WESTERN ASSOCIATION, ILLINOIS CONFERENCE UCC

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

Over the past year, our Association has experienced both challenges and successes. 2026 has been my first year as moderator and it has been a learning experience. I am deeply grateful to the Association Council members for their assistance and support.

The annual Spring meeting was planned for April 18 at First Congregational UCC in Canton but had to be cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. The Council decided not to reschedule the meeting but to gather in the Fall for the Association business meeting instead.

Thanks to the generous bequest from the Helen Leonhart Estate the Association was able to award grants again in Spring 2026. It has allowed us to support mission causes and special projects of the Western Association and its member churches and partners that otherwise would not have been possible. In 2026 the Council disbursed a total of $25,200 in grants to support local church initiatives and innovative community programs. Grants were awarded to five (5) Association churches:

Bethlehem UCC in Sutter received $10,000 for a shelter building and solar panels to be used for VBS and other church activities.

Community UCC in Morton received $3,200 to develop a community giving garden in partnership with giving gardens in Macomb.

St. John's UCC in Minier received $2,000 to increase visibility and outreach in the community, particularly around food distribution.

Salem UCC in Quincy received $5,000 to be used to launch a one-year concert ministry initiative as part of outreach to the wider community.

The Federated Church in Avon received $5,000 to set up a local food distribution site in collaboration with the Abingdon United Methodist Church.

The Leonhart Committee received a larger number of grant applications this year than in the past and unfortunately not all of them could be funded. It is heartwarming and inspiring to see that in spite of declining membership our churches are more active than ever and looking forward to the future. The grants will be available next year, and applications will be sent out in January 2027.

Sadly, I do have to report that Jacksonville Congregational UCC in Jacksonville closed in the Spring.

The Western Association Fall Business meeting took place on Zoom on October 3, 2026. The Council felt that it was more convenient to meet virtually by making it easier for people to participate and eliminate 3–4-hour travel time for many of our churches.

During the meeting the Association adopted amendments to the Bylaws to align with the new Bylaws of the Illinois Conference and approved the new slate of nominees for Association Council and Committee on Ministry. The five (5) 2026 Leonhart grant recipients presented inspiring reports on their projects, and we also received a report from First Congregational UCC in Springfield who received $10,000 in 2025 to expand their digital presence in the wider community by upgrading their streaming capabilities.

As moderator my main goal is to build relationships with our Association churches by visiting them in person and having meaningful and honest conversations about their accomplishments and their needs. So far, I have joined ten (10) churches for Sunday worship and want to thank all of them for their warm welcome.

Looking forward to the coming year, the Western Association Council is committed to helping our churches thrive by being true to our Mission Statement:

“We are called to witness the grace of God expressed by Christ Jesus with encouragement, assistance and resourcing to local congregations.”

Respectfully submitted,

Ursula Webster

Moderator of the Western Association