



SUMMER 2025
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NEW Spirit!

UNITED METHODISTS OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
& GREATER NEW JERSEY

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Rev. Rutendo Mahachi and Rev. Elijah Brown share on behalf of GNJ's Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century.

Leaders from EPA & GNJ Exercise Ministry Planning Muscles

AT THE STRATEGIC PLANS VISIONING DAY

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On a sunny and hot day in June, ministry leaders from many nations, tongues, and ministry contexts across EPA & GNJ gathered for a marathon session of ministry dreaming.

The vision day came as the result of months of careful listening and

discernment. Leaders from urban churches, small churches, and Hispanic/Latino ministries, among others, shared a longing for strategic plans that would help guide their ministry decisions. Bishop Moore-Koikoi discerned that the work would go better if EPA & GNJ could dream together. Conference leaders could create plans for their specific contexts

and then share their collective wisdom to help inform other teams' plans.

More than 110 leaders gathered to listen and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The day opened with a devotion from Rev. Sang Won Doh, District Superintendent for GNJ's Raritan Shore District and Dean of the Cabinet for GNJ.

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Messy Church Creates Space for Little Hands to Encounter the Grace of God

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

WASHINGTON, NJ

At Port Colden UMC, markers, crepe paper, paper plates, and toys were scattered across every table in the fellowship hall. It was Sunday afternoon, and it was time for church—but a different kind of church than the one that met upstairs earlier that same day.

The bulletins laid out on the tables prominently featured a quote from C.S. Lewis: "Joy is the serious business of heaven."



Rev. Catherine Jordan-Latham leads Messy Church while holding her infant son.

Joy-filled celebration of Christ's action in our lives is the serious business of Messy Church—an interactive and intergenerational worship experience, where children of God of all ages gather around the three C's: Christ, celebration, and creativity.

Messy Church began as a weekly Lenten practice. Rev. Catherine Jordan-Latham had noticed points of connection beginning to emerge between the church and children and families in the community. A couple of Girl Scout troops began meeting at the church, a young family came for a baptism and stayed and she began to wonder how she might build on

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Hope Thru Wholeness:

A Ministry of Healing and Hospitality

AT PROSPECT UMC

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

PROSPECT PARK, PA

Spring sun shined warmly on a crowded parking lot as neighbors from near and far gathered at the parking lot of Prospect UMC. This gathering was not a one-time event, but part of a monthly rhythm where Prospect UMC, along with ecumenical partners and community organizations, hosts a free farmers market and resource fair.

It all started with a question from a neighboring church: "Can we use your parking lot?" Cheryl Daly, from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, consistently had excess food from her church's Blessings Bags ministry. She dreamed of hosting a free pop-up farmers market, but her church didn't have a suitable space.



Guests select fresh produce at the Hope Thru Wholeness pop-up farmers market.

She reached out to Shelli Flowers Towey at Prospect UMC, who led a monthly soup luncheon, and asked, "Can we give produce away when you do your soup?" Towey in turn asked

her pastor, the Rev. Sterling Eaton, who immediately said yes. From that single moment of gracious hospitality, a brand-new ministry—Hope Thru Wholeness—was born.

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP

Living the Vision:
A Covenant for
Collaborative
Leadership

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



*“Every time I think of you, I thank my God.
And whenever I mention you in my prayers, it makes me happy.
This is because you have taken part with me in spreading the
good news from the first day you heard about it.”*
—PHILIPPIANS 1:3-5 (CEV)

Working with the EPA and GNJ Cabinets over the past eleven months has brought me great joy. In that time, we have wrestled with some difficult administrative and pastoral issues, celebrated manifestations of God’s grace throughout both annual conferences, and dreamed about ways in which both annual conferences might continue to be perfected in love.

This past June, both cabinets met for a time of retreat to reflect on our work over the past year, so that we might learn from what we did that brought glory to God and identify areas where we could improve our effectiveness and witness. We reviewed and refined cabinet policies and procedures and sought to discern God’s priorities for the cabinet for the 2025–2026 season.

We bathed our time together in worship, being led throughout the retreat by the newest members of the cabinet. We also had a life-giving conversation about the new United Methodist vision:

“The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.”

In the midst of this worshipful conversation about vision, we perceived God calling us to five values or priorities for our work together in the coming year. As a result, we developed the following covenant:

In alignment with the UMC’s guiding vision—*“Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections”*—we, as a coordinating cabinet, believe that we have been called to serve. The relationships we hold with each other are not only for ourselves but for the sake of the whole Church.

Therefore, we covenant to live and work together by the power of the Holy Spirit as we embody the following values:

- **Christ-Centered Purpose**
Rooting all we do in Christ, we seek to make disciples and empower the Church.
- **Authentic Relationships**
Loving boldly through honest, compassionate, and confidential relationships.
- **Joyful Service & Sabbath Living**
Serving with joy by honoring rest, play, and the rhythms of Sabbath.
- **Transparency & Trust**
Speaking the truth in love without doing harm, and upholding a culture of trust and accountability.
- **Collaborative Decision-Making**
Choosing hope over fear and prioritizing team-based collaboration.

These are the values that will guide our life together as a cabinet. I invite you to join me in prayer that we will live into this covenant fully.

In order for the district superintendents to live into the priorities of our covenant, they must decrease the amount of time they spend in conference-level committee meetings. Therefore, each district superintendent—except in rare cases—will be assigned as a liaison to no more than one or two conference-level committees. Because of their disciplinary mandates, the Director of Connectional Ministries and the Treasurer will need to relate to more than two conference-level committees and agencies. I have assigned other cabinet members to committees and agencies based on our collective discernment of their gifts, passions, and our contextual priorities.

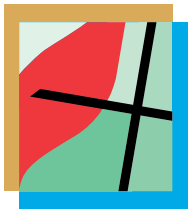
This will lead to some changes on the ground. Since there are nearly forty conference-level committees and agencies in each annual conference—and each cabinet member will be assigned to at most two committees—there will be some conference-level committees and agencies that do not have a cabinet member assigned to them.

This does not mean that the work of those committees or agencies is not vital to the ministry of the annual conference. It simply means that, at this moment in our journey together, there is not a cabinet member assigned as a liaison to that particular committee.

This reality makes the work of the Connectional Table in each annual conference even more critical. We will need to be especially intentional in ensuring that committees and agencies are not operating in silos, but are working collaboratively to promote the overall mission and ministry of the annual conference.

As with all that we do, we will continue to evaluate this decision. I believe this practice will help members of the cabinet live more balanced lives and, as a result, be more effective in their roles in the church and in their homes. I also believe it will empower some of our conference-level committees and agencies to take fuller ownership of their ministries.

Please continue to pray for the members of the cabinet. I know I will—because when I do, it brings me great joy! 🌱



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UNITED METHODIST
STEWARDSHIP FOUNDATION
OF GREATER NEW JERSEY

Stewardship Seminar Paves the Way
for Impressive Financial Turnarounds
at Two Churches

By Emily Wilton

Recently, the Rev. Tim Conaway, pastor of First UMC of Glassboro, and the Rev. Dr. Gina Hendrickson, pastor of First UMC of Moorestown, have both noticed a change in their churches’ energy, commitment, and participation. The Holy Spirit is moving—there is a renewed sense of shared purpose in ministry. The catalyst for this shift? Changes to how the churches approach stewardship and cultivating generosity!

For many church leaders funding the budget is not the most exciting part of ministry. Finances are often a source of stress and worry. Talking about money feels awkward. So, how can a church’s invitation to give actually become a source of Spirit-filled inspiration and renewal rather than a “necessary evil”?

The answer lies in shifting the way we think about giving and in making concrete changes to reflect that shift. Henri Nouwen puts it this way:

“When we seek to raise funds we are not saying, ‘Please, could you help us out because lately it’s been hard.’ Rather, we are declaring, ‘We have a vision that is

amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you – your energy, your prayers, and your money – in this work to which God has called us.”

At the Stewardship Foundation’s Annual Stewardship & Generosity Summit, Rev. Conaway and Rev. Hendrickson encountered tools that helped them make the shift from “things are hard, to “this is how God is calling us to respond.” They have pivoted from talking about their challenges to focusing their attention on the amazing and exciting work to which God has called them. By investing in relationships, communicating their work with grace and gratitude, and inviting people to engage deeply, both churches have seen profound changes.

Leadership teams at both churches regularly share stories of their ministries’ impact in weekly worship and in quarterly communications, alongside important information like giving statements and the church’s financial goals. The pastors also express their gratitude for pledges and financial gifts with personal, hand-written notes.

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Strategic Plans Visioning Day

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He preached on Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.” That well-known verse was written in the midst of war. In a time of crisis, God invited the people to be still and trust in God’s goodness. The invitation set before those who gathered was the same: to trust that God is still God and that God is good.

“We need to cease our own striving and trust that God is our refuge and our dwelling place,” Rev. Doh proclaimed.

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi built upon that point as she rose to greet those who had gathered.

She invited leaders to lean into holy optimism, trusting that God is already here.

“Try to resist saying we can’t, and instead say, *how can we?* Try to resist saying, *we never*, and say, *God is now calling us to*. Try to resist saying, *we don’t have enough*, but instead claim that *the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God*” (Psalm 50:10).

“Some of you have had things swirling in your mind—but felt like you haven’t had permission to do them. Don’t wait for the bishop or a conference staff member to bless the thing that God has laid on your heart to do. Speak them into the atmosphere.”

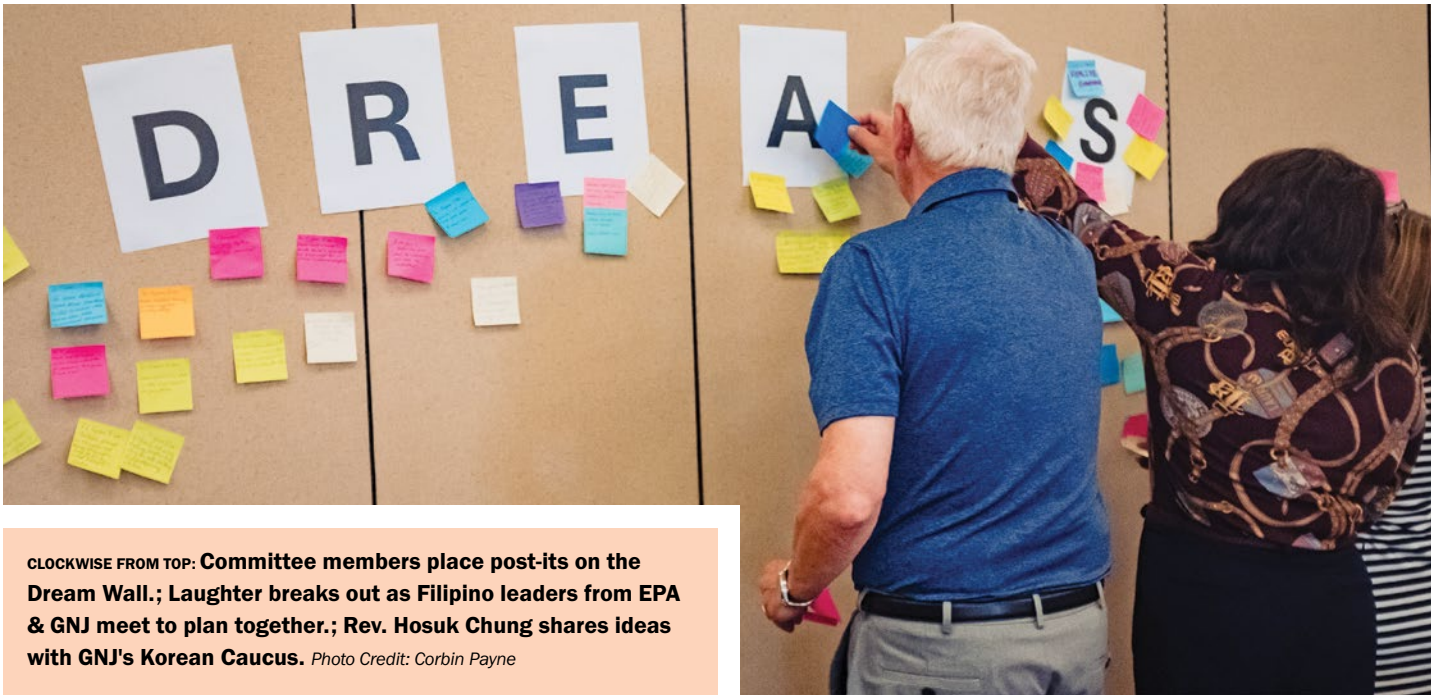
The Director of Connectional Ministries, Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, invited each leader to dream, walk, and envision the future in positive terms. Then, the ministry planning teams scattered to their rooms and corners to do the hard work of listening—to one another and to the Holy Spirit.

After lunch, everyone gathered again to listen for the whispers of God’s Spirit moving in their sharing. Each ministry team was invited to share insights from the morning about their strengths they identified that would support their work, and the support they needed to take the next faithful step. Each group was given three minutes to share—but there was such excitement that the conversation stretched far beyond the time allotted.

Some identified grittiness and resilience as a strength that could support them in their work. Others identified the relational nature of their local church as a strength. Common challenges also bubbled up, including reaching younger generations and anxiety over resources.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rev. William Brawner carefully captures thoughts from EPA's Black Methodists for Church Renewal.; Rev. Bruny Martinez, Ms. Jezerel Gutierrez, and Rev. Lisa DePaz stand to strategize.; Members of GNJ's Commission on Small Church Membership brainstorm together.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Committee members place post-its on the Dream Wall.; Laughter breaks out as Filipino leaders from EPA & GNJ meet to plan together.; Rev. Hosuk Chung shares ideas with GNJ's Korean Caucus. Photo Credit: Corbin Payne



After sharing together, the planning teams broke into small groups once more—this time gathering with their counterparts from the other annual conference to exchange ideas, brainstorm creative solutions to common challenges, and share best practices.

As the day drew to a close, Rev. Gabe López, Director of Social Impact and Belonging, led a time of reflection where groups had the opportunity to share what they had learned in conversations with their neighbors from across the Delaware River.

Rev. Ralph Terrell of South Orange–Vailsburg United Methodist Church paused to offer his thanks:

“We learned how to be encouraged by our friends in EPA. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience. We are better because of it. We look forward to going back and putting to work what we learned from you today.”

Rev. Lydia Muñoz led the gathering into deeper reflection:

“I want to make something really important. *Process is everything*. We have not had this process before. The fact that we are getting to know each other’s names—how we operate and how we connect—to me is the most healing thing that we have experienced in a long time.”

The time of group sharing ended with a soul-searching question asked by

Rev. Alicia Juliá-Stanley:

“Are we willing and ready to go where we have never gone before?”

As that question echoed in the hearts of everyone gathered, Rev. Dr. Andrew Foster III, District Superintendent and Dean of the Cabinet in EPA, closed the day with a brief meditation on 1 Peter 2:9–10 from *The Message*.

To those who often feel like they are on the margins—because of the color of their skin, their accent, or the size of their church—D.S. Foster spoke a word of grace:

“God says you are mine. You are chosen. God chose you, not randomly nor by accident. You aren’t the last one picked in a game; you were chosen for a purpose.”

He urged everyone to live into their belovedness and choose to exercise that access for the sake of others, connecting his message of grace to the larger vision of the day:

“You can pray, you can intercede, you can carry hope to your communities.”

After those words of power and encouragement, Bishop Moore-Koikoi sent those gathered forth with a commission to go and begin to live into the vision that was established.

“We are moving away from the hierarchy that says: ‘This is the program; now go do it.’

It’s the time for bubbling up.... I want to hear DS’s say, ‘Bishop, something is bubbling up, and I don’t even know what is going on.’ You have my permission. This is a time to see what new things are sprouting up and help them blossom. It’s time to do the hard work of growing in our own gardens.”

With that charge and blessing, leaders departed to exercise their ministry dreaming muscles and begin the hard work of turning dream into reality.

The permission given to those gathered on that day extends to you. We’ve entered a new season of holy curiosity about how God is moving in EPA & GNJ. This is indeed a time for “bubbling up.” If there is a mission or ministry that God has laid on your heart, share it with your church family—and begin dreaming together about how you might bring that vision to life. 🌱



Campers Practice Taking a Leap of Faith at the 2025 Latino Camp

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

During the week of July 4th, campers from across EPA and GNJ arrived at Gretna Glen Camp and Retreat Center for Latino Camp. This year's theme, "Reach Out: God's Love in Action," invited campers to experience God's love meeting them right where they are through every lesson and activity. The theme of reaching out felt especially poignant throughout the week.

The Latino Camp is a ministry partnership between EPA's Latino Commission and Gretna Glen Camp and Retreat center that began 43 years ago to reach out to Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters in Christ and create space for Latino children to experience camp and retreat ministries led by people who looked like them and spoke their native language.

Over the years, the camp has evolved from a Spanish-language camp to a multi-cultural, multilingual extravaganza, where everyone is welcomed to encounter the love of God reaching out to them. Some students come speaking Spanish, some second-generation campers prefer English, and everyone brings a friend to the party. Leaders offer instructions in both Spanish and English so that everyone can participate fully and grow in grace.

The camp week is organized around daily Bible study lessons designed to help campers explore the many ways God's love reaches out to them and how they can courageously live out their faith and share that love with others. On Day One, they explored how God reaches out; on Day Two, they learned how God comforts; and on Day Three, they discovered how God overcomes—through Matthew's account of Jesus calling Peter to walk on water in the midst of a storm.

The memory verse for that day was Matthew 14:27:

"But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'"

It was a timely message—on that very day, campers were invited to draw deeply on their courage as they



Students run to lift their friend up on the flying squirrel at Gretna Glen while a camper tests his courage on the rock wall.

Photo credit: Sarah Borgstrom Lee



tackled the rock-climbing wall and the flying squirrel.

The lesson was fresh in the minds of students as they watched their friends scale the rock wall. When asked which Bible study lesson stuck with her from the week, Jaqueline, from El Buen Samaritano UMC in West Chester, recalled the story from Matthew:

"When Peter had faith and was going through struggles like everyone does, he saw the storm and the distractions of the world and started to doubt his faith—but Jesus pulled him up. It shows how Jesus will always be there for everyone—and for me."

Up the hill, students were practicing trust in a very real and tangible way. At the flying squirrel, one camper is harnessed in while the others run to pull them up into the air. It's a great first step for students curious about the high ropes course but unsure how to take the leap.

Jezerel Gutierrez, a longtime leader in the Hispanic/Latino camp ministry, explained:

"We do this with new students. It takes the control out of you. You might be scared, but the option is gone. You might want to give up, but it's too late. It's happening."

She paused to cheer on the team helping their friend fly:

"¡Corre! ¡Corre! ¡Corre!... Run! Run! Run!" she shouted, as the next student prepared to defy gravity.

As the camper soared into the air, Jenn, a longtime volunteer, reflected on what this camp means to her:

"I've been coming to camp since 1992... I like being able to reach out to kids who don't know Christ or who want to feel closer to nature at the same time."

Many volunteers began as campers themselves. Chris Serrano, who helped prepare campers for the climbing wall, shared that he's been attending camp for 14 years—10 as a camper and now as a volunteer. He loves watching campers from different churches and cultures come together to form a true community. People arrive as strangers and leave as friends.

Volunteering at camp becomes an ongoing course in faith formation. As we spoke, Chris shared that he was still reflecting on the Bible study from that morning, meditating on the relationship between faith and doubt.

"If you look straight at Jesus, you'll be okay," he said. "You know in the end that He'll never let you go."

He wasn't the only one thinking deep thoughts on the ropes course. Damaijae Chambers, from St. Daniel's UMC in Chester, was also sitting with a message he'd heard the day before about the Good Samaritan. "You never know who your neighbor is," he said.

That is the wonderful miracle of camp. In this time apart—away from their phones and ordinary routines—campers' hearts are cracked open to hear from God and one another in new ways. It's a thin space, where it's easier to hear the voice of the Holy One speaking... and easier to hold on to what you hear.

At the end of a week of camp, campers bring home far more than their sleeping bags and souvenirs. They carry home stories of faith, moments of courage, and new friendships rooted in Christ. Hispanic/Latino Camp at Gretna Glen continues to be a sacred space where young people experience the transforming power of God's love in a community that celebrates language, culture, and connection. In reaching out to one another, campers were reminded that God is always reaching out to them—calling them to trust, to love, and to walk boldly in faith, no matter where life's journey takes them. 🇺🇸



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Campers wait to climb the rock wall; A student rocks a very appropriate t-shirt on the high ropes course; A team of campers gets ready to help their friend fly.



Stewardship Seminar

Continued from page 2

Although churches can sometimes be wary of asking too much of people, both Conaway and Hendrickson named the importance of invitation and engagement.

Conaway shared that “people who are engaged in volunteering, small groups and other aspects of ministry attend and give many times more than those who just attend worship,” and so his church sought to develop ministry teams

in which people could participate. First UMC of Glassboro has since seen an increase in attendance, pledges and giving. They have identified several areas of ministry expansion and focus to which they believe God has called them and are working through a course called Good Futures Accelerator Program by RootedGood to bring their dreams to life.

Hendrickson shared that during the 2025 stewardship campaign at First UMC of Moorestown, the Generosity Team asked members to “consider increasing their pledge by 20% to meet a Spirit-led

budget aligned with our vision and mission,” adding, “Don’t be afraid to ask!” Nearly every pledger and regular giver responded with a 20% increase in giving. The church, which had been facing a significant budget shortfall in 2024, ended the year in the black. Perhaps more strikingly, Hendrickson shares that there has been a noticeable culture shift marked by renewed energy, deeper commitment and a strong sense of shared purpose.

These stories of transformation are truly remarkable, but they need not be isolated. After all, we worship a remarkable

God! But change doesn’t come by doing the same thing and expecting different results. By implementing best practices for stewardship and generosity, church leaders can not only increase giving, but they can also open the door to renewed, engaged, Spirit-filled ministry. And there are resources available to help your congregation to do just that.

In August, the Stewardship Foundation of GNJ and Breakthrough will be releasing a stewardship worship series, complete with everything you need to run your church’s stewardship campaign. This year’s series is called “Counterculture”, and it explores the countercultural way that Jesus calls his followers to relate to their resources, financial and otherwise.

Like all Breakthrough series, “Counterculture” includes sermon outlines, worship resources, small group guides, graphics and more. Additionally, it comes with templates for a campaign launch letter, pledge card, church newsletter article, and segmented giving invitations tailored to members’ current giving patterns.

Each piece is designed to help you tell the unique story of your church’s impactful ministry and to invite people to become a part of it with their resources. The series will be released on <https://breakthroughseries.org>. Then on Monday September 8 from 7:00-8:30pm, the Stewardship Foundation of GNJ will be hosting a Zoom webinar on “Keys to Leading a Successful Season of Stewardship & Generosity” with expert consultants from Horizons Stewardship – Scott McKenzie, Erica Allen and Kenneth Stewart.

Set yourself up for success this stewardship season. Check out the Breakthrough resources and make a plan to attend the webinar today! 🇺🇸



Rev. Gina Henderickson of First Methodist Church Moorestown shares a reflection with the group.

GNJ AWARDS 5 SCHOLARSHIPS

GNJ’s Board of Higher Education and Ministry awarded five scholarships this year:



Wesley Kim

Wesley Kim received an Urban Scholarship to study at Case Western Reserve University.



Emily Rafano

Emily Rafano received an Urban Scholarship to study at Liberty University.



Ezra Shim

Ezra Shim received a Nelson Scholarship to continue his studies at Rutgers University.



Lydia Smith

Lydia Smith received a Nelson Scholarship to study at Miami University.



Adelina Wilks

Adelina Wilks received an Urban Scholarship to study at Saint Joseph’s University.

Mission u 2025 Inspires Participants to Make Hope a Daily Practice



United
Women
in Faith

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On July 18–19, United Women in Faith sponsored Mission u, a time for women and men to embrace the work of mission and grow deeper together. Some came to partake once again in a rhythm that had guided their summers for decades; others attended for the first time, looking to grow spiritually and witness the work of United Women in Faith beyond their local church setting. They came to do mission, celebrate mission work, and grow in their faith as women.

“This event is about bringing women together for a common purpose,” shared Rhonda Rea, Dean of EPA’s Mission u.

The weekend opened with a celebration of a longstanding mission project and opening worship, which featured a virtual sermon on hope from Bishop Moore-Koikoi. It was shared not only with participants physically present on-site but also with those attending virtually, including the online Mission u group led by Deaconess Darlene DiDomineck.



Tamara Clack adopts a meditative posture while listening to the sounds of nature.

Celebrating a Longstanding Legacy of Mission Work

One of the highlights of the weekend was the celebration of the Congo Partnership—a collaborative mission project between the Eastern PA, Peninsula Delaware, and Western North Carolina conferences, which began under the leadership of Bishop Weaver.

Barbara Drake, Deaconess, shared:

“For me, the best part of the program was the Congo Partnership. It was practically the beginning—at 1 p.m. Susie Keefer and Doris Obenshain came and shared the story of the Congo Partnership.

Susie Keefer has been to the Congo fifteen times in the last fifteen years. She started a nutrition program named after her daughter, Miriam, a Congolese child whom Susie adopted when she was 2. Miriam’s Table feeds 350 children five days a week.”

She hoped that as more people learned about the program, they would be inspired to support this amazing ministry.

In addition to celebrating a global mission partnership, participants also contributed to a local mission project designed to uplift women closer to home. Each person brought sanitary products to support those who struggle to afford them.

As they extended themselves in compassion to others, they also learned about deaconesses—servant leaders who are laywomen called by God to a



Participants gather for a group shot at UWF's Mission u 2025.

vocation of love, justice, and service. The deaconesses’ presentations made a deep impression. Charlene Smith of Mother African Zoar UMC shared,

“I had no idea the extent of what deaconesses do. They really are angels on this earth.”

Cultivating Hope as a Daily Practice

It wasn’t just mission that brought the group together; participants were also drawn by the opportunity to learn and grow deeper as they explored ways to *practice hope together*.

Deaconess Allison Francesco, from the Susquehanna Conference, and Rev. Janice Puliti, pastor of Pocono Lake UMC, each led a small group throughout the weekend. Participants examined what hope meant to them, reconnected with stories of hope in the post-resurrection accounts of Jesus, and engaged in rituals designed to reconnect them with their bodies and the present moment.

In Deaconess Francesco’s group, they considered how to practice hope by identifying and nurturing places of *refugia*—sanctuaries in their communities and social spaces. Each person wrote their response on a Post-it note and added it to a poster board. The prompt and responses were displayed throughout the weekend, encouraging shared meaning-making.

On Saturday afternoon, women took a virtual nature walk, invited to ground themselves in the present moment through the sounds and sights on screen. Together, they reflected on what they heard during this practice of deep listening.

Deaconess Francesco encouraged the women to make deep listening a regular habit.

“Deep listening also allows us to hear again the things Empire has socialized us to ignore. It forces us to slow down and pay attention to what nature and our surroundings are telling us,” she reflected.

Rev. Puliti’s group focused on building community. They held small-group discussions at their tables and later shared highlights with the larger group.

One moment that stood out for Deaconess Barbara Drake was when each participant was asked to identify a personal passion and what they hoped to accomplish.

“For me, it’s families with children who are homeless,” Deaconess Drake shared. “The program I’ve been involved with was forced to close because we were evicted from the building we’d used as a shelter for many years. My hope is to see if we can begin to host families at local churches, like we did before COVID shut everything down.”

Transformed to Transform

Through table conversations, meaningful discussions, and mission

projects, participants were refreshed and renewed—transformed to breathe transformational life into the spaces God would send them.

For Linda Youngstrom, that’s the best thing about Mission u.

“Today it occurred to me that being here and hearing the different speakers diving into the study book, I get to think outside the box.”



Barbara Drake, Deaconess and Dean of Mission u, addresses those gathered.

Mission u doesn’t just expand her thinking—it inspires her to act. “Mission u has this wonderful way of drilling a hole into the box and making the information more available.”

At Mission u 2025, some came for the fellowship, some to share in mission, others to root themselves deeper in United Women in Faith—but all left edified. With souls renewed and new tools to help them put hope into action, all returned ready to serve joyfully in the work God has laid on their hearts.

If you’re feeling a stirring in your heart to connect more deeply with United Women in Faith, visit their webpage or make a plan to attend the United Women in Faith Annual Celebration on October 18, at First UMC, Palmyra, PA.

Betty Henderson of Mother African Zoar UMC will make sure to save you a seat: “Come and see the extension of the United Women in Faith. You won’t really see it at the local level. You need to branch out.” 🌍

Mark your calendar and plan to take root and branch out at the fall gathering on October 18, 2025.



Laughter breaks out at a small group table.

A Weekend of Refuge *Renews Hope*

FOR GNJ MISSION U ATTENDEES

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

Nestled in the beautiful hills of Warren County, New Jersey, Centenary University provided the perfect setting for attendees of GNJ’s Mission u spiritual retreat to step away from the pressures of daily life for a weekend of study, connection, and worship.

This year’s event took place from July 18th-20th and drew about seventy participants, ranging from children to adults, to *practice hope together* – the theme of this year’s study from United Women in Faith.

Early in the program, participants were introduced to the term “refugia” – a biological concept referring to places where organisms retreat to survive and sometimes even expand when their living environments have been disturbed. Together, participants pondered where they see “refugia” – pockets of persistence and hope – amidst upheavals in their own lives and communities.

They named how, after the recent devastating floods in Texas, hope showed up in the form of neighbors and strangers rallying around the affected communities. In less catastrophic but still painful times of personal grief, participants said they find hope in sharing memories of loved ones who have passed or in playing with their grandchildren.

For many, the Mission u retreat was itself a “refugium.” Amy Charleston, a newly licensed Certified Lay Servant from Trinity UMC of Marmora and first-time retreat attendee shared, “It’s good to have time set apart to think about [hope] and to think about what you need, without worrying about kids, pets, what’s happening on your phone, what’s going on in the world.” Likewise, Vicki Lynch, a Mission u veteran who hosted this year’s craft table said, “We are pulled in so many directions. This is how I recharge my spiritual batteries.”

Indeed, the retreat’s space and schedule created many opportunities for renewal. The “Black Box” – a small theater off the facility’s main hallway – provided room for plenary sessions, worship, and personal meditation. Its back corner was lined with tables draped in colorful tablecloths and topped with symbols of hope - vibrant plants and handmade fabric butterflies.



Participants gather for a group shot.



Women co-create a tree of hope at Mission u 2025.

survive for years that way, blooming back to life when its thirst is quenched. In another, participants created “trees of hope” – visual representations of what keeps them rooted and how it bears fruit in the world. Nature – butterflies, flowers, trees – reminds us that God is always active, quietly creating and sustaining life even when the world is noisy.

Yet hope is not just found, it is practiced. It is embodied by people, and it

things they do with their hands that bring people hope. Their answers were numerous – cooking, sending texts, gardening, serving Communion, putting Band-Aids on boo-boos, to name a few.

These acts may seem ordinary. But just as in Luke 24:30-43 the risen Jesus meets his grieving disciples with hope in the familiar acts of breaking bread and sharing fish, it is often by being present with others and showing them simple



The craft table ready for participants to create hope together.

together and shared how much they appreciated the community there. “You get a lot of different views. Meet different people,” Viola said. Bobby added, “I loved it last year, so I came back and I’m loving it again this year... the friendships you make and the way everyone comes together to sit and discuss everything. Some may agree or disagree but it’s all to help you learn.”

Elizabeth Vaneekhoven, the Dean of Mission u, hopes that retreat participants will take what they have learned back to their local churches and communities. The *Practicing Hope Together* study is broken down into eight sessions that can be completed over the course of a weekend, like at the retreat, or can be spread out over several weeks in small groups. While some participants may go on to lead others through the curriculum, others will return home energized to be practitioners of hope in their daily lives.

Rev. Dubuisson reminded them that God has given them just what they need to put hope into practice by asking them to hold out their hands in front of them.

“They are not just tools,” she said.

“They are holy instruments of hope. Through these hands, God’s love is made visible in the world. Just remember that.”

“THE FRIENDSHIPS YOU MAKE AND THE WAY EVERYONE COMES TOGETHER TO SIT AND DISCUSS EVERYTHING. SOME MAY AGREE OR DISAGREE BUT IT’S ALL TO HELP YOU LEARN.”

—Bobby Grant

These symbols popped up in other places too. At the craft table, participants of all ages could make their own butterfly suncatchers. During one of the plenary sessions, the youth gave a presentation on the “Jericho rose” – a plant that curls up into a dry, brown ball when it goes without water but can amazingly

comes alive in relationships. In one session, study leader Rev. Kay Dubuisson made this tangible by having her class trace outlines of their hands on a piece of paper. One participant joked, “Are we going to make turkeys?” But that was not the assignment. Instead, Dubuisson instructed her class to jot down all the

kindnesses that we can bear hope to them too.

Again, the retreat’s attendees not only learned this lesson at Mission u, they lived it. Viola Grant and her adult daughters Bobby and Rebecca, all members of Saint Paul UMC Willingboro, came to the event

Embracing Curiosity with Alyssa Ruch, Director of Pathway Bridges

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

Pathway Bridges, a Lilly grant-funded program, has been equipping churches to bridge the gap between the church and the community since 2022. A new cohort launched in May 2025, and a second cohort is set to launch this fall.

Three years in, there's still an aura of mystery around this amazing program, so I sat down with Alyssa Ruch, Director of Pathway Bridges, to learn more about the ins and outs of the program and what church leaders can expect from this experience.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

If you were to capture the essence of Pathways Bridges in a couple of sentences what would you say?

Bridges is cultivating curiosity about our space, our place, and our neighbors—particularly across lines of difference—in ways that allow us to foster empathy and truly see the perspective of the other.

How have you seen church ministries impacted by the Bridges program?

One of the beautiful things about Bridges is that it's open for all churches to find their own space. We don't have a cookie-cutter model that we expect churches to fit into in order to engage with us.

The churches we've worked with have really flourished and taken the program in directions that support their local communities. For example:

- Trinity UMC in Hackettstown launched a safe parking ministry for unhoused neighbors, born out of their work listening to the stories of people in their community.
- Haddonfield UMC recently hosted a neurodiversity summit and has made significant strides in their ministry with the neurodivergent community.
- Moorestown UMC developed an annual health fair after learning that many in their community weren't aware of local resources. Each year, they showcase available services and invite the community to connect.



Alyssa Ruch, Director of Pathway Bridges

- Other churches, like Frenchtown UMC, have adapted longstanding dinner churches and breathed new life into them to incorporate storytelling and building new relationships with their neighbors.

What does participation look like for the local church? What's the commitment?

At a minimum, it's a twelve-month commitment, with optional group coaching for six months to support creative problem-solving. If you're running into snags, it's a great way to crowdsource wisdom and think things through together.

One of the exciting innovations is that coaches are now in-house and visiting local contexts. Walk us through that change.

Previously, we relied heavily on external coaches, support staff, and presenters. In this iteration, we're intentionally lifting up and celebrating the gifts within our two annual conferences. There are people right here who are thriving in ministry, and we want to learn from one another.

One major challenge we heard before was that while external coaches were knowledgeable in ministry areas, they didn't really understand the specific contexts churches were coming from.

As we envisioned this new season of Bridges, it was really important to me to find ways to show up for local churches—to worship with them, learn about their community, and be physically present.

That's one of the real gifts of in-house coaching: we now have the ability to go, to be present, and to learn firsthand so we can better walk alongside churches as they engage in this work.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about the Bridges program?

Bridges is different from many other conference

programs. It's an opportunity to learn in community—with pastors and laity—something that rarely happens outside of annual conference.

We intentionally structure the schedule, so that there is space to process and practice the tools. It's not just that we are dumping a lot of information and leaving you to figure out later whether this may or may not help you. Rather, we'll work on tools and then hold space for you to try those and to think through how that fits with your congregation before going deeper and doing more work.

It's an intentional journey—an opportunity to support and pour into church leaders. It's transformational.

Through Bridges we celebrate permission to try something new, even if it fails. We celebrate failure because where we are going, we haven't been yet. And so, it takes courage to step beyond our comfort zones of how we've always done ministry and begin to meet people where they are.

If someone were to join Bridges right now, what would their commitment look like?

We start with Hospitality. These sessions are currently held virtually, which reduces the need for pastors and laity to travel or give up a Saturday.

Then there are two in-person sessions where a team consisting of the pastor and laity attend together. Since this is a cross-conference initiative, we hold sessions in both annual conferences. We're very intentional about location—we consider where cohort churches are based and make sure no one has to travel an unreasonable distance.

The session on community engagement happens at the local church, which is great because it builds greater buy-in from the congregation.



Rev. Nina Patton-Semerod listens carefully as a "book" from the Human Library Project shares from her experience.

The last thing we have is a pastors' retreat—a time to pour into the pastors, spark their imagination, and prepare them to think creatively.

If someone wanted to connect with Bridges, how could they do that?

We have a new website—it's really cool: **PathwayBridges.org**. You can contact us through the site.

We also have a great resource library that I'm a huge fan of.

One of our core values is that, while we've been doing this work for a long time, we don't claim to be the experts. There's a lot of wisdom in the room, and we don't want to be the sole keepers of that knowledge.

That's why we've been intentionally building a public resource library for anyone who visits the site. You can explore the books, podcasts, websites, and other tools we're using as we develop this work.

Thank you Alyssa. My pleasure. 🌈

If you are looking to connect more deeply with the community outside the doors of your church, this program is for you. Take the first step in a journey towards deeper connection with your neighbors, visit pathwaybridges.org today.



Participants learn from one person's story through the Human Library Project.



Bridges participants learn to "unjudge someone" as a member of the Human Library Project shares her story.

Hope Thru Wholeness

Continued from page 1

God is Doing Amazing Things with this Initiative

Two years later, the farmers market has grown exponentially. “God is doing amazing things with this initiative,” Rev. Eaton remarked. “Nonprofits hear about it and want to be a part of what we have going on. Now more than 40 vendors and nonprofits are part of the network of people who show up to nurture the community.”

At the April event, organizations like the local library, St. Stephen’s, Family Support Line, and Helping Hands were present to share what they had been given with the community. But nonprofits weren’t the only ones populating the tables—individuals also came to share their gifts and uplift others.

One such individual was Bea Woodard. A regular volunteer at St. Stephen’s, Woodard heard about Broad Street Love’s mending service and was inspired to use her sewing talents to help anyone in need. She sat at her table mending sweatpants and altering a woman’s dress. “I help anyone who wanders in and needs sewing. I do my best. I do seams and repairs.”

The Lord Provides in the Face of Government Budget Cuts

Two Philadelphia-area food rescues—Share and Share Excess—purchase produce directly from farmers. But \$8 million in food support for the state of Pennsylvania was recently slashed from the federal budget. These cuts hurt both farmers and the organizations trying to help.



Volunteers help guests to pack a bag full of fresh produce.

challenge for the small congregation, which lacks a pickup truck. They plan to use their Journey of Wholeness grant to supplement the food they receive from other sources.

Still, they place their hope in God’s providence. “We are working it out; we are working through it. The support from the neighborhood is amazing.”

She started a Facebook page where mothers could post what they needed. As requests and donations grew, Helping Hands eventually needed a physical space.

Prospect UMC had empty rooms available. Butcher asked if her organization could rent the space, and a new missional partnership was born.

“If somebody is searching—be their answer.”

“Why am I stressed if this is a mess? Just clean it up.”

Butcher added, “I try to live the notes.”

Rev. Eaton sees the progression from community member to friend to church member as a natural outgrowth of the Hope Thru Wholeness initiative. “Wholeness is not just physical but also spiritual. You need to focus on the whole person. Take the focus off of filling the pews, and focus on filling their hearts. When you have that relationship, that’s when people open up.”

As the market continues to grow and the partnerships deepen, Rev. Eaton has his eyes on the next horizon. He is working towards a health symposium in the fall with immunization clinics, a dental truck, and CPR and First Aid classes.

Prospect UMC stands as a living example of what can happen when faith meets action. What began as a simple question—“Can we use your parking lot?”—has blossomed into a vibrant ministry that feeds bodies, nurtures spirits, and builds lasting relationships. In a world facing deep divisions and growing needs, Hope Thru Wholeness reminds us that sometimes, the most powerful transformation begins with an open heart, a shared table, and the willingness to say “yes.” 🌈

“WHOLENESS IS NOT JUST PHYSICAL BUT ALSO SPIRITUAL. YOU NEED TO FOCUS ON THE WHOLE PERSON. TAKE THE FOCUS OFF OF FILLING THE PEWS, AND FOCUS ON FILLING THEIR HEARTS. WHEN YOU HAVE THAT RELATIONSHIP, THAT’S WHEN PEOPLE OPEN UP.”

—Rev. Sterling Eaton, Pastor of Prospect UMC, Prospect Park, PA

At the April market, four pallets of food that were supposed to be delivered never arrived. “Food is going to be rotting on the vine,” lamented Rev. Eaton.

Rev. Eaton and Ms. Towe are concerned about how these cuts will affect their ministry. They are working on building a relationship with Caring for Friends, another group that donates food but does not provide delivery—a

Partnerships Expand Community Witness and Church Membership

God is indeed working things out for Prospect UMC. The church recently began a partnership with the nonprofit **Delco Helping Hands**, which supports mothers and children in need. The organization began during COVID in the home of founder Pauline Butcher.

The relationship didn’t stop there. Butcher found friends and mentors within the Prospect UMC faith community. Eventually, she and a few Helping Hands members began attending Sunday worship, finding joy and inspiration in Rev. Eaton’s sermons.

“I love it so much I take notes. I try to find what the Word is,” Butcher said. A few of Rev. Eaton’s lines really hit home for her:



Bea Woodward pauses hemming for a quick photo.



Rev. Stirling Eaton, pastor of Prospect UMC lingers at the doors of the sanctuary for a quick chat.

IGNITE

Get to know the Voices Behind IGNITE 2025: A Weekend of New Beginnings

By James Lee

In the beginning, there was chaos—and then, creation.

That’s the theme that will guide over a thousand young people and leaders this fall as they gather for IGNITE 2025, the annual youth conference hosted by the United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey. Held October 10–12 at the Wildwoods Convention Center in Wildwood, NJ, this year’s theme, “Genesis”, invites attendees to rediscover God’s creative power—not only in Scripture but in the unformed, uncertain places of their own lives.

Registration is open at ignitenj.org.

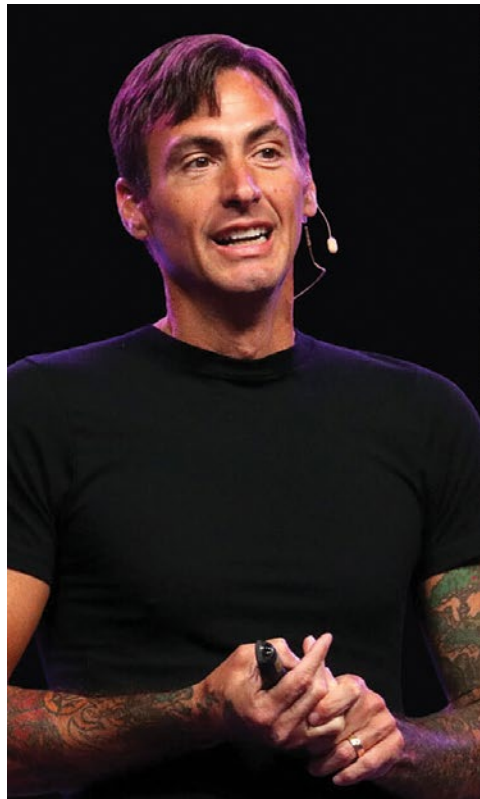
At IGNITE, worship is immersive. Stories are not told from the stage to the seats—they rise from within the crowd. And this year’s lineup of speakers and artists will challenge and inspire attendees to participate in the creative act of being Church.

A Visual Theology: Artist in Residence

Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell

New this year, IGNITE introduces an Artist in Residence, someone not only to speak but to co-create the experience. Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell is a Haitian-American visual theologian and multidisciplinary artist whose work fuses vibrant color with layered theological depth. Her visual lexicon emerges from Caribbean traditions and Christian pneumatology—what she calls a “dialogue with Spirit.”

After earning a Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary, Carmelle founded BeauFolio Studio, curating collaborative experiences that merge fine art, spiritual disciplines, and play to fos-



IGNITE 2025 SPEAKERS FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Rev. Michael Beck, Rev. Woojin Kang, and Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell.

ter creativity in sacred spaces. Her work has been featured in partnerships with Interfaith America, Flagler College, Duke Divinity, and A Sanctified Art.

Beyond her studio practice, Carmelle serves as Associate Director of the Missing Voices Project at Flagler College’s Center for Religion and Culture and serves on the board of Artworks Trenton. Carmelle’s installation art and creative engagement practices will serve as a backdrop—and springboard—for student reflection all weekend long. Her opening message on Friday night will set the tone.

On her website Carmelle writes, “We were created to be creative and to create, even if it seems that we are creating ex nihilo, or out of nothing. In seasons of stuckness, we find ourselves seeking answers and ideas outside of ourselves (books, podcasts, experts, etc). Here’s the irony— these ‘answers’ were generated from a place of authentic creativity. Someone had to write the book, create the message, and start

“At IGNITE, worship is immersive. Stories are not told from the stage to the seats — they rise from within the crowd. And this year’s lineup of speakers and artists will challenge and inspire attendees to participate in the creative act of being Church.”

particularly for young people, to rediscover what it means to be the Church and belong to a faith community. Through innovative, asset-based approaches, Woo is dedicated to meeting the spiritual needs of the community in fresh and meaningful ways.

Woo will bring that same posture to Wildwood: “We’ve made church about programs,” he says, “but Jesus simply gathered people. I’m excited to see what God will cook up among us.”

“Never Alone”: Rev. Dr. Michael Beck on Creative Community

Michael Beck is a pastor, professor, author, and one of the rare leaders bridging frontline ministry with academic scholarship. Alongside his wife Jill, he has led multiple revitalizations and planted unconventional faith communities among those often overlooked. They currently serve as co-pastors of Compassion and St. Mark’s UMCs, where they lead Open

Arms Village, a holistic recovery housing program, and oversee a network of fresh expressions—worshiping communities that gather in places like tattoo parlors, dog parks, burrito shops, EV charging stations, digital spaces, and recovery centers.

Beck also serves as Director of Fresh Expressions Florida, Director of the Fresh Expressions House of Studies at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, and Director of Fresh Expressions.

His most recent book, *Never Alone*, explores how churches can address the epidemic of loneliness with the Gospel’s radical promise of community.

his live sets have become known for fusing raw faith with powerful artistry.

He’ll be joined by Tomorrow Has Come, a young adult worship team led by Andrew LaBar-Dietz, a United Methodist deacon from the Virginia Conference. The group led worship at Exploration 2024, GBHEM’s national discernment gathering, and brings a fresh, prayerful energy to the stage.

“Tomorrow Has Come led our worship time with excellence and grace,” shared Rev. Amie Stewart, Director of Conference Relations, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. “The music moved attendees to tears as we joined our hearts in song. The lyrics, instrumentals, and presence combined to create a holy atmosphere.”

A Genesis Moment

IGNITE is a place where faith is made real through music, worship, storytelling, and community. And this year, the theme of Genesis is more than a metaphor.

“In the beginning, God created something beautiful out of something that felt formless, messy—even a little chaotic,” said Eric Drew, Director of Next Gen Ministries and lead of the IGNITE team. “And that’s what many young people are facing today. The question is, what will God do with all of that?”

IGNITE 2025 invites students and leaders to be co-creators with God, to find faith not in what’s finished, but in what’s just beginning. 🌱

Worship that Moves

It wouldn’t be IGNITE without DJ El Vow, a longtime favorite who returns to open the conference Friday night with high-energy beats and spiritual depth that gets teens dancing and thinking.

Main worship throughout the weekend will be led by Alexander Pappas, a renowned songwriter and worship leader best known for his work with Young & Free. Pappas co-wrote global anthems like *Alive*, *Wake*, *Real Love*, and *Echo*, and

REGISTER BEFORE THE PRICE INCREASES SEPT 15!

IGNITE 2025 is open to youth groups, individual students, and leaders from across the Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey conferences—and beyond.

When: October 10–12, 2025

Where: Wildwoods Convention Center, Wildwood, NJ

Register: ignitenj.org

Messy Church

Continued from page 1

those connections and help families go deeper in their faith.

What began as a Lenten discipline has since taken root and blossomed into a monthly rhythm, where families gather not in the pews, but at the table—for celebration, Bible story, craft, and food.

Everything is designed to be sustainable—both for the earth and for families. Craft projects are biodegradable, and the service is casual, making it easy for families to drop in after Girl Scouts or gymnastics.

“We do it at 5 p.m. on Sundays. That makes sense for our families. Families with older kids have time to go home and finish homework... With dinner, my hope is that they will feel comfortable coming from their thing to here,” Rev. Jordan-Latham shared.

Each month, the celebration begins with a beautiful opening litany accompanied by hand motions:

**Come and be seen
Come and be heard
Come and be loved
Come as you are**



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Rev. Catherine Jordan-Latham leads praise time and shares the bread of heaven with worshipers at Messy Church.

At the July 6 service, the celebration continued with a song—voices both young and old sang “Great is the Lord”—before gathering around God’s Word. The Bible lesson for the day was Psalm 66:1:



“Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise.”

Rev. Jordan-Latham invited worshipers to reflect on all that God had done for them as they sat at the craft table, decorating paper plate noisemakers and paper trumpets with markers and crepe paper streamers.

Young and old joined in making a joyful noise to God, then feasted on God’s love through bread and cup, in a simple celebration of Holy Communion, before sitting down together for a shared meal.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jeremiah Lee makes a paper plate tambourine to praise the Lord.; A child colors a paper trumpet.; Jonathan pauses to pray before eating the communion bread.

It was a simple gathering in the best possible sense. Every person was free to come as they were—exactly how God made them to be—and move freely in the space. Every element of worship worked together to lead people into an encounter with the Author of Love, who sustains them day by day and goes before them into each new day.

The experience was compelling. Jeremiah, a first-time attendee, was overheard asking his mom, “Can we go back again?” as he headed out the door.


Messy Church at Port Colden is more than a program—it’s a living expression of community, faith, and grace. In a world that often feels chaotic and rushed, it offers a sacred pause, a space where families can reconnect with God and one another through joy, creativity, and worship. Whether it’s through a simple craft, a shared meal, or the sound of voices raised in praise, the message is clear: all are welcome, and all belong. 🌈

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CURIOSITY AND COMMUNITY



Something More: Clinton UMC's Vacation Bible School Creates Space for Kids to Feel Seen, Known and Loved

By Emily Wilton

CLINTON, NJ

Every morning from August 4-8, more than fifty children ranging from age 4 to 11 gathered at Clinton United Methodist Church in Clinton, New Jersey for *Compassion Camp* – this year's Vacation Bible School (VBS) program. Each day, they learned Bible stories, sang together, made crafts, played games, and even engaged their bodies in movement through yoga. Yet beneath the surface of these (mostly) classic VBS activities, God was doing something more.

"In the interactions between kids and volunteers, knowing so many beautiful connections were being built even though it's such a short timeframe – it was *something more* than people just being in the same space," reflected Hailey Becker, the camp's director.

For Hailey, who began in her role as Clinton UMC's Children's and Youth Director in August of last year, this "something more" is God at work, creating a community where people are seen, known, and loved for exactly who they are. Hailey is intentional about nurturing an environment where it is possible for



Students dance and sing in opening worship at Clinton UMC's Compassion Camp VBS.

safe but I am safe, the [other leaders] are safe, there's always someone who cares so much more about them than they even realize."

On a more playful note, she adds, "The weirder they are, the better I know I'm doing. With kids, like with anyone, they have to be comfortable in order to be themselves. I think I'm doing my job well if kids are being weird."

was teenager because I was – I was going through it," she chuckles, remembering the struggles of adolescence.

She describes the sense of community she experienced at youth group: "It was a group of people who genuinely wanted to spend time with one another and get to know one another, and it was so nice." The most impactful part of Hailey's experience at Clinton UMC as a youth was the care and attention she received from her own youth leader, Mekan Payne and her husband, Corbin. "I have never felt so seen by someone before and have someone genuinely want to know everything about me, for no other reason than that they wanted to."

For her part, Mekan knew from the beginning that Hailey was cut out for ministry. When asked how she knew, Mekan told Hailey, "[It was] your ability to receive people as they are because I think that's the way that Jesus received people... he was just like, 'Come as you are,' and I feel like you've always been that way, even as a young person, you've always received people and people just gravitate toward you."

In a time when many churches are looking for ways to engage and keep young people invested in their ministries, Hailey's story points to a truth that we would all do well to remember; more than colorful sets, catchy music, or clever programming, relationships are what matter.

Just as Hailey received the gift of being seen, known and loved in her formative years, she now passes that gift on to the children and youth with whom she works. She tells the story of a parent who was shocked that her child was more excited to come back to *Compassion Camp* each day, than about the prospect of going to a marine biology camp the following week, with its promise of fun water activities.

Kelly Femenella, a mom of two boys in the youth group, also speaks highly of the children and youth programming at Clinton. "It's a fantastic program," she

says, "The kids adore you [Hailey]. It's tough to get middle school boys to want to do anything and it's tough to get young kids to want to do something at a church these days." Kelly emphasizes how her own experience with youth group in the 90s was much less focused on relationship; she is glad her kids are having a different experience.

On the ground, prioritizing relationships in children's and youth ministry involves slowing down, paying attention, and taking time to get to know the students as individuals. Hailey shares that one of her camp leaders asked if it was okay that he went off program with some of the kids who were looking bored and disengaged. "That's exactly what you should do," Hailey told him, "They want to spend time with you - as long as they feel welcome, that's all I care about."

Hailey's own care for the students as individuals is evident in the way she talks about them. She gushes over their unique and complementary gifts as different parts of the body of Christ, noting how one child will always hang back if others are trailing behind. "There's a natural calm, leadership that's there," she says. Speaking of another, she says, "[He] has so much energy and it's so obvious how much joy he brings... it's a different kind of leadership." Still another, older child "is so good with kids... watching her care for them – she already told me that she wanted to be a teacher," Hailey says.



Hands reach toward heaven at Compassion Camp.

"I THINK THE BIGGEST THING FOR ANY KID – OR JUST IN DEVELOPMENT – AS LONG AS A CHILD, AT ALL MOMENTS, FEELS LIKE THERE IS ONE ADULT IN THEIR CORNER, THEY'LL FEEL MUCH MORE COMFORT THAN IF THERE WASN'T...WHATEVER HAPPENS, I HOPE THEY KNOW THAT NOT ONLY IS THE CHURCH AND THE ROOM SAFE BUT I AM SAFE, THE [OTHER LEADERS] ARE SAFE, THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE WHO CARES SO MUCH MORE ABOUT THEM THAN THEY EVEN REALIZE."

—Hailey Becker, Compassion Camp Director

children to feel safe to be fully themselves.

"I think the biggest thing for any kid – or just in development – as long as a child, at all moments, feels like there is one adult in their corner, they'll feel much more comfort than if there wasn't... Whatever happens, I hope they know that not only is the church and the room

Hailey's ministry of authenticity, relationship, and belonging stems not only from her educational background in psychology but also from her own experience as a youth at Clinton UMC. Now 23 years old, Hailey began attending the church's youth group in the sixth grade. "My experience back then was so pivotal when I



Hailey Becker leads students in a time of reflection as camp draws to a close.

Now that *Compassion Camp* is over, Hailey is looking ahead to the fall program year at Clinton UMC. She drafts an email to invite families to a worship service where *Compassion Camp* will be recapped and celebrated, and to let them know about different opportunities coming up to engage in the life of the church.

The invitation comes with no strings attached, embodying God's unconditional love and welcome. "It's enough that they came this summer," says Hailey. "I want them to know there is always a place here for them, whether they come to a program or not. If they come once a month or only at Christmas and Easter or they just came to VBS. I want them to know that when they come, they will be known and there is a place for them."