

Prairie Association, Illinois Conference UCC

2025 Annual Report

Friends in Christ,

The Prairie Association has been continuing its re-covenanting movement throughout 2024-2025. We continue to see major changes in our congregations, both in new life and in celebration of ministries ending. We have taken the challenges of being a gathering of small town and rural churches seriously, supporting each other in stride. We have begun to rediscover the gifts of the Spirit that flow through our association, like the autumn winds across the fields in which our congregations were planted, are growing, and (with God's blessings) will abound in future harvest.

To say that 2024-2025 in the Prairie Association continues to change would be an understatement. We continue to see the restructuring and ending in the ministry of long-tenured pastors. We mark the beginnings and end of searches for new ministry leadership. We honor that other searches were set aside, with the local churches focusing on discerning God's still-speaking revelation for their mission and ministry.

At our latest count, the Prairie Association is a covenant community of 34 congregations across the geography of our twelve counties. Our Committee on Ministry (with thanks to Rev. Jennifer Amy Dressler and Rev. Muriel Jahn), reports these statistics:

- **Pastoral Leadership**
 - Rev. Randy Nicholas (PCUSA) began serving the Crooked River Ministry partnership (First Congregational Church UCC-Pecatonica and First Congregational Church UCC-Rockton)
 - Rev. Martha Langford began serving Second First Church-Rockford
 - Rev. Rachel Kirk completed her time serving St. John UCC-Freeport
 - Rev. Ted Englesdorfer completed his time serving Union Congregational UCC-Somonauk
 - Rev. Laurie Allen completed her time serving Mayfield Congregational UCC-Sycamore
 - Rev. Ron O'Neil retired from his ministry with Granville UCC
- **Authorizations in Ministry**

Jack Briggs, First Congregational UCC-Lee Center; Jim Brow, First United UCC-Sheffield; Beth Carson, St. John's UCC-Belvidere; Betty Delgado, Trinity UCC-LaSalle; Becky Erbe, Second/First Church-Rockford; Alex Garncarz, Zion UCC-Peru; Jon Graham, First Congregational UCC-Spring Valley; Karen Karczewski, First Congregational UCC-Cherry/ First Congregational UCC-DePue; John Omerod, English Congregational UCC- Big Rock; and Mike Slutz, UCC-Hollowayville continue their authorization in Lay Ministry.

Brian Eide (St. Paul's UCC-Hinckley) and Dale Sandell (Ebenezer/Salem UCC-Pearl City) were granted authorized as Lay Ministers.

Rev. Laurie Allen authorization in Lay Ministry, and Ordained to ministry, now serving outside of the association.
- **Church Affiliation**

Shabbonna UCC has disaffiliated with the UCC.

Like our Illinois Conference, the need for renewal in our governance and ministry is the driver for our current and future years. With smaller congregations and fewer churches in our Association, our structure has many unfilled seats required, both for our Association and for those relating to the Illinois Conference.

At this spring's Association Meeting, we gathered again with the Western Association for a day of inspiration. This year, we were led by Rev. David Fraccaro, who inspired us with his work at *Lumonos*, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering "meaningful conversations and relationships that create purpose in life, belonging in community, and wellbeing in the workplace." It was an inspiring moment, showing us again that God's still-speaking Word is calling us into our future ministry together.

At this fall's Association Meeting, we gathered with a quorum of members in a virtual meeting on Zoom. This allowed us to conduct business for the first time in three years. take the first steps in our re-covenanting, with a modification to our quorum rule. Also, we affirmed the resolution titled "Re-Covenanting as the Prairie Association," bringing us into an intentional dialogue on what we need as a covenant community to meet the current needs of the Association's governance and ministry.

Also, we hear from many of our local congregations that they are reviewing their local governance and evaluating their ministry models. This is the season in which we life and serve. And I, for one, believe it will be a productive and fruitful one in discerning God's call to the churches of the Prairie Association.

I also trust that we will listen closely to the Spirit's flame-filled inspiration on how to be more agile, while not suffering from pragmatism. Because, as Fred Pratt Green's hymn reminds us:

*The church of Christ, in ev'ry age
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage,
and keep on rising from the dead.*

May we be the change that we are needed to be, and keep listening to our God's Still-speaking voice,

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Hank Fairman,
on behalf of the Delegates of the Prairie Association