



NEW Spirit!

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CONNECTIONAL TABLES OF EPA & GNJ

Gather to Discern Priorities for Each Annual Conference



The Connectional Tables of EPA & GNJ gather for a group photo after an exciting day of discernment.

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

There are many leadership maxims that proclaim the importance of vision, including Proverbs 29:18a which boldly proclaims, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” But how does a leader arrive at a vision that inspires and unites those they are leading? Leaders might answer that question differently, but for Bishop Cynthia

Moore-Koikoi, vision is best discerned in community. In the sermon she offered at her Service of Welcome, Bishop Moore-Koikoi made it clear that both EPA and GNJ would indeed have a vision to guide their ministry—but that this vision would be discerned together.

On January 17, 2026, the Connectional Tables of EPA and GNJ, which are comprised of the chair of every board and committee in each conference, took the

first step toward discerning the vision for what God is calling EPA and GNJ to be and to do in this season of ministry.

The day began with a time of centering led by Ty ‘Dancing Wolf’ Ellis, a member of the Lenai-Lenape tribe. He lit a smudge pot representing a cleansing of spirit and mind, and then sang two chants in his native people’s tongue: “Creator Walk with Me” and “This Is All I Have.”

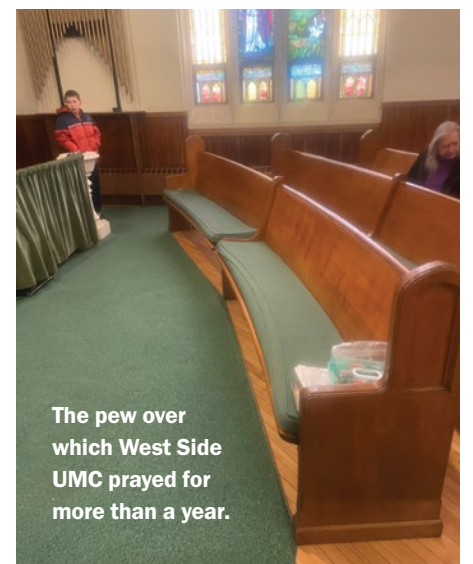
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West Side Millville’s Children’s Ministry Testifies to the Power of Prayer

By Emily Wilton

MILLVILLE, NJ

One hundred and ten years ago, West Side UMC in Millville, New Jersey began as a humble gathering of children and youth under the leadership of a lay person who was committed to nurturing these young disciples in their own neighborhood.



The pew over which West Side UMC prayed for more than a year.

Over a century later, the congregation—like many churches—found itself grieving the absence of young people. The children’s sermon, which had remained in the bulletin even though many Sundays there were no children in worship at all, was eventually dropped from the service altogether.

But for Pastor Dave Weldon and the people of West Side UMC, this change simply did not sit right. They decided to enter into a season of bold, trusting, and intentional prayer. Weldon recounts, “I said let’s put [the children’s sermon]

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East Stroudsburg UMC Plants *Seeds of Faith* THROUGH SERVICE

By Emily Wilton

EAST STROUDSBURG, PA

It is Monday afternoon, the sidewalks are lined with snow, and the temperature is well below freezing in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. But inside East Stroudsburg United Methodist Church, the gymnasium is bustling with warmth. Tables are lined with fresh groceries, cozy sweaters, hats and gloves, and hot to-go meals. Volunteers move about preparing food and standing ready to welcome guests from the community with smiles.

Building Trust, One Meal at a Time

The Monday afternoon weekly community meal at the church has been a staple for residents of East Stroudsburg for well over a dozen years. Ana Price, who coordinates the ministry, wryly recalls when fourteen years ago, she was asked to take the lead for just a few months. But there is no doubt, Price’s commitment to serving those experiencing food insecurity is genuine and deep. And it all stems from an abiding trust in God.



Pastor Kofi Ashley and volunteers stand ready to receive community meal guests.

“I show up at 7am on Monday and I don’t know what the menu is going to be,” says Price. While some might find the pressure of menu-planning, cooking, and serving up to 300 meals all in one day to be too much, for Price,

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP

Prayer, Not Panic: A Faithful Response in Anxious Times

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

—MATTHEW 24:13

As the US/Israel war with Iran intensifies, protests over that war have turned violent in our region, and social media chatter about Armageddon escalates, we can easily be lured away from faithful responses that bear witness to our discipleship in Jesus Christ.

As United Methodists, we reject a fear-based theology on which the theory of Armageddon—that there will be a literal battle between good and evil—is based. In fact, in just a few weeks when we gather for Easter sunrise services, we will celebrate that the battle over good and evil has already been fought and won on the cross! (John 19:30; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; etc.)

In every generation since the resurrection of Jesus, some have been convinced that the struggles, violence, wars, and rumors of wars of their time were signs that the end was near. I believe Jesus knew there would be anxiety and fear about this and that as a result of their fear and anxiety His followers would be tempted to act in ways that belied their Christian witness. I believe He knew that, out of a sense of fatalism, people would stop doing the things He had called them to do or, even worse, participate in the escalation of violence. So, Jesus said, "... about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). Jesus taught, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44).

This passage of scriptures teaches us that to make ourselves "ready" we should not bury our heads or circle our wagons to protect ourselves, rather we need to make sure that we are doing the things God has called us to do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is why I am so grateful that the Connectional Tables of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey met recently to discern what God is calling us to do in this season of our lives together. The two bodies initially met together for a time of worship and prayer and then each annual conference went to different rooms to discern missional priorities. Remarkably, both annual conferences discerned very similar priorities. Those priorities, in no particular order, centered on the following:

1. Youth and young adults which necessitates invitational ministry with and empowerment of youth and young adults
2. Discipleship which includes development of a culture of evangelism and call while normalizing the lifelong commitment to spiritual growth that our discipleship demands
3. Local church vitality which includes stewardship development and the intentional development of new, innovative communities of faith that are supported by and connected with existing congregations
4. Justice and advocacy which involves facilitating, equipping, and encouraging all to engage in justice and advocacy ministries
5. Lay and clergy leadership development to include emphasizing the fact that every believer has been given gifts for the purpose of building up the body of believers.

In the coming weeks we will be continuing to listen to God as the Connectional Tables do the work of discerning what organizational supports we need in order to live into the priorities we have identified. Please pray for the members of the Connectional Tables that their love will overflow more and more in knowledge and insight. We will provide updates as we continue this conversation.

In the meantime, our priorities of discipleship, justice and advocacy demand that while we do this inwardly focused work of discernment, we also do the outwardly focused work of praying and working for peace in the world. I encourage us all to send messages of support and prayers to active service persons and their families. I encourage each of us to contact our elected officials to urge them to advocate for peace. I discourage all of us from perpetuating the non-Biblical, erroneous theological discussions about Armageddon which only serve to justify and foster greater violence. Prayer, not panic, is our faithful response to the events in the world today. Faithful, discipleship endurance is our response. 🌈

Peace and blessings,
Bishop Cynthia

We Belong to Each Other: A Reflection on Lay Leadership Development

By Rev. Lorelei Toombs, Director of Lay Leadership Development

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."

— ROMANS 12:1 (The Message)



Rev. Lorelei Toombs, Director of Lay Leadership Development

Last fall, I was given an opportunity to present to the joint Coordinating Cabinet a summary of reflections, observations, celebrations, and emerging opportunities in my new affiliated role as EPAGNJ Director of Lay Leadership Development.

My celebrations included highlights of both gatherings of our 2025 United Women in Faith (UWF) Mission U summer events, the EPA Laity Academy in August, and the emerging fall Lay Servant, Christ Servant Minister (CSM), and Certified Lay Minister (CLM) basic and advanced classes.

As a part of that presentation, I also highlighted seeming trends and strong areas of interest or request for future learning opportunities. Such trends included:

UMC Polity and Theology classes being amongst the highest sought after and well attended classes in the last 2 years, as seen in offerings of:

- Methodist Theology thru the lens of Wesley Sermons & Hymns (EPA LA)
 - Sessions on New Social Principles (Metro-Highlands Training Day)
 - The October GNJ United Methodist Polity Class
- Surveys also showed special requests for more training opportunities on:
- The Sacraments and sacramental theology
 - SPR, Finance & Council Basics
 - Pragmatic skills—like Conflict Resolution

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A group of lay leaders gather around the table during the summer session of EPA's 2025 Laity Academy.



Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, Bishop

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Cultivate internships: A Win-Win for Young Leaders & Churches

By Emily Wilton

In a season when young leaders are craving meaningful spiritual experiences and churches are seeking ways to engage young people, an opportunity like Cultivate is a win-win for everyone involved.

Cultivate is a summer internship program that gives students a chance to develop leadership skills in a ministry setting and grow together with other young leaders. Some join Cultivate with a clear sense of call; others join knowing that they want to do something to change the world and impact the church, but they aren't sure quite what it is. Whether they come with a clear sense of call, or come just to explore, the experience connects them deeply to the life of the church, and to the God who calls, equips, and sends leaders into the world.

Meet Abby & Naiima

Abby and Naiima are just two of the several young people from across churches in Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey who participated in Cultivate 2025. Their stories bear witness to the Holy Spirit's movement in the lives of young people and the churches who invest in them.

When Abby Clark was in the eighth grade, she was deeply moved by a confirmation class trip to St. George's Historic UMC where she witnessed the reenactment of a historic moment in Methodist history when African American worshippers stood up for their rights to worship, even as they faced discrimination from white churchgoers.

"I was sitting there and I was crying and I was like, wow, I want to be a part of this. I want to make a difference," she recalls. After the reenactment, she spoke to her pastor, Rev. Joe Monahan of Medford UMC, about how she could get involved.

A year later, in the summer of 2025, Abby participated in Cultivate—an eight-week summer internship program that gives high school and college students a unique opportunity to gain leadership experience in ministry settings while exploring the calling God has placed on their life.

Naiima Jabati, a college sophomore studying psychology at UPenn and longtime member of Crescentville UMC in Philadelphia, learned about Cultivate when her Sunday School teacher, Sue Snyder, saw an ad in the Digest and brought it to her attention. Naiima's experience of feeling deeply valued and included in her church growing up motivated her to participate in the program. She wanted to create the same experience for other children and youth at her church.

A Unique Experience for Every Young Leader

Cultivate offers young people and local churches the chance to craft internship experiences that match their own interests and contexts, while also participating in common activities that provide structure and the opportunity for reflection.

Naiima's internship, focused on organizing a mix of church and community-based weekly events for the young



RIGHT: Naiima Jabati gathers with staff members in the Eagles Autism Foundation Sensory Room at Lincoln Financial Field.

BELOW: Abby Clark preaches at Medford UMC.



people in her congregation. "I decided to basically curate different events that incorporated the youth but also just like understanding that they also can connect to the greater Philadelphia community and creating a sense of inclusivity," she shared.

Naiima was inspired to focus on inclusivity in part by her younger sister, Naomi, who has autism. Educating people about autism is a passion for Naiima; alongside her Cultivate internship, she also worked at an autism research center last summer. Naiima was able to integrate this passion into her internship experience. She gave a presentation to her congregation about autism and took the young people from her church to visit the sensory rooms at Lincoln Financial Field. The trip was a highlight of the summer for the youth of Crescentville UMC.

At Medford UMC, Abby was one of two Cultivate 2025 interns, alongside fellow high school student Lukas Risser. For both Abby and Lukas, leading worship and creating wrap-up videos for their mission trip and Vacation Bible School were part of the internship experience. And, to Rev. Monahan's surprise, both jumped at the opportunity to preach a sermon! Beyond those common experiences, the interns forged unique paths. For instance, Abby wrote for a daily devotional that Medford UMC publishes online, a ministry in which she continues to participate.

Following God's Lead

In addition to hands-on experience in their local ministry settings, Cultivate interns meet with their internship mentor or supervisor weekly and spend time with others in the program to reflect on what they are learning and where God might be calling them. For Naiima, these weekly meetings with her peers were one of the most meaningful elements of the internship. "I was able to see how other people were creating changes in the church settings they were working with and also just growing in faith and learning more," she shared, adding that learning different approaches to reading scripture deepened her faith.

For both Abby and Naiima, the Cultivate internship offered space and

time for listening to God through hands-on experience, reflection, and community. Both students learned more about themselves and where they sense God calling them.

Naiima, who is confident that God has called her to pursue a career in clinical psychology, shared that Cultivate helped her recognize her giftedness as a leader: "I have agency. I can take control of things and do things on my own and I don't always have to rely on somebody else taking initiative. ...I was very proud of myself with just being able to do things that I wouldn't have seen myself doing a year ago."

As for her ministry in the local church, Naiima is still discerning what shape it will take. She wants to be active and involved, and she remains open to how God will lead her.

For Abby, Cultivate solidified her sense of calling to local church ministry, although she too remains open to exactly what that will look like. Her wise words echo what many seasoned pastors have experienced: "I didn't really understand for a while that I was meant to do this," she shared, "I just feel it strongly and I know it's something that I have to continue and if I don't continue it, I will be drawn back to it." Abby is currently considering her next steps—whether that is another internship, going to college for ministry, or something else.

A Gift to the Church

Cultivate's impact was felt not only in the lives of the interns but also in the life of the church at both Crescentville and Medford UMC. This was the second year that Medford UMC participated in the program and Rev. Monahan shares that it was a wonderful experience: "The level of pride that a congregation feels in seeing young people from their church stand up and do stuff is so huge. ... It's a boon to the whole system." Medford UMC's Cultivate experience has since become a launchpad for the church to imagine new ways of equipping and empowering young leaders.

Snyder, Naiima's Sunday School teacher and Cultivate supervisor, also witnessed the program's impact on the whole congregation. The puppet camp and show gave young people who were

usually hesitant to be seen a way to participate creatively from behind the scenes. Younger children began to look to Naiima as a role model, and even staff from the Eagles reached out after the group's visit to share how impressed they were with the church's youth—evidence of Crescentville UMC carrying its heart and faith into the wider community.

Cultivate: A Win-Win for Young People and their Local Churches

Naiima and Abby had very different Cultivate experiences. The two students crafted experiences that fit their gifts and allowed them to explore their unique callings from God. Yet both students—and their supervisors—agreed that Cultivate was an experience they would recommend to any student who was considering it, and to any church.

On a practical level, Rev. Monahan points out, Cultivate is a great way for churches to invest in a young person at a very small cost and the model works even for churches that only have one student. "The cohort that the annual conference provides enables them to connect with other students their age," he said, adding, "the decision to invest in them just makes all the difference in the world."

For Naiima and Abby, the experience deepened faith and created confidence that these young leaders will carry into their future callings, no matter the shape those callings take. "Having something to look forward to, something to be a part of, I just feel like I was doing good in the world," shared Abby, "It meant so much. And on top of that, I was growing a connection with God and with the world and it was just so beautiful."

Naiima's words to students considering Cultivate are clear and to the point: "Take advantage of the opportunity," she said, "There's nothing for you to lose."

Their experiences point beyond two individual internships and toward a larger truth about what is possible when the church chooses to invest in the faith, gifts, and leadership of young people. When we cultivate the young people in our midst, we are partnering with the incredible work that God is already up to, and we all win.

The next round of Cohort applications are due April 15th. Make a decision to cultivate a young leader in the life of your church and witness the power of the Holy Spirit as God works in and through them. 🌈

INSTALLATION

Rev. Dr. Derrick Doherty (Finally!) Installed as Cape Atlantic District Superintendent

By Emily Wilton

On a chilly Sunday afternoon, worshippers from around the Cape Atlantic District and beyond gathered at Absecon United Methodist Church to celebrate the installation of the Rev. Dr. Derrick Doherty as the district's superintendent. A gentle energy hung about the space; volunteers scurried to bring additional chairs, as more people than expected streamed in to officially welcome their district superintendent.

From beginning to end, the service brimmed with the promise of new life and the hope of resurrection. It opened with a bold prophetic word from scripture: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ... I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live," (Ezek. 37:4-5). A drumbeat—at first quiet, then steadily growing louder—filled the space as the praise band broke into song: "This is the sound of dry bones rattling...this is the praise, make a dead man walk again!"

The call to worship rang with resurrection faith – "Christ is risen, indeed!"

Rev. Rosario Quinones, Chair of the Cape Atlantic Episcopacy Committee, introduced Doherty, highlighting his educational background in ministry, organizational leadership, and crisis management. Beyond credentials, Quinones lifted up Doherty's experience revitalizing congregations, passion for disciple-making, and long-term service as a first responder, including serving as a chaplain with fire and police departments.

Barbara Sabath, Absecon UMC lay leader and Rev. Dave Ledford, the church's pastor, welcomed worshippers, giving thanks for the diversity of God's good creation reflected in the gathered group.

That diversity was embodied in the songs lifted to God in praise. "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" was sung in both in both English and Spanish and "Amazing Grace" was offered bilingually by the Korean UMC of South Jersey Women's Choir.

Pastor Jay Brown of St. John's & Wesley UMC in West Berlin read from Paul's letter to the Romans, echoing the service's theme, "if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him," (Rom. 6:8).

Then Bishop Moore-Koikoi took the stage, acknowledging with wisdom



Former DS Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash leads the cabinet in prayer as they lay hands on Doherty.

and humor that the installation was happening much later than originally planned: "It is indeed an honor to be able to be here finally," she said, "to be able to formally recognize what God has already done...I believe from the beginning of time, God was preparing Rev. Dr. Derrick Doherty for this day... and so because God already did it, there was no flood that was gonna stop it or make it undone."

She expressed her gratitude for Doherty's passion "to be a part of that process of folks being introduced to Jesus Christ for the first time and then falling in love with Jesus over and over and over again," for his commitment to theological diversity, and for his promotion of Wesley's maxim that though we may not all think alike, God calls us to love alike.

Bishop Moore-Koikoi then led Doherty in the Covenant of Ministry. After a confident affirmation, the Cabinet gathered around him, laying on hands as former district superintendent Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash led a prayer of blessing, with the congregation joining by raising their hands in prayer.

To commend him in his new role, district laity and clergy of all ages presented tangible signs of the ministry to which he is called: a Bible, pitcher, chalice, hymnal, *Book of Worship*, towel and basin, stole, *Book of Discipline*, and globe.

"Cape Atlantic District, thank you for welcoming me so warmly," Doherty responded. "Thank you for how together

we are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Thank you for being here with the Eagles playing at 4:30pm," he joked, as the congregation erupted in laughter.

No one seemed to mind missing the game, as the praise band led the con-

gregation in singing, "I Will Rise" and the gospel story of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11:38-44) was read in four languages. The people continued in praise with the Wesleyan hymn, "And Are We Yet Alive."

As he began to preach, Doherty returned to the hymn's opening question and its Methodist roots. "And are we yet alive?" he explained, was not a metaphorical or spiritual question for those early circuit riders.

"Many died within the first five years of ministry," he said. "The high mortality was due to the extreme hardship and dangerous conditions of the circuits." Doherty posed the same question to the congregation gathered that day: "Are we yet alive?"

Pointing to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and Jesus' own resurrection, Doherty proclaimed that Jesus has power of over the grave. Then he challenged his listeners, "If we claim to be Easter people, resurrection people, why are we living in the grave?"

Although many forces want to hold us down, "It's time for us to defy gravity," said Doherty, referencing the hit

book-turned-musical-turned-movie, *Wicked*. He played a clip from the musical in which Elphaba decides she is done playing other people's games and chooses, instead, to rise.

"It is time to defy gravity. It is time to fly. It's time to stand up. It's time to leave the graves empty...and not just live but thrive and fly," Doherty exhorted, as the congregation answered back with a chorus of "yes."

He shared stories of resurrection he's already seen in the district: a church mobilizing its community to care for the body of an unhoused man who died, another seeing double digit professions of faith, and another turning their sanctuary into a thrift store and food pantry, to name a few.

As he concluded, Doherty called the Cape Atlantic District, the Annual Conference, and the United Methodist Church to respond again to Jesus' invitation to step out of the grave and live.

The congregation received the sermon with applause. Rev. Brian Roberts, a former District Superintendent and current Executive Director of the GNJ Stewardship Foundation, offered a closing prayer before the praise band led



The Korean UMC of South Jersey Women's Choir sings "Amazing Grace" in English and Korean.



Rev. Kenneth Johnson, Pastor Solomon Rooks, and Ernest Jubilee present DS Doherty with the *United Methodist Book of Worship*.

the congregation in song: "Can't you hear the voice of Jesus calling us out from the grave like Lazarus? Rise up!"

Bishop Moore-Koikoi returned with closing words, sharing part of her process for appointing district superintendents. "With whom I can I trust the life of your church?" she asks God in prayer. Turning to Doherty, she said, "God affirmed it was you." Passing her bishop's crosier to him, she reminded those gathered that the superintendency is an extension of the bishop's office with all the authority and respect due to it.

Doherty then pronounced a final charge and blessing before the recessional: "Joy to the World." As music filled the hall, he made his way to the back of the hall to be received and celebrated by loved ones, colleagues, and congregants.

In a service shaped by the breath of God, rising song, and living testimony, the Cape Atlantic District did more than install a superintendent—it bore witness to a church called not to remain in the grave, but to stand, defy gravity, and live into God's renewing work together. 🌟

West Side UMC

Continued from page 1

back in and every week that there's not children here, we'll reach our hand toward the front pew. And we'll thank God in faith for the children that he's sending to us." For just over a year, the congregation did just that.

Then, in July of 2024, Weldon received a phone call from a woman asking about service times. It happened that that evening, Weldon was holding a worship service at a local assisted living facility. To his surprise, the woman, her partner and some their children showed up to worship. After the service, she shared with Weldon that she was battling stage four colon cancer.

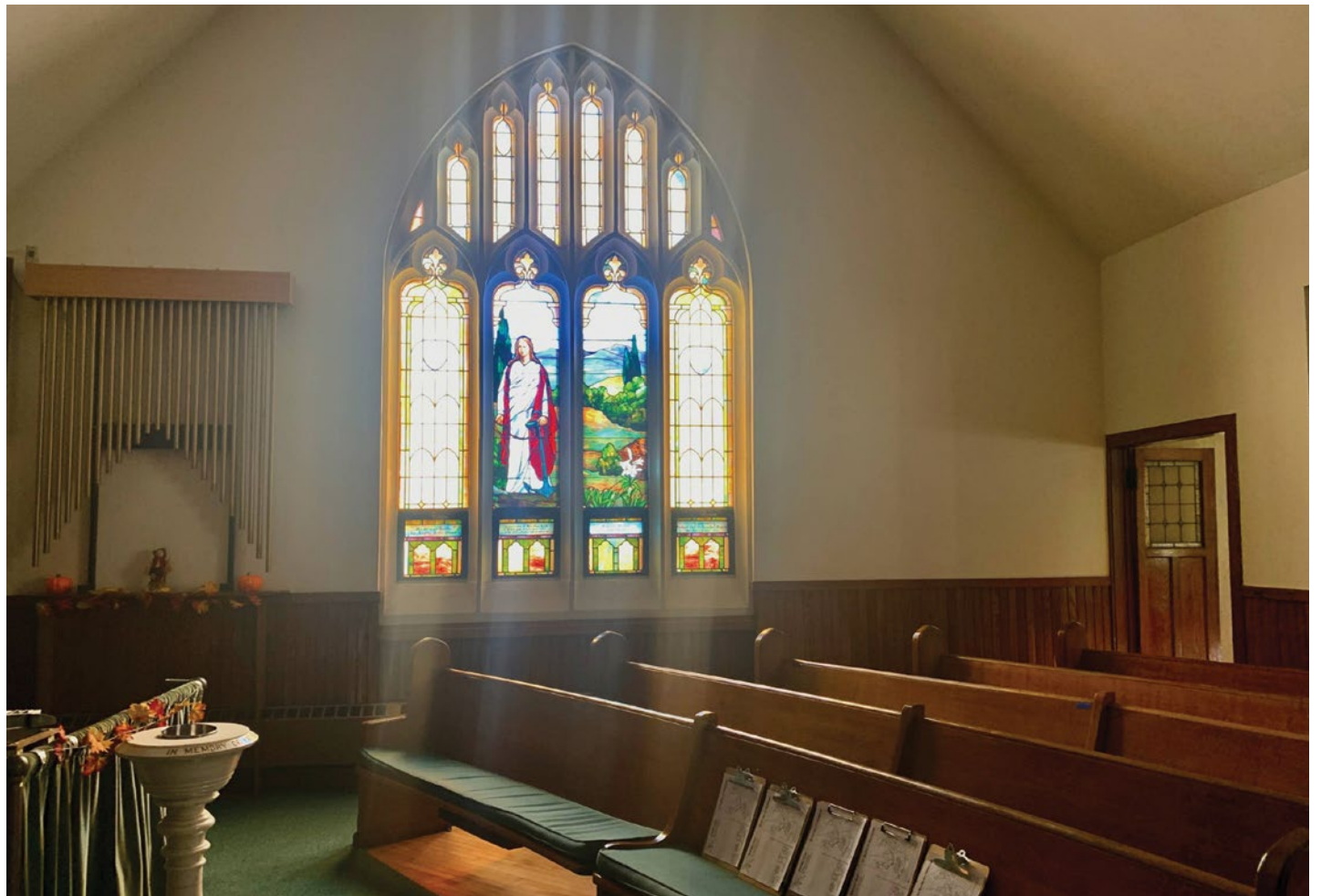
Over the next couple of months, the family came to church several times but then their attendance came to an unexplained end. When Weldon was finally able to connect with them again, he learned that the woman was too sick and weak to get out of bed, despite her deep desire to be in church. Tragically, she passed away not long after. At the request of her partner, the church held a memorial service.

After that, the church lost their connection with the grieving man, despite continued efforts to reach him. Then, around Easter of 2025, Weldon describes a moment of reflection that became a turning point.

"As I reflected on our church, and I thought I have a little extra time that I can go visit parishioners now... if I could put my time anywhere—we should not be having church every Sunday with no kids....I was deeply troubled. So, I went over to their house, I just knocked on the door," said Weldon.

Although the man showed little interest in the visit, the children in the home—now the children of his new partner—were thrilled to see Pastor Dave, who began throwing a football with them. Weldon invited the congregation into intentional prayer for them.

Two weeks later, five children from the home showed up at church on Sunday morning. "For kids to actually walk out



Sun cascades into an empty sanctuary where worshipers have prayed fervently for young disciples.



A young person is baptized.



Children pick out candy while on an outing with Westside UMC.



Rev. David Weldon (second from right) poses with other Vacation Bible School volunteers.

**"IT'S NOT THE PRAYER
THAT'S THE POWER,
IT'S THE GOD THAT'S
BEHIND THE PRAYER."**

—Pastor Dave Weldon,
West Side UMC, Millville, NJ

of their house—and the chaos in their home—for them to know what time it is and come out [to church], that is a miracle," said Weldon.

Overjoyed that God had answered their prayers, the congregation jumped into action. A retired teacher began offering children's sermons, the church raised funds to send the children to summer camp, a young adult began leading children's church, and the pastor continued regular pastoral visits with the family. Before long, the

children's friends from the neighborhood joined them, filling an entire pew!

That summer, the church hosted a Vacation Bible School. Moreover, many of these young people came to know Christ and were baptized. "If you could have been in the basement and heard the laughter—" Weldon beamed, "you could just feel the Holy Spirit and the angels all over our church. It's as though the prayers of the saints that have gone before us are being answered, and they were rejoicing in heaven to see it's happening again."

Amidst the joy of answered prayer, West Side UMC recognizes that the slow and patient work of nurturing these young disciples still lies ahead. The church will continue that work in the same spirit of prayer that brought them through the doors in the first place, always trusting that God will make good on God's promises. In the

words of Pastor Weldon, "It's not the prayer that's the power, it's the God that's behind the prayer."

West Side UMC is a living witness to the power of prayer. For more than a year, they prayed over the empty pew,

week in and week out. In God's good timing, their prayers were answered. It is said that every revival begins first with prayer. Where might God be inviting your faith community to embrace a season of intentional prayer? 🌿

CORRECTION

On page 6 of the Fall 2025 issue of *NewSpirit*, an article titled "Celebrating the Installation of Delaware Bay DS Kate Monahan" stated, in error, that "Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and DS Monahan stood side by side with Lenni-Lenape Chief Urie Ridgeway, Co-Chief Harry Jackson, and other members of the tribe. ... Musicians of the Lenni-Lenape tribe offered the gift of a traditional drumsong...."

It should read: "Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and DS Monahan stood side by side with former Lenni-Lenape Chief Mark Gould and other members of the historic Native American St. John UMC in Bridgeton, NJ. ... Musicians from St. John UMC offered the gift of the welcome drum."

Additionally, a photograph at the bottom of the page was incorrectly captioned: "Members of the Lenni-Lenape tribe stand with Barbara Revere of EPA CoNAM, Bishop Moore-Koikoi and DS Monahan for a land acknowledgment." It should read: "From left to right: Lia 'Watching Sparrow' Gould-Ellis, Braiden 'Bright Spirit' Gould, Ty 'Dancing Wolf' Ellis, Chief Mark 'Quiet Hawk' Gould, Cynthia Mosley, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, and DS Kate Monahan stand together for the welcome drum." We apologize for these errors.

From Shared Challenges to Shared Hope

Inside the Northeastern Jurisdiction Cabinet Gathering

By NEJ Communicators

2026 in the Northeastern Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church started out with a stirring gathering of leaders. From January 5–9, the Cabinets of the then NEJ annual conferences joined together in Haddonfield, New Jersey for worship, learning, and shared discernment. Rooted in Scripture and shaped by United Methodist and Wesleyan theology, the gathering embodied our connectional calling with leaders intentionally stirring one another up to love and good deeds for the sake of Christ and the world (Hebrews 10:24–25).

The week opened with worship at Haddonfield United Methodist Church, where Chris Heckert, senior pastor, offered a gracious welcome and Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, resident bishop of the Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey Area, greeted the gathered leaders with words of hope and expectation: “Your college of bishops is delighted to welcome you together for this time of visioning, collaboration, and restoration. We can’t wait to see what God is going to do.”

Inspired by the Feast of Epiphany, the opening worship invited leaders to embrace patient trust for the journey ahead, and for one another. Alongside Scripture readings from Hebrews 10:24–25 and Matthew 2:1–12, Rev. Debbie Earthowl (Upper New York) offered a prayer by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, reminding the gathering that God’s work often unfolds through seasons of

instability and waiting. Rev. Sherri Rood (Upper New York) reflected on the Magi’s uncertain journey, naming the truth that the path toward new destinations is rarely neat or predictable. God, she reminded the room, does not demand certainty, only faithfulness to keep walking. As worship concluded, each participant wrote a word on a star, a symbol of guidance to carry through the retreat and beyond.

On Monday, leaders were invited deeper into reflection through a presentation by Ashley Boggan and Chris Heckert, who spoke about their book *Calling on Fire*. Drawing on themes of holy longing, renewal, and God’s refining work, they



TOP RIGHT: The Rev. Dr. Chris Heckert and Dr. Ashley Boggan invite United Methodists to adopt a method to ground their mission.

LEFT: The Coordinating and Extended Cabinets of the Northeast Jurisdiction gather for a group photo in the sanctuary of Haddonfield UMC.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Rev. Sean Lee, Assistant to the Bishop, helps sort stuffed animals for Operation Bear Hug.



invited leaders to consider how the Spirit is already at work rekindling passion and purpose in this season of change. Those gathered were then broken into table groups and asked to reflect together on four catalytic practices as ways of igniting the fire within their conferences: field preaching, micro-communities, social engagement, and leadership activation. These conversations grounded the work of leadership not in anxiety or control, but in faithful experimentation and attentiveness to the fire God continues to kindle among God’s people.

In addition to worship and conversation, the gathering made space for hands-on service, living out the very love leaders were called to stir up in one another.

Participants supported **Operation Bear Hug**, a mission project of Haddonfield United Methodist Church that began in 1998 when the church’s youth imagined a simple yet profound act of compassion: collecting teddy bears to deliver to children who must remain in the hospital on Christmas Eve. Those gathered helped sort more than 1,000 bears, attaching personalized cards and organizing them for future delivery, an embodied reminder that small acts of love, offered faithfully, can bring comfort and hope.

Leaders also prepared lunches for The Neighborhood Center in Camden, a long-standing mission partner of Haddonfield UMC. The Neighborhood Center’s mission is “to work with an abundance of love to transform the community.” Each weekday, the Center provides nutritious meals to children, adults, and working families experiencing food insecurity, offering food in an environment rooted in dignity and hospitality. Through this shared service, participants were reminded that the work of renewal is not only discussed—it is practiced, shared, and served.

Tuesday morning’s worship was led by Rev. Tina Blake of the Baltimore-Washington and Peninsula-Delaware Area. Preaching from Hebrews 10:24–25, Rev. Blake called the church to examine what it truly means to “stir up” love and good works and issued a prophetic challenge. “If Jesus is the bread of life,” she proclaimed, “then we are the bakery.” Drawing on Matthew 25 and the feeding of the five thousand, she reminded leaders that Jesus consistently refused to send people away hungry, calling his disciples instead to offer

what they had and trust God to multiply it. Naming the long tradition of faithful “pot-stirrers” from Moses and Esther to John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus himself, Rev. Blake affirmed that holy love often requires courage, discomfort, and action.

The closing day of the retreat was led in worship by the New York Annual Conference. Rev. Elizabeth Abel offered the image of an Olympic torch relay, proclaiming, “The torch is not diminished by being shared.” As a candle flame was passed from one person to the next while the room sang “Pass It On,” leaders were reminded that Christ’s light is not something to be guarded, but something to be shared freely.

Beyond worship, the gathering created space for honest conversation and shared imagination. Participants challenged one another to practice hope, to tell new stories of where God is already at work, and to anticipate growth rather than scarcity. Collaboration emerged as a powerful opportunity, with ideas ranging from shared leadership development and online learning to cooperative approaches to church planting and reimagining church buildings for community-centered ministry.

As the gathering concluded, gratitude and resolve filled the room. This historic convening affirmed that the church’s mission is not to preserve institutions, but to form disciples rooted in Christ and sent into the world for the sake of love, justice, and transformation. United in purpose and grounded in God’s grace, leaders departed committed to walking together, listening deeply, sharing boldly, and trusting the Spirit to shape the next chapter of the church’s life in the Northeast. 🌱



TOP: Cabinet members help pack lunches for The Neighborhood Center in Camden, a mission partner of Haddonfield UMC.

BOTTOM: The Rev. Dr. Andrew Foster III, Dean of the Cabinet in EPA, and the Rev. William Williams III, District Superintendent for the Meadowlands District of GNJ, share a chuckle in the midst of table discussion with other leaders from across the jurisdiction.



Deepening Discipleship Sparks Impactful Community Outreach at Marlton UMC

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On Sunday February 1, sunlight peaked around towering pine trees to streak through the windows of Marlton UMC during morning worship. To witness the light shining through those windows felt like a gift for all those who gathered. After nearly ten years of worshipping in the gymnasium, Marlton UMC had finally returned to their traditional worship space.

The capital campaign was over, the work was now complete, and many leaders would be asking themselves, "What's next?" But not Rev. Jesse Ruch. Even before the campaign ended and the work was completed, he was already asking himself, "What's next?" The church is more than a building, and Rev. Ruch knew that the church needed to be thinking beyond the sanctuary renovation and toward who God was calling them to be as a faith community.

"Even in the midst of the sanctuary remodel, discipleship was becoming what was next." Pastor Jesse remarked. "If we don't know where we are going, then where are we going?"

The church spent a year thinking through how Marlton UMC would intentionally form people as disciples.

"A disciple," they determined, "is someone who is growing in their faith by deepening their relationship to God, to their neighbor, and to the community. We accomplish this by encouraging participation in worship, small groups, service, and generosity."

After getting serious about the definition, they took time to outline expectations.

Disciples grow by:

- Worshipping every Sunday morning that they are in town
- Attending a small group at least twice a year
- Serving both the church and community twice a year
- Sharing faithfully the gifts that God has given through a tithe or beyond.

They created a small group calendar with a wide variety of six-week study options, so that everyone could find a place that felt good to them, with breaks in between where people could be intentional about fulfilling their call to service both to the larger community and the church itself.

While the church has not yet landed on what it looks like to invite people to serve the church and community in a programmatic way, the investment in deepening discipleship is already producing fruit, as the church engages with the community in new ways.



TOP LEFT: Rev. Jesse Ruch preaches in the renovated sanctuary of Marlton UMC.

TOP RIGHT: Custom designed coasters and a guide to the 2025-2026 discipleship plan are laid out in the fellowship space, ready to welcome newcomers and old friends alike to grow deeper in faith.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Custom-designed pulpit, altar, and baptismal font create a worshipful center in the large, flexible sanctuary space.

Marlton UMC Raises 32,050 for School Lunch Debt

In the same year Marlton UMC was visioning about discipleship, Rev. Ruch and a few other church leaders had the opportunity to go to Church of the Resurrection's Leadership Summit. One of the questions that arose while they were there was how would they handle the Christmas Eve offering. In the past they had chosen to donate it to the ForTanzania campaign, sometimes to Heifer International, other times to UMCOR. The Holy Spirit was stirring them to do something different this year. They wanted to choose something local, reflecting again the church's commitment to faithful discipleship that moves beyond the church's walls.

They decided to reach out to the school nurse at Beeler Elementary to see what the school might need. She put them in touch with the principal, who put them in touch with the Superintendent's office, who put them in touch with the Business Administrator's office. Together with the school district, Marlton UMC discerned that they would tackle school lunch debt.

It just so happened that the school lunch debt for Beeler Elementary, the school in their neighborhood, was

\$4,000, which is exactly what Marlton UMC typically raised with their Christmas

Eve offerings. On a whim, they asked how much the school lunch debt for the entire district was; \$19,000 was the answer.

"What if we tried to raise all of it?" Rev. Ruch imagined. So, he cast a vision that during the month of Advent, Marlton UMC would raise \$19,000 to cover the lunch debt for every elementary school in Evesham township. And the vision took off. They posted about the project on their neighborhood Facebook page, and it was posted and reposted. Rev. Ruch told his barber about the project, and she and all the other barbers immediately donated all their tips to the campaign, and dropped off a second gift the week of Christmas.

Two weeks before Christmas, Marlton had already raised \$9,000, double what they normally donated in their Christmas offering.

By the morning of Christmas Eve, the count was \$14,000. On Christmas Eve they collected \$3-4,000 additional dollars. When they invited the superintendent and his wife to church the Sunday after Christmas, Rev. Jesse was proudly able to share, "The school lunch debt is \$19,000, we have a check for you for \$20,000."

Upon hearing the amazing news, the superintendent and his wife immediately burst into tears. He later told Rev. Ruch that he expected that after worship he would be able to call Beeler Elementary and tell them that their lunch debt was erased, but instead he now had to call all eight schools.

Donations continued to roll in following Christmas and into the new year. The funeral home in town donated, Hope UMC down the road in Voorhees contributed. When the Superintendent of schools returned in mid-January, Rev. Ruch was able to share that they had raised \$30,050. Enough to erase the school lunch debt and create an enduring



gift that would ensure that every child who came to school would have access to the same lunch options, no matter their families' circumstances.

"This was an amazing local witness, to actually do something in our community, for our neighbors, for one another... to say that we care about more than just our sanctuary. Our love extends beyond the building."

This moment of missional outreach captured the imagination of the entire Evesham community that surrounds the church and sparked a new horizon for possibilities for ministry. Marlton UMC is currently wondering what more they might be able to do to ensure that no student goes hungry in Evesham.

The Power of "What If"

The journey towards new possibilities begins with a simple question, "What if?" "What if the church really is more than a building?" "What if we focus our charitable giving on our community this year?"

"What if we dream big and try to raise enough money to eliminate lunch debt for every elementary school in the district?"

This simple question unlocks so much possibility. Through the power of holy imagination, and God-breathed wondering, Marlton finished a capital campaign project, developed an intentional discipleship program, and raised \$32,050 to feed a hungry community. "It's amazing to watch God show up, and help us show up, and to watch the way that God is showing up for the congregation." Rev. Ruch reflected.

The enthusiasm is catching. At a recent finance meeting, a lay leader prayed "May 2026 be an even more eventful year than 2025." With an ear for the Holy Spirit's leading, an eye on discipleship, and a heart for deepening community connections, Marlton UMC is poised for more eventful years to come. 🌱



Worshippers pause to listen and reflect as Pastor Jesse welcomes them to worship.

IGNITE Inspires Renewed Youth Activity at Teaneck UMC

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

EPA & GNJ are blessed with lots of opportunities for youth to experience community, test out the waters of faith, and grow closer to their connection to God. In countless church basements, fellowship halls and youth rooms across both conferences young people are invited to play, ask tough questions, and explore faith.

Every year Eastern Pennsylvania's camping and retreat ministry welcomes 20,000 campers into a vivid faith experience. In GNJ, youth and young adults, are invited to come to IGNITE, a faith-filled high energy youth weekend, where they can sing, dance, and play together with other Christ-followers.

In the constellation of youth and young adult programming, Camp and Retreat ministries at Carson Simpson, Gretna Glen, Innabah, and Pocono Plateau provide the opportunity for young people to go deep into the waters of faith, IGNITE provides a wonderful opportunity for young people to test the waters. This Friday night-Sunday morning event, with a Saturday only option, offers an opportunity for students to invite their friends to experience a faith-filled weekend.

Thousands of lives have been transformed through weeklong camp and retreat experiences and through faith-filled weekends. Today, we take a closer look at one of the stories of a group



Students strike a pose at IGNITE 2025.

transformed through participation at IGNITE.

In 2024 Teaneck UMC dreamed of attending IGNITE. Rev. Jaeyoun Kim had worked with youth for years and knew how transformational a weekend away with students who had faith lives of their own could be. "I wanted our youth to be able to worship freely, meet other students from different churches, and really feel the presence of God in a personal way."

With the help of scholarships, and a dedicated fund set aside for youth programming, Teaneck UMC attended IGNITE 2024. It was everything Rev. Kim

hoped it would be. The students loved their time at IGNITE.

"You meet a lot of new people a lot of people from different churches. It made me feel like I had a really big family and I really like that." gushed Ray Kwon. Kwaku Opoku-Amoah shared, "I like how the leaders went out of their way to bond with us and make a personal connection."

The experience fanned the flames of the young people's faith, and they came back energized to grow even deeper by restarting the church's youth group.

After the conference the group made a commitment to meet regularly on the second and fourth Sundays of each



month. "We made a whole calendar of things we want to do." Shared Rev. Kim.

They didn't just pick activities, the group decided to be serious about service. They made Christmas packages for a local shelter that included items that unhoused persons would need and they assembled Valentine's Day packages for college students.

They also decided that they wanted to raise the money to attend IGNITE again next year, so that other students could come on scholarship. Throughout the year they hosted bake sales, where the students made cookies, brownies, banana bread, pineapple bread.

The congregation generously supported their efforts. When the students hosted a fundraiser at a local restaurant, church members who couldn't make it sent money directly to the group.

"The whole church poured out their hearts." Shared Rev. Kim. She continued, "We have a lot of younger children, 5th-6th graders. The students can be a good model to them. We are so excited they are growing."

IGNITE inspired the youth of Teaneck UMC to take ministry into their own hands. They planned their calendar year around service and fundraisers, doing everything they could to come back again.

They met their goal and returned to experience IGNITE 2025, this time bringing a friend of a student with them, Kayla Saley. Kayla had never attended worship, but had hung out with the youth group students, helping them to bake for their fundraisers. They invited her to come with them and experience IGNITE, "We are praying that the Holy Spirit does something in her through IGNITE." Rev. Kim shared

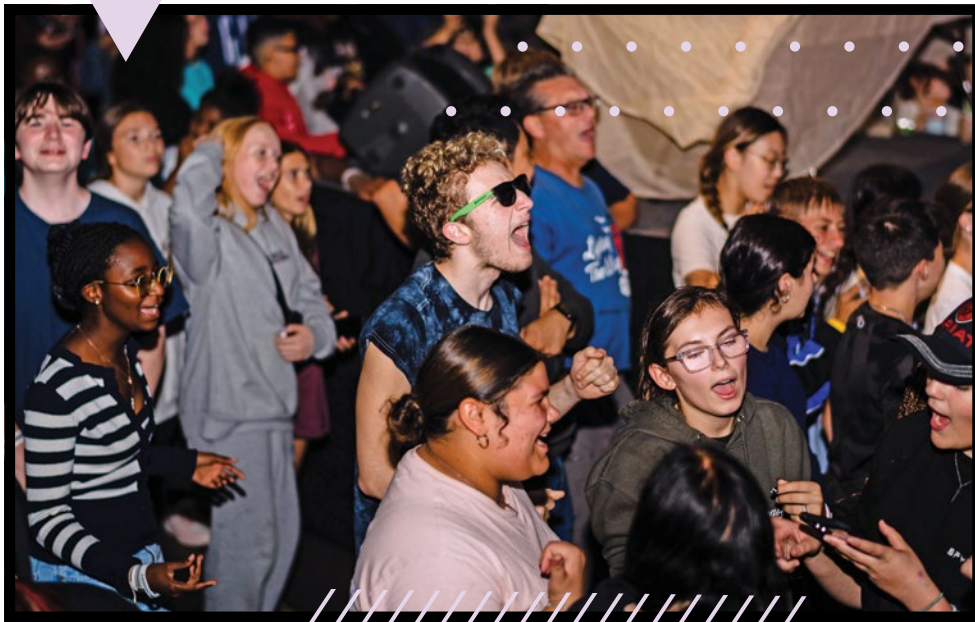
By Saturday afternoon it appeared that those prayers were being answered, Kayla shared, "When I was younger I used to go to church a lot. When Covid hit that changed a bit. Coming here reconnected my roots a bit, and it lights up my connection with God again."

By the end of the weekend, the young woman sought out Bishop Moore-Koikoi and officially recommitted her life to Christ.

The youth ministry at Teaneck UMC looks dramatically different than it did a year ago. Through the spark provided by IGNITE and through the power of the Holy Spirit, something fresh and exciting is happening at Teaneck UMC.

In the words of a member of Teaneck's youth group, "If you're really struggling with your relationship with God, or if you just want to get closer, IGNITE is a really good place to start. It's really fun."

If you are hoping to draw students in your ministry closer to Jesus, IGNITE is a great place to start. October 9-11, 2026, may seem far away, but it's never too early to start planning. Visit ignitenj.org to learn more and begin to plan your trip to Wildwood. 🌲



"You meet a lot of new people a lot of people from different churches. It made me feel like I had a really big family and I really like that."

—Ray Kwon

"If you're really struggling with your relationship with God, or if you just want to get closer, IGNITE is a really good place to start. It's really fun."

—Youth Member

"I like how the leaders went out of their way to bond with us and make a personal connection."

—Kwaku Opoku-Amoah



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Students dance and sing at IGNITE 2025.

Kwaku Opoku-Amoah and Yaw Osafo-Mensah from Teaneck UMC take a photo with a new friend.

Rev. Jaeyoun Kim, Yaw Osafo-Mensah Kwaku Opoku-Amoah, Ray Kwon Kayla Saley from Teaneck UMC.



Two Campaigns, One Mission: Empower Leaders in Tanzania

By Emily Wilton and Sarah Borgstrom Lee

EPA and GNJ have, for years, engaged in a missional partnership with our siblings in Christ in Tanzania. Together, we have raised funds to build a new church and to help pastors earn a living wage. This year, our missional partnership continues, but it is taking a different shape in each annual conference.

GNJ Continues its Commitment to Supporting Pastors with a Living Wage

GNJ is continuing to raise money to help support pastors with a living wage, to help pastors like Rev. Gilbert John Bagaya support his family and serve his congregation with clarity and focus.

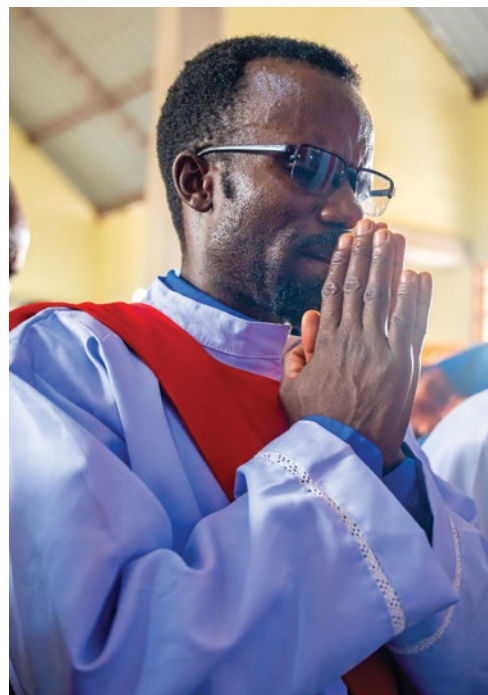
Rev. Bagaya was appointed to serve in the Misungwi District among the Sakuma tribe. When he first arrived, the congregation was small, and the flock had been scattered by past challenges. On his first Sunday, only one member came to worship. Still, Rev. Bagaya committed himself to being present among the people as one who serves.

In his own words, “I love my community because I learned that to make them love Jesus Christ is to live together with them; learning what they love and what they don’t love and showing them who Jesus is through action.”

Rev. Bagaya’s incarnational ministry reveals the love of Jesus in their midst. Over time, he gathered the people together, and now forty people worship each Sunday morning. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Rev. Bagaya and his congregation are loving boldly and serving joyfully as they address the challenges their community faces.

In Rev. Bagaya’s own words, “I want to say thank you very much for how you choose to be with us. We promise to keep you in prayer in your ministries and in your families. We ask that you also pray with us, share with us, and walk together with us.”

Many pastors in Tanzania receive an annual salary of only \$67 per year, many



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ordinand stands with their robes and stoles at Annual Conference; A student practices signing. Rev. Dr. Tom Hudspeth teaches sign language to a group of students; Rev. Gilbert John Bagaya pauses to pray at Annual Conference.

committed to deaf interpretation in our congregations. Now we have the chance to be part of building the Yatasha deaf school in Tanzania, the first United Methodist deaf school in the world.

In Tanzania, there are an estimated 690,000 deaf people and less than 1% of deaf children are in any education

program. As a result, deaf children often remain isolated at home, excluded from classrooms, unable to communicate, and cut off from opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive. Many face a lifetime of stigma and poverty simply because they have been denied the gift of education. Yatasha Deaf School will change that reality by creating a place where deaf children in Tanzania can learn, grow, and thrive—a place where communication is possible, learning is joyful, and every child is empowered to reach their God-given potential.

When you make a gift to build the Yatasha Deaf School you play a part in breaking cycles of isolation and poverty, share the love of Christ through accessible communication and equip a new generation of deaf leaders. This is more than a school—it is a ministry, a movement, and a testimony of God’s love made visible. 🌍

Make a gift today at epaumc.org/fortanzania.

“I LOVE MY COMMUNITY BECAUSE I LEARNED THAT TO MAKE THEM LOVE JESUS CHRIST IS TO LIVE TOGETHER WITH THEM; LEARNING WHAT THEY LOVE AND WHAT THEY DON’T LOVE AND SHOWING THEM WHO JESUS IS THROUGH ACTION.”

—Rev. Gilbert John Bagaya

receive much less than that. When you give, you help pastors and their families flourish in their ministry contexts.

You can make a difference in the life of pastor in Tanzania.

- Full Year Pastor Salary: \$1,200
- Half Year Pastor Salary: \$600
- Quarter Year Pastor Salary: \$300
- One month Pastor Salary: \$100

Every gift makes a difference, no gift is too small. Make a gift today at gnjumc.org/fortanzania.

EPA Works to Build Yatasha Deaf School

This year, EPA’s missional partnership with Tanzania gets personal. EPA has long history of deaf ministries. Under Bishop Johnson’s leadership, many churches

Pastor Isaya Mwita of First Deaf UMC of Viwege, Dar es Salaam shares about the importance of Yatasha Deaf School: “First, because at a Deaf school the students can get learning in their minds that will affect that entire life in the future as

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Lay Leadership

Continued from page 2

I wasn't the only one who presented that day. Rev. Juel Nelson, Director of Clergy Leadership Development led a shared reflection on what factors lead to success for clergy who are just starting out their ministries. As the conference leadership reflected on what they had observed, over and over again, strong lay leadership was named as an essential component.

This is true in my own experience. I would not be where I was or have been able to boast or share some of the successes I have had in ministry, had it not been for supportive and committed laity who worked alongside me.

Right from my earliest days in ministry, I have been surrounded by Laity who love the Lord, who were prayerful in their leadership, and acknowledged both their strengths and areas of needed growth.

We belong to each other. Strong lay leadership and strong clergy leadership are essential for a healthy congregation.

I am encouraged too by the numbers of lay leaders that I see who are hungry to grow deeper.

The past few weekends of January, GNJ laity and pastors have gathered again for such growth opportunities – through the Coastal Plains "Regional Day of Learning" at Hope UMC (Vorhees) and Metro-Highlands virtual "Foundational Day".

In a few weeks to come, EPA laity and clergy will do the same, gathering for their Tools for Ministry Days:

- **Saturday, February 28th** at Salem UMC, Manheim (West District)
- **Saturday, March 7th** at Palmer Seminary at Eastern University (South-East Region)
- **Saturday, March 14th** at Asbury UMC, Allentown (North District)

If you missed these opportunities, don't worry, there are other opportunities to come.

In GNJ, the spring Basic Lay Servant Course will begin on Monday, March 2nd at 7pm via zoom. Registration is open and will remain so until either 2/23/26 or the class reaches maximum capacity of 20 students. Additional advanced classes are being developed for late spring and early summer, with consideration being given to in-person and intensive weekend classes. Certified Lay Servants and Lay Ministers seeking specific additional information should reach out to their District Directors listed below.

In EPA, Basic and Advanced CSM/CLM classes are scheduled for Saturday,



Leaders gather for a workshop taught by the Rev. Dr. Chris Heckert at the Coastal Plains Regional Day of Learning.

March 21st and Saturday, April 25th. Classes will take place across the annual conference as such:

- **March 21st** – Introduction to Christ Servant Ministry and Speaking I (advanced class) @ Christ UMC, Lansdale
- **March 21st** – Speaking 3 (advanced) @ Christ UMC, Fairless Hills
- **April 25th** – Introduction to Christ Servant Ministry and Cultural Competency (advanced) @ Church of the Good Shepherd, Lebanon
- **April 25th** – Servant Leadership (advanced) @ Cedarville UMC

Over the summer there are more chances to grow. Regional United Women in Faith (UWF) leadership is collaborating to all host their MISSION U conferences on differing weekends to create greater regional opportunity for participation:

- **July 17-19**—GNJ Mission U @ Centenary University, Hackettstown
- **July 24-25**—EPA Mission U @ Chester Hotel, Exton
- **July 31-Aug 2**—Pen-Del/ Baltimore-Washington Conf. Mission U @ location TBD

And EPA's Laity Academy is planned for early August, at Eastern University.

There are so many ways for you to grow. You can join one of the opportunities named above, take an online course through the Leadership Academy, at <https://leadership-academy29.teachable.com/>, or reach out to me at ltoombs@epagnj.org or 484.474.0129.

As I close, I invite you to reflect on these words offered to us in Romans 12:1-2, let us work towards the renewing of our minds – and as The Message says:

Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. 🇺🇸

For GNJ Lay Servant Ministries please visit: <https://www.gnjumc.org/leadership-academy/lay-servant-ministries/>. For EPA Christ Servant Ministries Lay Servant Ministries please visit: <https://www.christservantministries.net/>.



United Women in Faith pause for a photo at GNJ's 2025 Mission u.

"Saving the Soul of Our Nation, State, and Church":

Faith Forum & Historical Tour Offer Chance to Examine History and Stir Hope

"If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree," wrote Michael Crichton. In this 250th year since the founding of our country, we are especially poised to examine and learn from our history – not only as a nation, but also as United Methodists. Our history is not just artifact; it is the soil in which we are planted. It needs tending, so that we might continue to grow. Grab your calendars; this May, you will have two incredible opportunities to do just that.

The first is a faith forum entitled "Striving to End the Sin of Racism in Church and State: Contemporary and Historical Methodist Perspectives." The forum will be hosted on Tuesday, May 12 from 1:00-6:30pm at Pennington United Methodist Church, one of the earliest congregations started as a class meeting by Captain Webb, one of the first Methodist preachers in America.

The day will open with worship and a powerful word from our own Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi. Bishop Ernest S. Lyght (Retired) will share about the UMC's history of racial segregation and integration in his presentation: "My Personal Memories of the Delaware Conference of the Central Jurisdiction: What the Black Church gained and lost during integration, and what gifts it gave to the wider Church." Rupert A. Hall, Jr. JD and Founder of Hope for the City Foundation will then speak on, "Economic Justice in Faith and Society," and consider obstacles and challenges to ending the sin of racism in our time.

For those interested in preserving their own church's or conference's history, Kevin Dusenberry

will lead a workshop on archival best practices, including identifying resources for ethnic congregations.

On May 13, a historical tour, "Saving the Soul of Our Nation and State," will focus on how the American Revolution played out in New Jersey and on Captain Webb's ministry in the area. Buses will leave from the Courtyard by Marriott Ewing Princeton at 8:30am.



Stops at Washington's Crossing State Park and Monmouth Battlefield Park will allow participants to explore and learn about sites of America's early revolutionary history, and they will even have a chance to view original documents by the nation's founders at Princeton Theological Seminary's Library and Archives.

The tour will also visit Turning Point UMC, a successor to another of Captain Webb's class meetings, and the historic Tennent Church, a significant site in early American Presbyterianism and in Francis Asbury's ministry.

That evening, Dr. Kevin Newburg of Drew Theological School will give a keynote address on Captain Webb's preaching in central New Jersey and the growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the United Methodist Church's forebears.

These events are open to all and form part of the Northeastern Jurisdictional Commission on Archives and History (NEJCAH) 2026 Annual Meeting and Program, which runs from May 12-14 and is hosted by the Greater New Jersey Commission on Archives and History and Pennington United Methodist Church.

At a moment when we are asking hard questions about identity, justice, and faithfulness, history becomes more than memory—it becomes a guide. These gatherings invite us not simply to look back, but to listen: to the voices that shaped us, the struggles we faced, and the hope that still calls us forward. By tending the soil of our shared story, we make room for new growth rooted in truth, courage, and grace. Whether through worship, learning, or walking the ground where faith once took flesh, you are invited to join in the work of saving—not by nostalgia, but by faithful imagination—the soul of our nation, our state, and our church. 🇺🇸



SCAN THE QR CODE TO REGISTER TODAY.

Seeds of Faith

Continued from page 1

it is an exercise in trust. The menu must be nutritionally balanced, and it must be created from the donations that come in each week from partners like ShopRite. This week's offering was sloppy joes, cornbread, a fruit or vegetable, and dessert.

Week after week, Price and the volunteers at East Stroudsburg UMC ground themselves in God—spending time together in devotion and prayer ahead of opening the doors—and week after week, God provides. Just as they trust God, so also do they recognize the importance of building trust with those they serve.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the church insisted on continuing to serve the community meal, knowing how much people rely on it. To minimize health risks, the volunteer team was limited to five people who committed to limiting outside exposure. The community learned they could rely on the people of East Stroudsburg UMC, even in extraordinary circumstances.

More recently, the ministry experienced a shortage of turkeys to distribute



Groceries and clothes line tables for the community meal time at East Stroudsburg UMC.

to their guests at Thanksgiving. Price was worried and didn't know what to do. She decided to put her trust in God and in the people she serves. "I got up in front of [the people here to receive food] and said, 'I've only got 50 turkeys. I don't have enough to give to everyone here. What would you do if you were in my shoes?'"

One by one, people raised their hands. One said they'd received a turkey at another church, another at the grocery store; still others said that they didn't need one. In the end, everyone who needed a turkey got one. "It was a God thing," said Price.

Planting New (Mustard) Seeds

Although East Stroudsburg UMC has been steadfastly serving the community meal for many years, its feeding ministry has not remained static. It has responded to changing needs in the community.

Rev. Samuel Kofi Ashley, lead pastor of East Stroudsburg UMC shared how, in recent years, there was a sudden increase in Hispanic families who were attending the community meal. Price, herself an Argentina native, began giving the opening welcome, instructions and prayer in Spanish, alongside Rev. Ashley in English.

As comfort grew and trust was gained, these families began to attend the church's "Fourth Friday" community events—like line dancing and crafts. The potential for

outreach seemed strong and the church was beginning to put ministries in place to deepen these relationships, like a Bible study in Spanish for moms, with childcare provided.

The church applied for—and received—an UMCOR Mustard Seed Grant for "a community-based service project and ministry focused on migrants and refugees." But when immigration raids and enforcement intensified, says Pastor Ashley, there was a dramatic drop in the number of Hispanic families and individuals at the community meal and other church events.

In that moment, the church's capacity for building trust allowed them to pivot so they could serve the most vulnerable among them. Understanding the fear that many were feeling, the church continued with its Bible study in Spanish. They created a space for childcare in the room right next door—within earshot and line of vision—so that parents and children could feel safe. They placed bilingual signs around the space to make Spanish-speakers feel welcome. They collect little identifying information from Bible study participants, knowing that sharing that information can be intimidating for those already living in fear.

Although the Bible study does not have the high attendance numbers that church leaders had originally envisioned, it nevertheless is proving to be fertile ground for mustard seeds of faith. Those who do attend the Bible study are beginning to learn what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ, shares Price.

Participants take turns choosing the topic for the Bible study and they are beginning to talk to their extended families and neighbors about what they are learning. They are also able to share



Community Meal Coordinator Ana Price stands with another volunteer as guests receive meals and other goods.

resources that the church provides with their loved ones—like feminine hygiene products and children's books in Spanish and English.

Michelle, a volunteer who provides childcare during the Bible study, shared that when she first began, she focused on building relationships, unsure of the children's religious backgrounds. Eventually, she talked with them about Jesus, who said, "Let the little children come to me" (Matt. 19:14). Later that day, while a child played with a Paw Patrol toy, Michelle asked what the show was about. "It's like the man you talked about," the child replied. "They are kind, and they help kids." Despite differences in language, culture, and age, Michelle's message had clearly connected.

Eileen, a community meal volunteer, is also finding meaningful connection through the Bible study. She only speaks a little bit of Spanish but loves the language and is learning it more as she participates in the Bible study. Moreover, she is getting to know the other women in the group and feels honored to learn their stories.

These moments of connection and trust may seem small, but they are the mustard seeds that, with God's help, will grow into a tree whose branches provide safety and refuge for those who abide in it. The people of East Stroudsburg UMC are a people practiced in acts of trust. They have experienced the blessings that come when a community steps out in faith. As they look ahead for new opportunities to serve the people around them—especially the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the imprisoned and the sick—they no doubt will continue to know the joy of serving Christ himself. 🌱



Volunteer Eileen packs to-go meals.



Bilingual books and signs adorn the children's space.

Healthy Conflict with Rev. Dr. David Woolverton:

Now Available on Teachable

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

Have you ever experienced conflict in the church? If you are a leader in the church, whether that's a Sunday School teacher, a trustee, or the pastor of a congregation, odds are you have experienced conflict, an emotionally charged disagreement about how things should be done.

Some leaders thrive in conflict, others avoid it at all costs, fearing that conflict will disrupt the ministries of the church. In this Leadership Academy course, Rev. Dr. David Woolverton, invites leaders to set aside our anxiety about conflict, and embrace the opportunity that conflict presents to help the congregation grow deeper as disciples. "Conflict is essential for growth and discipleship."

Over the course of seven videos, Rev. Dr. Woolverton helps leaders unpack the systemic patterns behind the conflict, inviting ministry leaders to cultivate curiosity about what lies beneath presenting issues, to practice responding instead of reacting to other's reactions, and to model Christ-centered security by leading with calmness and assertiveness.

"Often, when faced with someone else's reactive behavior, we take it personally and we react to their reaction, creating a defensive loop that can spiral out of control."

He explores conflict from a biblical perspective and invites leaders to consider conflict from a theological perspective. "Growth requires conflict. Think about it, this side of heaven, conflict is one of the ways that God pushes us out of complacency and into transformation."

Whether you are a seasoned ministry leader or are only just beginning to wade into the waters of church leadership, this course is essential viewing.

Whether you are looking to develop your ability to lead through conflict, want to practice strategic church communication, or want to understand the role of the trustee in the life of the church, the Leadership Academy on Teachable has something for you. 🌱

Find the tools you need to level up your leadership today at leadership-academy29.teachable.com, or scan the QR code.



LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Annual Conference

Continued from page 1

Next, Ms. Lenora Thompson, chair of EPA's Connectional Table, offered a welcome and opening prayer. "May we be open to new thoughts, ideas, and direction," she prayed, "committed to everything in the process that we are doing."

Bishop Moore-Koikoi then rose to offer her greetings, reminding everyone of what she said when she first arrived: "When I first arrived on September 1, many people asked me, 'Bishop, what is your vision?' I don't want you to follow my vision. I want us together to discern God's vision."

She went on to explain that different leadership styles suit different seasons of ministry. In times of crisis, it can be helpful for someone to lead like Moses, going up the mountain, speaking with God, and then returning to the people to say, "This is what we are going to do." Other seasons call for leadership more

wall. After everyone had a chance to share, the group worked together to organize the ideas around common themes.

The process was slow and intentional, with organizers careful to ensure that what was recorded on the wall truly reflected the spirit of the room. Rev. Lorelei Toombs, Director for Lay Leadership Development for EPA and GNJ, described the exercise as "holy wrestling together to arrive at the truth of where we stand and what we need to move forward at this time."

After deep conversation, reflection, and significant personal sharing, both EPA and GNJ arrived at the priorities they believed God was inviting them to attend to in this season of ministry. Leaders from the two conferences gathered together to share their priorities, along with the stories and ideas that had sparked their imagination along the way.

EPA identified a call to:

- Lovingly sharing the Gospel with all people & service to our neighbors
- Prophetic and Bold Witness and Leadership in our community
- Transformational Equipping and Empowering of Discipleship of all ages & calling

These commitments led to a focus on the following priority areas:

- Strengthening the local church
- Justice
- Leadership, discipleship, and ministry with youth and young adults

GNJ identified four top priorities:

- Social justice—loving God and neighbor
- Discipleship—a lifelong, Christ-centered, and guided process
- New and renewed expressions of church—creating and revitalizing faith communities through new models and ministries
- Young people's ministry—nurturing, empowering, and connecting young people through spiritual formation, leadership, service, and community

As hopes and dreams were voiced and priorities shared by elected leaders from across both conferences, it became clear that although each conference traveled a distinct journey and emphasized slightly different areas, there was clear thematic overlap.

Together, the clergy and lay leaders who comprise the Connectional Tables of EPA and GNJ broadly identified the following as key areas where God is calling focused attention in this season:

- Social justice
- Discipleship
- Leadership development
- New and renewed expressions of church ministry
- Young people's ministry



LEFT: Rev. Sean Lee strategizes with Rev. Guillermo Javier Barroso-Rodriguez and Rev. Laura Quackenbush-Steele.



BELOW: Rev. Tracy Duncan, Rev. David Eckert, and Rev. Lisa DePaz listen attentively for the Holy Spirit as EPA worked to discern ministry priorities in this season.



Bishop Moore-Koikoi welcomes leaders and lays out the purpose of the day.

like Deborah's: sitting with the people and listening and looking for God's movement alongside them.

"You've all heard the proverb, 'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,'" Bishop Moore-Koikoi shared. "We need to go far. We need a collective vision that we are invested in—one that is owned by the people. How does God want us to be? What does God want us to do as annual conferences serving together?"

As she concluded her remarks, Bishop Moore-Koikoi invited each leader present to consider the ways they are developing other leaders—nurturing them to take on the roles we currently hold.

After a blessing from Rev. Shelley Smith, GNJ Conference Secretary, leaders from each conference dispersed into separate rooms for a time of holy wrestling, listening for what the Holy Spirit might be beckoning from within each annual conference.

Once the leaders of EPA & GNJ gathered in their respective spaces, discernment began in earnest. As many visioning processes do, it started with Post-it notes. Each leader wrote down ideas about what the annual conference's priorities should be in this season and placed them on the

On January 17, the leaders elected to represent EPA and GNJ gathered for a time of dreaming and storytelling. They listened on our behalf for what God is doing and attended to what the Spirit is revealing in this season.

They have begun the work—but they did not, and indeed cannot, finish it alone. The work continues with you. The conference is not a far-off entity comprised only of people who work in an office building; the conference is each of us. Every member of every local church is part of the conference. Together, we look for what God is doing. Together, we discern where the Holy Spirit is leading.

We are living in a new season under a new United Methodist vision. It is time to engage with our Creator, who is always creating and recreating. It is time to discern where God is inviting us to focus our

energy and attention. The Connectional Tables, the elected leadership of EPA and GNJ, have begun this work, but it continues with you. 🌈

Where do you believe the Holy Spirit is inviting us to focus our energy and attention at this time?

SCAN THE QR CODE TO TAKE A BRIEF SURVEY AND LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD.



DISTRICT CONFERENCES

EPA

East District Conference
April 25th at 2pm,
Montgomery Square UMC

North District Conference
May 3rd at 10am,
Allentown: Asbury UMC

South District Conference
May 2nd at 10am, Cedarville UMC

West District Conference
May 3rd at 3pm, Lancaster: First UMC

GNJ

Cape Atlantic
May 3rd at 2pm, Cross Keys
United Methodist Church

Central District Conference
May 2nd at 2pm, location TBD

Delaware Bay District Conference
May 2nd at 10am, Pitman UMC

Meadowlands District Conference
April 25th at 10am, Chatham UMC

Raritan Shore District Conference
April 26th at 1:30pm, location TBD

Skylands District Conference
April 25th at 2pm, location TBD

28 DAYS OF PRAYER:

Preparing Our Hearts for Annual Conference 2026

As we prepare for Annual Conference 2026—centered on the theme of PRAYER—join Bishop Moore-Koikoi, laity, and clergy across EPA & GNJ for a 28-day prayer journey. Every weekday from April 8 and through May 15 we'll gather together over Zoom for a time of intentional prayer. Lay and clergy leaders from across EPA & GNJ will take turns leading the day's reflection. Each day's prayer will be inspired by the transformative book, *Dynamite Prayer*, by Rev. Dr. Rosario "Roz" Picardo and Rev. Dr. Sue Nilson Kibbey.

We invite you to join the journey. Set aside just 20 minutes each weekday morning from 7:00-7:20am to connect with God, reflect in community, and listen for the Spirit's leading. You are invited to join as often as you're able. Registration details are available in the weekly Digest, or on the annual conference page, epaumc.org/ac2026 or gnjumc.org/ac2026. Hope you can join this time of transformational prayer!



ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2026