Northern Illinois Conference
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY CELEBRATION

The far-reaching legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will be commemorated on Jan. 19, 3 p.m., at First United Methodist Church, 1032 Maple Ave., Downers Grove.

Rev. Danita R. Anderson, assistant to the bishop, will speak on "The Unfinished Agenda." Bishop Dan Schwerin will offer remarks. We will enjoy the music of choirs from around the

conference. Following the service, worshipers may stay for a light supper.

There is no cost to attend the event or stay for the supper. However, registration is required for accurate planning. Learn more and register at umcnic.org/calendar/nic-mlk-celebration-2025. Downloadable flyers and bulletin inserts are also available on that page.



2025 DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TRAININGS

- Lake South: Sat., January 18
- Prairie Central: Sat., January 18
- Prairie North: Sat., January 27
- Lake North: Sat., February 1
- Prairie South: Sat., March 22

Each district will host a combination of worship and workshop sessions on different topics. For further details and registration visit the calendar at umcnic.org/calendar and click on the individual events.



Upcoming Events

See the full calendar at umcnic.org/calendar to learn more about our current and upcoming events.



Reimagining Church

by Rev. Christian Coon, NIC Director of Congregational Development

It was his big smile that caught my attention at first.

There were all kinds of facial expressions that I saw when I imposed ashes out in the streets of Chicago for Ash Wednesday. Probably one of the most common is what I consider the Solemn Look. A person would approach me to receive ashes and could sense that this was a holy moment. They closed their eyes and intently listened as I pressed my pinkie onto their forehead, making the shape of the cross and using my favorite liturgy for this day, lyrics to the Mumford and Sons song, "Awake My Soul": "In these bodies we shall live/in these bodies we shall die/And where you invest your love, you invest your life." After I finished the imposition and told them to have a blessed Lent, they opened their eyes, thanked me and continued on with their Solemn Look.



Double ashing, double grace

But not one particular man. He came up to me with that big smile. He didn't say anything to me, but just walked up, took off his orange stocking hat and looked at me expectantly.

But I hesitated. Not because of his smile or that I have something against orange hats, but I noticed . . . he already had an ash cross on his forehead. I froze for a moment and quickly tried to remember if I'd ever learned anything in seminary about whether there was something verboten about ashing someone twice.

By this time, I wouldn't have been surprised if the man was getting impatient with my hesitation, but he continued to wait patiently with a smile. I decided to err on the side of grace and added to his ash cross with my own. Again, without saying anything, he put his cap

back on, nodded at me and went on with his day. He'd been double ashed. Blessed twice. And I found myself a bit envious of him.

It takes a certain amount of vulnerability, I

think, to admit wanting to get ashed again. I'm not sure why he felt the need to go through this informal liturgy more than once. Did he consider himself particularly sinful? Maybe he just needed the reminder of his humanity and God's active presence through his humanity and the humanity of others. If so, we all could use that reminder and rekindle the yearning for whatever grace God shares with us.

It is these kinds of grace moments that I remember the most when reflecting on the many Ash Wednesdays where we would stand in the cold and offer "street ashings" to anyone who wanted to them. Ash Wednesday is on March 5 this year and I hope your church is making plans to go out of your buildings and into your communities on this day and throughout Lent to be public symbols of grace, offering God's love at no cost and without questions, including for those who need a double ashing. Which is probably something we all need, too.

(This story appears in Rev. Coon's book *Evangelizing Christians for the Journey*)

Your giving to NIC apportionments supports Congregational Development.



Repairing the Harm to Children—because they matter

by Martha Rudy, a member of First UMC, Evanston

"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up to the foundations of many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." Focusing on Isaiah 58:12 as a guide, and incorporating messages of hope, peace, love, and joy, First United Methodist Church of Evanston designated its special Advent and Christmas offering to the Repair the Harm to Children Fund. While many other churches in the Northern Illinois Conference already have given toward the Boy Scouts of America Survivor Trust via the NIC's Repair the Harm to Children campaign, Evanston First made a pledge this past November.

When you receive this issue of The Reporter, it will be the season after Epiphany. We just celebrated Christmas Day and before that we lit the candles of Advent.

I really appreciate Advent. I like the lights, reminiscent of stars in the sky, and I enjoy the decorating of trees, gathering of friends, and the special music. But what hits my heart the most are the undertones of acknowledgement that we live in a broken world. My favorite hymn from this time of year is written in a

minor key: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." It is haunting, and I find that it captures the mood of so much that is going on—divisive politics, displacement, war, and suffering. Even the prophet Isaiah talks about people walking in darkness.

But he also talks about how a baby will come unto us and be called Wonderful and Prince of Peace. We hear from Isaiah before we hear the birth story from Luke. Isaiah prophetically shares hope. Isaiah tells us that no matter how dark the day gets, hope breaks through. Now, the baby is born!

We are people of hope, called to share that hope with the world. One way we can do that is to be—as Isaiah calls us to be—repairers of the breach. Children's trust was broken by those

into whose care they were entrusted. There was a breach. It doesn't matter if it wasn't our specific church involved or if it happened



before you were born or to people you don't know. If we can help repair the breach by acknowledging those brave men who brought their abuse to light and by supporting the Survivors' Trust Fund, it seems like a good way to share the hope of the Christ Child.

Information about the Repair the Harm to Children campaign can be found at umcnic.org/RepairtheHarm. Individual and church gifts can be made directly to the campaign at that web page, or your church

can collect donations and remit them to the annual conference office. Perhaps a Lenten or special Easter offering could be designated to Repair the Harm. It's not too late! It is never too late to share hope.

Martha Rudy was formerly the chair of the NIC Board of Trustees. She was a signer of the official document acknowledging the NIC's participation in the Boy Scouts of America Survivors' Trust.



Clergy Appointments

Bishop Dan Schwerin announces the following clergy appointments for the Northern Illinois Conference

Matthew Mariani (Provisional Elder) to Northwestern Memorial Hospital (Chicago) as Staff Chaplain, from Northwestern Hospital (Huntley) as Chaplain. Effective Oct. 28, 2024.

Young-Mee Park (Retired Full Elder) to Chicago: First (Temple) as Interim Senior Pastor. Before her retirement in June 2024, Young-Mee served at Dixon: First (Associate); Oak Park: First; DeKalb District (Superintendent); and Hinsdale. Effective Dec. 1, 2024.

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



Marengo UMC joyfully supports community organizations

by Rev. Doc Newcomb, pastor Marengo UMC

Marengo United Methodist Church has found an easy and engaging way to serve their neighbors: a monthly mission collection.

We noticed that our collections for Midwest Mission that we brought to annual conferences always attracted a lot of donations. That led us to seek different agencies to support each month.

We learned that limiting our request to one or two specific items that aren't overly expensive made it easier for people to remember when they were out shopping. And, boy, do our people respond! We typically fill a couple large totes

each month. It's a blessing to give, and the organizations that receive the items are also blessed.

Among the items we've collected are pillows for PADS, clothing for the local rape crisis center, food for weekend nutrition programs, and dishes for the local nursing home. We've collected school supplies, hats and mittens, toothbrushes, and cleaning supplies. We've collected for Rockford Urban Missions, a sober-living facility, and two women's shelters.

Monthly missions collections have become another way for Marengo UMC to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community. And it's fun!