

REPORT OF THE INTERIM CONFERENCE MINISTER

By Rev. Dr. Terrill N. Murff

Greetings to the members of the Illinois Conference. It has been my pleasure and a blessing from God to serve you as the Interim Conference Minister. 2025 has been a year of transition. I would like to begin by celebrating the Conference Leadership of Juanita Bradley and Emily Mitchell who have curated a sense of calm and collaborative leadership throughout our Conference. The Ministry Leadership Team (MLT) continues to work hard to provide needed resources and to meet many of the needs of our local churches and clergy. This includes congregational resources along with Pastoral care and nurture.

We contracted the leadership skills of Jon Prain to facilitate the implementation of two (2) of the most critical initiatives that the Conference has undertaken since its inception; new Governance, and the independence and operation of our two (2) camps (Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill). The exhaustive work of both the Governance Implementation Team and the Camp Forward Team has made tremendous strides towards implementation of both major initiatives for 2026.

Responsibilities and Duties

The focus of my first year as Interim Conference Minister was to concentrate on the Responsibilities and Duties outlined in my Call Agreement as specified by Conference Council and Personnel. These responsibilities and duties include:

- Oversight of the Ministerial and Office Support Staff, assets and budget of the Illinois Conference in conjunction with the Personnel Committee and Conference Council.
- Provide emotional stabilization for the Conference by bringing about healing and trust.
- Be the point of contact for all Conference Committees, task forces, and Association Councils.
- Provide primary but not exclusive staff leadership in the areas of programs and events.
- Represent the Conference in ecumenical and interfaith communities in the wider society.

Like many of our kindred Conferences, financial support from our member congregations continues to decline. The reality is that this is more than a twenty-year-old trend. As you all know, we have half of the staff that we had more than ten (10) years ago. The work of the Illinois Conference is supported by contributions which come from our member congregations through Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM). Approximately 40% of our member churches contribute to OCWM annually. Much of the work of the MLT, newly created Board of Directors, Finance Board, and Community and Vitality Ministry; is to develop better and stronger relationships with our member churches.

Trauma Informed Culture

Much of my work as Interim Conference Minister in 2025 and beyond, utilized many of the components of "Trauma Informed Culture." My work was focused on different ways of integrating compassion, empathy, safety and respect into every interaction, every decision and how we plan to govern ourselves throughout the Conference. During 2025 and throughout 2026 I will continue to emphasize empathic leadership, collaboration, trust, mutual respect and accountability will be the pillars upon which my ministry within the Illinois Conference will be

built upon. This work will focus on creating a more empathic and nurturing culture throughout our Conference which identifies, recognizes and develops gifts in others.

I will work to focus our collective efforts in 2026 and beyond on creating new and unique revenue sources. I will also focus my efforts on the following:

Pastoral Care:

Healing Trust Issues & Strengthening Relationships: Continue to address trust issues across the Conference and build stronger relationships between Associations, churches, and the Conference.

Trauma-Informed Care: Continue the ongoing work on trauma-informed care within the Illinois Conference culture.

Administration:

Management: Focus on MLT/Staff management and effective communication

Working with Board of Directors, Associations & their committees:

Implementing new governance

Discuss and determine the relevancy of Cluster gatherings

Meeting Effectiveness: Work to improve attendance and preparedness at Board and Association meetings.

Outreach & Ecumenical Work:

Continue the collaborative work of the United Church of Christ with both our current Covenanted Partners along with establishing new Covenanted Partners.

Self-Care:

Focus on modeling intentional ways to deepen my spiritual journey so that I may offer the best version of myself to the staff and throughout the Conference.

Proclamation (Preaching):

Continue to be present with many of our member congregations and bring vision and purpose by preaching when invited.

IT/Communications (report from Sarah Lohrbach):

As some of you may already know, there have been several big projects on my plate for quite a while! Late this spring, we were finally able to hire a temporary part-time communications person to take over doing the bi-weekly newsletter so that I can shift my attention to these large and important projects. Diane was a great addition and was able to hit the ground running. The two (2) projects I have been focused on this year are:

1. File Migration: Setting up a SharePoint Intranet Hub for the Conference which will become our new cloud-based file server to replace our current on premises one that is around 15+ years old and no longer supported by Microsoft. This also includes the start of another big project in cleaning up and organizing our Conference files (including church and clergy files).
2. Database Migration: Building a new custom database to replace Realm which has never worked for us the way we needed it to. We are moving to Servis AI (formerly Free Agent CRM). This will also replace Realm as our donor management system. The building is about 90% done. Before importing data into the new database I am also doing a significant data cleanup to make sure we are importing the most current and accurate data

possible (knowing it will still not be perfect because we have over 200 churches and between 700-900 people we are importing into the new system). I am currently in the data clean-up and importing phase.

The goal is to have these two (2) projects complete by mid-January if possible (or at least complete enough that we can begin settling into the new systems). Once these projects are complete, the next major project will be moving towards a new website for the Conference and Associations.

Administration (Naomi Else):

MESA (Ministerial Excellence Support and Authorization) worked to merge the old web-based data collection system which was used to maintain and centralize congregations, authorized ministers, Associations and Conference record keeping system called the Data Hub, onto the same platform as the Ministerial and Local Church Profiles system and renamed it DAD (Database and Directories). This transition experienced many glitches and hiccups (some pieces did not work as anticipated; staffing permissions caused unexpected issues, bugs that cropped up took more time than expected to resolve).

CARDD (Center for Analytics, Research and Development and Data), MESA and Suran has worked tirelessly to address concerns, fix bugs and worked to build out improved capabilities of this newly improved system.

We have provided our annual yearbook information and have yet to receive the 2025 compiled annual Yearbook. As issues continue to persist with the DAD, we have little reliance on the accuracy of the information provided by the new DAD. We have found inaccuracies in necrology information (forcing us to maintain our own necrologies by hand. We have also experienced inaccuracies in our authorized ministers' records, which requires checking and then verifying our records DAD's records with our known records.

Work and improvements continue within the national setting.

Operations (Lauran Smith)

JITASA- is our outsourced bookkeeping and accounting firm who has expertise in working with religious and non-profit organizations. I meet on a weekly basis with Lauran Smith, Scott Peterson, and the account manager to provide updates, proper coding and classification of our transactions. We have had a fair share of hiccups, with coding and class designation, slow and delayed bill payment (utilizing Bill.com as a cloud-based bill payment service). We have also experienced snafus with Bill.com regarding client notification delays, operational nuances which impede payment efficiencies, and other systematic challenges which we are slowly overcoming.