Illinois Conference UCC Ministry Council

2026 Annual Report

In 2026, the Ministry Council began organizing its work to strengthen ministry across the Illinois Conference and its local churches. The year's central accomplishment was establishing a regular Council meeting structure and clarifying how the ministry teams can serve the Conference, its Associations, and congregations. The initial Ministry Team formation struggled with low participation, scheduling conflicts, and insufficient membership to fully initiate actions for the Illinois Conference and local churches. The Council also identified a key challenge: teams need clear communication, reliable contact information, active participation, and shared expectations to carry out their missions effectively.

At the October 17, 2026 Ministry Teams meeting, the Conference reaffirmed and oriented participants to the Ministry Teams structure established by the Conference Constitution and Bylaws. The meeting introduced the four (4) primary teams and expected them to begin meeting independently to set their own workflows and goals.

Accomplishments and organizational progress

The Ministry Council established monthly meetings, scheduled for the first Wednesday of the month, to support the team's needs and eventually move to quarterly meetings as needed. The Council selected Rev. Michael Jones as chair and Rev. Duane Lahti as recording secretary and began preparing agendas and meeting records to support ongoing coordination and reporting to the Board of Directors. Members discussed how to connect the Council with existing subcommittees and Conference efforts, including Outdoor Ministry, disaster relief, and Tuthill.

The Council also worked with the Nominating Committee to address gaps in team membership and participation. Members identified missing contact information, limited responses, and difficulty reaching quorum as practical barriers. They began pursuing updated member lists, preferred contact methods, and followed up with nominated members. The group proposed a joint gathering of ministry team members to confirm who remained interested, clarify expectations, and help teams begin planning together.

Communication and shared tools were another important focus. Members discussed using existing channels such as Faithful Fridays and Constant Contact to provide reports and newsletters to Associations and churches, and to establish a consistent technology and document-sharing approach. The Council also sought better access to Zoom meetings and recordings to support participation and continuity.

The October 17 meeting clarified the accountability structure: ministry teams coordinate mission implementation and report to the Ministry Council, which the Illinois Conference Board holds accountable. Teams were encouraged to shape their own working style, set their meeting schedules, and form task forces or subgroups as needed. Outdoor Ministries (ODM) was placed under Wider Engagement.

Ministry teams: focus and current work

- **Community and Vitality** develops leadership, supports pastoral excellence, and deepens relationships among local churches and Associations. Discussion identified narrative budgeting and online giving as possible areas of work. At the October 17 meeting, Pat, Joycelyn, and Emily served as acting leads or supports, while Rev. Martin Nussbaum was absent. The Finance team is working with Community and Vitality as the "relationship arm of generosity and stewardship."

- **Justice and Witness** focuses on advocacy and action for a more just, equitable, and inclusive world. The team explored ways to share information through existing Conference communications and discussed the difficulty of scheduling meetings and reaching enough members to proceed effectively. Participants also considered sharing information related to a civility press conference. Rev. Duane Lahti was identified as chair, with Amanda, Ursula, and Mark serving on the team.
- **Church Connections** supports care and connection among congregations, pastoral leaders, and the Conference structure. Its early work centered on forming the team, clarifying available shared resources, and understanding the Conference's technology and support capacity. The Council identified Douglas Roberts as Chair.
- **Wider Engagement** connects the Illinois Conference with the wider United Church of Christ and ecumenical partners. The Council began clarifying the team's responsibilities and identifying connections with related efforts, including Outdoor Ministry, Tuthill, and disaster relief. ODM is now aligned under this team. Rev. Michael Jones was identified as chair.

Finance team update

At the October 17 meeting, Ken Webster reported that the Finance Committee, formerly FAB, transitioned to four (4) task forces: accounting and narrative budgeting; property; investments; and a visionary team focused on the Conference's direction into the 2030s. Ken remains available to answer ministry team's questions. The regular level of interaction between Finance and the other ministry teams remains to be defined.

Priorities going forward

The Ministry Council intends to prioritize building a sound foundation so teams can move from organization to sustained ministry. This includes confirming membership and contact information, supporting recruitment, setting workable meeting patterns, and clarifying team responsibilities and expectations.

Following the October 17 meeting, team leaders were asked to schedule initial meetings and establish regular meeting cadences. Team members were asked to exchange contact information, and all teams were encouraged to begin envisioning how to carry out their ministry goals within the new framework. Specific meeting dates and times remain for each team to determine.

The Council also intends to strengthen communication between teams, Conference leadership, the Board of Directors, Associations, and local churches. With that groundwork in place, it will support each team in defining objectives consistent with its mission, identifying resources and partners, and reporting progress regularly. The Council's direction is to keep the ministry teams' work connected to local churches' needs and the shared mission of the Illinois Conference.

Respectfully Submitted,
Rev. Duane A. Lahti
Recording Secretary.
Ministry Council of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ.