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NEW Spirit!

UNITED METHODISTS OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
& GREATER NEW JERSEY

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Rev. Dawn Corlew and Carl Anderson sign during Annual Conference. Photo: Shari DeAngelo

Waretown UMC, Where Everyone Belongs

By Krista Jeffries

W A R E T O W N , N J

The United Methodist Church is an organization of inclusivity in many ways. Waretown United Methodist Church in Ocean County has embodied this virtue by becoming one with the Deaf members of their congregation and offering ASL interpreters for all worship services.

Natalie Callis, Grace Towery, and Sandra Piscitelli are three ASL interpreters who are part of the Waretown UMC staff. They are kind, patient, and compassionate women who thrive on helping others become a part of their community.

This integration began in 2010 with Carl Anderson, the first Deaf member of the Waretown UMC, who is considered

“a rockstar in the Deaf community.” Carl represents Waretown UMC at the Annual Conference and has become a wonderful leader in the church. Together, Carl and interpreter Natalie Callis initiated this journey. They are now the largest congregation of hearing and Deaf members together in the United Methodist Church in the United States.

Pastor Dawn Corlew makes every effort to ensure that the Deaf community is not separate but an integral part of the congregation. “We try to incorporate everyone,” Pastor Dawn said. “As a pastor, I’ve been mindful to learn sign language and greet everyone in ASL.” She also led an endeavor to have the congregation learn the Lord’s Prayer in ASL in celebration of Deaf Awareness Month. Throughout the year, parishioners learned to sign

the prayer one phrase at a time each week during church services. Leaders also posted recordings on Facebook so that members could practice and share them with others.

This mission brought people closer to each other and to the prayer itself. Pastor Dawn shared, “When I sign it, I feel connected not just with those verbally saying the prayer but with the Deaf as well. Plus, when you sign Amen, it is a powerful way of ending the prayer.” She noted that she gives that final sign the enthusiasm it deserves. She also points out that some of the signs in ASL give a visual representation of words that helps understand the English word better. This mindful way of praying the Lord’s Prayer empowers everyone to truly think about the meaning behind those words.

Continued on page 9

We’ve Got Your Back at Wesley Church in Bethlehem

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

B E T H L E H E M , P A

It all started with a vision. In 2012, Pastor Tom Fries envisioned a school bus filled with school supplies, sparking the creation of “We’ve Got Your Back,” a backpack distribution initiative that has provided over 18,650 backpacks to students in need. This year, the program distributed 1,500 backpacks at its main event and an additional 500 through Bangor UMC, a key partner in fundraising and packing.



Students stop for snacks at We’ve Got Your Back.

“We’ve Got Your Back” is about more than just school supplies; it’s about helping students get ready to go back to school in every way possible. Early on, a social worker who was part of the volunteer team alerted the group that students don’t just need school supplies; they also

Continued on page 11



A New Chapter for EPA&GNJ:
A Conversation with Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

PAGE 3



IGNITE
Celebrations from IGNITE 2024

PAGES 6-7

MORE INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Message from Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi
PAGE 2

From Lament to Hope: The Journey of Urban Ministry
PAGE 4

EPA & GNJ Welcome Bishop Moore-Koikoi
PAGE 8

New Opportunities at the Leadership Academy
PAGE 9

Bridges Program Testifies to the Power of Story to Inspire and Heal
PAGE 10

A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP

Getting to Know You

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



"When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul."
—1 SAMUEL 18:1-3

1 Samuel tells the story of David, Saul and Jonathan getting to know one another after it became clear God had called them together for a common mission. They spent intentional time together speaking with and listening to one another. As a result, Jonathan and David’s hearts and souls became as one. This process helped each of them be successful in all that God called them to do.

The formal Onboarding process recently conducted in EPA and GNJ was an intentional time for me to listen to laity and clergy. Each annual conference was engaged separately during this process. Dr. Celeste Eubanks gathered the entire staff of each annual conference. She also had two sessions with laity and clergy in each annual conference. Almost two hundred people from each annual conference participated in the process.

I am grateful for the honest and open sharing that took place during each of the three gatherings that happened in each annual conference. It is my prayer that this process helped us to join our hearts and souls together so that we might be more faithful in all that we have been called to do together. It is my prayer that the Onboarding process is one step of many that will help us to discern together God’s vision for each annual conference.

While there were some diverse opinions shared at each gathering, there was remarkable consensus among the members of GNJ around all the questions that were asked. The members of EPA also had remarkable agreement in how they answered the questions posed to them by Dr. Celeste Eubanks. I will share some more of the responses that were given in future communications. But for now, I will share with you the verbatim responses those in attendance gave to the question, “What should be your new bishop’s priorities?”

EPA Priorities

- Improving morale and trust
- Recognizing EPA as its own separate conference
- Strategic vision for urban and BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) ministries
- Improving relationships between churches and the conference
- Bring people together
- Build trust
- Unifying the conference around a vision for disciple making
- Reducing apportionment
- Raising up new clergy
- Create effective and efficient administrative structure at the conference level
- Healing of the community through connectionalism
- Addressing and healing trauma
- Establishing an equitable connection within the conference and between EPA and GNJ
- Health and well-being of clergy
- Discerning where God is at work in the conference
- Strengthening congregations with the community

GNJ Priorities

- Serve our local churches and define what “serve” is
- Learn and discern more about our conference and it’s culture
- Financial well-being of the conference
- Re-establishing trust
- Local church sustainability - spiritual and financial
- Discipleship
- Trust enabled healing
- Growing vitality through trust and transparency
- Effective strategy for financially struggling churches — support and relief
- Encourage, empower and release GNJ leaders and churches
- Provide leadership around what vital church is, excluding money
- Build trust by empowering local churches
- Heal, mend, nurture, empower clergy
- Movement to spur unity for every level of the church
- Call and equip transformational leadership for making disciples of Jesus Christ
- Feed and tend the souls of the sheep so they can feed others
- Levy every resource of the conference to make disciples

One group from each conference was asked, “What do you want most from your new bishop’s leadership?”



NEWSpirit!

Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, Bishop
United Methodists of Greater New Jersey
205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune, NJ 07753

James Lee, Director of Communications
732.359.1044 | jlee@gnjumc.org

Joshua Watkins, Communications Administrator
732.359.1063 | jwatkins@gnjumc.org

Sarah Borgstrom Lee, Editorial Manager
sborgstromlee@epaumc.church

Lindsey Cotman, Graphic Designer
lcotman@epaumc.church

David Beverly, IT and Web Specialist
dbeverly@gnjumc.org

Corbin Payne, Video Producer
cpayne@gnjumc.org

Christopher G. Coleman, NEWSpirit Designer
chris@cgcoleman.com

New Subscriptions, renewals, address changes, and corrections should be addressed to Communications Department at info@gnjumc.org or by mail to: NEWSpirit | 205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune NJ 07753

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Contact: info@gnjumc.org

EPA Responded

- Visit our local churches
- Fix, eliminate or replace Arena
- An improvement in Charge Conference
- Fairness in appointments among disabled, minority, and clergy of color
- Transparency on how connectional monies are spent — particularly to local churches
- Developing a plan for increasing number of ordained ministers
- Continue to build bridges and reconciliation between EPA and GNJ
- Accessibility
- Guidance on building capacity in local churches
- Address the trauma sustained from the “discernment process”

GNJ Responded

- Visit local churches and districts more
- More succinct emails from the conference office
- Look into making paperwork deadlines more reasonable
- Listen to opinions with open heart and mind
- Transparency
- Strong leadership during annual conference and humble leadership
- Address financial issues and gain clarity on that
- Plan (strategic plan) for appointment making
- Restructuring staffing in conference staff

I share these lists with you to be transparent and to invite you to hold me accountable to responding to the concerns and hopes that were expressed. As you can see, there were many priorities and desires for my leadership. Not all of them can be met all at once. Further, some of them are in tension with one another. Therefore, I will need your grace and your prayers in addressing these priorities and desires. I will continue to be intentional about listening to you so that we might be bound together in heart and soul as bishop and people so that we might be faithful to all God has called us to do. 🌈

—Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

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A New Chapter for EPA&GNJ:

A Conversation with Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

By James Lee

It was a crisp, sunny morning on the Tuesday after Labor Day weekend when Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi stepped into the Mission and Resource Center in Neptune, NJ. The air was filled with a sense of anticipation as the new episcopal leader began her first day, setting up her email and getting acquainted with the technology that would connect her to thousands of United Methodists across Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey (EPA&GNJ).

Dressed in her signature purple clergy shirt symbolizing her episcopal office, Bishop Moore-Koikoi exuded warmth, confidence, and a pastoral charisma that immediately put me at ease.

It was an interview, yes, but it felt more like a friendly chat—an exchange of hopes, dreams, and the promises of a new chapter for EPA&GNJ.

What’s your favorite part about being a bishop?

“My favorite part about being a bishop is helping people discern their call—whether they’re laity or clergy—and then mobilizing resources so they can grow and develop into that call.

Calls change and evolve over time. Many of us have that initial call into ministry, but then there are also smaller calls that happen along the way. We might be called to a particular ministry or relationship. It really excites me to create an atmosphere where people expect that God is going to call them to something new – and then to be able to

“IT REALLY EXCITES ME TO
CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE
WHERE PEOPLE EXPECT
THAT GOD IS GOING
TO CALL THEM TO
SOMETHING NEW.”

—Bishop Moore-Koikoi

figure out what resourcing needs to happen, whether that is financial resourcing or people resourcing – Getting folks connected with a coach or mentor or someone can help them to grow and develop in that call. That’s my favorite thing to do.”

How has your past experience, both as a bishop and as a school psychologist, equipped you to lead well in this liminal time?

“One of the things I’ve always held sacred is that while God’s character never changes, God is always in the business of creating and re-creating, and God invites us into that task of co-creation. I expect things to change all the time, and I get excited about that because it’s one of the ways God shows up. For me, it’s a means of grace to see God moving in the world as things grow, develop, and change.

As a school psychologist, I had to help people find their *grounding*—whether it was a student dealing with emotional challenges, a parent coming to terms with their child’s lifelong challenges, or a teacher needing to change their approach to support a student’s growth.



Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi reveals her hopes and dreams for EPA&GNJ as she steps into her new role.

As a bishop, the grounding I try to help people connect with is our Wesleyan theology. Who we are as United Methodists—our understanding of how God wants us to be in the world—is our grounding. Those basic things never change, but the modality of how God wants us to be in the world—that’s what changes. It’s exciting to be looking for that new way of being that God wants us to grow into. And so, it’s a matter of helping folks find that grounding, but then

I’m excited to learn more about the people, and therefore more about God through the people.”

What’s one hope that you have for our time together?

“My hope is that we would all be excited about being United Methodists! That we would respect and accept the different ways we manifest what it is to be United Methodist while holding on to our grounding.



James Lee interviews the newly appointed Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi.

nurturing and supporting them in this new discovery—not trying to control or manage it, but to support and nurture it as it comes along.”

What excites you most about serving in EPA&GNJ?

“I’ve heard lots of wonderful things about EPA and GNJ, and I’ve been at both annual conferences and have known some folks from both conferences for quite some time. What excites me most is how the face of God looks different in these two conferences. There’s so much diversity, and the image of God shows up in many different ways.

Yes, that would be my hope, because with excitement comes vitality. If you’re excited about something, you’re gonna invite other people to be a part of that something; if you’re excited about something, you’re gonna make sure you do it with excellence whenever you do it; if you’re excited about something, you’re gonna be looking to see what new things God wants you to be involved in. So for me, the key is getting excited.”

We are eager to get to know you more. What do you do for fun? Anything else you want us to know about you?

“My husband and I love to ride our bikes, travel, and I enjoy cooking and sewing. I’m trying to be more disciplined about taking time for those activities. Every summer, I plan a weeklong bike trip with my girlfriends, usually a Rails to Trails ride. The most we’ve done in a day is about 65-70 miles over a four to five-day period.

I’m excited about my husband, Raphael, being with me on this journey. He’s thrilled about the appointment that Bishop Schol and the cabinet discerned for him at Morrisville United Methodist Church, so I’m looking forward to supporting him in his ministry. Together, we have a lovely little Maltese named Ranyshia, which is a Bantu Christian name that means ‘blessed little angel.’ And he is spoiled rotten. He came to us during COVID, and so for the first year of his life, it was just us—he had our undivided attention.”

How can we pray for you?

“Prayers for wisdom and discernment. I always want to ensure that I’m hearing from God and acting in ways that bring wisdom to every situation.”

As our conversation came to a close, Bishop Moore-Koikoi rose from her seat and warmly shook my hand, ready to step into the day’s agenda. The next chapter for the United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey was beginning, and Bishop Moore-Koikoi was fully prepared to guide it forward, one handshake and one heartfelt conversation at a time. The week ahead is filled with meetings, planning sessions, and the responsibilities that come with her office, but the bishop is sure to approach them with the same warmth and pastoral presence she brought to our interview.

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi’s passion for fostering diversity, nurturing individual callings, and leading with a collaborative spirit offers a hopeful and invigorating future for the United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey. 🌱

To get in touch with Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, you can email her at bishopmoore-koikoi@gnjumc.org / bishopmoore-koikoi@epaumc.church.



Photo: Kelly M. Lacy/Pexels

FROM LAMENT TO HOPE: The Journey of Urban Ministry

By Noé Gabe Lopez

We all have stories—narratives that share our journeys. My story begins in the city of Philadelphia, where two young Guatemalan parents made their home. From an early age, I navigated life from the perspective of different worlds, juggling two languages and cultures. At home, I spoke Spanish, ate tortillas and frijoles, and watched Univisión. At school, I spoke English, ate pizza and hot dogs, and tried to make sense of the latest episodes of *The Magic School Bus*. At home, my parents read *La Biblia* to me, praying with me every night. At school, Irish nuns taught me to pray with the Rosary.

This duality shaped me, grounding me in the reality that life is often lived in the intersections. It is from this experience of living between worlds that my passion for urban ministry was born. I've seen firsthand how cities like Philadelphia and those across Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey are not "just places of struggle" but places of profound strength and possibility.

The work of urban ministry exists in the tension between lament and hope—a space I know well from my own life.

The Paradox of the City

My feelings toward the city are deeply paradoxical, shaped by both its beauty and its pain. Philadelphia and urban ministry raised me, formed me, and instilled within me both a tough mind and a tender heart, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached. It taught me resilience, compassion, and how to navigate multiple worlds. The city is where I learned to survive and thrive.

Yet, it is also the place of much personal suffering. It's where many of my childhood friends were swallowed by a system that disproportionately targets young men of color. It is the place where, as a teenager, I watched my associate pastor—someone I looked up to—get deported. It's where I learned to be hyper-aware of my surroundings. The city, in all its complexity, is both my teacher and my challenger.

This juxtaposition of beauty and struggle defines not only my personal story but also the story of urban ministry. It is in the city where we must learn to hold together both lament for systemic injustices and also hope for its transformation.

The Convergence of Lament and Hope

Urban ministry invites us to stand with communities, holding these two powerful realities together. We lament the deep systemic injustices that have plagued our cities for generations. Gun violence, poverty, inadequate housing, lack of access to mental health resources, and insufficient healthcare are symptoms of a larger systemic issue.

The beauty of urban ministry is that we are invited to step into this intersection, *not as saviors*, but as co-laborers alongside the communities we serve.

The work we do through Wholeness Centers in EPA and Hope Centers in GNJ is a testament to this commitment to solidarity. These ministries are focused on long-term empowerment, education, and



Noé Gabe Lopez, Associate Superintendent for the South-East Region of EPA

advocacy—not just providing relief but equipping communities to thrive. Through initiatives such as job training, food distribution, and leadership development, these centers become places where hope is not just imagined but built.

In urban areas, churches and Hope and Wholeness Centers are bringing together people from all walks of life to advocate for housing justice, healthcare access, mental health awareness, and educational equity. Each of these ministries embodies what it means to be present in the community, to stand in solidarity, and to witness the transformative power of hope.

Solidarity in Lament and Action

Urban ministry isn't about easy fixes or quick solutions. It's about hearing the deep lament of our cities—the racism, the violence, the poverty—and choosing to remain, to listen, to learn, and to act together. We are called to act in faith, believing that through our collective efforts, justice can emerge.

This is the heart of solidarity.

We do not stand above or apart from the communities we serve. We stand with them. We bear witness to both the pain and the possibilities. It's about journeying alongside, learning from one another, and building a future rooted in God's vision for justice, love, and equity.

Hopes and Dreams for Urban Ministry

My hope is that we can begin, or continue, having honest conversations. While I envision our churches and ministries evolving into even stronger hubs of justice and advocacy, I must also acknowledge that the church has, at various points in history, been the source of great pain, conquest, racism, and exclusion. Repairing this harm is not an easy task, and frankly, I'm not sure it can be fully accomplished in our lifetime.

With so much grief weighing on us, it's natural to feel disillusioned, even suspicious, of institutions—including the church—that claim to offer help. For many, the very place that should have been a sanctuary became a source of harm, and that legacy casts a long shadow. This suspicion is valid, and the wounds of the past cannot be brushed aside in our pursuit of healing.

However, even amid this grief and doubt, I believe there is room for hope. Hope does not diminish the reality of what has been lost or the wrongs that have been done, but it calls us to imagine a future where transformation is possible. We are rooted in the Christian narrative of resurrection and new life! Death does not have the final word, and despair is not the end. It is our calling to hold on to that hope, to cling to the belief that justice, healing, and restoration can be pursued, even if they seem out of reach.

We are called to preach the good news of Jesus—news that was first proclaimed to the least and the last, to those pushed to the margins by systems of oppression and exclusion. This same good news compels us to reimagine the church as a place where those who have been harmed can find repair and those who

"IN URBAN AREAS, CHURCHES AND HOPE AND WHOLENESS CENTERS ARE BRINGING TOGETHER PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE TO ADVOCATE FOR HOUSING JUSTICE, HEALTHCARE ACCESS, MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS, AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY."

—Noé Gabe Lopez

have been cast aside can be embraced. It will not be easy, but our faith teaches us that transformation is not only possible; it is essential. And in that hope, we press forward together, committed to justice, truth, and reconciliation.

My journey from the neighborhoods of Philadelphia to ministry across EPA and GNJ has taught me that the work of urban ministry is not about "fixing people or places." It is about witnessing the sacredness of each community, listening to their stories, and joining them in their work for justice.

Urban ministry is about being fully present—standing in the tension between lament and hope—and trusting that God is already at work, inviting us to join in. 🌈



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&GO Be You!

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



“

“God needs all of us to be who God has called us to be. If we don’t do that, there’s someone who might miss out on hearing about the love of Jesus Christ.” —Bishop Moore-Koikoi



Rev. Joe Kim preached a powerful message on Saturday night.



Students write Christmas Cards for prisoners for the Saturday afternoon mission activity.



Jonathan Traylor exuding joy as he led worship.



Bishop Moore-Koikoi sends those gathered out with a charge to go and be who God made you to be.





Singer Angle Rose gave a dynamic concert on Friday night.



Leaders pray with students during Saturday night worship.



Students play Foosball in the exhibit hall.



Send us in your love to those around us, O God.



Student lifts her hands in praise during Sunday morning worship.

“

“God put God’s goodness in you. Your creativity, your humor, your friendliness, your helpfulness, your love for animals, your instrument, your leadership skills, are all reflections of a God who took the time to carefully MAKE you in a way that is unique and special.” —Rev. Kate Monahan



Rev. Kate Monahan

Pastor YaNi Davis invites everyone to consider their passion and purpose.



Participants feeling the good vibes.

EPA & GNJ

Welcome Bishop Moore-Koikoi

By Krista Jeffries

A buzz of joyful anticipation filled the air at Calvary Korean UMC and West Lawn UMC on Sept. 14th and Sept. 21st, respectively, as the people of EPA & GNJ prepared to welcome their new bishop.

As she waited for the service to begin at Calvary Korean United Methodist Church, the Rev. Dr. Gina Hendrickson, Lead Pastor of the First Methodist Church of Moorestown, bubbled over with excitement. "God's always doing a new thing, and we trust and believe in that. And the Spirit blows in mighty and profound ways," Rev. Hendrickson said. "For me, as a clergywoman, to have our first female bishop, I'm totally stoked about that. She is a dynamic woman of God, a strong leader, and the new things she'll be bringing will be a gift to our church and our conference."

Rev. Drew Dyson, Co-chair of the general conference delegation of Greater New Jersey, added, "We are so excited about her leadership and her vision for what this conference can do."

At West Lawn UMC, Darlene DiDomineck, Deaconess and Executive Director of The Center at Arch Street shared, "As a Deaconess, I am excited to serve alongside a leader deeply committed to ministries of love, justice, and service. I am especially excited to serve with a prophetic leader whose call is rooted in community and guides us toward faithful and intersectional social change."

Both services incorporated "Great is Thy Faithfulness," one of Bishop Moore-Koikoi's favorite hymns, into the service. At Calvary Korean UMC, the Greater New Jersey Joint Choir sang the beloved hymn alongside "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" as the clergy jubilantly processed in, and ASL interpreter Natalie Callis signed along. At West Lawn UMC, the hymn was beautifully interspersed with the Covenant Service, where Bishop Moore-Koikoi promised to faithfully lead, and all who were present affirmed their willingness to be "faithful witnesses,

serving justice, showing mercy, and in all things proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord."

Rev. Raphael Koikoi had the honor of introducing his wife, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi. He proclaimed that "God has called her to be an agent of change." He spoke passionately about the bishop's vision for mission and her challenge for people "to do better and be better." Rev. Koikoi said, "We are called to be change-makers."

During the Presentation of Signs of Episcopal Ministry, Bishop Moore-Koikoi greeted each person individually, wanting to know their names and thanking each of them personally. A woman seated in the audience at Calvary Korean UMC sighed and said, "She is such a breath of fresh air."

She rose to preach and began her sermon by playfully setting people's expectations: "I'm not going to share a vision with you today. Today I invite you to rest—to break the fast. I invite you to breakfast, which is a fresh start."

She chose as her text John 21:15-17, where Jesus rises from breakfast with his disciples and tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." She recounted that after the death of Jesus, his followers had been fasting spiritually. They were in a liminal time, a space between one way of being and another, where they couldn't feel the Holy Spirit and had no certainty. They needed to break the fast with Jesus.

She contrasted fasting, a spiritual discipline where you choose to go without for a time, with starvation—the actual lack of food. Fasting, for a time, is good for the body and the soul. However, fasting too long will kill you.

She confessed that, like others in the United Methodist community, she has felt as if she were starving—starved for peace, starved

for direction, starved by those who chose to leave, starved by the Book of Discipline. "I felt as if I was in a spiritual fast," she said. "I wonder if you, like me, have been casting your net and catching nothing, and knowing that you are far from shore."

But then she shared a revelation that God gave her; she heard God say, "Must I remind you who you are? Must I remind you who I am as your God? Don't you know, Cynthia, that what I have for you is for you?"



Bishop Moore-Koikoi joyfully recesses at Calvary Korean UMC and Lenora Thompson smiles at West Lawn UMC.

Photos: Shari DeAngelo

She invited those present to search their hearts and consider that perhaps what we've called spiritual starvation has actually been a fast—a fast that we have chosen because we have not accepted the gifts that God has given. She proclaimed, "Jesus is the center of my joy and all that is good. God

Bishop Moore-Koikoi greets students and pauses to take it all in at GNJ's Service of Welcome.

Photos: Shari DeAngelo



reminded me that our contentment comes from Jesus." She continued, "God had to remind me that if the world didn't give it to you, the world can't take it. The world is not taking your peace; you're handing it over. No one can take it from me unless I give it to them."

That truth landed. At Calvary Korean UMC, there were gasps from the audience as the sudden epiphany hit home. At West Lawn UMC, people stood, clapped, and cheered.

Bishop Moore-Koikoi invited everyone to break their fast: "Beloved, it's time. It's time. It's time to break the fast. Jesus is calling us to break the fast. We have been fasting from the Holy Spirit. It's time to break the fast. Time to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers, and we can't wait until we do. It's time to expect the Holy Spirit to show up in every worship service." As Bishop Moore-Koikoi hit her rhetorical stride, some people in the room at West Lawn UMC rose to their feet. The joy and hope in the room felt palpable.

Bishop Moore-Koikoi continued, "It is time to break the fast. Jesus has shown us where the food is. Jesus is issuing a call to each one of us."



Rev. Raphael Koikoi leads the way as everyone prays a blessing over Bishop Moore-Koikoi at EPA's Service of Welcome.

Bishop Moore-Koikoi celebrates communion at West Lawn UMC.

Photos: Shari DeAngelo



New Opportunities at the Leadership Academy

By Juel Nelson

“A new day is coming” is a repeated theme in the book of Jeremiah. The Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, called God’s people to be faithful and participate in God’s reign. As Christians, we believe that with Jesus, “the old has passed away” and “the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). While any day can be a day of new beginnings, the fall season is certainly a season to begin again.

The Leadership Academy is here to assist you in your new leadership journey. We are excited to announce the launch of various leadership programs this next season that speak to a wide range of leadership needs. Our academy offers a variety of dynamic and interactive courses that are designed to equip leaders with the knowledge and skills to thrive in ministry.

Jay Brown, a certified lay minister and supply pastor, plans to use the online overview courses on church committees with his leaders. Brown shares that the format and courses “may stimulate discussion and address some issues that individuals have wondered about and were uncomfortable asking their church leadership directly.”If you are new to serving on a committee, these overview courses on topics such as trustees, staff parish relations, and church council could be a great place to start.

Be on the lookout for new online classes later this fall in areas of the Bible & cross-cultural cross-racial ministry, setting strategic direction, the role of the congregation, grief ministries, and more! We are also working with laity and clergy leaders to produce courses in other languages to serve the diverse leadership of EPA&GNJ.

This month, EPA&GNJ collaboratively launched three new Clergy Seminar Cohorts, designed to provide a strong support system, foster deep fellowship, and encourage mutual learning among

our clergy. This year’s cohorts include the cross-racial and cross-cultural (CRCC) cohort, the generous disciples’ cohort, and the foundational cohort.

In these groups clergy are both learners and teachers, worshipping together, engaging in case studies, coaching, and applying concepts to their lives of faith and ministry. One of the past clergy participants, Rev. Heather Valosin, shared, “The Clergy Seminar was like a spark plug for my ministry.” Rev. Valosin continued, “I gained a better understanding of leadership styles, thought more critically and constructively about my practice of ministry, and developed valuable collegial relationships that continue to inspire and encourage me.”

The Rev. Dr. Anita Powell, one of the facilitators of the CRCC clergy cohort, shares the importance of this ministry: “Any gathering of clergy and/or congregations in a cross-racial and cross-cultural context is a powerful reminder of God’s creative design for diversity and cultures.” Rev. Dr. Powell continues reflecting on the experience, stating, “It is deeply meaningful and extremely powerful...as, together, we examine the challenges and embrace opportunities to be in life-giving relationships with others in the way God intended.”

There are lots of ways that the Leadership Academy develops both lay and clergy leaders in EPA & GNJ. This fall, each conference will offer Lay Servant and Christ Servant Ministries Programs. Lay Servant Ministries and Christ Servant Ministries help disciples become aware of their gifts by offering education to enhance and develop their skills in the areas of caring, communicating, and leading. It is an excellent way for people to be better servants of Jesus Christ and to become stronger church leaders.

The Certified Lay Minister Course is designed to equip certified lay servants to become certified lay ministers (CLM). A CLM serves as part of a ministry team under the supervision of a clergyperson

and engages in various ministries in a local church, such as worship, program development, congregational care, preaching, and more.

This year, Dianne Gordon-McGrath will join the leadership team for the GNJ CLM program. Dianne Gordon-McGrath is grateful for the opportunity to serve. She shares, “I have met many wonderful people while preaching, praying, facilitating Bible Study, and conducting extension ministries. Being a CLM has enhanced my Christian walk while helping others.”

In addition to lay leadership development, the Leadership Academy helps pastors—at all stages of their careers—grow and develop.

Local Pastor Licensing School prepares certified candidates for ministry to be local pastors. It offers seminars on worship design, preaching, small groups, pastoral care, administration, and more. Both EPA and GNJ’s schools begin early next year; Rev. John Bletsch, the Dean of EPA’s Licensing School, shares, “We are thankful for the opportunity to help those called to be local pastors prepare for their licensing and ministry.”

Pastors who are on a journey towards full ordination participate in the Residence in Ministry Program. Rev. Karen Bartkowski, the coordinator of EPA’s Residency in Ministry Program, shares, “The program offers an opportunity to continue to discern one’s calls to ministry, to foster a community of support and encouragement for clergy, especially during the rigors of the ordination process, and to continue to develop strong leadership skills that are necessary as we serve congregations and communities in desperate need of the good news of Jesus Christ!” Rev. Bartkowski continues, “I am honored and humbled to walk alongside of these candidates to see how God is showing up and working in and through them.”

Rev. Joe Monahan and Rev. Dr. Jennifer Cho have been serving as the RIM leaders in GNJ since 2020. Rev.



Monahan emphasizes the supportive and formational nature of the program, stating, “It’s so important to help create an environment for our provisional members to have this space to grow in their relationships with each other and with other clergy colleagues and to be able to work through the challenges of ministry together.”

The Leadership Academy also offers support to clergy who want to further develop their preaching skills. The Leadership Academy Preaching Institute, a collaborative effort of EPA&GNJ, is funded through a grant from the Lilly Endowment and is a hybrid continuing education program that cultivates compelling preaching that leads to congregational vitality.

Program Director, Rev. Dr. Darryl Stephens, states, “LAPI is a fantastic opportunity for preachers to bring their craft to the next level. Whether you have decades of experience or are just starting out, this program helps you set individualized goals and provides the support you need to succeed in reaching those goals.”

These are just some of the programs offered by the Leadership Academy. These programs are possible because of the Holy Spirit’s guidance and the many, many gifted laity and clergy leaders, who so freely offer their content expertise, gifts in program design, and time in facilitation.

God promises to make all things new. *What new beginning are you wishing for or praying about right now? A new learning? A new vocation? A place of belonging? Something else?* The Leadership Academy is ready to walk beside you in that journey. Trust in the Lord and believe God can make all things new. 🌈

Waretown UMC

Continued from page 1

The vision statement for the church has become: “We are a neighborhood church faithfully serving God and the community with love and hope.” All members work daily to express that vision. The church now offers weekly signing classes, teaching basic signs for anyone to learn ASL. Pastor Dawn observed that even hearing people consider themselves part of the Deaf community as they all sign together. And they don’t just sign in prayer but also in song.

The “God Squad” is a group of kids between first and fifth grade are a young choir that signs, and many parishioners have learned to join in. Musical amplifiers called “ButtKickers” are also placed on each pew so Deaf church members

can feel the vibrations and experience the music as well.

During the holidays, the church puts on a live nativity performance on the first Monday of Advent, which they make sure is interpreted. They provide special seating for Deaf members, ensuring they are up front to see the performance and within sight of the ASL interpretation. It’s a beautiful event that brings their community together.

Natalie Callis, a long-time church member and certified educational sign language interpreter, has been proud to see their venture flourish from the beginning. She explained that their success is due to a three-part effort. “Think of it like a three-legged stool,” she said. “It works because we have a minister who is so supportive of having interpreters, a congregation that is so welcoming to the Deaf community, and a strong Deaf presence in the Deaf community as well.” Today, the church has 34 Deaf members and 3 interpreters in the congregation, which is the largest in the country.

They also made history this summer with a movie called *Jesus* that was entirely in ASL and featured Deaf actors. They rented out the movie theater and filled it with both Deaf and hearing members they had invited to watch. Pastor Dawn recalled the experience with awe. “As a hearing person,” she said, “it gave me a little more insight into my Deaf community and how they typically have to watch movies with Closed



ASL Translators and members of Waretown UMC sign together.

Caption.” She is planning to show the film at their church in Waretown during the last week of September to celebrate Deaf Awareness Month.

Awareness in the community is certainly growing, even beyond the church. Ocean County College has an interpreter program, in which students observe and participate in services at Waretown UMC and even return to worship with them. Interpreter Saurda Piscitelli is one of the professors in the program and has been a perfect liaison between the college and the church.

God lives within each of us and loves us the way we are. In an address to Bishop Schol, Carl Anderson wrote, “We are ALL the Body of Christ, and we believe that together we have done it right.”

Waretown United Methodist Church is certainly getting it right. Their openness to fully embrace all members of their community is a beautiful thing for all

involved. “Deaf people are so grateful for any hearing person who attempts to learn their language,” Natalie Callis said. “I want people to come and see for themselves. To experience it, you have to show up.”

To make it all work, Pastor Dawn said, “You must be willing to be a learner. You’re going to make mistakes, and you just have to laugh at your mistakes. It’s important to show that you are trying. That means more than anything.”

The members and leaders of Waretown United Methodist Church have demonstrated the importance of empathy, understanding, and connection. This experience has given their community the opportunity to put themselves in someone else’s shoes and to ensure that all people have access to experience God’s love and grace.

Pastor Dawn says their goal is for their Deaf community to know that they are loved, valued, and appreciated. “They are a part of our community,” she said. “ASL is a part of our DNA as a church. It’s important that they know they are welcome and belong.” She added, “I’m grateful that we’ve made this a priority so our Deaf community can go beyond worship and even lead.”

At Waretown UMC, everyone belongs. This isn’t just a program; it’s a part of who they are. They see each other, and signing helps them communicate and stay connected. In the words of Carl Anderson, “Don’t close your eyes because you’ll miss all the good stuff.” 🌈



Natalie Callis & Carl Anderson

The Bridges Program Testifies to the Power of Story to Inspire and Heal

It began with stories: storytelling and story listening.

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

In February 2024, the third Bridges cohort gathered around the art of storytelling. Mark Yaconelli told stories from his life, participants shared their stories with each other, and then each participant wrote a story, which was then posted anonymously on the wall. The assembled body moved quietly and reverently about the room, reading one another's stories of pain, loss, triumph, and confusion. Jerry, a member of Pemberton UMC, noted, "We have more in common than we would ever know, but the things we have in common are the things no one ever talks about."

The leaders were given homework: to go into their churches and communities and collect the stories of others. They were to gather stories of places where people are experiencing joy, as well as stories of frustration or pain, in both the church and the community.

Creative Tools for Ministry

In May, participants returned and began to work with the stories they had gathered. A ministry resource team from Ministry Architects added tools to their ministry toolkit, guiding congregational leaders to imagine how they might best minister to the people moving into their neighborhoods.

As Christ UMC Piscataway gathered around the table and playfully imagined a new neighbor they nicknamed "Gary," the Holy Spirit moved. Gary ceased to be just a playful imaginary figure and took on flesh. As they genuinely considered Gary and what he and his family might need as they moved into the community, they gained clarity about which ministries needed their focused energy and attention.

Playful Dreaming of New Ministry Possibilities

For the third and final weekend, pastors and church leaders gathered to learn about the power of testimony from Amanda Drury and to consider how Jesus was already at work in their communities. They brainstormed how they might reach new people based on what they had learned over the past six months through the practice of collecting stories.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bridges participants laugh as they work together.; Amanda Drury invites participants to consider their communities' testimonies.; Bridges participants refine their ideas through conversation with others.; Rev. Sean Lee brainstorms ministry ideas with a lay leader.

Photos: Sarah Borgstrom Lee



Kenda Creasy Dean, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and leader of Ministry Incubators, along with Aqueelah Ligonde of Ministry Architects, helped churches generate and refine their ideas.

Churches had encountered specific individuals in their communities who were struggling with particular issues through their story capturing work. They brainstormed how God might be inviting them to launch new ministry initiatives to address the real concerns of their communities.

The long process of listening, problem-solving, and playful brainstorming produced dynamic ideas.

Westmont UMC learned that its community members were longing for a gathering space. They realized they had a garage on their property and are now planning to renovate that space into a community gathering place.

Haddonfield UMC listened to the stories of its community and learned of the

struggles faced by families with neurodivergent children, who often who found it difficult to locate a place to worship. They launched a sensory-friendly room for Vacation Bible School, which is now available for individuals and families who need a quieter space on Sunday mornings.

Bridges Births a New Community Ministry

Trinity UMC in Hackettstown embraced the call to storytelling and story-listening. Through their thrift store, they had many opportunities to interact with people in their community who were not yet part of the church.

They asked everyone who came in about their joys and challenges and listened deeply to their stories of pain. Trisha Massa, a lay member, shared the story of a man who arrived in the U.S. seeking asylum. He was bussed to New York and told there were jobs available in Hackettstown. After traveling 60 miles, he discovered there were no jobs when he arrived.

As they spoke with more neighbors at the food pantry, they learned of a mother with three children living in a tent in the woods. The family couldn't afford rent and was scraping by in the wilderness, with their car as their last major asset.

Time and again, they heard stories of rising costs and families who had lost or would soon lose their homes. The stories prompted them to dig deeper. They learned that homelessness had increased by 33% in their county over the last year and by 100% in the neighboring county.

They began to wonder how they might meet the needs of the unhoused in their community. A quick Google search led them

to Park Safe, a program hosted by Lake Washington UMC in Kirkland, Oregon. Park Safe allows unhoused community members to safely park and sleep in their cars overnight, free from interruption or disturbance. Lake Washington leaned into the joy of connectionalism and generously shared all that they had learned with Trinity UMC.

Trinity UMC received a \$3,000 Peace with Justice Grant to launch its own program. The Parking Lot Program at Trinity will be the first of its kind in New Jersey and one of just a handful on the East Coast. This program will create a safe space for families navigating the challenges of losing their housing.

In addition to offering overnight space for families to stay in their cars, Trinity also plans to set up mailboxes for guests, allowing them to receive mail at the church. Lack of a mailing address can be a barrier to finding new employment. These two initiatives are part of the first phase of the program. Trinity UMC plans to expand its program to include a laundry room where families can wash their clothes and a weekly community meal where parking lot guests and community members can eat together.

Relevant Ministry Begins with Listening

Often, our impulse is to start a community ministry based on what we think is needed. Trinity UMC began by listening for the community's needs and then asked themselves the question, "Okay, what do we have?" Storytelling and story-listening served as the guiding light that carried them into this new season of relevant ministry with their community.

The first round of cohorts of Bridges has ended, but thanks to a \$750,000 scaling grant from The Lilly Foundation, a new season is unfolding shortly. Stay tuned for more information on how to connect with the Bridges Pathway, so that you might learn how to tell your story, hear the stories of others, and connect more deeply and relevantly to the world outside your church's door.



Bridges participants listen and reflect on their ministry ideas.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Aqueelah Ligonde leads conversation while Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean looks on.



We've Got Your Back

Continued from page 1

need underwear and socks—items that can't be found at a clothes closet and are awkward to ask for. Now, in addition to the regular back-to-school supplies, every child receives four brand-new pairs of socks and four brand-new pairs of underwear.

Community Partnerships: A Collective Effort

What makes "We've Got Your Back" so special are the partnerships that span across denominations and generations. Rev. Candy LaBar shared, "It's really cooperative. I do socks and underwear with a whole bunch of Catholics... We have people of absolutely all ages participating. My son and Sarah's son, their job throughout the whole day is to go around and empty trash from each station."

In addition to partnerships with other faith organizations, local community organizations also step up to help. The Lehigh Valley Reilly Children's Hospital is a major sponsor for the event, donating funds and branded giveaways. The local public library attends and leads a story hour. The health department comes, and



Volunteers screen students for vision concerns.

the fire department brings a truck. Lehigh Valley Therapy Dogs come out; kids get to meet the therapy dogs, which also helps the dogs with their training. Wegmans sponsors the event by providing fresh fruit, granola bars, and fruit snacks. Cops N' Kids collects used books throughout the year, and on the day of the event, they set up a station so that every child who comes leaves with two books.

Each family that arrives receives a warm embrace. After registration, students go to the bus where they can pick out their own backpacks, and from there, they choose where they want to go. They can stop by the underwear tent, the socks tent, or visit any number of stations on site. The day takes on the feel of a community festival as children run around, climb on the fire truck, and explore their surroundings.

Beyond Supplies: Meeting Holistic Needs

This year, Wesley UMC was able to offer vision screenings. Of the 120 screenings, 30 resulted in further referrals, catching concerns early before they could escalate into more serious issues.

While "We've Got Your Back" provided a wonderful launching pad for students to return to school, leaders dream of doing more. "We would love to have hygiene-related items, deodorants, toothbrushes, and toothpaste," shared ministry leader Sarah Campbell. Ms. Campbell would be happy to welcome a new community partner or church to come alongside and help fund that resource.

In addition to offering more tangible resources, Wesley also dreams of once again providing health screenings and haircuts. In the past, they had doctors

and nurses on hand to complete the health form that needs to be filled out every year. Wesley also had volunteers available to cut hair so that students could return to school looking and feeling their best.

At first glance, you might not think of haircuts as a priority, but Rev. Candy LaBar shared, "In my career, I have experienced parents not sending their children on the first day of school because they are too ashamed that they don't have a haircut or the clothes they need. That shame runs deep in parents. Haircuts aren't just a nice add-on for some families; they're the lifeline that prevents them from having their education interrupted."

The Growing Need for Support

More and more families in the Lehigh Valley need that lifeline. Over the past few years, the cost of housing has become a major problem. Campbell shares, "The Lehigh Valley has become a suburb of NYC. We've had a serious problem with housing, where low-income housing doesn't exist as much here. Rental prices in Bethlehem have risen by 40%. People who have lived here their whole lives can't afford to live here anymore. Even two-income households with solid jobs face real challenges in providing the baseline for their kids, let alone opportunities for their kids... It's families and kids who get caught in these statistics. We want to be the face of Jesus for them."

The growing need for support is evident at "We've Got Your Back." Typically, Wesley hands out 1,500 backpacks. Most of them are distributed at the main event, but families also have the

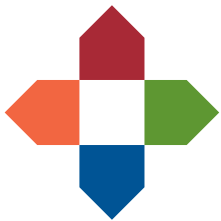


Backpacks in different colors to choose from.

option of picking up backpacks throughout the week. Last year, they ran out of backpacks on Monday and scrambled to find another place to send families. This year, they increased the total number to 2,000—1,500 distributed at Wesley UMC and 500 at Bangor UMC. "We want to be the face of Jesus for them," they say. "We are trying to keep up with the need. The need has been spiking so much."

Wesley is indeed working hard to keep up with the demand. Every little bit helps. This sounds like an extravagant event, and it is, but it's not something that Wesley does alone. They have cultivated community partnerships and offer this program in conjunction with others. Nearby Epworth UMC collects socks and underwear throughout the year and then drops them off for Wesley to distribute. Wesley also partners with Bangor UMC, and they help each other with fundraising.

It's the collaborative work with community partners and the connectional work with fellow UMC churches that allows Wesley to have such a significant impact. If you or your church would like to partner with Wesley or learn more about how to set up your own backpack event, you can reach out to backpacksatwesley@gmail.com or call 610-865-5715.



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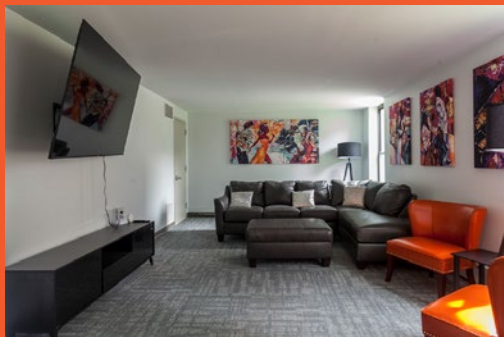
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