Prairie Association, Illinois Conference UCC
2026 Annual Report

Friends in Christ,

The Prairie Association continues to re-vision and re-covenant our ministries as one body in Christ across the northwest corner of Illinois.

The "change" we noted in past years continues, as long-term pastors retire and move on to new ministries; and as congregations look to their futures, determining the most impactful ways to bring the Spirit's energy into their communities.

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. And we give thanks to long-standing congregations that have found their future midwifing other ministries in their closings.

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 the team) reports these statistics:

Authorizations in Ministry
Rev. Becky Erbe – Ordained and Installed at Second/First Church – Rockford
Brian Eide – Licensed, departed St. Paul's UCC – Hinckley, serving Garden Prairie UCC
Dale Sandell - Licensed, serving Ebenezer-Salem UCC - Pearl City; installed 10/18
Jim Brown - Licensed, serving Sheffield UCC
Continued Authorizations
Jack Briggs, First Congregational UCC-Lee Center
Jim Brown, First United UCC-Sheffield
Beth Carson, St. John's UCC-Belvidere
Alex Garncarz, Zion UCC-Peru
Jon Graham, First Congregational UCC-Spring Valley
Karen Karczewski, First Congregational UCC-Cherry/ First Congregational UCC-DePue
Mike Slutz, UCC-Hollowayville
Transitions
Rev. Martha Langford – Installed as Senior Pastor at Second/First Church – Rockford
Rev. Joe Gastiger – Installed as Pastor at Mayfield Congregational – Sycamore
Rev. Nancy Fraley – Concluded Interim at Union Congregational - Somonauk
Christopher Hamm – Departed Salem UCC – Lena
Betty Delgado – Retired, Trinity – La Salle
Rev. Dina Lauman - Retired, Garden Prairie UCC
Jon Omerod – Concluded Interim/Supply, English Congregational UCC- Big Rock
Church Affiliation
No additions or departures

Like our Illinois Conference, the continued renewal in governance and ministry continues.

This Spring, the Association delegates gathered at Federated Church – Sycamore, focusing on:
"A Reaffirmation of Community:" How we restart living out covenant by gathering together
We took inspiration from the Exile's return to Jerusalem, and the re-affirmation of the Torah, as reported in Nehemiah 8:5-8:
"Then Ezra praised God, the great God, and all the people responded,
"Oh Yes! Yes!" with hands raised high." (MSG)

Our goal was to produce a vision statement for Shared, Covenanted Ministry within the Prairie Association. At the end of our day, we did just that:

GOD'S vision for the Prairie Association is: *Healthy Churches in healthy relationships.*

What does that mean?
It means we've got our work cut out for us. It means that our attention to community and communication is our first task. It means that we will continue to support the Conference's governance transition and honor our covenant of representation. It means prayerfully supporting the ministry of the Conference Ministry Leadership Team and Staff Team in their work, and honoring the mutual accountability that supports our member churches. It means working through past struggles and into the life-giving future that we know God intents for our covenant community.

Specifically, we named these focus areas for the next period of our ministry together:

- We want to build connections between our congregations with similar mission engagements.
- We will work to connect our pastors through Communities of Practice, and our church leaders gathered in peer groups for training and fellowship.
- We will support our Committee on Ministry in their maintenance of a system of robust, functioning oversight of our authorized ministers, including Boundary Training, Racial/Cultural Sensitivity Training, and continuing education and practice.
- We want to see the Conference and Conference Ministry Team fulfill the implementation and staffing of the new model of governance.
- We look forward to a called and settled Conference Minister, and the team that will gather around them to support their work in building healthy relationships.
- It means that we will continue to listen closely to the Spirit's flame-filled inspiration on how to be more agile, while not suffering from pragmatism.

Our recent Fall Business Meeting celebrated these commitments and reiterated that this ministry of healthy relationships is exactly what God is calling us to do and be in 2027 and beyond.

God is still speaking, and still forming the Prairie Association, and that is worth celebrating! 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