Annual Celebration Report 2026
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In the vernacular of those who sometimes struggle to find the "right words", I will start by saying, "This has, indeed, been a year (with all appropriate emojis inserted as punctuation and emphasis)." However, in the midst of this year "yearing", there have been some incredible partnerships formed, some real love and appreciation for the work shown, and each day continues to be one full of transition of some kind.

Before venturing into the "knit and grit", I cannot go any further without honoring the following people: Rev. Dr. JJ Flag (Metamorphosis Relationship Manager to ILUCC Churches in Transition), Rev. Dr. Terrill Murff (Conference Minister, Interim), and Mr. Scott Peterson (ILUCC Treasurer). All for different reasons, these people have made the load more bearable, been quick to help, and always shown the type of partnership that makes ministry worth waking up to do each day. Dr. Flag is an exemplary colleague who always seems to remember what I have forgotten and vice-versa. He has shown that being like-minded (which is different from always agreeing) is not just possible but mandatory for excelling in working together. I feel confident in saying that both he and Dr. Murff allow me to do my best work, support my success, and understand fully that without ubuntu, we have nothing. Dr. Murff has been the type of leader that most people pray for – but then don't recognize when they receive it. He carries loads unseen, concerns unvoiced, and burdens that don't belong to him. YET, he's never met a stranger and always makes time to ensure that the other person has whatever they need to be their best. Mr. Peterson has always sought to venture into understanding, ask as many questions as necessary, and do his best to make sure that we are all on the same page at the end of our meetings. He takes his role very seriously and when we work together to provide reports to the Lilly Foundation, he does not hesitate to own what he doesn't know, follow through with what he says he will provide, and then reiterate his openness to being available for anything that may arise. Words cannot express my gratitude for them all and I want to publicly sing their praises without them being able to self-deprecate and play down their greatness.

The Knit…and The Grit

As of October 2026, at least twelve churches within the Conference are visibly engaged in the transition process (this means that their congregation is listed on the UCC Opportunities site as actively seeking a minister for some level of leadership in their congregation). I say "at least" because there are more that are working with our team but not at the place where they are ready to post their profile publicly. During this last year, our goal has been to engage with each congregation in pastoral transition on some level. This continues to be a challenge since all churches that are in Pastoral Transition do not choose to work with the Conference for a variety of reasons that pre-date my tenure. Currently, seven of those twelve congregations are actively participating in regular direct consultations with the Pastoral Transitions team as they navigate a new season of transition. These consultations have centered around pastoral transition, search processes, strengthening of lay leadership, empowering their congregation, and discernment about faithful next steps in their life together.

Throughout this year, we estimate that approximately 77 individuals have participated in our meetings. In many cases, this included groups of five to seven people serving on search committees, along with pastors and lay leaders who were helping guide the congregation through a season of uncertainty and change.

One of the shared realities among these congregations is that many are navigating significant decline in membership, which has also meant a decline in volunteer capacity. That reality has shaped both the urgency of their needs and the way they are able to engage the process. Even so, we see this year as one worth celebrating. Since the previous year was focused largely on development of newer resources and laying the groundwork for our work together, the increase in direct engagement with Conference constituents marks a meaningful step forward.

Additionally, a number of this year's meetings with congregations and their search committees were not simply informational, but deeply formative. Much of that work centered on training search committees to carry out their responsibilities with care, clarity, and efficiency. For many congregations, this was not limited to just a handful of conversations. Once a church entered an active search process, committees often met with the Pastoral Transitions team on a monthly basis over the course of six to nine months.

Since Annual Celebration is open to congregations across the Illinois Conference, a direct result of our workshop last year was that we were able to see a significant increase in churches reaching out for guidance and support as they became more aware of what our team offers, specifically relating to churches in transition within the Conference.

Across these encounters, one of the most common themes to emerge was the anxiety congregations are carrying as they try to fill leadership gaps created by ministerial vacancies. At the same time, there is also a deep and persistent hope. More and more pastors, lay leaders, and church members are seeing the value of being accompanied by Conference staff, especially the Pastoral Transitions Team, during seasons that can otherwise feel isolating and uncertain. In that sense, our times of consultation are doing more than sharing information. They are helping congregations experience what it means to be cared for, companioned, and supported through transition.

One of the clearest trends we are noticing is a growing curiosity and willingness to learn among congregations that know they are at an important point in their life together. Many of our churches are facing difficult questions about who they are, who they have been, and who they may need to become in the years ahead. They are wrestling with whether they will settle for stagnation or remain open to the movement of the Spirit and the possibility of reimagining what ministry can look like in their setting.

Another important trend is that more congregations are beginning to reach out earlier in the transition process. In the polity of the United Church of Christ, the autonomy of

the local church means that Conference staff can only accompany congregations when we are invited in. Even with that reality, we are seeing a noticeable increase in churches seeking support before they reach a point of crisis, rather than after trying to manage the process alone. This indicates that that there is an increasing willingness to trust that the Conference has wisdom, resources, and companionship to offer. That matters because it underscores the importance of building a clear and accessible place where churches in transition know they can come for guidance, tools, and support. The Lilly Endowment's generosity is helping the Illinois Conference model, in very real ways, what covenantal relationship can look like between the Conference and the congregations and leaders it is called to serve.

In the coming year, in addition to direct consultations and retreats for participating congregations, we plan to continue building partnerships that expand both the reach of the program and the range of resources available to churches in transition. One especially meaningful partnership that we explored this year was with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which offers an important opportunity to extend the theological, relational, and justice-oriented resources available to congregations, particularly those engaging ministry with communities across the African diaspora.

This work carries particular significance in light of the racial and cultural diversity of the Illinois Conference. The Conference is home to one of the largest Black United Church of Christ congregations in the denomination, and yet the participation of predominantly Black congregations in Conference-driven initiatives has too often been limited. Some have named that many Conference-developed or Conference-promoted resources have tended to center the needs and experiences of a majority-white constituency. Our partnership with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference offers a meaningful opportunity to respond to those concerns with both care and intention. It has the potential to help predominantly Black congregations feel more fully seen, heard, and resourced through access to a rich well of historical, theological, and communal wisdom. At the same time, it offers predominantly white congregations an opportunity to learn

from perspectives and traditions that may not have been primary in their own formation.

To capitalize on this, we intend to offer a mix of gatherings throughout the coming year. Some will be regional, others Conference wide, and many will be offered virtually in order to make participation more accessible across the breadth of the Conference. To quote Dr. Flag, “Due to our denominational covenant, this is a deeply invitational work.” This means that we will never force our services, resources, or wisdom upon any person, group, or congregation. We will always wait for your extension of partnership and then embrace that opportunity to the best of our abilities.

As the end of this year rapidly approaches, I pray for a 2027 that illuminates the best in us all. I hope for a year that does not end with us being the same Church (big “C”), but one that reflects the emerging church born of learned history, systemic challenges, and an understanding that there is no such thing as good/bad transition. There is only the opportunity to develop (go inward), reshape (shift perspective), and come out at a different stage of beauty than when we first began (emerge with the ability to fly).

This, is true Metamorphosis.

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~and~

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