STATE OF the ILLINOIS CONFERENCE
Interim Conference Minister
2026 Report

"Hope, Spring Eternal"

Jeremiah 29:11–12 | October 2026

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." — Jeremiah 29:11

Greetings to the members of the Illinois Conference.
It continues to be my honor, privilege, and blessing from God to serve as your Interim Conference Minister, a role I have held since September 2024. I begin this report by celebrating the faithful and steady leadership of Juanita Bradley as she concludes her tenure as President of the Board of Directors.

President Juanita has guided the Illinois Conference through a significant period of governance transition that has brought both operational and organizational change. Throughout this process, she has cultivated a culture of calm, collaboration, and thoughtful leadership. Her unwavering commitment, wisdom, and grace have helped position the Conference for continued growth and effectiveness in ministry. On behalf of the Conference, I extend heartfelt gratitude for her service and leadership during this important season in our shared life together.

A CONFERENCE AT A CROSSROADS

As I present this State of the Conference report as Interim Conference Minister, I recognize that the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ is navigating a significant season of leadership transition, organizational healing, governance implementation, and financial sustainability. Yet, amid these challenges, "hope springs eternal."

Jeremiah reminds us that God's promise of hope is not dependent upon present circumstances. It is rooted in God's faithfulness and the assurance that a future remains possible.
The Illinois Conference possesses meaningful assets: committed congregations, dedicated clergy and staff, experienced leadership, established partnerships, and opportunities for renewal. Our challenge is to align these resources with our mission and transform them into a sustainable foundation for ministry.

OUR PRESENT REALITIES

Leadership and Organizational Culture

We are working to rebuild trust, strengthen accountability, and address organizational challenges while preparing sustainable leadership beyond the interim period. Through trauma-informed

principles and empathetic leadership, I have sought to acknowledge the impact of past organizational experiences, encourage constructive communication, and cultivate a healthier, more collaborative culture.

Governance and Accountability

Implementation of our revised governance structure continues to provide opportunities to clarify responsibilities, strengthen relationships, improve communication, and establish effective decision-making. Our success depends upon shared responsibility, role clarity, and collaboration among the Board, Associations, Ministry Leadership Team (MLT), and Conference staff.

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability remains one of our most significant challenges. At the current budget pace, the Conference has approximately three years of cash reserves. This reality requires careful stewardship, responsible financial oversight, alignment of resources with mission, and thoughtful planning for long-term sustainability.

Staff and Congregational Vitality

Healthy staff relationships, effective communication, pastoral support, and stronger connections across our five Associations remain essential. The vitality of the Conference depends upon strengthening the relationships and leadership capacity that sustain our congregations and shared ministry.

I thank God for the ministry of Rev. Michelle Hughes who retired in June of 2026. Rev. Michelle's excellent leadership and Pastoral support to the Fox Valley and Chicago Metropolitan Association Councils and Committees on Ministry and the six (6) CMA Clusters during her tenure. The MLT and Illinois Conference will miss Rev. Michelle Hughes' contributions.

STRENGTHENING OUR FOUNDATIONS

Throughout 2026, my ministry as Interim Conference Minister has focused on strengthening the organizational, relational, and spiritual foundations of the Illinois Conference.

My leadership has been guided by six (6) strategic priorities:

- **Pastoral Care:** Strengthening relationships with pastors, congregations, staff, Association leaders, and Conference leadership through pastoral presence, accessibility, and responsive engagement.
- **Staff Development:** Supporting Ministry Leadership Team collaboration, professional development, shared ministry practices, conflict resolution, Search and Call, pastoral care, and ministerial accountability.
- **Governance Implementation:** Working collaboratively with Conference Leadership, Association Councils, Human Resources, and Finance to support role clarity, communication, accountability, and organizational alignment.

- **Financial and Operational Stewardship:** Maintaining engagement with Conference financial leadership and Jitasa to support financial reporting, budget monitoring, administrative effectiveness, and responsible stewardship.
- **External Partnerships:** Representing the Conference through ecumenical, theological, health care, and community partnerships, including Advocate Health, Community Renewal Society, theological institutions, and community initiatives addressing justice and well-being.
- **Congregational Ministry:** Maintaining preaching, worship leadership, and congregational engagement, particularly throughout the Fox Valley and Chicago Metropolitan Associations as I provide coverage for the Associations that were part of Rev. Michelle Hughes portfolio.

An important accomplishment was facilitating a Ministry Leadership Team retreat with the assistance of a nationally recognized church leadership consultant. This initiative provided opportunities to strengthen collaboration, assess ministry practices, and establish a framework for ongoing Associate Conference Minister development.

I have also increased engagement with support staff, Conference leadership, and Association Councils to strengthen communication, coordinate responsibilities, and encourage shared ownership of the Conference's mission.

TRAUMA-INFORMED LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

Recognizing the impact of organizational history and leadership transition, I have sought to provide a consistent, spiritually grounded, and non-anxious presence.

My leadership emphasizes empathy, transparency, accountability, clear expectations, constructive conflict engagement, and opportunities for concerns to be addressed appropriately.

Trauma-informed leadership does not eliminate difficult decisions or accountability. Rather, it seeks to ensure that these responsibilities are exercised thoughtfully, consistently, and with appropriate attention to their impact on people and the institution.

I believe organizational healing requires both relational care and structural accountability. Our work is to strengthen the practices and relationships that support a healthier, more resilient Conference.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

As we move into the next phase of transition, our priorities must include:

1. Strengthening governance effectiveness and communication;
2. Developing staff capacity, collaboration, and accountability;

3. Rebuilding relational trust across the Conference;
4. Advancing financial and operational sustainability;
5. Maintaining congregational presence and community partnerships;
6. Preparing for a successful transition to settled Conference leadership.

My commitment is to help prepare the IL Conference with clearer governance, stronger relationships, more effective organizational practices, and a realistic understanding of its financial, personnel, and missional responsibilities.

The measure of this interim period will not be whether every challenge has been resolved, but whether we have strengthened the Conference's capacity to address those challenges faithfully and constructively.

HOPE, SPRING ETERNAL

The Illinois Conference is not defined solely by its present challenges. We are also defined by God's continuing promise, the faithfulness of our congregations, and our willingness to work together toward a better future.

As Interim Conference Minister, I remain committed to strengthening the people, relationships, and organizational practices that sustain our ministry and prepare us for the future.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve our pastors, congregations, staff, and leaders. Together, we continue the work of building a healthier, stronger, and more sustainable Conference.

Hope for healthier leadership.
Hope for stronger congregations.
Hope for renewed relationships.
Hope for sustainable ministry.

And above all, hope grounded in the faithfulness of God.

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you." — Jeremiah 29:12

Hope, Spring Eternal. Our future is in God's hands, and our work continues in faith.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. Terrill N. Murff

Interim Conference Minister
Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ

(ICM report on the following pages)

Interim Conference Minister's Report – Rev. Dr. Terrill Murff

Support Staff

Database Migration-Update (clergy, church and donor management):

Sarah Lohrbach worked with **Servis AI (formerly Free Agent)** to build a customized CRM (customer relationship management) system which contains two (2) modules: donor management and database management (people and churches). This system replaces REALM. All church data and people data for 4 out of 5 Associations has been imported into Servis AI. Sarah is doing a data cleanup prior to import to help us start with the best set of data possible and is continuing to update data in Servis AI as well during the cleanup and import process. We will be fully moving from Realm to Servis AI for our Conference database once the final Association people import is complete.

The donor management module enables the Conference to track contributions and generate reports and giving statements. The donor management system is already being used by our Conference Treasurer, Scott Peterson, for 2026 donation tracking.

File Migration

Microsoft SharePoint is the Conference's new cloud-based file server. At the end of 2025, Sarah migrated all files from the on-premises file server into SharePoint and it has been up and running since the beginning of the 2026. It features three (3) hubs for file management: Operations (finance, personnel), Conference (churches, clergy, governance, CoM, etc.), and Archives.

There is still a great deal of data cleanup and file organization that needs to be done, but all Conference files are now in SharePoint and accessible.

New Conference Website

Now that the file migration is complete and the database cleanup/migration is nearing completion, the next major project (which will be the focus for 2027) is the Conference website. Sarah will begin this project by assembling a volunteer team. This team will review other Conference websites to glean ideas for building a robust, user-friendly Conference website.

Part of the process will be getting input from ILUCC clergy and leaders in order to create a site that better meets the needs of our people and churches. Another key component in starting this process is researching web design companies and choosing which company will be the best and most cost-effective company for us to work with in building our new website from the ground up that we will be able to then maintain in house upon completion.

This new website will replace our current Conference website and five (5) Association websites.

JITASA

JITASA is our outsourced bookkeeping and accounting firm which handles bill payments, monthly bookkeeping, accounts payable and accounts receivable. The Treasurer (Scott Peterson), our Conference Bookkeeper (Lauran Smith) and myself

continue to meet weekly with JITASA to reconcile the books, address issues and work to create efficient workflow practices. We continue our work to refine the collaborated financial and administrative practices which we hope will increase our output.

Conference

Fox Valley Re-Covenanting Initiative

There have been two re-covenanting meetings with the pastors of the Fox Valley Association focused on listening, encouraging participation in Conference leadership roles within the new governance structure, and providing pastoral care support where needed.

This approach closely mirrors the re-covenanting model being led by Hank Fairman and Muriel Morely in the Prairie Association. I give thanks to God for the vision, leadership, and collaborative spirit they have brought to this important work, which is strengthening relationships and engagement across the Association.

Re-covenanting efforts will continue throughout 2027 as we seek to deepen connections, strengthen pastoral relationships, and encourage broader participation in the life and leadership of the Conference.

Conference Association Roundtable

I am planning to meet with the Conference Association Chairpersons to create a stronger relational discernment network across the Conference. The purpose of these roundtable conversations is to:

Build Trust and relationship

Provide an early warning system for concerns

Create 2-way conversation

Strengthen polity

Create consistency among the Associations

Improve coordination for ACM's

Create a channel for difficult conversations

Committee on Ministry Chairpersons

1. Annual Information Review (AIR)

I have suggested to the Chairpersons of the Committees on Ministry that the 2027 Annual Information Review (AIR) be administered by the Conference Support Administrative Assistant. I am recommending that the AIR process originate from the Conference office for a few reasons. First, the Conference is working to establish and maintain an accurate and comprehensive database of clergy information, including ministry settings, the status of Boundary Awareness Training (BAT) requirements, church membership, location of ministerial standing, current call position, capturing continuing education and to note changes.

Information gathered through the AIR process is used to update both Conference records and the Ministerial Directory and Authorized Ministers Database (DAD), formerly known as the

Data Hub. Centralizing the AIR process through the Conference Office will help ensure consistency, accuracy, and timely updates to these records, which are essential for supporting authorized ministers and fulfilling Conference and denominational reporting responsibilities.

2. Vetting of Boundary Awareness Training from the Disciples of Christ

I mailed a copy of the Disciples of Christ boundary awareness training curriculum, *Choices for Abundant Living: An Ethics Training Course for Clergy*. I ask that COM's review this curriculum and determine whether it meets the Illinois Conference requirements for Boundary Awareness Training. I would like to use this curriculum during our upcoming Boundary Awareness Training during the Annual Celebration.

In addition, I would like each Association to begin identifying individuals who would be strong candidates to serve as Boundary Awareness facilitators. The authors of *Choices for Abundant Living* have expressed a willingness to partner with the Illinois Conference and have offered to provide facilitator training for individuals we identify. This partnership would enable us to use the curriculum to offer our own Boundary Awareness training events within the Conference.

3. Adoption of the Unified Fitness Review Process (UFRP)

As we continue to strengthen our shared ministry and support authorized ministers throughout the Conference, a common Unified Fitness Review process enables us to respond faithfully, compassionately, and consistently when concerns arise. Adopting the UFRP across the five (5) Associations of the IL Conference also reinforces our commitment to mutual accountability and the well-being of those we are called to serve.

I have asked Bob Tallitcsh to coordinate the five Association COMs to implement a Unified Fitness Review Process (UFRP) for the Illinois Conference. I encouraged Bob to connect with Elizabeth Dilley from MESA (Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization) to learn from conferences where a UFRP is already operational and functioning well. Understanding their experiences and best practices will help inform our approach.

A Unified Fitness Review Committee (UFRC) is often created by multiple Associations within a Conference so that fitness reviews are handled timelier, by a trained, experienced, and more impartial group rather than by a single local Committee on Ministry (CoM). Participating Associations agree to accept the committee's findings and recommendations.

Midwest Ministry Development

Ecumenical church related organization that provides professional assessment, counseling, vocational discernment, and leadership – development services for clergy and other church professionals. I am working with them to more effectively and widely utilize their services for our clergy.

Hospice/Threshold Churches

A **hospice/threshold church** is a congregation that recognizes its ministry is nearing completion and intentionally chooses to conclude its life faithfully rather than continue in decline or denial. The term borrows from hospice care — where the focus shifts from curing to comfort, dignity,

and meaningful closure. It's not about failure, but about finishing well — with grace, gratitude, and purpose.

David Schoen (Church Building Loan & Fund) Minister for Church Legacy and Closure has retired and that leaves a huge void during a time when many of our churches are facing an uncertain and challenging future.

I am looking for programs and initiatives to resource and provide Pastoral nurture to the many of our congregations who find themselves in this challenging paradigm.

Church Property

God Can Ministries

The congregation disbanded during COVID. The mortgage holder is Church Building Loan & Fund who threatened foreclosure. God Can Ministries has sold the property to another church and will plan to close prior to year-end.

The Conference office was approached by Century 21 Lincolnwood seeking a congregation who is looking to sell its property. They have a congregation who is looking for a free-standing church building (not a campus nor a school) circa 6,000-12,000 sq ft., with the sanctuary and restrooms on the ground floor, seating around 250 – 300 people with on site parking.

Weekly Meetings

MLT (Ministry Leadership Team)- ACM's

Conference Leadership (President and Vice President)

CMA Community of Practice

JITASA (IL Conf Treasurer, IL Conf Bookkeeper)

Monthly Meetings

Board of Directors

Finance Board

FVA/CMA Association Council

CMA Clusters 1, 3, 5, and 6

Human Resource Board

CMA Community of Practice – Clergy & MID

Quarterly Meetings

Council of Conference Ministers w/ Karen Georgia Thompson

Community on Ministry Chairpersons

Bi Monthly Meetings (every two months)

Advocate Hospital Board of Directors

Advocate Southland Governing Councils

Advocate Quality Management Oversight

Community work with Covenanted Partners

Midwest Ministry Development Board Meeting

Civility Press Conference @ Chicago Urban League

Advocate Hospital – Philanthropy to Support Southside Transformation Initiative

Community Renewal BOD – Facilitate / Chair meeting

Ecumenism Chicago Metro Unity Prayer

Rainbow PUSH Conference

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference

Live Free