



NEW Spirit!

UNITED METHODISTS OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
& GREATER NEW JERSEY

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Rev. Cyndi Stouffer paints with a memory café guest.



Millville Hope Center Serves Daily Lunch and More, With Healthy Portions of Love

By John W. Coleman*

MILLVILLE, NJ

Donna Stiles fondly remembers the distraught, homeless, 20-year-old man who two years ago stumbled into the Trinity First Hope Center, a United Methodist church and community partnership that serves neighbors in need in downtown Millville, NJ. Volunteers were



Millville Hope Center's Monday prayer circle.

...serving lunch when he came in crying and said he was at his wit's end and was considering suicide. "He had been here before, but that day he was so broken you could see it in him."

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Joyful Community Blossoms at West Chester UMC's Sunshine Memory Café

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

WEST CHESTER, PA

On a late November Tuesday afternoon, the sun beamed both through the windows and around the rooms as guests of the Sunshine Memory Café gathered to paint pictures of sunflowers. The room radiated quiet joy as guests painted while their caregivers looked on or swapped ideas with one another.

Guests, caregivers, and volunteers gathered to do what they do every Tuesday afternoon—create connections, community, and opportunities for growth and joy, even in the midst of memory loss.

The Sunshine Memory Café was the brainchild of Adean and Jim Bridges. Adean heard of a new concept called a Memory Café, a place where people struggling with memory loss due to dementia, Alzheimer's, or other illnesses could gather—together with their caregivers—for mutual support. She asked Pastor Brooks for space and a modest budget. Pastor Brooks gave his approval, volunteers quickly hopped on board, and the Sunshine Memory Café was born.

They welcomed their first guests in October 2017. To date, they have served more than 100 pairs of memory-impaired guests and their caregivers.

Volunteers brainstorm cheerful and engaging Tuesday afternoon activities for every week of the year. Whoever comes

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP

As We Grow in God's Grace

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

—MATTHEW 6:33

During the sermonic moment of The Bishop's Days on the District, I shared that the delegations from the Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey Annual Conferences provided a liturgy for the Jurisdictional Conference, which articulated their discernment of what they needed from their next bishop. I shared one of those missional needs during the sermon. I thought that some of you might be curious about all of the missional needs that were shared in the liturgy. I have listed them here:

- To provide spiritually grounded leadership in a season of much needed healing throughout both annual conferences;
- To provide interculturally competent leadership that sets an anti-racist framework and continues to build upon the "Journey of Hope and Wholeness" across both annual conferences;
- To provide risk-taking and boundary-pushing leadership in both annual conferences building fully inclusive communities, particularly as it relates to supporting LGBTQIA+ leadership;
- To strengthen both conferences' ministries with young people, building a leadership pipeline by calling, equipping, and supporting young people for clergy and lay leadership;
- To build relationships within and across annual conference lines, build trust, foster collaboration, and strengthen shared advocacy work;
- To empower congregations to live out their missional identity through evangelism, disciple-forming, and justice-seeking ministry.

I previously shared with you the priorities that were identified by those who attended the on-boarding process conducted in both annual conferences. As one might expect, there is significant repetition and overlap between the on-boarding process and the

liturgy. I believe the vision for the two annual conferences is embedded in the information that has come from these two sources of data. I invite you to continue to pray and engage in conversation about these priorities as together we seek clarity of vision and mission. I anticipate that by the time we arrive at Annual Conference, we will all have clarity about God's vision for us working together.

As we continue to discern God's vision and grow in God's grace, I will attempt to address each of the missional needs and priorities that have been identified. And I will regularly remind myself and the annual conferences that we do this work together, as together we bear the responsibility and the joy of serving in our beloved United Methodist Church. I cannot and will not try to do this work alone.

I will continue to work in consultation with the Committee on Episcopacy in both annual conference in order to discern pace and effectiveness as we address these needs. There may be times in which I ask particular individuals or groups within the annual conferences to help me develop appropriate strategies—that is, theologically-grounded plans that have been verified by science—to address these needs. But all of you can pray and speak words of life into the atmosphere regarding the missional needs that are before each annual conference.

During the Bishop's Days on the District, many of you expressed your awe at the magnitude of the work before me as your bishop. I appreciate your concerns and covet your prayers as I remind you that this is our work to do together. I offer a passage of scripture that helps me when I begin to feel anxious about the magnitude of any task or the many needs of any community to which I have been called to serve:

"...for indeed your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." MATTHEW 6:32B-34

Today, I prayerfully invite you on a spiritual venture of *A Journey of Healing: From Lamentation to Praise*—an EPA&GNJ campaign designed to walk with one another, through God's grace, toward healing and ultimately, PRAISE! This journey will unfold over the coming months, culminating in opportunities to praise and celebrate the work of God in our lives during District Conferences and our Annual Conference in May. 🌈

—Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi

Find out more at: epaumc.org/healingjourney and gnjumc.org/healingjourney.

Journey of Healing

PreLenten & Lenten Gatherings

EPA

EAST DISTRICT

Feb 22, 2025—Jarretown UMC - 10am
March 30, 2025—Montgomery Square UMC - 4pm

SOUTH DISTRICT

Feb 26, 2025—Swarthmore UMC - 7pm
Feb 26, 2025—Lincoln Park Community UMC - 7pm

NORTH DISTRICT

Mar 1, 2025
Mar 18, 2025—Zion of Iona UMC

WEST DISTRICT

Feb 27, 2025—Wesly UMC, Strasburg
Mar 18, 2025—Zion of Iona UMC

GNJ

CAPE ATLANTIC

Mar 8, 2025—Seaville UMC - 2pm
Mar 19, 2025—First UMC Mays Landing - 7pm

CENTRAL

Mar 21, 2025—Medford UMC - 6pm
Mar 22, 2025—First Tom's River UMC - 10am

DELAWARE BAY

Mar 15 2025—First UMC Millville - 9am
Mar 16, 2025—Chews UMC - 6pm

MEADOWLANDS

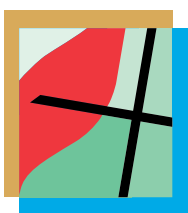
March 22, 2025—Arcola Korean UMC - 10am

RARITAN SHORE

Mar 22, 2025—Montgomery UMC - 10am

SKYLANDS

Mar 1, 2025—Denville Community Church - 2pm



NEWSpirit!

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After Two Decades, District Conferences Return to GNJ— With EPA’s Help

By James Lee

After more than twenty years of dormancy, district conferences are returning to the Greater New Jersey Conference (GNJ). These gatherings, a staple in Eastern Pennsylvania (EPA), are designed to bring clergy and laity together to celebrate, connect, and prepare for Annual Conference. The revival of this practice in GNJ is part of a collaborative effort with EPA, reflecting a shared commitment to fostering connection and learning across both conferences.

What Are District Conferences?

District conferences, as outlined in *The Book of Discipline*, are annual gatherings for lay and clergy delegates to elect leaders to district committees, discuss legislation, and celebrate local accomplishments.

“In EPA, district conference elects people to our district committees, elects equalizing lay delegates to Annual Conference, celebrates transitions within the district, and holds preliminary conversations about Annual Conference legislation,” explained Rev. Jenny Freymoyer, EPA’s West District Superintendent.

When asked, Eastern PA’s East District Superintendent Rev. Dr. Andrew Foster III highlighted the immense value of being an opportunity to gather ahead of annual conference, wrestle together in-person on any legislation, and celebrate local accomplishments.

While EPA has consistently practiced district conferencing, GNJ has relied on virtual “Info Sessions” to discuss Annual Conference legislation. These Zoom sessions, while convenient, often lacked the engagement of in-person gatherings and garnered mixed results.

“Being on Zoom means not being able to ask tough questions freely. Inevitably, the sessions feel more controlled, and words are coming at you, not from you,” shared one GNJ lay leader who requested to remain anonymous. “They felt more like a monologue than a conversation.”

Recognizing the value of in-person dialogue, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and GNJ’s cabinet agreed to reintroduce district conferences as a way to deepen trust, build community, and encourage participation.

Learning From Eastern PA

EPA’s long history with district conferences has served as a model for GNJ’s revival of the practice. During a joint extended cabinet meeting in November, EPA District Superintendents shared their experiences and tools with their GNJ counterparts to help structure their conferences.



TOP: District Superintendents from EPA & GNJ share resources and ideas at a cabinet retreat.

BOTTOM RIGHT: DS Evelyn Kent Clark (EPA), Nicola Mulligan, and DS Glenn Conaway (GNJ) celebrate the good things happening in the local church.

BOTTOM LEFT: Rev. Jenny Freymoyer and Rev. Dr. Andrew L. Foster III, plan together.



“EPA district superintendents are sharing about how district conferences have worked in EPA—our experiences, sample agendas, lessons from the past—with the superintendents in GNJ as they reimagine how district conferences may best support the work of GNJ,” said Freymoyer.

GNJ Meadowlands District Superintendent, Rev. William Williams III, described the collaboration between EPA and GNJ as pivotal. “EPA has been and continues to be a leader... guiding [GNJ] along the path of scriptural and disciplinary holiness. EPA’s guidance, especially in the area of district conferencing, will propel GNJ forward in our mission,” he said.

A Joyful Hope for GNJ

Freymoyer expressed optimism for GNJ’s journey with district conferencing: “My hope for GNJ is that district conferences become a joyful time of gathering that will help order the annual conference in a way that increases participation, brings transparency, nurtures community, and ultimately helps further our common mission as United Methodists.”

GNJ’s leadership echoed this sentiment. “With God’s grace, the cabinet hopes that our trust and transparency are strengthened,” said Williams.



DS Ronell Howard (GNJ) and DS Jenny Freymoyer (EPA) discuss strategy.

SAVE THE DATES

2025 DISTRICT CONFERENCES

SATURDAY
APRIL 26

MEADOWLANDS DISTRICT - 10PM
SKYLANDS DISTRICT - 1PM

SUNDAY
APRIL 27

CAPE ATLANTIC DISTRICT - 2PM
DELAWARE BAY DISTRICT - 6PM
EAST DISTRICT - 3PM
SOUTH DISTRICT - 3PM
NORTH DISTRICT - 3PM

SUNDAY
MAY 4

WEST DISTRICT - 3PM

SATURDAY
MAY 10

CENTRAL DISTRICT - 10AM
RARITAN SHORE DISTRICT - 1PM

Millville

Continued from page 1

Stiles called center director Andy Reif to come talk and pray with him. “We could see the desperation clearly in his eyes,” she recalled. “I feel so hopeless,” he said to them. “I looked him right in the eyes,” said Stiles. “I told him he was in the wrong place. I said, ‘This is not the Hopeless Center; this is the Hope Center.’”

It’s a favorite story she likes to share because it has a happy ending, one of many that happen there. Two weeks after staff got the young man the help he needed, he returned and asked for Stiles. “I told him if he wanted lunch, I needed a hug first,” she recalled. “But he had the biggest smile on his face and just wanted to thank us for helping to save his life. He said, ‘I came back to tell you that I have a job, and I’m getting place to live. You never gave up on me, and you wouldn’t let me give up on myself.’”

“That’s our goal,” Stiles explained. “We’re going to do everything we can to help people, so they don’t give up on themselves.”



Rev. Brian Robinson and Donna Stiles chat with a guest.

The Hope Center is the right place for more than a hundred people who come there daily to enjoy a hot, nutritious lunch, as well as warm fellowship and supportive services to help them overcome various needs and problems. Indeed, it offers guests a growing menu of abundant blessings besides just lunch, including:

- Bathrooms, showers and laundry facilities for their personal hygiene.
- “Blessing bags” containing toiletries and personal supplies.
- A Code Blue warming center for frigid winter nights and a Code Red cooling center for hot summer days.
- The “Hope Chest,” which offers donated clothes and accessories available for “shoppers.”
- A mailing address and mailboxes needed to receive government documents and benefits.
- Help getting birth certificates, social security cards and driver’s licenses for identification.
- Visits from social workers to offer housing assistance, veterans’ benefits, and referrals for acquiring mental health and addiction recovery services.
- Three weekly AA support-group meetings.
- And, last but not least, a weekly, lunchtime Bible study on Wednesdays.

In fact, Jesus’ oft-quoted words in Matthew 25:40—“...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”—is the Bible verse that inspires the Hope Center’s mission and ministry. While volunteers busily prepare and serve meals, some sit to talk with guests at tables, offering a reflection of Christ’s calm, loving presence.

‘Trinity First Hope Center kept me alive’

“Trinity First Hope Center kept me alive while I was homeless, (living) outside for eight months,” Seth William Hall wrote on the center’s Facebook page. “They kept me fed, sheltered from the cold and heat, showered, clothed, and blessed with love. The individuals who volunteer are genuinely sincere and kind. I could not have survived through nearly a year outside without them. Thank you so much to each of you.”

This Hope Center is one of more than two dozen collaborative church and community nonprofits that have received support from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey since the Covid pandemic struck Millville in March 2020. It is the fruit of a merger between First and Trinity United Methodist churches that happened in January that year, and it operates in Trinity’s former fellowship hall.

Millville, in South Jersey’s largely impoverished, often-overlooked Cumberland County, was once renowned for its glass-making industry and is trying to reboot with a downtown arts district and new business investment. But it’s indelible stain of poverty remains, deepened by daily food insecurity and food insufficiency.

The Hope Center began as a county-certified Code Blue warming center during winter nights, and then a Code Red center during hot summer days. But it launched its Care and Share Feeding Program for unhoused residents in March 2020, when Covid closed restaurants and other food-sharing sources, leaving no place for homeless residents to find a healthy meal.

The Rev. Brian Robinson, a commissioned deacon, retired elementary school principal and Hope Center board member, became the senior pastor of the sponsoring First United Methodist Church in 2023. Associate Pastor Jack Fosbenner helps Robinson and leads the weekly Bible study.

“As a school principal in this city for 15 years,” said Robinson, “I got to see up close and personal what some families’ lives were like and how challenging it is for people who don’t have jobs, and even those who are working, to make ends meet. And that often broke my heart.” Invited by the previous pastor, the Rev. Tom Stark, to join the board, he also began volunteering there, from washing dishes to peeling potatoes.

But it was while helping guests with the laundry machines that Robinson says he got to know some of them. “While your laundry is running, you’ve got time to talk. I got to hear their stories and learn about what interesting lives they’ve lived.”

He’s also got to know and admire the Hope Center’s dedicated volunteers. “It’s just wonderful to see them in action and see all that the Hope Center is trying to do to help people. It’s a real blessing and privilege to be able to serve the community like this.”

Donna Stiles began volunteering because “retirement was not agreeing with me. I had to do something that I thought was worth doing.” She started volunteering in the Code Blue shelter. But when the pandemic hit, she joined the Hope Center’s urgent effort to help feed hungry neighbors. Soon she began managing its operations and volunteers.

‘Earning trust makes us family’

“It’s an amazing thing,” she said. “I mean, it’s exhausting, yes, and at times it’s frustrating; but it’s also the most fulfilling thing.” She marvels at the gratitude expressed earnestly by guests, especially by those who at first were not open or trusting toward her and other staff. “You know, trust is the biggest thing. It takes a long time to earn it; but once we do earn it, it’s incredible.

It really is. We say then we’re not volunteers and guests anymore. Earning trust makes us family. Yeah, we are family.”

And the volunteers in this family, many of whom come from various churches and community groups, enjoy the fun of working and serving together. “We have a great time,” said Stiles. There’s usually a radio playing music in the kitchen, adding to the infectious camaraderie among people who clearly are not weary from their well-doing.

Volunteer Denise Arrigo recalled in an interview that she was slightly nervous to approach guests at first. But she did and came to know them by sitting down to converse over a cup of coffee. “I learned how easily becoming poor can happen to someone. One loss follows another—your license, then your transportation, your job and income, then your home, your family, and so on. When they tell their stories, we might find ways to help them, especially when we have the right connections. We have ways to help them turn it around and get back up. And we have seen some miraculous turnarounds.”

The center displays a poster to measure and motivate guests’ individual progress. It reads “Step in, Step up, Next step and Step out.”

So far, over 15 guests have signed their names to the poster, meaning they have completed all their steps. “They now have a home and a job, and are doing really well on their own,” said Stiles. “And the blessing is for them and for us as volunteers. Some come back to volunteer here. They give us hugs and tell us that we cared, so now they care. It just makes us feel good and gives us encouragement to keep on fighting for our friends.”

A once homeless husband and wife arrived in the winter when they overstayed their time at a shelter and had nowhere to go. They are homeless no longer, Stiles reports. They eventually moved into an apartment and are now “home-blessed.” In fact, the center hired them as custodians. Another couple, Wayne and Kim Floyd, met as guests, became close friends, fell in love and were married in September at the Hope Center among fellow guests. A proud staff volunteer coordinated their wedding. Meanwhile, four guests are in First Church’s new members class.

“It’s about providing people in need with hope and support and helping them move from homelessness to stability, all in a safe, loving environment,” asserted Stiles. To be sure, there are some sad endings among the many happy ones. The Hope Center “family” remembered the life of one regular guest who died in September. “But when one passes from an overdose, or an unfortunate accident, or dies from a drug overdose, it is a loss for our community,” she said. “We know their names, we know who they are, and we care for and love each one of them.”



Donna Stiles (right) with guests, Wayne & Donna

‘We’re blessed to have the partners we have’

Indeed, the Hope Center virtually pulsates with daily expressions of love and life. But it all begins with lunch. And that begins with the donations given by so many contributing partners. Robinson is grateful to local restaurants and other businesses for food donations. But he is also grateful for a 2024 GNJ Conference Community Development grant and other gifts that have improved the center’s ability to store and serve its food. “We were able to purchase a full-size, walk-in freezer,” he said showing it off with glee. “And that’s enabled us to accept food donations and not have to use them immediately. We can plan our meals better that way.”

However, planning for the center’s future is a real challenge right now. “We are planning for a future we don’t know yet,” Robinson said. “Four years ago, when we started, we were serving about 20 people for lunch. Then our numbers and our needs suddenly grew. We’ve been serving up to 125 people lately, which we never would have predicted. Now we are starting to look at how can we accommodate more people for the lunch program in a way that still makes it a comfortable place for everybody, because it is truly the socializing that is so important here.”

The center also is exploring ways to use more of its facilities and add more services needed by its guests to help them gain self-sufficiency. That includes such possibilities as mental health counseling onsite, plus more personal hygiene resources, financial literacy and life skills education, job training opportunities and additional Code Blue beds in the winter. To do any of that, it knows the key will be growing its already impressive list of community partnerships in various directions.

“We’re blessed to have the partners we have,” said Robinson. “But we’re really dreaming big, because we believe that not only is there great need in our city, but there are also resources that can help us solve many problems that our homeless population deals with. We just have to dream and work together to make it all happen.” 🌱

To learn more about the Trinity Hope Center and its activities, visit their active Facebook page. Also, view an hourlong recorded interview with staff members on the YouTube “Around South Jersey,” podcast, conducted in May 2024 by guest host Andy Reif. The occasion celebrated the Hope Center’s fourth anniversary.

*The Rev. John W. Coleman is a freelance United Methodist journalist, who retired from the EPA&GNJ Communications staff in June 2024. He is also a part-time, licensed local pastor in GNJ.

On the Turnpike Heading West



By Rev. Lorelei Toombs
Associate Superintendent for
the North-West Region

It was an early Sunday morning in August when I was making my way west on the PA Turnpike. The road ahead of me already stretched further than my well-worn 18-minute path of 9 years between my home and the Willow Grove UMC. Having settled into the drive a bit, I found myself talking to God and simply noticing who and what was around me while driving. In this season, I found myself especially mindful of and praying for other clergy colleagues and congregations who had experienced transitions this summer. And as I wondered what the day would bring, whom I would meet, and what I might learn, the sight of three traveling companions brought me a smile, like a divine “hello,” accompanied by a sense of great peace.

A Classic Car, a Military Convoy, and a Horse and Buggy

Yes, at 7:30 a.m., these were my traveling companions. A classic car, likely on the road to a car show in a neighboring small town; a military convoy, likely national guardsmen on their way to morning exercises; and a horse and buggy, carrying early morning worshippers to their gathering. It was a beautiful reminder of the varied contexts and communities our congregations represent across the Eastern PA Conference. The North-West Region of our Conference is filled with people and churches who value hard work, meaningful fellowship, and often live their commitments to God and country through hands-on mission, various forms of civil service, and ministries of feeding.

Serving as Associate Superintendent of the North-West Region and of Leadership Development has gifted me the oppor-



Rev. Lorelei Toombs with Rev. Bob Howard

tunity to sit in a wide cross-section of organizational and programming spaces. There have been those expected places, like serving on the Leadership Academy Project Team and attending district events for Pastoral Interviews, Charge Conferences, and Clergy Retreat Days. But there have also been invitations to unexpected and surprising places, where I have learned a great deal, and I hope I have grown significantly, so that I might serve you better.

One such surprising place was the invitation to assist with the consolidated “Grant Process.” The consolidated grant process,



Hebron UMC in Lebanon, PA

new to EPA in the fall of 2023, invites local churches and ministries to apply for all manner of funds at one time, in the fall. While in previous years, churches might have applied for these funds year-round, in many different cycles and with wide-ranging deadlines, the consolidated grant process has sought to unify the application processes, heighten the visibility of all EPA-offered grants, increase engagement, and better meet the needs of all churches applying for the grant, since they no longer needed to know exactly which fund to apply to.

As a result, in fiscal year 2024, the total grants awarded to local Eastern PA churches and ministries exceeded half a million dollars, totaling \$539,345. These grants represented funds drawn from several sources, distributed to support these initiatives:

- Congregational Development: \$97,345
- Wholeness Centers & Urban Ministry/Alliance: \$62,375
- Dewees (funds for Missions & Evangelism): \$72,395
- Metro Ministries, Latino & Community Engagement: \$90,300
- Equitable Compensation: \$216,900

What is as impressive to me as the total dollars sent back to local churches is that 70 of our 380 churches (nearly 1 in 5) will receive funds in 2025, up from 55 churches last year. In fiscal year 2025, the expected distribution to local EPA churches and ministries is \$507,500. However, the total distribution will likely be greater, as additional equitable compensation funds will be disbursed following Q2.



Clergy gather for spiritual retreat at Seltzer Retreat Center.

and the freedom that came with the openness of a “church school” not defined by physical church architecture and/or implicit beliefs or understandings of God as a part of that space.

These grant dollars are helping Hebron UMC reimagine and redesign how they can grow and maintain the authentic relationships they have built. As they look to 2025, they have several ambitious goals:

- 1) Expand their neighborhood youth outreach events for “at-risk” youth with a continued focus on physical activity opportunities, like the “skate park”.
- 2) Establish a new informal monthly Saturday-night Praise and Worship service introducing different styles of multicultural music and singing.
- 3) Continue their Sunday morning traditional worship service with quarterly multicultural worship services, as in the past.

We all know that “birthing” a new ministry or church program is not easy. Successful ministries and programs grow with significant effort. But they also require being open to the Holy Spirit and flexible to its guidance. We face challenges and redirection. And, if we are honest, most often, all persons that are engaged are transformed in some way or another.

Today, Eastern PA, you are blessing this ministry. Through your grant dollars, you are blessing Hebron UMC and offering them your confidence and support to “keep on keeping on.” You are celebrating with them the good work God is doing through them. You are blessed to be a blessing. Thank you, EPA, for your support!

Your apportionment and grant dollars are helping Hebron UMC reimagine and redesign how they can grow and maintain the authentic relationships they have built. As they look to 2025, they have several ambitious goals: 1) the expansion of their neighborhood youth outreach events for “at-risk” youth with a continued focus on physical activity opportunities, like the “skate park”; 2) to establish a new monthly informal Saturday-night Praise and Worship which introduces different styles of multi-cultural music and singing; and 3) the ongoing support of their Sunday morning traditional worship service with quarterly multi-cultural worship services, as in the past.

We all know that “birthing” a new ministry or church program is not easy. Successful ministries and programs grow with significant effort. But they also require being open to the Holy Spirit and flexible to its guidance. We face challenges and redirection. And, if we are honest, most often, all persons that are engaged are transformed in some way or another.

Today, Eastern PA, you are blessing this ministry. Through your apportionment and grant dollars you are blessing Hebron UMC and offering them your confidence and support to “keep on keeping on.” You are celebrating with them the good work God is doing through them. You are blessed to be a blessing. Thank you EPA for your support! 🌈

“Still, Where Do all Those Dollars Go? And to Do What?”

With that, I would sit you down and introduce you to my new friend, Pastor Bob Howard of Hebron UMC in Lebanon, and we’d tell you about “Jesus School & Skate.”

Jesus School is a program that was birthed in the summer of 2024 when willing leadership and the pastor experimented with new and creative ways to engage the “at-risk” youth and families surrounding their church. Recognizing their natural assets of multiple parking lots, on otherwise busy Lebanon streets, willing volunteers transformed the parking lots into recreational spaces. Out came the basketballs, varieties of lawn games, and food. But what clinched the deal for the local kiddos was the portable stunt ramps for bikes and skateboards!

Yep. Skate ramps. Skate ramps, pizza, and the love of Jesus.

What started as a Saturday afternoon endeavor morphed into both Saturday and Sunday afternoons! The consistent and recognizable faces of the trained adult volunteers enabled the program to grow to an average attendance of 20–30 youth between the ages of 5 and 18. The investment of approximately 5–8 hours a weekend in face-to-face engagement forged new relationships, bonds, and a sense of community.

Here’s Where Grant Dollars Make an Impact

For “Jesus School” to become a year-round endeavor, Pastor Bob knows the program requires a complete redesign. In his own words, he shared with me that the summer afforded unique freedoms: the freedom of summer schedules (both for youth and adults), the freedom to gather outdoors (out from the natural obstacles of our individual homes and church walls),

In EPA Latino Pastors and Missionaries Gather to Remember and to Grow Closer to God and One Another

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On a cool autumn day, Latino pastors and missionaries from across Eastern Pennsylvania gathered at Gretna Glen for a day apart. Their purpose was to reconnect with God, with one another, and with all that they had learned in the past.

It was a God's timing. Latino pastors and missionaries gathered- worried about what the election might mean for the communities and the people they serve- were invited to step out of the worry, just for a moment, and connect with the living spirit of God.

Rev. Alicia Julia Stanley led the group in a mindfulness exercise. She invited people to connect with their bodies, to connect with the present moment.

She told the group "Let go of this past week. The pain, it doesn't exist. When you breathe in, breathe in the Spirit, breathe in the life."

The room felt lighter and less tense after just a few minutes of mindfully grounding the presence of the Holy Spirit by attending to the body and the breath.

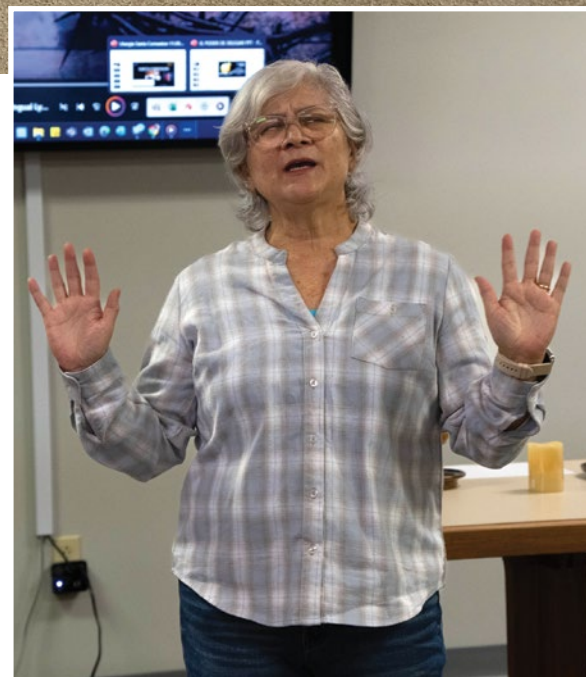
The Rev. Lisa DePaz preached a sermon on Number 13:17-20, 25-27. In the scripture passage "God sent twelve spies to survey the land: their mission was to "See, judge (discern, find out), and act (plan)." She proclaimed to all who gathered "Like the Israelites, we are called to act as "spies" in our communities, observing and assessing in order to carry out God's mission in our contexts." She asked all those present to consider whether we are truly seeing the full possibilities and needs of our communities, and to prayerfully consider whether the service we are offering is a true expression of love and justice.

It was a timely message that set the table for the work ahead. Rev. Bruny Martinez and Rev. Alicia Julia Stanley presented on The next part of the retreat



Pastors, Missionaries and Retreat Leaders gather for a group photo.

Rev. Maria Quesada "Lisa" DePaz prays before the afternoon session.



revisited the process of asset-mapping. They invited everyone to listen carefully to the communities they served, and to observe them with the eyes of God.

They were invited to consider where are the people gathering? Are they working at home or the office? Listen to the whole person.

As the pastors and missionaries were led to reflect on their communities, they were invited to do so from

a spiritually grounded perspective. We don't just analyze our communities with our minds. "Discernment is a spiritual process. Always."

PowerPoint slides remained in view throughout the entire presentation, summarizing the essential point.

"The important thing here is that we understand that we alone do not have the solution, and that Jesus is already there before us moving in the midst of the community of which we are a part."

The message of the morning landed. Over lunch, retreat members processed what they learned and connected with one another. This retreat is "refreshing my thoughts and actions. I've been serving with the UMC for 12 years. Every day you learn more and more." Shared Candida Torres, a lay member of Bridgesburg UMC.

Marcos Rios, Lay missionary for El Buen Samaritano UMC shared that the review of what was learned in the past was an intentional choice for the morning session. "It's important for the Bible itself is law of repetition. The seminar is always the same name. That gives opportunity for different people to bring different ideas. That's how we learn... We are always asking the holy Spirit for direction. Even though we might be going through critical moments, we always ask the Holy Spirit."

You could tell that the leaders had been seeking the Holy Spirit as they prepared for the retreat. The Spirit's presence was palpable throughout the retreat. In the singing, in the praying, in the laughter and in the sharing the Holy One was moving—inspiring, refreshing, and renewing the spirits of those who gathered so that they might be strengthened to return to their communities and view them once more through the eyes of God. 🇺🇸



Pastors and missionaries pause to bask in the goodness of God through music and song.



Rev. Bruny Martinez gives an engaging presentation on asset-mapping within the community.

We must observe, and we must also pray, and attend to our own spiritual journeys, for it is through our personal transformational relationship with Jesus that others and our community will be transformed. "I need to hear God speaking to me to create transformational change."





Pastors gather for a group shot with facilitator Rev. Lydia Muñoz.

GNJ Latino Pastor's Retreat Reflects on the Past AND DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On November 6, 2024, Hispanic Latino pastors from across Greater New Jersey gathered for the first time since COVID. They worshiped together, laughed together, ate together, and reflected on the progress they had made toward strengthening Hispanic Latino ministries in Greater New Jersey.

The Rev. Eunice Vega Perez, District Superintendent for the Skylands District, shared her vision for the day: "The dream for this day was to come together as Latinos from the GNJ Annual Conference to return to the table, dream together, and plan and strategize for the future of our ministries in local churches and leadership, both laity and clergy."

The first part of the retreat focused on storytelling and remembering. On the first day, pastors reconnected with past goals, identified areas needing renewed energy and attention, but, more importantly, celebrated the progress made toward those goals. The Rev. Dr. Lydia Muñoz, Executive Director for the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry, led the reflection, helping participants acknowledge where

ministries had fallen short and where progress had been made. The honest sharing, and the process of remembering together both the sorrow and the joy, was deeply meaningful.

The Rev. Lyssette Perez, pastor of Oasis UMC and Salem UMC, spoke about the impact of the retreat: "This brings hope. Every time you bring a group together, it brings hope and new energy. Because we need it. We're a connectional church, and if we're not together, everyone will do things individually, and we won't find support in each other. Especially today, as we have received news of the new leadership in the United States... We have a new president who lacks a vision for the diversity of our country—a country that is diverse and should be paying attention to the poor, the immigrant, and those who are marginalized, especially those who are different from the dominant race. This is meaningful."

The Rev. Isabel Quezada, pastor of El Macias and Christ UMC in Fair Haven, spoke about the joy she experienced from both the connection with colleagues and the open, honest reflection. For her, "Latino pastors coming together and being able to openly talk about what didn't work, what can be improved, and what else we can do" was a hope-filled exercise.

Over and over, other pastors and leaders echoed that sentiment. It was good to gather, to reflect, and to notice and celebrate all they had accomplished together since the goals were set. Over the past 10-15 years, programs like SELAH (the Hispanic Latino lay leadership academy) and Ninos Para Cristo (the Hispanic Latino camping ministry held at the Pinelands Center) had borne real fruit.

For those gathered in the room, it was easy to quite literally see the fruits of their labor—for the fruit sat among them. The Rev. Geraldo Oviedo attended the retreat for the first time. Rev. Oviedo is a licensed local pastor, serving in his first appointment. His call to ministry was nurtured and developed through SELAH—the lay leadership academy born out of the last round of goal setting and dreaming. Rev. Pedro Pillot received his call to ministry at Ninos Para Cristo.

SELAH, Ninos Para Cristo, and Walk to Emmaus had developed and nurtured both lay leadership and a new generation of disciples. The immigration clinics held in the past had a real impact on the communities they served.

After completing the work of looking back, the participants went out to eat—connecting with each other as friends, as well as colleagues. For Rev. McWilliam Colon, that was the most meaningful part of the retreat. He shared, "After the meeting, when we went out to dinner, we were no longer pastors; we were just hanging out as friends, loving each other."

On the last day of the retreat, participants gathered for worship, which ended with a moment of silence. It was that moment of silence that the Rev. Pedro Cesar Miyares, pastor of Simpson UMC and President of the Committee for Hispanic Latino Ministries, wanted to carry forward with him. He shared, "The final moment of the meeting, when we took a minute of silence to reflect on what we've done, was a very meaningful moment for us. It makes us reflect on what we can do in the future."

The Rev. Miyares, the current chair of the Latino Committee, is looking forward to a bright future. "It was beautiful for us to talk about the history of the ministry in the past, and also about our life in ministry right now. No matter the problems we face, the solution is what we are looking for. We must look together for solutions to the problems we have."

No matter the problems we face, we must look together for the solutions. The pastors departed from the retreat resolved to look together for the solutions to the problems the Hispanic Latino community is facing. Since the retreat they've had two follow-up meetings to clarify goals and identify next steps. May the Spirit of God bless and inspire, as the ministers of God continue to proclaim and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ to communities who need a word of hope, now more than ever. 🇺🇸



TOP LEFT: Rev. Lydia Muñoz leads a reflection on past successes.

TOP RIGHT: Guillermo Javier Barroso-Rodriguez poses with Rev. McWilliam Colon

LOWER LEFT: Rev. Lyssette Perez discusses progress with Rev. Muñoz



Thank You for Helping Us to Minister to People in Prison at Christmas

Through the last quarter of the year the EPA Prison Ministry & Restorative Justice team invited you to write Christmas cards with an encouraging message for people who are incarcerated.

You rose to the challenge. We received 7,280 cards. Boxes and bags of cards poured in from United Methodists in Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey. Students at IGNITE wrote 650 messages of hope and encouragement for people in prison. The ministry extended further than we could have imagined as people from Virginia and Minnesota donated cards.

Thanks to your contributions the Prison Ministry & Restorative Justice Team distributed 7,280 cards to 8 facilities across Eastern Pennsylvania. Cards were also sent to a facility in Texas, whose chaplain had heard about this ministry through the national United Methodist News and requested cards.

That's not all. In addition to writing messages of encouragement in Christmas cards, you also donated unused cards so that those who are incarcerated could send cards to their family and loved ones. Your generosity allowed people in prison to maintain supportive relationships with those nearest and dearest to them. In total 4,236 cards were collected and distributed to 2 facilities.

Through your messages of encouragement and donations of new cards, you reminded those who are in prison that they are not forgotten by God, nor by those who are on the outside.

THANK YOU for supporting this important ministry. As you continue to walk in the light of the new year, we invite you to continue to draw the circle wide and find ways to share God's love with all who need to hear it. 🌟



Get Ready to Jump into Summer

Registration is Open Now for Summer Camp 2025

By Apryl Miller

Although it's only December, it's already time to start planning for Summer Camp 2025!

Why register early, you may ask? Summer camp is an essential part of our faith formation, and sharing about summer camp now ensures children, youth, and adults don't miss out on this incredible experience. By registering early, you can secure a spot before the calendar fills up with other commitments. Early registration also gives the perfect opportunity to invite friends and family to join in on this unforgettable adventure. Summer camp is not just about fun activities—it's a fantastic way to introduce others to a vibrant Christian community and a life-changing faith experience.

Don't wait—explore the camp websites today for more information and to register. Start planning for an amazing summer that will strengthen your faith and create lasting memories!



- www.csfarm.org
- www.gretnaglen.org
- www.innabah.org
- www.poconoplateau.org



EPAUMC churches will have two Confirmation Retreat options at our Camp & Retreat Centers in Spring 2023. Gretna Glen and Pocono Plateau will each offer a chance for confirmands to explore their Christian identity, grow in their faith journey, and understand their gifts and roles as part of the body of Christ.

Gretna Glen
APRIL 21-23
GRETNAGLEN.ORG
CAMP@GRETNAGLEN.ORG
 717-273-6525

Pocono Plateau
APRIL 28-30
POCONOPLATEAU.ORG
CAMP@POCONOPLATEAU.ORG
 570-676-3665

\$120 per Confirmand
\$50 for Confirmation Leaders & Chaperones

Check each camp's website for registration information.



GRETNA GLEN CAMP & RETREAT CENTER 2025 EVENTS

JANUARY

Jan 10-12 • My Grown-Up & Me Retreat
 Jan 19 • Free Youth Event 4-6:30

FEBRUARY

Feb 7-9 • Youth Winter Blast
 Feb 16 • Free Youth Event 4-6:30
 Feb 21-23 • Young Adults Retreat

MARCH

Mar 16 • Free Youth Event 4-6:30
 Mar 21-23 • Confirmation Retreat

APRIL

Apr 11-12 • Children's Spring Blast
 Apr 26 • Spring Work Day 9:30am-5pm

MAY

May 10 • Open House 10am-4pm
 May 13 • Spring Fling 9:30am-3pm

JUNE

June 1 • S'mores & Tours 1pm-4pm
 ☀ Summer Camp

JULY

☀ Summer Camp

AUGUST

☀ Summer Camp

SEPTEMBER

Sep 12-14 • Family & Friends Getaway
 Sep 13 • Gretna Gritty

OCTOBER

Oct 19 • Fall Fun Day 12pm-4pm
 Oct 19 • Free Youth Event 4-5:30
 Oct 21 • Autumn Leaves 9:30am-3pm

NOVEMBER

Nov 16 • Free Youth Event 4pm-6:30pm
 Nov 21 • Glow Run 6:15

DECEMBER

Dec 5-6 • Children's Winter Blast



87 OLD MINE ROAD LEBANON PA 17042
CAMP@GRETNAGLEN.ORG
717-273-6525

EPA Residence in Ministry: Leaning into Leadership Development

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

The Residence in Ministry program in EPA is a two-year cohort experience where provisional elders and deacons grow as leaders and prepare for their ordination paperwork. The Residence in Ministry in EPA is a two-year cohort. The first year is formational—participants focus on growing as leaders. The second year is preparational—participants prepare for their full membership interviews. Each cohort meets separately so that they can dive deeply into their material.

EPA's RIM focuses on nurturing the whole person. Under the leadership of Rev. Amy Banka, this focus included spiritual formation. She invited participants to deeply consider their identity as leaders and pastors, their identity as children of God, and how God was speaking to them in and through those multiple identities.

When she stepped down from leadership, Rev. Karen Bartkowski, who was herself nurtured by Rev. Banka in RIM,

took up the mantle. Like Rev. Banka, Rev. Bartkowski views Residence in Ministry as something more than a disciplinary requirement, but as an opportunity to help elders and deacons nurture and develop their leadership skills.

"I want RIM to be a safe space to wonder about things, to ask hard questions, and to bring challenging situations to the table." Rev. Bartkowski strives to help people recognize their own leadership style—their strengths, and the areas where they might still need to fill in the gaps—and then invites participants to consider how they will employ their unique leadership style to address the challenges they are facing.

Next month, each member of RIM will bring a case study of a curious or challenging situation in their church or community. They'll provide the backstory, describe the challenge, and then explore the problem with one another.

While the presenter works with their peers to think through the challenge at hand, Rev. Bartkowski plans to nudge them



Rev. Karen Bartkowski

into deeper self-reflection on themselves as leaders. She invites provisional deacons and elders to consider, "What button does this push for you? What leadership skills are needed to address this situation? Do you have these leadership skills?"

As she considers curriculum and process, Rev. Bartkowski engages BOOM for feedback on areas where pastors could dig a little deeper—whether that's in their theology, preaching, or practice of ministry—and then creates opportunities for the cohort to engage more deeply on those topics.

Over the next six months, Rev. Bartkowski plans to cover topics such as engaging church finances, exploring tools for introducing anti-racism work into the local church, and handling conflict.

Equipping a new generation of leaders is hard and hope-filled work. For Rev. Bartkowski, the Residence in Ministry program is a source of great joy. "I love to see transformation. I love to be in a place where that happens."

It is a joy to be in a place where transformation happens. May God continue to bless the Residence in Ministry program in EPA as they continue to do the hard work of equipping leaders to lead in such a time as this. 🌱

Building Clergy Leaders: Inside the Residence in Ministry Program of GNJ

By Rev. Jennifer Cho

Since 2020, the RIM of GNJ has thrived under the dedicated leadership of Rev. Jennifer Cho and Rev. Joe Monahan. We are excited to welcome 20 participants to the 2024-2025 class, paving the way for a year filled with dynamic learning, meaningful sharing, personal growth, and strong fellowship. Our first in-person meeting at Bridgewater UMC on September 25, 2024, was a great success, and we eagerly anticipate our next in-person gathering on February 13, 2025, at MRC.

What is the Residence in Ministry?

RIM is a program that nurtures and equips provisional deacons and elders. Its activity is directed by the *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 326:

- Assist provisional members in their transition into ministry by building covenant relationships with their colleagues for mutual prayer, support, and reflection on the meaning and practice of ordained ministry.
- Guide them toward deeper fruitfulness and effectiveness in servant ministry, so that they might become excellent and passionate clergy leaders, carrying out the mission of the UMC and the Greater NJ Annual Conference.

RIM hosts two identical virtual sessions each month, lasting three hours each, on Wednesday afternoons and Thursday mornings. We aim to stagger these sessions on different weeks whenever possible, allowing participants to attend the alternate session if they need to miss one due to illness or vacation.

During the pandemic, we initially held a six-hour Zoom session, but we found it challenging to maintain attention and attendance. The current approach enables us to manage a more workable group size and provides greater flexibility for candidates who must coordinate their schedules around work,



GNJ RIM cohort gathers for a photo.

particularly those in academia or located outside of New Jersey.

In 2023, we introduced an in-person session to jumpstart relationships, which has proven helpful. Each participant selects a preferred "home" session—either Wednesday or Thursday—and is assigned to a small group that they meet with throughout the year. We mix the groups during individual assignments to encourage interaction among more colleagues.

RIM focuses on delivering content directly related to the Board of Ordained Ministry's interviews and general topics connected to pastoral leadership and formation. Subjects covered have included preaching, the Wesleyan theology of

salvation, Wesleyan sacramental theology, polity, cultural competence, implicit bias, anti-racism, stewardship, mission and evangelism, self-care, emotional



Rev. Joe Monahan with Rev. Jennifer Cho

intelligence, vocation, small groups, and leading in cross-racial/cross-cultural appointments.

Each meeting begins with worship, during which one participant preaches while other group members assist in leading worship. Following this, we break into small groups where participants check in and discuss the sermon based on the feedback rubric provided by the Board. Guest lecturers are invited to present a topic, followed by a conversation and a Q&A session. These interactions help participants become acquainted with other members of the annual conference by featuring various speakers and leaders.

In recent years, we have chosen a book to read together throughout the year and provided discussion questions for small groups. In other cases, we have engaged with self-paced online learning resources and debriefed those experiences. We also select an article, blog post, or book chapter that addresses a specific aspect of pastoral leadership or vocation for discussion. Additionally, we have developed a case study format based on an emotional intelligence analysis of a situation, which takes about an hour to complete.

At RIM, we recognize the transformative power of peer learning in fostering growth. We are devoted to developing and empowering our provisional candidates, ensuring they are fully prepared for ordination. We invite you to join us in nurturing a new generation of leaders by lifting them up in prayer. Your thoughts and prayers for RIM candidates can significantly enhance their journey, helping them thrive as they pursue their calling! 🌱

West Chester UMC

Continued from page 1

up with the idea then has the privilege of planning that activity or event. Some activities are planned based on the gifts and talents of the volunteers. Kean Spencer has a knack for arranging flowers, so he plans days when the group can make arrangements together. Laura Raybourn is good at crafts. She planned and prepared the sunflower painting activity.

Sometimes the activities are community-oriented. Guests have made Valentine cards for veterans and collected pet blankets for a local animal shelter that sometimes brings dogs to visit the café. Other times, the activities are just about fun and joy. Together they've assembled a cookbook, competed in the Sunshine Memory Café Olympics, and brought in items for show and tell. Occasionally, the group goes on trips together. They've visited a local farm, ridden on the Strasburg Railroad, and gone to the Brandywine River Museum.

Volunteer Karen Herr shared, "We do all different kinds of things to stimulate people. Some people like outdoor activities, some like artwork." Laura Raybourn



Memory cafe guests exercise self expression through art.

shared, "What I really enjoy is seeing that creativity is not lost. One of our first guests was a professional musician. He was almost completely mute, needed full-time care, and yet he played from memory for almost 20 minutes."

The café endeavors to create space for meaning-making, exploration, and self-expression. Painting and flower arranging might, at first glance, seem simplistic, but they are powerful tools for self-expression. Grace Muzzo, a new volunteer at the café, eloquently summarizes the impact of the work: "It's incredibly therapeutic. It engages motor memory. There are memories of being able to do it. It's not a verbal activity, but it is an expressive activity. Humans want to be creative."

Muzzo connected with this ministry because she had witnessed the way progressive memory loss

impacts a family unit. "Both my mom and my mother-in-law were in similar situations. It is easy for us to just be here. It's fun. And hopefully, we can provide a nice change and human contact." The impact of a change of pace and some human contact cannot be overstated. Some caregivers continue to attend the café, even after their loved ones have passed away, because of the community they've formed.

Volunteers are intentional about creating a space where everyone feels welcome. Some of the guests are members of West Chester UMC, others come because they learned about it online, and a few come because their doctor recommended it.

The relationships formed at the café matter just as much as the programming. Kean Spencer, a volunteer since the beginning of

the café, keeps his eyes on the impact that this experience has on the caregiver. He shared, "We know the mission is to help the guest, but the benefit to the caregiver is just as important. They can compare notes and swap practical tips and tricks for living with someone with Alzheimer's. The smiles on the caregivers' faces are bigger than the guests' smiles. The love is palpable, and their loved one is out of the house."

The love in the room was indeed palpable. The day I visited, Laura Raybourn, led the group in painting sunflowers. Volunteers filled and refilled paper plates with globs of paint colors so that guests and their caregivers could focus on their craft or on each other. Quiet conversations bubbled up here and there.

When the afternoon drew to a close and guests began to gather their belongings, there was a quiet sense of fulfillment in the air. The simple act of painting sunflowers, surrounded by caregivers, friends, and volunteers, had created a space for connection, creativity, and joy. No matter the challenges we face, there are always opportunities to create meaningful moments and lasting bonds.



Volunteer Laura Raybourn outlines the next step in the painting process.

Save the Date

EPA Tools for Ministry

WEST DISTRICT
Feb. 22, 2025 @ Salem UMC
140 N Penn St, Manheim, PA 17545

SOUTH EAST REGION
March 8, 2025 @ Eastern University
1300 Eagle Rd, St Davids, PA 19087


NORTH DISTRICT
March 15, 2025 @ Asbury UMC
1533 Springhouse Rd, Allentown, PA 1810

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SupportUMCF.org



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Abundant Life for Seniors





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Both/And – Fall
Counterculture – Stewardship
Laity Sunday – October
Sanctuary – Advent

