

Reports

Connecting Council

Scott Brewer, Executive Director

The Connecting Council meets twice a year to align conference initiatives with the missional priorities of the conference, to function as a decision-making body between Annual Conference sessions, and to develop communication across the conference. Membership consists of the Bishop, Cabinet representatives, directors, conference and district lay leaders, chairpersons of conference teams and committees, as well as clergy and lay members at-large. At their two meetings, in October 2023 and May 2024, the Connecting Council received updates from the Bishop and staff of the work of the conference.

In October, members approved revisions of the Standing Rules of the Great Plains Annual Conference, which you can find in the proposed standings rules printed in the Workbook and this Addendum. These rules clarify parliamentary procedure and update requirements for resolutions and proposals submitted after the regular submission deadline.

In May, members discussed the outcomes of the 2024 General Conference, approved \$87,375 in Missional Opportunity Funds for Be the Bridge Training as requested by the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, and also approved the first year of funding to start a multi-county pilot partnership of the Great Plains Conference and DART Center to work in Riley, Clay, Ottawa, Lincoln, Geary, Dickinson, Saline, Ellsworth, Morris, Marion, McPherson, Rice, Chase, Harvey, and Reno counties.

The Connecting Council also voted to recommend the a change to the membership of the Great Plains Conference Nominations Team as originally suggested by the Districting Task Force.

Proposed Change to Nominations Team Membership

Effective July 1, 2025, the membership of the Conference Nominations Team shall be expanded from its current six

members to a total of 21 persons, including one lay and one clergyperson from every district, and a chairperson. The members of this team will continue to be nominated by the Conference Nominations Team and elected by the Annual Conference.

Administration

Episcopacy Committee

Rev. Maria Campbell, chair

The Episcopacy Committee (as per ¶1637.3 in BOD), supports the bishop in the oversight of the spiritual and temporal affairs of the Church, with special reference to presidential responsibilities; is available to the bishop for counsel; and keeps the bishop advised concerning conditions within the area as they affect relationships between the bishop and the people of the conference agencies. The committee has held three meetings with Bishop David Wilson and seeks to encourage and support his leadership of our conference and his witness in the world.

2023 was the year we welcomed Bishop Wilson, the first Native American bishop in our denomination, on January 1, 2023. His Installation service was held on Saturday, Feb. 9, 2023. We celebrated his Native heritage and his exemplary commitment to justice. Bishop Wilson is committed to the inclusion of all people.

2023 was a year of many disaffiliations in our conference and denomination. Our bishop led us through this difficult time by exemplifying grace and professionalism in challenging conversations and decisions.

2023 was also a year when the people of the Great Plains had the opportunity to meet their bishop across the two states. The bishop's warmth and the hospitality of our congregations provided moments of authentic conversations and much joy. The bishop travels extensively throughout the conference

to celebrate life and ministry within the Great Plains. He has engaged with our Mercy and Justice Team as they provide immersions that educate us to the plight of those in the margins. Bishop Wilson's leadership provides opportunities to expand our understanding of God's call upon our lives and the life of our denomination.

The Episcopacy Committee conducted an evaluation of the bishop as per the South Central Jurisdictional Episcopacy Committee request. A cross-section of lay and clergy, staff and ministry leaders were invited to respond to questions provided by the SCJ committee. The results of that evaluation were shared with the bishop and the SCJ Episcopacy Committee. We do not anticipate the election of bishops at the 2024 SCJ Conference.

The Episcopacy Committee is dedicated to supporting the work of the Bishop and the Cabinet. It is our hope that the entire Conference joins us in prayerfully supporting their ministry to us.

Council on Finance and Administration

Rev. Amy Lippoldt, President

The Great Plains CF&A is grateful to the generosity of faithful United Methodists all over Nebraska and Kansas who fund their local church ministry and also our larger work as an annual conference. We are a connectional church that believes in the power of what we can do together. Your mission and ministry dollars are a tangible sign of that belief and of the strength of our annual conference. Your gifts help support the church all across our states and spread the love of God in countless ways. Thank you.

At year-end 2023, our overall apportionment payout was 87% of asking. This was a reduction from 2022 and 2021 but still within the anticipated range. We always hope to receive over 90% but staff had done a good job of preparing for slightly lower payout, and there were no major disruptions.

There have been a few notable events for our committee's work in the last year. In the fall of 2023 our treasurer, Angie Gleason, left to pursue another professional opportunity. Scott Brewer stepped in to fill the role of treasurer again temporarily, and Darci Koci was elevated to the position of controller. Darci will continue in this role long-term, and we are so grateful for her work. With Scott transitioning this spring to a new permanent role in the conference staffing structure, we began the process in early April of hiring a new permanent treasurer.

At annual conference last year, CF&A voted to allot \$500,000 in unrestricted reserves for a grant process to support church who had been deeply wounded by disaffiliation fights and votes. In December of 2023, we received a report from Congregational Excellence that \$450,000 had been spent out of the original \$500,000. At their request, we approved another \$600,000 to be spent over the course of 2024 as need to offer further support. While there might be one more dispersal in the future, this will not be a long-term program. The purpose of the funds is to help churches recover and transition to their new reality.

As of this writing the 2025 budget is not yet complete but we anticipate there will be a drop in income of about 5% from 2024. This is due to fully feeling the effect of church disaffiliations. In 2025, for the first time we will have no income from the payout disaffiliating churches made while leaving. Some of this may be compensated for by a reduction in General Church apportionments, depending on what the General Conference decides. We are grateful for the ongoing work of our conference staff as they prepare the 2025 budget, helping us live into the realities of a smaller annual conference with as minimal impact as possible to our conference ministries.

Personnel Committee

Rev. David Livingston, chair

The Great Plains is blessed with an extraordinary staff. The Personnel Committee has the joy of empowering our staff to

do their best work by reviewing and updating policies, procedures, and position descriptions on an ongoing basis.

This year's work has once again included approving equitable compensation grants. A number of grants were made last year to help churches that had suffered significant membership loss during the time of disaffiliations. While this year has been better, we are grateful that funds have continued to be available.

We have recommended CFA budget a 3% cost-of-living increase to the staff salary pool for 2025, in keeping with recommendation No. 1 below.

We have two action items this year.

Action Items:

1. The Book of Discipline guarantees all licensed or ordained clergy members of the Great Plains Conference in good standing who are serving in a local church as well as every pastor serving a full-time pastoral appointment within the conference boundaries shall receive from the church or churches in their charge not less than the minimum compensation as outlined above (§1625.3). This policy also serves as guidance in the setting of pastoral compensation for less than full-time ordained clergy serving Great Plains churches while retaining their membership in other United Methodist annual conferences, as well as clergy appointed to Great Plains churches who are members in good standing of other Christian denominations.

We recommend an increase of 3% in each clergy status category as noted in the table below. This recommendation reflects our attempt to balance both the financial reality of our churches as well as the financial needs of our pastors. It reflects the reality that while average wages have increased by 19% between 2020 and 2023, our minimum compensation has risen by only 10% during that same time.

2024 JOURNAL

Clergy Status	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Full Time Local Pastor	\$37,617	\$38,746	\$40,683	\$41,903	\$43,160
Associate Member	\$40,051	\$41,253	\$43,316	\$44,615	\$45,953
Provisional Member	\$42,486	\$43,761	\$45,949	\$47,327	\$48,747
Full Member	\$44,921	\$46,269	\$48,582	\$50,039	\$51,540
Rate of Change	3%	5%	3%	3%	3%

2. The Personnel Committee recommends adoption of the following policy to provide consistency and fairness in the treatment of housing benefits for clergy in all appointments:

Great Plains Policy on Clergy Housing Benefits

The Great Plains Conference seeks to provide procedures to provide consistency and fairness in the treatment of housing as compensation across our conference all appointments where churches have a parsonage and a housing allowance is not provided.

Wespath states, regardless of whether a clergyperson lives in the parsonage, if a parsonage is provided (offered) to the clergyperson, compensation includes a parsonage value equal to 25% per (IRC 415 Compensation plus housing allowance).

Parsonage value will not be included in the calculation of plan compensation for clergy:

1. Who are provided a housing allowance in lieu of living in a parsonage, or
2. Whose compensation is increased to account for the fact that they will not benefit from living in a parsonage.
3. Who decline living in the parsonage and waive the benefit.

Full-time & Part-time Clergy (three-quarters time)

Plan compensation for full-time and part-time ¾ clergy appointed to a full-time or ¾ charge or conference shall include either a parsonage value of 25% of salary, or a housing allowance, or a waiver.

Clergy Couple — Full-time & Part-time (three-quarters):

1. Serving the same church and residing in the same parsonage, both clergypersons should receive the 25% parsonage value as defined by 415 Compensation. It equalizes the pension benefit for each clergy appointed regardless of where they are serving or who they are or who they are married to.
2. Serving separate churches, each providing a parsonage, but with the couple electing to reside in the same parsonage each clergyperson's compensation includes a parsonage value equal to the 25% of compensation.
3. Serving separate churches and sharing a parsonage provided by one church with no parsonage or housing provided by the other, only the clergyperson whose church provides a parsonage will have the 25% of compensation.
4. Both spouses in a clergy couple are entitled to receive the full value or their housing allowance(s), without reduction.

Part-time clergy (one-half time):

Church or charge is not required to provide a parsonage or housing allowance. If a parsonage is provided the clergyperson will receive the parsonage value of 25% unless the clergyperson waives the benefit.

Clergy serving a church or multiple churches where one or all churches provide (offer) a parsonage will receive the parsonage value of 25% of salary split among the churches regardless of whether a clergyperson lives in the parsonage unless waived the benefit.

Part-time clergy (one-quarter time):

Clergy serving one-quarter time appointment are not eligible for a parsonage value of 25% of salary or housing allowance to be included in the calculation of their plan compensation.

Waiver of Housing Parsonage 25% Value or Housing Allowance: Clergypersons choosing to waive the housing allowance or parsonage value of 25% of salary must sign a waiver

acknowledging they are relinquishing the 415 Compensation. The waiver must be notarized.

Pension and Health Benefits

Michael Shockley, chair of Pension and Health Benefits team

Pension & Health Benefits Items for Action:

Past Service Rate (PSR)

The past service rate is received by those that have vested years of service in the Pre-82 Pension Plan. The board recommends increasing the PSR to \$925 from \$907 which is in line with the 2.0% cost of living adjustment reflected in the Comprehensive Funding Plan for 2025.

Contingent Annuitant Percentage (CAP)

The board reviewed funding the CAP (amount the surviving spouse receives from Pre-82) to 100% and determined at this time current funding levels in Pre-82 Plan do not allow an increase. We therefore recommend the CAP remain at 100% for Kansas West and 85% for Kansas East and Nebraska in 2025. The board will continue to review this policy yearly.

Retirement Benefits/Funding Percentage/Use of Reserves

In 2022, the board's minimum target funding level for the Pre-82 Pension Plan to 110% funded. This move is in the best interests of the conference and our Pre-82 participants as this fund supports a closed and mostly retired population and the funds are invested in a low-risk and low-growth strategy of primarily bonds and securities. The board will continue to bill the church for CPP benefits at 3%, CRSP DB at 3%, and CRSP DC at 3% for 2025 with the board covering the additional cost of 6.2% from reserves. Churches with (1/4) 25% appointments will be billed 10% UMPIP with the remaining 2% from reserves.

Health Stipend

At this time, the health stipend will continue to be \$15,850 annually for 2025 with the clergy maintaining at least an ACA

Bronze Plan. Per the 2020 Annual Conference vote, churches with three-quarter to full-time clergy must either pay the \$15,850 stipend (if not providing a church sponsored health plan) or provide them with a health plan (in which case the \$15,850 may be reduced accordingly). The Emergency Health Grant program will continue to be offered to families for whom the costs of premiums for coverage exceed \$15,850.

2025 Comprehensive Funding Plan

The board is required to submit a comprehensive funding plan each year to Wespath and Investments. The funding plan must meet the standards for a Pre-82 funding plan as established by Wespath Benefits & Investments and the favorable opinion requirements for a funding plan. We have submitted our funding plan for review and are awaiting formal approval by Wespath Benefits and Investments.

Housing Resolution

In order to meet federal guidelines, an annual housing resolution must be approved at the Annual Conference and printed in the journal..

Resolution on Rental/Housing/Household Expense Allowance

In accordance with Federal Guidelines for clergy housing, the following resolution is recommended.

WHEREAS, the religious denomination known as The United Methodist Church (the Church), of which this Conference is a part, has in the past functioned and continues to function through ministers of the gospel (within the meaning of Internal Revenue Code section 107) who were or are duly ordained, commissioned, or licensed ministers of the Church (Clergypersons);

WHEREAS, the practice of the Church and of this Conference was and is to provide active Clergypersons with a parsonage or a rental/housing allowance as part of their gross compensation.

WHEREAS, pensions or other amounts paid to active, retired, terminated, and disabled Clergypersons are considered deferred compensation and are paid to active, retired, terminated, and disabled Clergypersons in consideration of previous active service; and

WHEREAS, the Internal Revenue Service has recognized the Conference (or its predecessors) as an appropriate organization to designate a rental/housing allowance for Clergy Persons who are or were members of this Conference and are eligible to receive such deferred compensation.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED:

THAT an amount equal to 100% of the pension, severance, or disability payments received from plans authorized under The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist (the Discipline), which includes all such payments from Wespeth Benefits and Investments, during the period January 1, 2025 through December 31, 2025 by each active, retired, terminated, or disabled Clergyperson who is or was a member of the Conference, or its predecessors, be and hereby is designated as a rental/housing allowance for each such Clergyperson; and

THAT the pension, severance, or disability payments to which this rental/housing allowance designation applies will be any pension, severance, or disability payments from plan, annuities, of funds authorized under the Discipline, including such payments from Wespeth Benefits and Investments and from a commercial annuity company that provides an annuity arising from benefits accrued under a Wespeth Benefits and Investments plan, annuity, or fund authorized under the Discipline, that result from any service a Clergyperson rendered to this Conference or that an active, a retired, a terminated or a disabled Clergyperson of this Conference rendered to any local church, annual conference of the Church contributions to or accrue a benefit under, such a plan, annuity, or fund for such an active, a retired, a terminated, or a disabled Clergyperson's pension, severance, or disability plan benefit as

part of his or her gross compensation.

Note: The rental/housing allowance that may be excluded from a Clergy person's gross income in any year for federal (and, in most cases, state) income tax purposes is limited under Internal Revenue Code section 107(2), and regulation thereunder, to the least of: (a) the amount of the rental/housing allowance designated by the Clergy person's employer or other appropriate body of the Church (such as this Conference in the foregoing resolutions) for such year; (b) the amount actually expended by the Clergy person to rent or provide a home in such year; or (c) the fair rental value of the home, including furnishings and appurtenances (such as a garage), plus the cost of utilities in such year. Each Clergy person or former Clergy person is urged to consult with his or her own tax advisor to determine what deferred compensation is eligible to be claimed as a housing allowance exclusion.

Archives and History

Don Everhart and Doris Wills, Co-Chairs

Commission members as of May 2024: Chairs — Don Everhart and Doris Wills (Kansas); Members — (Nebraska) Mel Luetchens, Mark Schulze, Peg Walters and Kayla Mangrich; (Kansas) Carolyn Collins May and David Shrum.

Archivists:

- Nebraska — Karrie Dvorak
- Kansas — Brad Fuerbringer

The commission met by Zoom twice and in person twice in 2023-2024. The Advisory Committee for the Kansas Archives at Baker University met twice in person and once by Zoom. The Advisory Committee consists of two representatives from the Archives Commission, two Baker University staff members and the archivist.

Commission members provide support for the archivists, gather information about the anniversary churches, reach out to local churches when possible and search for historic material concerning all churches and denominations that are

part of the United Methodist family.

Business conducted entailed preparing budgets for 2024 and 2025 — consisting of salaries and addendums for Baker Archives personnel, monies for operating expenses for both archives and monies for commission travel, meeting and other expenses. The archivist in Nebraska is a conference contract employee (the commission makes recommendations for salary) and the Kansas archivist is employed part time for Kansas Methodist Archives and part time for Baker University and has a salary recommended by the university. A part-time assistant at Baker is paid totally by the conference in the Commission budget.

Disaffiliation played a significant role in the work of both archivists. All churches who have disaffiliated are required to provide records for the archives such as membership, baptism, marriage, trustee minutes, and other significant papers and records. The conference is providing the funds for the archivists to acquire these records and have copies made. The churches may request the originals to be returned or have digital copies provided for them, or make copies at their own expense for the archives. Regardless, the records must become a part of the Nebraska or Kansas archives in some manner. Many hours and many miles were devoted to this process, and it is not finished. This work may well go into the end of 2024.

The commission designed and purchased a banner to be used at meetings and at our booth at annual conference. It was felt that a signature logo and image would help people know who we are and what we do. At the booth, our archivists and other commission members answer questions about finding, preserving, and maintaining church records and how to keep church history alive.

The commission recognized at annual conference in 2023 those churches with significant anniversaries in an AV presentation and with framed certificates. This will also be done at annual conference 2024. In 2023, there were 23 churches honored; this year, 2024, there are only nine churches celebrating 150 years. Do you suppose it is because 1874 was the year of the infamous grasshopper invasion?

The commission was notified in January 2024 of the resignation of Melinda Rittgers, the archivist at Baker. This is a shared position for the University Archives and the Kansas Methodist Archives. The Great Plains Conference made the decision to hire the former archivist on a short-term contract basis to deal with Kansas churches that have disaffiliated to continue collection and return of records without any delay. After interviewing the archive assistant, Brad Fuerbringer, it was determined that Brad would be an excellent choice for the dual archivist role at Baker University. At the present time, there is no archive assistant for the Methodist Archives at Baker.

Kansas Archivist Report

Brad said that “catch up” is the current emphasis since there has been no archivist for about two months. There have been about 20 research requests from September to November and 18 requests since January — mostly baptism and membership needs. Duplicate records have been taken to off-site storage, and other church records returned to the archives, and an intern/student worker has processed 11 sets of church records for the archives. Efforts toward clearing a backlog of research requests and filing materials were given priority.

Nebraska Archivist Report

Karrie helped detail the 2025 budget preparation; reported that the move to new quarters for the archives may not happen until fall or 2025, and the cost of off-site record storage has increased; the work of collecting records from disaffiliated churches has taken most of her time; there is now a part time contract assistant at the Nebraska Archives, Madison Barber, who is assisting with the preparation of disaffiliating church records for scanning; Karrie answered family and church research requests (51) and has provided information about the changes over the years in district boundaries for Nebraska.

With anticipation of future work in individual churches and continuation of great archival collections in Nebraska and Kansas, we thank the members of the commission for a super year.

Clergy Excellence

Clergy Excellence

Rev. Kathy Williams, Clergy Excellence Director

Clergy Excellence Mission Statement: Cultivate clergy and leaders for faithful and flourishing ministry

Praise God from whom all blessings flow! The Office of Clergy Excellence celebrates a year of clergy faith and wellbeing support, continuing education opportunities, listening and discernment, increased immigration support, and collaboration with Congregational Excellence. Our office is grateful for the steady and constant resources God has provided through the generous support of our conference. During the 2023-2024 year, our office offered Clergy Retreats, Renewal Leave Grants, Culture of Call Grants, Transition into Ministry programming, Preaching Workshops, Worship and Sermon Planning Retreats, Pastoral Transition Resources, Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural Ministry Resources, Next-Level

Leadership Scholarships, and Mini-Grants offering financial support for Spiritual Direction, Peer Coaching, Reflective Supervision as well as reimbursements for a multitude of requests supporting clergy wellbeing. We continue to find these resources essential as we seek to Cultivate clergy and leaders for faithful and flourishing ministry.

As our clergy and laity serve in an ever evolving and changing Church which is navigating the impact of a pandemic, racial and economic tensions, immigration process changes, changing communities, and church disaffiliations, the Office of Clergy Excellence offered an invitation for clergy to complete a 21-question survey describing their mental and physical health, clergy wellbeing practices, job satisfaction, Conference support, and Continuing Education needs. The survey allowed for anonymous response, and 162 clergy (23.5% response rate) shared voices of their lived experiences within their local ministry context. Rev. Dr. Ashlee Alley Crawford, Associate Director of Clergy Excellence, provided the data analysis and

summary results. The survey results were shared with the Cabinet, Connecting Council, and in an article published in the GP Connect. The results according to those who responded revealed that “The picture of appointed Great Plains clergy was on the whole, indicative of healthy and positive clergy leaders who are satisfied with their job, feel supported by the Conference, and take some time off (for Sabbath or vacation).

Read more about it at www.greatplainsumc.org/newsdetail/clergy-survey-results-shared-with-connecting-council-17865909

The Great Plains has been recognized as a conference which welcomes clergy from all over the world. Our multiculturalism is a gift. With this spirit of hospitality, it requires us to engage with USCIS which “administers the naturalization and immigration system.” The conference retained the services of Brown Immigration Law out of Lincoln, Nebraska. Staff from the Office of Clergy Excellence and the Episcopal Office have been working closely with Brown to support and assist our clergy and families as they navigate through the immigration system. With the financial support of the conference, our greatest hope is that families are relieved of the heavy financial burden, they remain spiritually uplifted, and they know their gifts and presence are appreciated as they serve within the Great Plains.

Lastly, God works powerfully when we collaborate with a shared mission and vision. In July of 2023, a contracted position, Intercultural Family Coordinator, was funded in partnership between the offices of Clergy and Congregational Excellence and the Prairie Rivers District and designed to support youth and families serving in CRCC Ministry and increase multicultural awareness. In September, offices of Clergy and Congregational Excellence gathered for a retreat and discussed our interconnectedness in ministry and mission. During February our offices were present alongside Bishop Wilson and participated in listening sessions with clergy focusing on Strengthening the Black Church and Hispanic

Ministry on GPAC. In Spring 2024, Clergy and Congregational

Excellence offered three Zoom opportunities and resources focusing on Pastoral Transitions with invitations extended to both pastors and congregational leaders experiencing new appointments. Our collaboration reveals both promise and hope in this new season of ministry.

Board of Ordained Ministry

Rev. Andrew Conard, Chair

The Board of Ordained Ministry continues to witness and exemplify Christ's ministry by shepherding those entrusted to us. We recognize each individual as a gift to the church, strengthening the Kingdom of God on earth.

With humble authority and a spirit of service, we tend to their formation and offer oversight.

This year, the Board has demonstrated adaptability and progress through the efforts of our Call, Competency, and Covenant teams. These teams have been instrumental in identifying, developing, and supporting those who have answered the call to ministry.

During our Candidacy Summits in 2024, we engaged with 34 candidates. Additionally, 10 persons were certified as candidates between April 2023 and March 2024, with another 10-13 anticipating DCOOM interviews before the Annual Conference.

The 2023 Licensing School had six students; we anticipate approximately 15 in 2024. We are expanding the 2024 Licensing School to offer Right Start Orientation and a July session for new clergy, District Superintendent Assignments, and Certified Lay Ministers.

We will recognize 13 Local Pastors for completing their first year of appointive service and 5 for completing the Course of Study in 2023. We present 10 candidates for commissioning as Provisional Members, with an average age of 42.

For ordination and reception into Full Membership, we

present 10 candidates for elders, one for deacon, and two for recognition of prior ordination. The average age is 39. We will also receive four elders and one deacon by transfer from other annual conferences.

We remain committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We invite you to be a Bridge Builder by participating in a training event focused on racial literacy and humility in collaboration with Be the Bridge (<https://bethebridge.com>).

This training empowers people and cultures toward racial healing, equity, and reconciliation. It is for lay people, pastors, church staff, BOM and DCOM members, educators, and community leaders to elevate leadership skills in response to diverse communities and build a more equitable and inclusive environment in our churches and the conference. You can find more information and register at <https://www.greatplain-sumc.org/bethebridge>.

As we follow God and serve Christ in the Great Plains, we seek to deepen relationships, enrich our work, and carry out our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world.

We extend our gratitude to all who have shown unwavering dedication to excellence, faithfulness, and progress as we serve the Great Plains.

Transition into Ministry (TiM)

Rev. Dr. Ashlee Alley Crawford, Associate Director of Clergy Excellence

The Transition into Ministry (TiM) program, established in 2011, seeks to support young clergy, 35 and under, in their first five years of ministry through the network of collegial relationships, mentoring and coaching, and intentional collaboration with lay leaders in their congregations.

The vision of the program is as follows:

- TiM Pastors will be excellent preachers, collaborative clergy, and confident leaders who will empower the laity and

be empowered to flourish in ministry.

- The TiM program will aid Clergy Excellence staff in identifying best practices for training and developing all Great Plains clergy for excellence in ministry.

In July of 2023, we welcomed one new clergy to join 13 others. Four pastors graduated from

five years within the program in 2023: Lori Patton Aguilar, Alex Rossow, Blake Stanwood, and Younghwan Won. The Phase 1 pastors (those in their first two years of the program) met regularly with a mentor pastor for support and opportunity to reflect on their pastoral role and identity. Ashlee Alley Crawford continues to resource this group with monthly meetings that include time for connection, reflection, and resourcing. Mentoring pairs have the opportunity to apply for a continuing education grant for a shared experience within their two years in Phase 1. For the first time since 2016, there was an increase of \$400/year in the salary stipend for churches who have an associate pastor.

Pastors in Phase 2 met with Rev. Kathy Williams throughout the year. The significant leadership opportunity during Phase 2 is to have an opportunity to apply for a "Fruitfulness Grant" of up to \$10,000, which allows the pastor to assemble a team from the church to engage a process of "context mapping," discernment, and identifying a project that leads to "fruitfulness." In 2023, three grants were awarded:

1. Younghwan Won and Goodland (KS) UMC to create the Community Activity & Fellowship Center within their fellowship hall building to foster a sense of belonging and community engagement for families and children.
2. Lori Patton Aguilar and Woodlawn UMC, Derby, KS, to host a series of four events focused on connecting the senior community in Derby with each other and community partners, encouraging volunteerism and channeling their energy for making an impact around them.
3. Alex Rossow and Wamego (KS) UMC who sought to cultivate

a loving community where people could be who God has created them to be through rebranding, cultivating their church as a “hub” for ministry, and nurture the youth ministry.

A retreat was held in the spring with the purpose of taking time away from the rhythms of life and connecting with God. Two new pastors will join the TiM Program starting in July 2024, both serving as associate pastors. The TiM Board is guided by a board that is currently made up of eight clergy and two laity.

Cross Racial and Cross Cultural Ministry

Rev. Kathy Williams, Clergy Excellence Director

Cross-racial/Cross-cultural (CRCC) ministry is under the Clergy excellence department. The staff in CRCC ministries are Rev. Dr. Jane Langat, the Intercultural Development Coordinator, and Rev. Seulki Choi, the Intercultural Families Coordinator. The intercultural Development coordinator works closely with the clergy and congregations to raise awareness in cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry within the conference. Whereas the Intercultural Families Coordinator works closely with CRCC spouses and their children.

In this past year, the Intercultural Development Coordinator focused on:

- Cultural awareness trainings in congregations so that they and the clergy could be better equipped to serve together in their diversity. A CRCC transition orientation was done in July 2023 with seven new clergy and a few laity from the receiving churches in attendance. Another transition orientation is scheduled to take place in July, 2024 for the incoming new clergy and the laity from the congregations to which they are appointed. The goal is to support and give them resources in their transition as the clergy and the congregations prepare to do ministry together.
- In-person visits were made to 32 CRCC clergy with a goal of listening, learning, meeting with some of the congregation members, and seeing their ministry contexts to

better understand how the conference can support them in their ministry now and in the future.

- A successful multicultural worship service was held at Orders & Fellowship in October 2023 and are planning to do the same at the 2024 Orders & Fellowship.
- Everyone needs a time for self-care. Through listening to the clergy, a time of rest has been one of the themes that has emerged. Due to this need, a CRCC retreat was conducted in April 2024 and had more than 70 clergy, facilitators, spouses, and children in attendance. This was a time for the clergies to fellowship, connect, worship, and support each other through sharing of lived experiences in their ministries.

The goal is to have this kind of retreats every year. Intercultural Family Ministry Focused on:

- CRCC Clergy Family Gatherings: In October 2023 and March 2024, CRCC clergy families convened at Prairie Rivers/Elkhorn Valley District and Kansas City District, respectively. With 20-25 families in attendance, these gatherings fostered meaningful connections and joyful interactions. The initiative will expand to encompass gatherings in other districts in the following year, ensuring all families have the opportunity to participate.
- The primary objective of these gatherings is to cultivate strong bonds and support networks among CRCC clergy families within each district. By maintaining regular gatherings, families can stay connected and engage in discussions encompassing family dynamics and CRCC ministry-related topics.
- CRCC Youth Support Project: Commencing in January 2024, this project facilitated two Zoom meetings (January and March 2024) involving about 10 youths from CRCC clergy families per session. An in-person meeting is scheduled during AC 2024.
- The project aims to forge connections among CRCC youth,

fostering a sense of support and belonging within the community. Additionally, it seeks to motivate youths to engage in leadership programs within the Great Plains Conference, providing them with opportunities to establish connections and develop leadership skills both within the conference and the broader community.

- Support for Transitioning Clergy Families: Recognizing the challenges faced by clergy families relocating to new churches and communities, support and resources are provided to facilitate their transition effectively.

Clergy Faith and Wellness

Rev.Dr. Shelly Petz, Clergy Faith and Wellness Coordinator

Thank you, Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church, for tending to the faith and wellbeing of clergy and their ministry settings.

Listed below are numbers. Behind each number is a story. A story of investment, possibility, hope, encouragement, renewal, courage, or transformation.

Forty-two clergy wellbeing mini-grants were approved in 2023. Great Plains clergy have used these grants in a variety of ways in nurturing their body, mind, and spirit. Here is a sampling of what the grants have funded:

- Personal spiritual retreat (self-directed or a pre-planned program).
- One-on-one support: spiritual direction, coaching, reflective supervision, or counseling.
- A focus on one's body through a gym membership, home gym equipment, or personal training/coaching.
- Music lessons or musical instrument.
- Pulpit supply.
- Registration, travel, and/or lodging for an event related to spiritual mental or physical wellbeing.

In the final reflection that is requested after a pastor has completed their proposed wellbeing activity, pastors are overwhelmingly positive and grateful! Here is what some of our pastors have said to us:

- “It is such a gift to do something to take care of ourselves ... do yourself a favor and apply!”
- “DO IT! It was truly an incredible gift to have time away. I would highly encourage it.”

Clergy of the Great Plains Conference, plus laity who are serving our congregations (DSAs or CLMs) are eligible between 2023 and 2024 for \$400, which is distributed in two cycles each year. The spring cycle is Feb. 1- May 1 for use between Feb. 1 and June 30.

There will also be a fall cycle from Sept. 1 to Nov. 1 for use through Dec. 31, 2024. Clergy and laity who are serving congregations are encouraged to customize a grant to give space, resources, and/or persons to help renew and recharge for your present season of ministry. For more information:

<https://www.greatplainsumc.org/clergy-wellbeing-mini-grants>

In 2023, 30 clergy attended the Roots for Your Soul Retreats, carving out time to remember their call, create time to abide with God, and tend to the needs of their soul. The spring retreat was led by Revs. Doug and Anne Gahn, and the fall retreat was led by Rev. Tina Harris of the Transforming Center. Two retreats are planned for 2024, one right after Easter, and one in the fall led by Dr. Dave Janvier, a licensed trauma counselor who will guide clergy in the power of the embodied gospel. For more information: <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/roots-for-your-soul>

At the beginning of 2024, there are 29 clergy in Reflective Supervision and 10 Reflective Supervisors. There is now the opportunity for lay staff and clergy to be a part of this tool to explore and reflect on the practice of ministry, view ministry from a variety of perspectives, and pay attention to the presence of God. For more information, please visit: <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/reflective-supervision>. Clergy Wellbeing Mini-grants are available for those who are eligible if funding is a concern.

Ten renewal leave grants were approved for 2023. Nine renewal leave grants were approved for 2024.

There is an additional handful of other renewal leaves that are being planned for 2024, with funding coming from other sources. Creating a culture where renewal leaves become a part of the healthy functioning of clergy, congregations, and a conference is in the beginning stages. We are grateful for the intentionality of those who have been a part of these set aside times and for how we can learn together best practices that may be helpful to suggest to others. Find out more at: <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/renewal-leave>.

General Board of Higher Education & Ministry

Rev. Greg Bergquist, General Secretary

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) embraces the ministry of learning and leadership formation in the Wesleyan and United Methodist tradition, stewarding the intellectual life and educational mission of the UMC. Our mission is to bring people together to discern, learn, and lead for the Church and the Academy, creating a world where everyone is living fully into God's call on their lives.

GBHEM programs — like Course of Study, Exploration, Journey Towards Ordained Ministry (JTOM) and Passage UMC — support the development of transformative leadership in The United Methodist Church. We remain committed to building and sustaining collaborative cross conference networks that foster collegiality and guide credentialing for licensed and ordained ministry.

Alleviating student debt through financial support remains a priority for GBHEM. The GBHEM Office of Scholarships awarded over \$3.9 million in scholarships to 2,100 students in 2023. Scholarships were awarded to students all over the world including 54 annual conferences and two central conferences. In addition, GBHEM stewarded the distribution of roughly \$20 million

in grants and scholarships to United Methodist ministries.

Because of your generous support, each year approximately \$10 million is apportioned for the 11 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) related to the church through The Black College Fund. The funds are utilized for enhancing capital improvements, providing scholarships to students in need, and providing resources for faculty, staff, and students.

GBHEM also supports the next generation of critical thinkers and leaders through the University Senate peer-review and evaluation process for church-related educational institutions. The UMC is related to 107 educational institutions across North America, the largest cohort of protestant educational institutions in the USA. Similarly, 52 educational institutions representing 25 countries formed the Africa Senate for Methodist Education (ASME) this past year providing culturally appropriate standards for the evaluation of Methodist education throughout the African continent.

Among its various activities, GBHEM is also responsible for two initiatives approved by General Conference: The Methodist Global Education Fund for Leadership Development (MGEFLD), which includes the Grants and Scholarships Program (GRASP); and the Central Conference Theological Education Fund (CCTEF). The CCTEF advances theological education in all central conferences by strengthening theological institutions, creating networks among these schools, and increasing access to theological education.

Since 2008, GBHEM has established 11 regional Leadership, Education and Development Hubs (LEAD Hubs) around the world. Each LEAD Hub is a part of the agency's strategic plan to connect with The United Methodist Church worldwide through collaboration with Pan-Methodist and Ecumenical leaders in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, and Eurasia, Latin American and the Caribbean, and North America.

For the past two years, GBHEM and the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) have been moving toward greater collaboration and strategic alignment, attending each other's consulta-

tions, and bringing together program ministry staff in the areas of scholarships, granting, regional work, shared services, theological reflection, and leadership formation and training. Last October, the board of directors announced that my colleague and friend, Roland Fernandes, would become general secretary of both agencies when I retire in June of 2024.

We celebrate our partnership with your annual conference and thank you for nurturing and supporting United Methodist lay and clergy leaders throughout the UMC world-wide connection.

Congregational Excellence

Congregational Excellence

Rev. Jeff Clinger, Director Of Congregational Excellence and Connectional Ministries

The Congregational Excellence Team for the Great Plains Annual Conference includes Rev. Nicole Conard, associate director, Rev. Dr. Richard Fitzgerald, conference circuit pastor; Rev. Melissa Gepford, intergenerational discipleship coordinator; Heather Hoffmans, our administrative assistant extraordinaire; Jeanie Leeper, lay leadership coordinator; Rev. Dr. Gerald Liu, emerging faith communities cultivator; Rev. Sarah Marsh, mercy and justice coordinator; Rev. Hollie Tapley, disaster response coordinator, and myself (Jeff).

It is our privilege to work as conference staff, in support of district superintendents, to support existing and new ministries and congregations across Nebraska and Kansas.

This spring, with nearly as many new members as returning members on the team, we revisited and refreshed our mission, vision, and purpose as a department.

All our work is rooted in the mission of The United Methodist Church: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

As we do our work, we have a vision for a future with ... New and renewed United Methodist faith communities that embody

the diversity of and serve with the people of Nebraska and Kansas now and for future generations.

As we pursue that vision, the congregational excellence team's purpose is to inspire and empower ministries to be emotionally and spiritually healthy following Jesus in God's mission in all the places they live, work, worship, and play.

A year ago, we were thinking and talking about what it was going to mean for individuals and congregations to work to build the church of 2050. Though we continue to dream about being a church today that is becoming a church for the future, we have shifted from a focus on a specific timeline to a broader vision of how we can work together to help congregations increasingly thrive in service to their community and the world for future generations.

While various members of our team continue to be deployed to serve as district liaisons, helping connect resources from our department with the work that local congregations, networks, district strategy teams, and district superintendents are doing, we are aware that district lines may soon change, and some of the ways in which districts function could be changing, too. Through any coming transition, we remain committed to helping congregations of all sizes continue to grow in their love of God, neighbor, and self.

We continue to offer tools like Readiness360 and Mission Insite to assist in this work. We have also been developing a discernment guide that we believe will be an asset to the congregations of the Great Plains as together we seek to connect with God and neighbor.

If ever you are dreaming about how to help your congregation more fully live into who God is calling you to be, feel free to reach out to anyone on the team. We love to connect for conversation and to share in dreams about how together we can help people who are and are not yet connected to our congregations grow in love of God, neighbors, and self.

Vital Congregations

**Rev. Brad Wheeler, Chair, and Rev. Jeff Clinger, Director
of Congregational Excellence and Connectional Ministries**

United Methodists throughout the connection share the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This, of course, ends up looking very different in different contexts around the world, and even within the bounds of the Great Plains Annual Conference.

The Vital Congregations Team helps provide resourcing and support for health and vitality in local church ministry in a variety of contexts. In our work we fulfill the disciplinary purpose of the Board of Discipleship ¶1630, Board of Laity ¶1631, Disability Concerns ¶1653, Parish and Community Development ¶1633.5, and Young Adults ¶1650 (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016).

Regarding lay ministries, Lisa Maupin, conference lay leader, relates to our team and is present to help guide and shape discussions. Additionally, Jeanie Leeper, lay leadership coordinator, is a part of this team, especially bringing to voice her roles as the lay servant ministries coordinator for the conference.

Ethnic ministries have been a responsibility of our team since the inception of the Great Plains Conference. In his first year as our episcopal leader, Bishop David Wilson has been intentional about connecting for conversation with Korean, Hispanic/Latino, and African-American pastors and congregational leaders. As an extension of those listening sessions, efforts are under way to relaunch a conference committee on Hispanic/Latino ministry, and an effort focused on Strengthening the Black Church. Our team is also continuing conversation about how to administer grant support of ethnic ministries in ways that are equitable and truly support and empower ministry in sustainable ways.

When it comes to the role of small-membership congregations, the vital congregations team intentionally includes members in our makeup that represent small-membership churches. Over the last year we have been engaged in the

work to support congregations negatively impacted by disaffiliation votes and conversations. Many of these congregations have been smaller churches, often in rural areas. We are also working to develop and deploy a discernment guide that will aid congregations in determining faithful next steps they can take to be a church for future generations.

Ministry to and with young people is coordinated through the support of this team by Rev. Melissa Gepford, our intergenerational discipleship coordinator.

Additionally, the vital congregations team has responsibility for overseeing Urban Ministry Grants. Though there haven't been additional resources added to this program recently (these come from the sale of property in counties with a population of more than 50,000 people) we have continued to support several existing projects.

It is our hope and prayer that all congregations in the Great Plains will find a vision to serve the communities in which they reside, and increasingly find ways to work for health and vitality in partnership with God and others in the connection.

New Church Development

Rev. Curt Magelky, chair

New Church Development Board Executive Members: Rev. Curt Magelky (Chair), Rev. Dennis Ackerman (Vice Chair), Ms. Beverly Benson (Lay Representative), Rev. Mandy Barkhaus (Secretary; Provisional Elder), Additional New Church Development Board Members: Rev. Harun Gatobu, Rev. Alan Gager, Rev. Harry Christian, Pastor Juan Espinosa (Locally Licensed), Mr. Corey Reeves Ex. Officio: Scott Brewer, Rachel Johnston, Rev. Stephanie Ahlschwede, Rev. Gerald Liu, PhD

In response to changing dynamics in church planting, NCD held an executive board retreat Sept. 6-7, 2023, in Concordia, Kansas, where legacy NCD projects and a new vision for NCD going forward under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Liu were discussed.

Initiatives such as the 20 x 2020 are wrapping up and are concluding well. New ministries from that initiative include: Lincoln Neighbors (NE), Iglesia Comunitaria (NE), Ushindi UM Fellowship (KS), Church of the Resurrection Overland Park (KS), and Heart of Christ (KS).

Various one-time grant funded projects have also begun wrapping up and shedding new light. Examples include Cafe Quetzal (KS) and TNT (KS). Hays Iglesia Hispana (KS), a Spanish-speaking assembly notably led by English-speaking Troy Miller; and All Saints, a digital-dedicated campus from St. Andrew's Omaha, are prime examples of the fruits born from those ministerial set-piece projects.

As a result of our September retreat, Rev. Dr. Liu has received approval for several new initiatives including, cluster hiring, new ministry incubation in campus ministry at Washburn University, NCD immersion-learning in Africa, and research and development more broadly conceived.

Liu also experimented with recruiting NCD interns from a Washburn University career fair.

We have seen God producing much fruit within several NCD-supported ministries. Ushindi United Methodist Fellowship led by Pastor Joseph Ogole in Kansas City, Kansas, added 64 members on one Sunday. Iglesia Comunitaria led by Pastor Juan Carlos Veloso in Omaha, Nebraska, doubled its membership and its annual giving in one calendar year (2023). Iglesia Hispana — a Spanish-speaking congregation of Hays FUMC in Hays, Kansas — is growing remarkably under the pastoral leadership of Troy Miller, though Miller himself is not fluent in Spanish. Lincoln Neighbors led by Trever Rook has added an additional worship service and is growing.

Lora Andrews, Changhyun Kim, and Diana Fajardo have been awarded NCD church planting fellowships. This is a new experimental initiative that we are trying for 2024-2025. Andrews is considering a new ministry in the Roeland Park neighborhood of Kansas City. Kim is beginning a progressive, multigenerational ministry for Korean Americans in the Overland Park area

of Kansas City. Fajardo is exploring LatinX opportunities for new ministry in South Omaha. The fellowships, which provide salary and benefits for one appointive year to focus upon discernment and implementation of new ministry, are a new precedent within the GPAC and a new precedent for United Methodism overall.

This year's "Move the Chains" award for innovative and fruitful new church ministry, in memory of Rev. Nathan Stanton, has been awarded to Pastor Joseph Ogole. Through Pastor Ogole's leadership, Ushindi United Methodist Fellowship has grown by leaps and bounds over the last year. Worship has been described as standing-room only, and on Feb. 24, they welcomed 64 new members in one day.

Kids and Youth Ministries

Rev. Melissa Collier Gepford, Intergenerational Discipleship coordinator

Intergenerational Discipleship Ministries in the Great Plains Conferences resources more than 700 local United Methodist Churches who serve more than 12,800 children and more than 7,000 youth and their grown-ups. Our conference ranks fifth in the U.S. with total number of churches, second with number of youth, and first with number of children. Considering our numerical and geographic reach, the Great Plains Conference is uniquely positioned to serve as a leading innovative entity for ministries with and for Generation Z, Generation Alpha and, beginning next year, Generation Beta in the United Methodist denomination.

The Great Plains Conference is one of the few remaining annual conferences that employs at least one full-time staff position dedicated to children and youth discipleship. Additionally, we contract with up to 10 other leaders throughout the conference to collaborate with the Intergenerational Discipleship Coordinator as Regional Children's and Youth Ministry Coordinators. Together, they connect quarterly with ministry leaders in their respective regions and specialties. The regional coordinators offer additional support, resourcing, care, and coaching — which has built trust and created

an interconnected web of relationships and resourcing for the entirety of two states.

As other conferences in the U.S. anticipate consolidation and a growing geographic reach, they have learned from our strategy and plan to implement similar paths forward.

In addition to the quarterly regional opportunities, ministry leaders are invited to gather on Zoom monthly for resourcing and peer learning. We resource through newsletters, Facebook Group, monthly peer learning opportunities, and quarterly regional gatherings. Intergenerational resourcing that has come out of the office includes: Beloved Community: Together We Rise Intergenerational Curriculum (part of the larger project directed by the Mercy and Justice Team); Picture Lent and Picture Advent Devotions; Sacred Roots Network development (a multi-conference initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment); a training on United Methodist doctrine, polity, and praxis; preaching at youth retreats; articles on youth culture; a training on generational differences and hopes for the future; and a training on innovation in kids and youth ministry.

For the upcoming year, we look forward to setting new conference-level goals. Regional coordinators will gather for strategic planning; we are in early stages of planning a ministry leaders' retreat; and we have applied for a \$1.25 million grant to explore new and innovative ways to nurture children's spiritual growth through prayer and worship. We hope to know more by the end of this year, so stay tuned for new possibilities!

Leadership Lab

Leadership Lab is a gamified Christian leadership experiment for high-schoolers in the Great Plains Conference. High school students engage in a web of relationships, resourcing, and experiences that culminate in eligibility for a pilgrimage with other students, their mentors, and the key conference leaders. Students who have earned 10 badges are traveling to Greece at the end of this year, where they will walk in some of the steps of the Apostle Paul! These students are fantastic

leaders, and I am so proud to know each one of them.

Students complete a series of “quests” each year. During a quest, they learn something, experience something, and lead something. In Leadership Lab, most of the decisions rest on the participants. They choose their mentor and which quests to complete when. Every student’s experience will be their own unique one as they engage in dynamic relationships across the conference with each other. Individuals choose the pace, the topic, the quests — everything! For more information and to apply, visit greatplainsumc.org/leadership-lab.

Lay Leadership and Lay Servant Ministries

Jeanie Leeper, Lay Leadership coordinator

What is the first thing you think about with Lay Servant Ministry? When I look deep into what lay servant ministry is, the first thing I think about is connection. When I glean through the Annual Reports of each person across the Great Plains Conference, I see connecting people of the community to the church, and the connection of the church, the Body of Christ, with the greater community known as the mission field.

Lay Servant Ministries is about practicing the Spiritual Disciplines of Staying in Love with God and serving God through acts of compassion and acts of justice. The testimonies of certified lay servants recount the “people of God,” known as “laity,” answering God’s call and being the very presence of Christ in community.

Just a glimpse of the Body of Christ at work in the world from the annual reports are ministries such as helping with after-school Kids Club, sponsoring multi-generational New Year’s Eve parties, and coaching football and various sports summer youth programs. Other testimonies include commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ through sharing the gospel to shut-ins and nursing homes, as well as their local church. Lay Servants

also served with the community in National Day of Prayer events, mission meals, prison ministry, grief ministries, and hospice care ministries. Still others testify to practicing the presence of God through Bible Study and listening. The list of ministries happening in and with community goes on and on.

When you think of Lay Servant ministries, I hope you think about connections and collaborations that create something bigger than the sum of what each person can contribute and create on their own. Lay Servant Ministries is a connectional community following Jesus in God's mission in all the places we live, work, worship, and play.

Higher Education and Campus Ministries

**Rev. Claire Gager, Chair, Rev. Nicole Conard, Associate
Director of Congregational Excellence and Staff Liaison**

The Great Plains United Methodist Campus Ministry Board oversees the campus ministries in consultation with the superintendent of each district where there is a campus ministry. Local campus boards connect with local churches in the area, providing day-to-day oversight of the vision and ministry with students.

As the Great Plains United Methodist Higher Education and Campus Ministries, we provide a connectional relationship between the conference and our many campuses of higher education. We are called to share the transformational nature of Christ in a way that raises up a new generation of thoughtful, articulate Christians who care about making the world a better place.

As a board we work to ensure that our conference's investment in campus ministry is maximized. Twice a year, the district superintendent, campus minister, local board chair, GPUMCM board liaison, and staff liaison meet to provide support, encouragement, and resourcing to each campus ministry.

Annually, each campus sends a grant request to support a portion of the financial resources for the campus ministry or institution. The conference board then determines the distribution of funds needed to ensure ongoing support of our

colleges, universities, and campus ministries.

We provide partial funding on repairs and upgrades of campus ministry properties and approved 10 projects this year, from new signage to complete remodel of a residence hall. There are five properties in the care of Great Plains UM Higher Education and Campus Ministry. There are campus ministries that are congregation-based at the University of Kansas, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

For churches who would like to reach out to a nearby campus and students around them, there are church campus grants available for matching grants. Two churches have taken advantage of these grants this year: St Luke in Omaha and Chadron UMC.

We have also allocated funds to send campus ministers and board members to Be The Bridge Training, which equips those who participate to foster racially inclusive cultures. We do more than allocate funds: This ministry includes connecting campus ministries to the church at all levels, equipping our boards of directors and local church committees who plan and implement mission and ministry, supporting and evaluating the vitality of our Conference's Campus Ministries.

In the Great Plains conference our four United Methodist Schools are:

- Baker University (Baldwin City, Kansas)
- Kansas Wesleyan University (Salina, Kansas)
- Nebraska Wesleyan University (Lincoln, Nebraska)
- Southwestern College (Winfield, Kansas)

United Methodist Campus Ministries are also at the following campuses:

- Emporia State University (Emporia, Kansas)
- Fort Hays State University (Hays, Kansas)
- Kansas State University – K-State at Wesley (Manhattan, Kansas)

- Pittsburg State University (Pittsburg Kansas)
- University of Kansas – Wesley KU (Lawrence, Kansas)
- University of Nebraska – Kearney – United Campus Ministries, Inc. (Kearney, Nebraska)
- University of Nebraska- Lincoln (Lincoln, Nebraska)
- University of Nebraska - Omaha, Creighton University, College of Saint Mary
- Metropolitan Community College - Urban Abbey (Omaha, Nebraska) -
- Washburn University (Topeka, Kansas)

You Can Help

Every United Methodist Church connects with a campus ministry through their mission shares, sending students and providing resources for students to grow in their faith and impact the world around them.

As our schools and campuses embody a United Methodist presence on campus, recommend a United Methodist campus ministry to students you may know and continue support with your prayers, presence, gifts, and witness.

For more information, go to www.greatplainsumc.org/campusministries.

Thank you for your investment in the next generation of leaders and providing opportunities for students to explore faith in Christ through the United Methodist Church.

Mercy and Justice

Rev. Sarah Marsh, Mercy and Justice Coordinator
and Rev. Anne Gahn, Mercy and Justice Team Chair

In 2022, the Mercy and Justice Team established two focus areas for the next five years: 1) to provide 100 percent of Great Plains congregations with the resources needed to engage in progress oriented justice ministry by 2026, and 2) to

recruit, equip, send, and support 26 racially diverse clergy and lay leaders for the work of racial justice in the Great Plains by 2026, giving priority to leadership development for local congregations. These two areas were identified as the team and staff work together to fulfill the vision of A Great Plains Conference where justice is as normal as mercy.

The Doing Justice Initiative (DJI)

The Great Plains Conference has now built three new non-profit organizations to assist churches in living out God's call to justice, with two more organizations under active development through the DJI, a partnership established in 2020 with the Direct Action Research Training Center (DART) and the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC).

Justice in Action launched this year in Lincoln after a listening process engaged 627 people in the fall of 2022 and identified two priorities for the county: criminal justice reform and mental health care. The Good Faith Network in Johnson County, KS, added affordable housing in 2022 to their ongoing campaign work to end homelessness and establish a mental health crisis center, while Churches United in Wyandotte County, KS, added elder care to their priorities, in addition to violence prevention and affordable housing. Efforts in Wichita are on schedule to hold the first listening process in the fall of 2023, and plans are underway in Norfolk, NE, for a listening process in summer 2023.

26 Leaders for Racial Justice by 26

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. led Great Plains and Central Texas leaders on a U.S./Mexico Border Immersion experience to McAllen, Texas, in August of 2022. Mercy and Justice leaders participated, with an eye towards leadership development. Inspired by that trip, the vision of Great Plains Justice Encounters was born. Justice Encounters are on the ground immersive experiences where United Methodists have the opportunity for face-to-face encounters with those directly impacted by injustice, and for learning from experts on location and in the field.

A leadership team directed by Rev. Anne Gahn led the first Justice Encounter of 35 back to the Border in March. A second Civil Rights Justice Encounter is scheduled to Montgomery, Alabama in July, with Bishop David Wilson, Bishop Dee Williamson, and the Micah Corps, under the leadership of Rev. Maddie Johnson, Program Director of the Micah Corps. The purpose of Justice Encounters is not only for learning, but for relationship-building, networking, and initial recruitment efforts for the Fellowship of Racial Justice planned for the fall of 2025. The Fellowship will provide intensive training, collaboration, and financial resources for those laity and clergy who God may be calling to lead the UMC in seeking racial justice in the Great Plains.

Intercultural Leadership Development

In 2022, Rev. Kathy Williams and Rev. Sarah Marsh participated in training to become qualified administrators of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a widely used tool to measure intercultural competency. Intercultural competency as defined by the IDI is “the capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities.” To date, Williams and Marsh have offered IDI training to conference staff teams and the Mercy and Justice Team. Additionally, they have integrated the IDI tool as a key component of preparation for Justice Encounters. This tool will help United Methodists improve bridge-building skills across diverse populations in our church and communities.

Peace with Justice Ministries

Andrea Paret, Peace with Justice Coordinator

<http://www.greatplainsumc.org/peacewithjustice>

[Facebook.com/peacewithjusticeministriesgp](https://www.facebook.com/peacewithjusticeministriesgp)

*“Why are you cast down, oh my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.” Psalms 42:5*

“Why are you cast down....?” We live in a world with much violence and suffering. There are more active armed conflicts around the world today than at any point since World War II. One out of every four people live in places affected by conflict. It is difficult for us to even know in which violent conflicts our government is engaged in. Besides bombing places and people ourselves, we sell an enormous amount of weapons to other countries. Where can we find God in these situations? God, who created all of us, God who loves every child and every adult around the world just as much as God loves us? God who envisions the beloved community where everybody can live a fulfilled life?

God calls us to love God and love our neighbor. God calls us to work for the beloved community. Our specific calls might be different but each of us is called to use our God given gifts and talents to make this world a place of peace and justice where everybody is treated with human dignity and as a beloved child of God. We are grateful for all the churches that contributed to last year’s Peace with Justice Sunday offering. Again, churches in all districts participated with Prairie Rivers District having the highest number of churches participating and the Missouri River District the highest overall amount given. Offerings brought a little over \$27,000 which is a slight increase over 2022.

As always, fifty percent of the offering stays in our conference to support peace with justice work, the other 50% go to the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) for grants for such work around the world. Thank you for your support.

The official date set to celebrate Peace with Justice Sunday this year was Sunday, May 26, 2024, but churches are encouraged to celebrate on a date that is most convenient for your congregation. For resources go to <https://www.umc.org/en/content/peace-with-justice-sunday-ministry-article#>.

Some of the activities your offerings have supported since the last Annual Conference:

- A scholarship was given to attend the Reconciling Minis-

tries Convocation

- Scholarships were offered for General Conference delegates to travel to Israel/Palestine with Bishop Wilson this February. Sadly this trip had to be cancelled.
- Support was given to our peace organizations in Kansas and Nebraska, the Topeka Center for Peace and Justice and Nebraskans for Peace
- Support was given to United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR)
- Support was given for a Civil Rights Trip for confirmands and others organized through Urban Ministries

Cooperative Parish in Omaha

As Peace with Justice Coordinator my work continues to focus on immigration and how we can work towards being more welcoming to the stranger, a mandate given to us numerous times in scripture. I am also an active member of our Holy Land Task Force (see the Holy Land Task Force report). We work with the United Methodist Principles and encourage congregations to engage with them (<https://www.umcjustice.org/latest/revised-social-principles-updating-the-umc-tool-box-for-social-witness-1936>). Congregations or church groups are invited to reach out if they are looking for resources or want to connect with others working on the same issues they feel passionate about.

To watch the Celebration of 100 Years of Social Witness of GBCS, please go to: <https://www.umcjustice.org/latest/view-church-and-society-recorded-livestream-celebrating-100-years-of-social-witness-1919>.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the peace makers for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:9

Disaster Response

Rev. Hollie Tapley, Disaster Response Coordinator

The Great Plains Disaster Response is a ministry of compassion and care that has theological, material, mental health, advocacy, and social service components designed to provide for the spiritual, emotional, and physical recovery of disaster survivors.

In 2022 we had volunteers respond to three tornadoes, Marysville, KS; Andover/Sedgwick County; and Fort Myers, Florida. In late December we were able to hold an early response team (ERT) training with the result of 18 new early response team members.

Because of the generosity of the people of the Great Plains United Methodist Conference we were able to provide financial assistance to 43 families and a donation to the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) for work in Ukraine. These families were survivors of wildfires, house fires, and tornadoes. As we are in the heart of tornado and flooding seasons now, our disaster response fund needs to be replenished.

Donations can be sent to the Conference Office, PO Box 4187, Topeka, KS. 66604 with the notation of “975 Disaster Fund” written on the memo line. You can also give by text, by texting the dollar amount and the word Help to 785-333-3863. For example: 25 Help.

We are looking forward to another year of ministry as we care for all individuals who survive a disaster.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity Committee

Rev. Eduardo Bousson, chair

The DEI committee was formed this year upon the recommendation of the DEI Task Force. We have been meeting since last fall. In all, we have had eight meetings and two retreats. Our discussions have been lively and Spirit-filled. We have set our agenda according to the recommendations of the DEI

Task Force. These include the creation of the DEI committee, establishing definitions for racial and cultural demographics, Cross-Racial Cross-Cultural (CRCC) support and integration, leadership opportunities and development of our racial-ethnic clergy and laity, and intercultural competency education for clergy and congregations.

We also have taken to heart our tasks ideated by the DEI Task Force. Our discussions included the (1) development of actionable recommendations that counteract unconscious bias and reduce and eliminate discriminatory practices at all levels of the conference; (2) expanding research, study, and wide information-sharing regarding findings; (3) initiating dialogues with cabinet, conference directors, and conference leadership teams to secure commitments to action; and (4) monitoring of commitments to action. We have come to understand that our committee is not programmatic, but it supports, researches, empowers, and monitors.

Most of our processes this year included gaining a greater understanding of each other and creating a common language regarding DEI. The committee went through IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) training. About half of the committee participated in the Be the Bridge training the Board of Ordained Ministry provided. These experiences anchored our discussions and our experiences of each other. Our conversations also integrated the concepts of the Diversity Bonus (Scott Page) and the Danger of a Single Story (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie). We shared our stories of inclusion and exclusion and listened to each other. We realized that even with all the work the Great Plains Conference has accomplished and needs to be celebrated, much work still needs to be done. Toward the end of the year, we were drawn to collecting more stories. We acknowledged that our stories are unique and were hesitant to draw an agenda without first listening to the stories of other people in our conference from underrepresented groups.

We want to invite clergy and lay people to join in an event immediately following Orders and Fellowship this fall, to gather in main identity groups and large groups to share our

stories, learn from one another, and support each other. The stories we learn will guide the DEI committee in fleshing out our tasks and advocacy in greater detail.

We have felt the Holy Spirit's guidance at every step of the way. We are grateful to the Great Plains Conference for selecting us for this task and trusting us to help the conference be even more reflective of the Kingdom of God.

Holy Land Task Force

Carol Garwood, chair

www.facebook.com/greatplainsumcholylandtaskforce

The Great Plains Holy Land Task Force came into being after a resolution was passed at the 2015 Annual Conference. The opening rationale read: "United Methodists in our conference are deeply concerned about the ongoing violence and injustices in Palestine/Israel. Jesus calls us to care for our neighbors near and far, to speak out and stand up for justice."

Tasks of the Holy Land Task Force include sharing reliable information about what is happening in the Holy Land and making space for the voices of people directly impacted. It also means encouraging our church members to take action and speak out for human rights and justice for all involved.

In September, the Great Plains Holy Land Task Force was privileged to host Adam Manasra from Wadi Foquin located in the Bethlehem district of the West Bank for a speaking tour in our conference. In collaboration with the Palestinian Human Rights Task Force of Nebraskans For Peace, he spoke with different groups in Omaha, Nebraska. He then went on to Lincoln, Nebraska, and spoke at Saint Paul UMC and Christ UMC. He ended his tour engaging with students at Morningside University in Sioux City, Iowa, and the wider Siouxland community.

All this happened a few weeks before the attack by Hamas on Oct. 7 and the brutal war and genocide Israel has been waging ever since. In these past months it has been especially important to lift up voices from all involved that are often ignored in

our mainstream media. This involves voices from Jews, Christians, and Muslims, voices from Palestinians and Israelis.

In a special Easter worship service with over 850 participants from around the world, Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, pastor at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, shared how difficult it is for Palestinian Christians to hold on to their faith. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cries out on the cross. Palestinian Christians struggle to hold on to their faith with the genocide in Gaza having been normalized. Over 32,000 people have already been killed, and more are dying daily. This number includes more than 13,000 children killed and another 12,000 injured. UNICEF reports that at least 1,000 children have had one or both legs amputated. And over 17,000 children have been separated from their immediate family and many of them are orphans now.

“It is so hard to speak of resurrection. We are mourning. Our siblings in Gaza are literally dying from starvation, man-made starvation.” But they look at the cross and at the empty tomb to find hope. “In the Easter story we find hope and empowerment in knowing that Jesus identifies with us.”

“Faith is the only thing they cannot take away from us. Christ is risen, God has the final word.” (Link to the sermon: <https://www.facebook.com/munther.isaac/videos/1109867063682399>).

The situation in the West Bank has also deteriorated immensely with more killings of Palestinians by Israeli settlers, more roadblocks and other limitations that make it extremely difficult to pursue the daily tasks of making a living for many Palestinians.

There are several current resolutions as well as new legislation on the agenda for General Conference. A good source for information regarding this comes from United Methodists for Kairos Response. Legislation includes addressing the Israeli detention of Palestinian children, the incarceration of Palestinian children, as well as the right to peacefully address injustice. (https://www.kairosresponse.org/gc2020_resolutions_resources.html)

We urge you to join us in prayer and action for peace in the Holy Land!

You can find us at <https://www.facebook.com/greatplainsum-holylandtaskforce>.

General Board of Global Ministries

Jerry Feese, Conference Secretary of Global Ministries

In 2023 churches and individuals in the Great Plains Conference gave 1,226 gifts totaling \$816,404.79 to General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) Advance projects. Let’s celebrate!

GIVING SUMMARY

Donations From:	Donations To:
282 Churches — \$746,871.92	6 Missionaries — \$ 8,820.72
Individuals — \$63,990.87 61	Advance Projects — \$133,059.98
Organizations — \$5,542.00 18	GBGM & UMCOR
	Special Focuses — \$674,524.09
Total — \$816,404.79	Total — \$816,404.79

All GBGM projects and missionaries are supported 100% by donations given through the Advance. Each Advance project has been vetted and approved by Global Ministries.

The Advance works with church leaders around the world to ensure that projects are aligned with the goals of the United Methodist Church in the local area, help develop partnerships that are mutually advantageous, and report on how giving is making an impact.

If you have any questions regarding the General Board of Global Ministries or the Advance you can email Jerry Feese, Great Plains Conference Secretary of Global Ministries, at feedell@sunflower.com.

Great Plains Conference Missionaries

- The following missionaries were supported by churches and individuals in the GPAC in 2023 David Makobo N'shikala, missionary serving in Senegal, Advance #3021869
- Sandra Kay Raasch, missionary serving Belize-Honduras, Advance #15075Z
- Daniel Randall, missionary serving in the Middle East region completed service on Aug. 31, 2023
- Mary Grace M. Luna, Global Mission Fellow serving in Ecuador, Advance #3022679
- Karis Elizabeth Brown, Global Mission Fellow served in Michigan, Advance #3022762

These missionaries are supported through the Advance and are available for covenant relationship with churches, groups or individuals. For more information on this go to: www.umc-mission.org/give-to-mission/about-the-advance.

Global Ministries US Mission Partners Consultation

GBGM hosted the US Mission Partners Consultation in Atlanta, GA, Nov. 28-29, 2023. The purpose of this gathering was to improve the partnership between Global Ministries and the annual conferences, and to discern how the Spirit is moving to sweep us into a new mission age and what forms and models of mutual partnership can carry us forward together into that new mission age.

The Great Plains was represented by Rev. Jeff Clinger, Director of Congregational Excellence, Rev. Jane Langat, Intercultural Development Coordinator, and Jerry Feese, Conference Secretary of Global Ministries.

Great Plains Camping Inc.

Rev. Bill Ritter, GP Camps, Inc., chair,
and Robert Kahle, Director of Camping Services

God blessed us through camping in 2023. The bonding of the camps together continued and we took some important steps as we distanced ourselves from the effects of the pandemic. We started the year with a new strategic plan. The plan provides a four-year process as to how we will serve, develop and communicate at each of our five camps Chippewa, Horizon, Fontanelle, Lakeside and Norwesca.

The theme of the summer curriculum was “Fruitful Faith,” and we discussed the Fruit of the Spirit. The camps were creative in how they recognized and accentuated the characteristics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We looked at examples of these traits in ourselves and others and talked about the power of the Holy Spirit when we struggle.

Some of the camp highlights throughout the year including a new director at Camp Lakeside, the opening of a new lodge at Camp Fontanelle, some major improvements to the cabins at Camp Norwesca and Camp Horizon, and a new program area at Camp Chippewa. Programmatically we developed a Bethlehem Project at Camp Chippewa and had more than 1,000 people attend this outdoor event in December. Camp Fontanelle developed a relationship with a community organization and held its first camp with kids with cancer. Camp Lakeside developed a new relationship with Western Kansas Coalition of First Responders.

We received a grant that has allowed us to bring in a marketing and promotion firm to help us get the word out about our camps more effectively. This has led us to a more systematic approach for marketing the camps, and we are seeing enrollment increase in summer camp as well as retreat ministry.

Camp Chippewa

- 556 campers enjoyed summer programs
- 336 people said they dedicated or rededicated their lives to Christ while at Chippewa
- 4,747 people were served at camp throughout the year

Camp Fontanelle

- 307 campers enjoyed summer programs
- 32 people said they dedicated or rededicated their lives to Christ while at Fontanelle
- 2,530 people were served at camp throughout the year

Camp Horizon

- 695 campers enjoyed summer programs
- 354 people said they dedicated or rededicated their lives to Christ while at Horizon
- 3,503 people were served at camp throughout the year

Camp Lakeside

- 191 campers enjoyed summer programs
- 82 people said they dedicated or rededicated their lives to Christ while at Lakeside
- 794 people were served at camp throughout the year

Camp Norwesca

- 69 campers enjoyed summer programs
- 18 people said they dedicated or rededicated their lives to Christ while at Norwesca
- 849 people were served at camp throughout the year

Our five camps had direct impact for more than 12,400 people in 2023. We thank you for being our partner in ministry as we together make an eternal difference for so many lives in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lay Ministry

Lay Leader Report

Lisa Maupin, Conference Lay Leader

The Laity of the Great Plains continue to be an example of the hands and feet of God in the world. Every day our laity continue to love, lead and grow in mission fields and mission contexts in their communities, districts and the conference. Their impacts are felt far and wide.

This hasn't been an easy time for the church and for our laity. Heartbreak over disaffiliation conversations have created fractures in relationships within the church and communities. Budgets and leadership were greatly affected. And yet, within that brokenness little seeds of hope have been growing, and the laity are leading the way. New local church leaders are being identified and given opportunities to lead with new visions. Creative ministries are emerging as new mission statements have opened up different possibilities. New partnerships are forming, and conversations are being lifted up as the question of "who do we want to be in our community?" is being answered.

At the 2023 Annual Conference, the laity address challenged our church to plant seeds in a garden that we may never see harvested. Across our conference the laity are taking up that challenge in a big way with their voice, presence and leadership.

Local Church Leader Training

This year virtual trainings were offered for local church leaders in the areas of trustees, SPRC, Administrative Council/One Board governance and Financial Secretary. District superintendents and laity led the trainings and provided insight on best practices for each role. These trainings were met with rousing success and are going to be offered on an annual basis.

Laity Summit

Laity Summit 2024 provided one opportunity for learning and engagement for our laity. This annual event exists in a virtual setting and had attendees from all 17 districts. Attendees learned about engaging in social justice work in the local church setting, got to know the conference lay leadership team and their vision for lay leadership, building youth ministries, best practices for stewardship campaigns and how to move to a one-board governance structure. All of the workshops were recorded so that they can be accessed and viewed post-Laity Summit for continuing education.

Planting the seeds for lay leadership in the church's garden

The lay leadership team is consistently at work behind the scenes to lift up the work of the laity and to advocate for their needs. The team is unwavering in posing the question “what about the laity?” in meetings, conversations and decision making. This includes working to ensure equal representation of laity at annual conference across the generations, lifting up the talents and skills of the Great Plains laity in conversations about nominations, identifying emerging lay leadership and pushing for laity inclusion in programming and strategy conversations. The conference lay leadership team takes seriously its role in representing laity and lay voices. Our commitment to that role and passion for the Great Plains laity is evident in all that we do.

United Women in Faith

Janice Elmore, president

Happy Birthday United Women in Faith, 155 years. I thank God for your commitment to His work and His people. Today as members of the United Women In Faith, we have inherited a glorious history and tradition. We are a voice of service and advocacy, equipping women to be leaders and helping women to grow spiritually.

It was a dark and stormy night in Boston, March 23, 1869, when eight women gathered to discuss how to help other women, and they founded this organization! To fulfill their vision of creating educational opportunities and providing health care to women in India, these founding women asked others to contribute “their prayers and two pennies.” In this way a movement of faith and generosity in action was born. That was 155 years ago, March 23 of this year. We celebrated with a donation to the UWFaith Legacy Endowment Fund, a permanently invested endowment that supports the work of improving the lives of women, children and youth at home and abroad. Thank you for participating in the Day of Giving and for making this great organization what it is today. Our Legacy is to leave an impact on future generations. Faith, Sisterhood and Action are the core values of United Women In Faith, so that we can Inspire, Influence and Impact local and global communities. We have a vision for the future and a plan to make it a reality. Our birthday was a Day of Giving! We believe love in action can change the world.

Our annual meeting was held Sept. 16, 2023, in McPherson, KS, with the theme “Together In Mission.” Our special guest speakers were Bishop David Wilson, Rev. Kathy L. Williams, Pastor Marsha E. Haney and the missionary coordinator of women’s work in Central Africa, Grace Musuka.

Legislative Event for Advocacy in Faith (LEAF). United Women In Faith along with the Church Women United in Kansas presented LEAF on Feb. 18-19, 2024. Nebraska Ecumenical Legislative Day met Feb. 10, 2024. LEAF had two days of workshops and panels to learn about state issues and about mental health that concern us as United

Women In Faith. LEAF legislature representatives had a discussion lunch with the UWFaith. Nebraska Ecumenical Legislative Day topics included mental health, restorative justice, education, economics, housing and more.

This year, as part of the church’s Creation Justice Movement, United Women in Faith partnered with Global Ministries, the Love Your Neighbor Coalition, and the General Board of

Church and Society for an Earth Day vigil held on April 22, 2024. The featured speaker was Dr. Musa Dube, Botswanan theologian, and professor of New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

The South Central Jurisdiction Gathering “Get Together,” is June 21-23, in St. Louis with engaging workshops, inspiring worship, riveting and motivating speakers, and renewing soul care. The SCJ gathering features UWFaith Sisters from Texas, New Mexico, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

Connect

Social media is an ever-evolving method of communicating, a variety of free articles, podcasts, and webinars on using different communications tools, and they even offer communications training. We have many ways to tell our United Women in Faith story. Sign up for the member portal at uwfaith.org. Don't be afraid to try something new! Register for Faith Talks, Voices from the Field, Just Energy 4, etc. We have many resources and opportunities to be inspired at uwfaithresources.org: Prayer Guide, response magazine, Thrive newsletter, Mission U studies, Program Resource, Charter for Racial Justice, Protection of our climate and our environment and the new Soul Care Retreat Manual and more.

The social action priority issues for the next quadrennium:

- Observing the Child's Sabbath every 3rd Sunday in October. Children must be lifted up in church.
- Girl Child — still being marginalized, vulnerable, exploitation, mutilation and limited to access to education, limited to resources that will help girls strive.
- The Status of Women — still limited to economical equality, pay, environments in which they lift and work. Uplift opportunities in leadership and decision making.
- The Voting Rights Act — limits people's access to voting.

The United Women In Faith (UWFaith) share our collective story:

- Inspire — we share how we connect, nurture and uplift,
- Influence — We share how we equip women to lead, serve and advocate.
- And Impact — We share how we make a difference through our giving and action. We are faith, action and sisterhood!

United Methodist Men

The director of the GPUMMen presented a briefing to the Great Plains Annual Conference, sharing the mission, vision and goals of both GPUMMen and the General Commission on United Methodist Men, as well as staying connected by attending meetings with Connecting Council and with the conference Lay Leaders.

We stayed connected by attendance at the National Association of Conference Presidents

(NACP) meeting, which is attended by all annual conference men's ministry presidents and jurisdictional presidents.

I had the privilege to serve as team lead for NACP Nominating Committee.

Members of the Executive Leadership Team met with a few district superintendents and district lay leaders to help develop their vision for helping men grow in Christ in their districts. A member of the team is also supporting the Great Plains Conference team to realign our districts.

We also held monthly meetings with the Great Plains Executive UMM team and with South Central Jurisdiction leadership.

Mission Agency Reports

Universities

The following universities submitted reports for the annual conference. They are positioned in alphabetical order first within the annual conference boundaries and then from United Methodist-affiliated schools located elsewhere.

Baker University

Dr. Lynne Murray, president

Since 1858, Baker University has been committed to providing a rigorous, relevant education to generations of students in the United Methodist tradition. The values statement of the university includes these words:

- Student learning and academic excellence. We provide quality learning environments promoting intellectual, professional, and personal development resulting in lifelong learning.
- Critical thinking, inquiry, and freedom of expression. We challenge all participants to think critically using open inquiry and freedom of expression.
- Integrating learning with faith and values. We expect all participants to be open to questions of faith and values as part of intellectual inquiry in the United Methodist tradition. We expect personal and professional responsibility based on high ethical conduct standards.
- Connections. We promote a community of belonging and Baker family connections, which result in lifelong associations.
- Inclusiveness. We embrace diversity of community, thought, and expression.
- Service to the community. We address the civic, social, health, and environmental needs of our global community.

We are proud of our strong affiliation with The United Methodist Church. Baker students continue to excel in the classroom, on the courts and on the fields, and through their many

extracurricular activities.

The Rev. Kevin Hopkins has been serving as minister to the university for 10 years now, making him the third minister in the long history of Baker. Osborne Chapel is the central hub of the university community, where students, faculty, and staff gather every Thursday for student-led and spirit-filled Chapel services. This previous summer, the University hosted the Great Plains Youth Institute once again, which was made even more memorable with a visit by Bishop David Wilson. The event provided an exceptional experience for all attendees.

The Osborne Chapel continues to be a vital source of spiritual leadership and support for the university and the surrounding community.

I am privileged to serve as Baker's 29th president. We continue to raise funds to support student scholarships and academic and faculty excellence. I will continue to build on the foundation of past presidents and faculty members.

Kansas Wesleyan University

Dr. Matt Thompson, president

Kansas Wesleyan University's Campus Ministry program (www.kwu.edu/campusministry) is a critical part of the institution's overarching commitment to inclusion, to community investment and to the United Methodist belief in the importance of both.

Our approach begins before students even get to campus. We offer scholarships for those in the United Methodist church, including KWU alumni, and also for individuals who participate in our Campus Ministry praise band, Rise Up! These scholarships cover as much as 50% of tuition, and are an important part of our devotion to the United Methodist motto of

"Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." We want to embrace our UM heritage, and while we welcome individuals of

all belief systems, that heritage comprises a critical part of who we are.

Our approach continues as students integrate into our campus experience. We have increased our small group offerings and other ministry-related opportunities, including offering programs at different locations throughout Salina, to better engage with our student body. Our host family program provides students a home away from home, right here in Salina.

Campus Ministry also embeds chaplains within each academic department, activity or athletic team, helping to provide spiritual support across our campus, wherever it is needed.

We are also opening new doors for our students to become part of the Campus Ministry team. We are finishing the fourth year of our internship program, and currently have six interns. Each intern is working within a specific area of ministry, whether it be social media, worship, service or spiritual life. They assist the full-time staff, but more than that, they help in developing and instituting the spiritual culture of Kansas Wesleyan.

Part of the UM philosophy has always been the building up of communities, whether spiritually or through physical means, and KWU continues to excel in this area. One of our newest endeavors, the Community Resilience Hub (www.kwu.edu/crh), is dedicated to establishing resources and providing support, research and education that will lead to a more stable, secure and equitable ecosystem in Salina, the state of Kansas and beyond. Right now, that effort is focused on regenerative organic agriculture, including a project with numerous regional partners to establish a food corridor from Wichita to Salina on Interstate 135.

We continue to pour into the future of University United Methodist Church, which is located directly across the street from our campus. Our Music Department is currently holding numerous concerts and recitals there, as their performance space is being renovated, and university events – highlighted by baccaulaureate – take place there, as well.

All told, KWU's Campus Ministry is a critical part of our campus' life and our strategic plan. It touches the experience of every student on campus, whether through chaplains, services, host families or simply the UM ethos of community growth, engagement and giving back. It helps us foster an educational culture that is truly holistic, focusing on the growth, education and development of the entire person. We look forward to seeing this program grow even more in the years to come.

For more information, visit www.kwu.edu. Go Coyotes!

Nebraska Wesleyan University

Rev. Maddie Baugous, University Minister

Hello friends of the Great Plains Annual Conference! I am happy to offer a report on behalf of Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska. I began my role of university minister in January 2024. As a Nebraska Wesleyan graduate, I am relearning the campus, noticing changes but also the aspects of the NWU experience which remain the same. The university continues to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom and in every aspect of student life.

Like many higher education institutions, the past few years were a challenge, as we navigated a pandemic and changes in higher education. However, this year we welcomed the third largest entering class in the university's history. Our student body continues to be more racially and culturally diverse. We have also seen an increase in students who are Pell eligible. Pell grants are awarded to low-income students who have a large financial need. Of our first-year students, 40% are eligible for Pell grants.

Many college students, especially international students, face the challenge of food insecurity. One program that continues to aid students is our Prairie Wolf Pantry. The pantry is accessible to any student, and they can receive food items or hygiene products they need. While we long for an end to food insecurity, it is good to see students utilize these resources to ensure their basic needs are met. When a student is not

worrying about where their next meal will come from, they can thrive in an academic setting.

The University Ministries office was in transition this year, as the campus was without a minister for the fall semester. However, four student workers made weekly worship services on campus available. These students showed resiliency and adaptation, providing for the spiritual needs of campus. They also fostered new relationships with retired clergy in the Lincoln area and a partnership with the United Methodist campus ministry at the University of Nebraska. There was also a lot of support from the NWU Office of Student Life, which provided guidance for the students. Because of these new relationships, we hope to continue to have further collaboration with others in the Lincoln area, from Nebraska Wesleyan alumni and supporters to organizations across the Lincoln area.

Nebraska Wesleyan continues to support students as they discern their vocation. In February, three students went to Exploration, a conference hosted by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Exploration is for students discerning a call into ministry, whether ordination or lay leadership. Reflecting with the students, they all expressed how they came to Exploration with lots of questions and left with different questions to answer. Each student continues to discern how they can best serve in innovative new ministries. I am excited for these students because all three will be working in the Great Plains Annual Conference this summer, in local churches and the Micah Corps.

We hope to continue to develop strong leaders for the future of the church.

Nebraska Wesleyan provides students with life-changing experiences so that they can go forth into the world to do all the good they can. We are hopeful the Great Plains Annual Conference will continue to be blessed by their leadership, and we can support each other in ways which bring transformation to all the world.

If you want to learn more about Nebraska Wesleyan, check out www.nebrwesleyan.edu.

Southwestern College

Chapel takes place every Wednesday at 11 a.m. in person and is broadcasted live at www.facebook.com/chapelsc, planned by the campus minister, and director of worship outreach and a team of volunteer students. Local speakers share the pulpit, along with Great Plains Clergy colleagues. SC Campus Ministry also planned and hosted numerous worship and prayer nights throughout the school year both on and off campus.

The average attendance at chapel this school year has been around 65 with homecoming chapel reaching over 200 in attendance. Chapel consists of live worship from the SC Worship Outreach Team – 19 student volunteers.

Theme of Chapel for 2023-2024 School Year: “Something New” from Isaiah 43:18-19 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!”

Mission Statement of Chapel: SC campus ministry exists as a shared space to worship Jesus through song, word, prayer and the spiritual equipping of the entire builder family.

Southwestern College Chapel service seeks to invite individuals to come together in a community of faith and to equip one another with skills to share the Gospel as disciples, by providing an open, Christ-centered, participatory worship experience.

Changes in Chapel Service: Chapel this year has consisted of students reading scripture, opening the service in prayer, give-aways and student testimonies in addition to a weekly guest speaker. Speakers have not only consisted of local clergy but also alumni, coaches and staff at the college.

Staff Changes in the 2023-2024 School Year: With the registration of Molly McConnell and retirement of Martin Rude, Southwestern College hired two new people, Rev. Rodney Worsham as Interim Campus Minister and Caitlyn Hecker as Interim Worship Outreach Coordinator. They have both breathed fresh life into these programs and, through new ideas and new approaches, have reached a larger number of

students through chapel. In the last few years, our chapel attendance has waned and mostly attracted students already in a campus ministry like Discipleship or students who grew up in the church. We are now getting students from all different parts of campus, many who have never attended chapel and never been a part of any campus ministry. Our chapel attendance is up by an average of over 20 students per chapel, as is our student engagement in the leadership of chapel. Dr. Jackson Lashier, Associate Professor of Religion, now serves as the Director of Discipleship and Rev. Charles McKinzie, Grace United Methodist Church, serves in a volunteer role as Coordinator of Interfaith Outreach between the college and the local Winfield Community.

Spring Chapel Speakers:

- Jan. 7 Alvin Mason
- Jan. 24 Sarah Stephenson with testimony by Rev. Nathan Cook
- Jan. 31 Krystal & Brent Winn, alumni
- Feb. 7 Joel & Lindsay Wilke, alumni and Director of Camp Horizon
- Feb. 14 Anjaih & Justin Williams with testimony from Dr. Bryan and Julie Davis, alumni
- Feb. 21 Dr. Daniel & Sarah Miller with testimony from Tag and Elizabeth Wall, alumni
- Feb. 28 Dr. Jackson Lashier with testimony from Brae Wood
- March 6 Dr. Simon Hill with testimony from Allyson Moon
- March 13 Spring Break - No chapel service
- March 20 The Branch Worship Group from Dallas, TX
- March 27 Rev. Chali Kalaba, United Methodist District Superintendent of Great Plains Conference
- April 3 SC Football Coach Ryan Nelson & SC Women's Basketball Coach Chardonnae Parker
- April 10 Rev. Jenni Conrady, Alumni and World Missionary, Rev. Aaron Duell, Cheney Methodist Church

- April 17 Senior Chapel with Caitlyn Hecker
- April 24 Senior Chapel with Rev. Rodney Worsham

Southern Methodist University

R. Gerald Turner, President

Southern Methodist University (SMU) has served as a non-sectarian institution of higher learning since its founding in 1911 by the citizens of Dallas and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. SMU's mission is to expand knowledge through research and teaching and to serve as an igniter and facilitator of growth in Dallas and North Texas. With continued Methodist representation on the Board of Trustees and welcoming students of all faiths, SMU is reaching a higher level of accomplishment and global recognition. Consistent with the University's appreciation of our Wesleyan heritage, SMU voluntarily submits this report.

Students, faculty, and staff

SMU attracts academically excellent and diverse students. For the 2023-24 academic year, 7,115 undergraduates and 4,727 graduate students make up the total student population of nearly 12,000. 56% are from other states, 41% are Texans and 3% are international students. After graduation, they will join 136,000 alumni worldwide.

Comprehensive campaign and research funding

As of March 2024, donors have contributed over \$1.288 billion to the University's comprehensive campaign:

SMU Ignited: Boldly Shaping Tomorrow, with a \$1.5 billion goal to attract and support outstanding students and faculty, explore new fields and cutting-edge technologies, and positively impact Dallas and the world beyond.

SMU upcoming transition to the Atlantic Coast Conference where our athletic teams will compete against some of the country's most academically focused universities brings

heightened prestige and visibility that will also bolster SMU's priority of becoming a Research One (R1) institution in the Carnegie Classification system.

For 2023, SMU reported \$59.7 million in research expenditure which included external funding for domestic and global research. Current funding agencies include the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Energy, National Institute of Justice, Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT), Google, and Toyota USA Foundation.

Rankings

SMU continues to receive strong recognition and high rankings, including:

- Top 20% best national universities by U.S. News & World Report (2024). Also, a Best Value School, among the Best Colleges for Veterans, and Top Performers on Social Mobility by USNWR (2024).
- Among the nation's best institutions for undergraduate education in The Princeton Review's "Best 389 Colleges" and its "2024 Best Southwest Colleges."
- Top 5% best nationwide colleges (68 out of 2,238) by College Factual (2024). Also, top 1% of the U.S. Best liberal arts/sciences and humanities schools for students pursuing a bachelor's degree and among the highest-paid graduates across a range of fields.
- "Higher research activity" as classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Perkins Chapel at No. 10 on College Rank's list of the most beautiful college churches and chapels.

Perkins School of Theology

SMU remains grateful for the enduring work of our Perkins School of Theology in the instruction and training of clergy for all Wesleyan traditions and other denominations. We request your continued prayers and support.

Africa University

James H. Salley, Associate Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement, Africa University and President/CEO of Africa University (Tennessee) Inc.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.—Philippians 4:9 (NRSV)

Africa University greeted 2024 with bold faith and eager confidence because of the goodness of United Methodists who are faithful, generous, and enthusiastic about instilling hope and bringing about wholeness in communities.

Through faithfulness and generosity, the Great Plains Conference maintained its investment in the Africa University Fund (AUF) apportionment at 81.2 percent of the asking for 2023. Thank you for your unwavering support. You have helped Africa University to evolve into the cornerstone institution for The United Methodist Church’s mission of disciple-making for transformational impact in Africa and beyond.

In 2023, sustained by the support of The United Methodist Church, Africa University:

- Provided more than \$2 million in scholarships and financial aid grants to students who would otherwise fail to access higher education.
- Enrolled 2,219 young women and men from 26 African countries.
- Launched its second new academic unit in less than a year — the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences — with a first cohort of 279 students.
- Saw its alumni swell to more than 12,000 serving in 32 African countries, with the addition of 954 graduates in June.
- Developed new products, such as lozenges made from the indigenous Zumbani plant, and IT solutions to reduce food waste and make vital research findings more accessible to those who need the information.

As United Methodists fortify themselves for a vital and vibrant

witness beyond the 2020 General Conference in 2024, and its outcomes, Africa University urges the members of the Great Plains Conference to:

- Support Africa University's effort to secure General Conference approval of Report #4.
- Continue striving to invest in the Africa University Fund at 100%, using as your goal the amount approved at the 2016 General Conference — \$9,368,872 million for the 2017-2020 quadrennium.
- Help identify at least two (2) churches (keystone congregations) in your conference that will commit to provide second mile gifts of \$6,500 each or \$13,000 in total for annual scholarships for two undergraduate students. (This will help address any shortfall in giving to the Africa University Fund.)

Going forward, Africa University's focus is on delivering high-impact pan-African education, grounded in Christian values, which is relevant in the ever-changing context of the African continent and the world. Additional programs in STEM subjects are planned in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, including an undergraduate degree in Artificial Intelligence.

Thank you, Great Plains Conference, for ensuring that Africa University continues to nurture and send forth ethical and effective leaders whose daily efforts invite increase food security, overall health, good governance, abundance, and peace in their communities.

Africa University is grateful for your support and for your profound commitment to being the church in the world. Let us keep doing this important work together and may the God of peace be with you!

Health and Welfare Institutions

The following organizations submitted reports for the annual conference.

Aldersgate Village

Aldersgate Village is a faith-based senior living community open to people of all denominations and backgrounds. Our Christian and socially responsible mission are to serve and advocate for those advanced in age. Established in 1904, Aldersgate Village has been providing compassionate, person-centered health care for 120 years.

Aldersgate Village owns and operates one of Kansas' largest life plan communities. We opened our current location in Topeka, Kansas in 1979. On a beautiful 154-acre campus at 7220 SW Asbury Drive in Topeka, Kansas, Aldersgate Village features include independent living, offering 89 maintenance-free one- to three-bedroom apartments and 79 maintenance-free age-in-place villas, cottages, and garden homes; 60 licensed assisted living apartments; and 36 Home Plus suites. Access to a skilled nursing care facility within the campus is also available. People who spend their golden years in Aldersgate Village

know they have a home where they will be surrounded by loving staff who will preserve their dignity, offer compassion, and do their absolute best to provide the best health care possible.

Aldersgate Village ensures that our residents not only live but thrive — as we faithfully enhance the lives of elders in the greater community.

Accomplishments

In the fall of 2021 Aldersgate Village Life Plan Community, one of the largest retirement communities in Kansas, added two additional Home Plus buildings. The additional Home Plus

units increased this home-like desired service offering to 36 private suites. The suites are arranged around comfortable shared spaces, including a great room, dining area, kitchen, quiet room, and outdoor courtyard. Round-the-clock certified staffing and monitoring is part of the service.

This innovative design makes Home Plus a welcoming option. These new additions are in response to the growing and changing needs of

area seniors, specifically their need for modern, safe housing options that combine the comforts of home with a customizable level of care that adjusts as needed.

In 2022 the construction of an additional 13 independent living age-in-place cottages began. These added cottages were constructed to meet the demand of seniors seeking a modern approach for long-term independent living. The new Cottages were ergonomically designed to accommodate seniors' healthcare needs as they change.

The organization is also rolling-out innovative programs such as Comprehensive Orchestrated Services. This program anticipates the healthcare needs of the residents served through technology and in-home services. The added program will allow the organization to provide care much earlier in the continuum and help our seniors live independently as long as possible in the comfort of their selected home on campus.

Improving the Lives of Seniors

As a faith-based organization, we provide both health and spiritual care for seniors and are blessed to have a chaplain available for on-site pastoral services. Our mission is a challenging one, especially in these challenging times. We were also fortunate to have Topeka-Flint Hills District Superintendent, Rev. Jenny Collins, join our Board of Trustees in July 2020.

The organization remains appreciative of the churches in the

Great Plains Conference for their continued support of our charitable care program, the Good Samaritan Fund. Caring for seniors, including those who have exhausted their resources and are unable to pay, is also part of Aldersgate's Christian mission. Our Christian and socially responsible mission will continue as we strive to ensure that seniors of this region receive compassionate, person-centered health care in a warm and welcoming community.

EmberHope/Youthville

Nickalia Sandate, President and CEO

During 2022, EmberHope Youthville enjoyed several achievements, including updating our strategic plan for our future and reaccrediting key programs by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). The 2022 agency's financial statements indicate stability, sound investment practices, and successful fundraising results this past year.

We are encouraged to see lives changed and families positively impacted through the programs and services offered this past year. What a joy it is to celebrate with these children and teens the success of engaging in and completing their treatment programs.

For the children and families we serve, our mission, vision, and values represent our pledge to serve them well using the best practices we can access. For placing agencies, judges, licensing authorities, and others, our programs represent EmberHope Youthville's commitment to quality ongoing improvement through its effectiveness, efficiency, service access, and satisfaction, cornerstones of the accreditation process we once again embraced in 2022.

Impact Highlights

Foster Care in Kansas and Texas provide caregiving for chil-

dren who cannot safely live with their biological parents. In 2022, Kansas Foster Care recruited and retained 71% of sponsored foster homes. As an agency, EmberHope Youthville has recruited and retained 53% of those foster parents sponsored during this same period.

Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility provides short-term, intense, focused treatment to children or teens experiencing psychiatric symptoms that may cause danger to themselves or others. This mission-focused work is being provided by the dedicated treatment team on-campus in Newton, Kansas.

Contributions & Grants

- 75% Government Grants
- 13% Cash Contributions & Pledges
- 9% Other Revenues
- 3% In-Kind Contributions

Program Expenses

- 57% Foster Care Services
- 39% Residential Treatment
- 3% Grants & Other Programs

Epworth Family Resources

Margaret Donovan, chief executive officer

Greetings from Epworth Family Resources in York, Nebraska! Yes, Epworth Village's board of directors adopted a trade-name — Epworth Family Resources. Epworth Village will remain our legal name, but we now are known as Epworth Family Resources. The board of directors' desire was for our new name to reflect what we are and what we continuously strive to be — a resource for hope, healing and new beginnings for children, youth and families.

Our mission statement was tweaked and now reads: To

provide comprehensive family-centered resources that bring hope and healing to children, youth and families across Nebraska in a compassionate and caring manner.

2023 had many more exciting changes for us. After we sold our campus property in 2022 plans began to renovate and move to the lower level of the York First United Methodist Church (YFUMC). The renovation design plan was finalized in February 2023 with the renovation and move completed by November 2023. The York First United Methodist Church immediately embraced Epworth with open hearts. A heartfelt welcome service was held with brunch, fellowship and tours of the new office space. The members held a Christmas party for the children and families we serve and provided a Christmas meal box for every family.

The opening of our new office was also celebrated with YFUMC members, partners, supporters and United Women in Faith units during our annual Heart of the Matter fundraiser with special guest Great Plains Conference Bishop David Wilson who was in the area for Orders & Fellowship. We were so honored to have Bishop Wilson as our guest speaker.

During the celebration, we revealed our new tradename — Epworth Family Resources — and new logo.

We are always so proud of our greatest asset, our team of staff, and their accomplishments in working with children, youth and families providing high-quality services. This past year we served 352 people — 176 adults and 176 children through our child care center, Little Jewels Child Care & Enrichment Center, in-home family services and foster care programs.

Epworth's board of director kept busy throughout the year laying the groundwork for Epworth Family Resources' future. In addition to construction, name, logo, and other decisions, the board conducted an organizational assessment and began developing a strategic plan for 2024 through 2026. One of the priorities is to deepen our connection and communication with you all.

Our multi-talented and right-hand person, Mary Plock, was promoted to chief administrative officer and turned over the public relations reins to Kansan Julie Troy. We were fortunate and blessed to find Julie, who has expertise in the full realm public relations and development. We immediately knew we had keeper shortly after she began in August last year. Julie has begun working on deepening our connection and communication with you. In January, Julie began producing a monthly newsletter, which is in addition to our quarterly Wings publication to keep you updated on Epworth Family Resources happenings. Look for new things and enhanced publications and communications over the next several years as progress in enhancing our communications capabilities.

This year, 2024, is our 135th anniversary of our founding as a National Mission Institute of the United Women in Faith and providing services to families, mothers, children and youth. How does a ministry remain strong for so many years? It is not only because of Epworth's willingness and ability to adapt to change but largely because of you and a long line of people like you going back for 135 years — people, churches and women's groups who believe in and support Epworth's mission and ministry. We look forward to a long future of providing services and tools that move families from surviving to thriving.

We know we can't do this work without you and are so grateful for your support. Thank you all for being a resource to the children, youth and families, many who are struggling to find their way. Your generous prayer, monetary and in-kind support help provide the resources necessary for children and families to thrive.

We will be celebrate our 135th anniversary Oct. 20, 2024 during our annual Heart of the Matter fundraiser. We hope you can join us in our celebration. Look for further details in the future and ways you can participate in our anniversary celebration and fundraiser.

Wesley House

Wesley House is an outreach mission of Pittsburg First United Methodist Church. Established in 1982, the organization has provided 42 years of emergency assistance to low-income community members and families in Crawford County, hosting a wide variety of programs developed to respond to urgent and emergent needs of our most at-risk community members. Today, Wesley House serves as the primary food pantry in Crawford County, facilitates the Senior Food Program, functions as a day shelter with comprehensive services for anyone experiencing homelessness, and has provided overnight shelter during the past two winters.

Everyone that walks through our doors, regardless of circumstance, is entitled to dignity and access to resources that allow opportunities for self-sufficiency and growth. Through community partnerships and engagement, those accessing our services are connected to internal or external programs centered on reintegration and improving health and social outcomes. To decrease barriers to care, and therefore decrease health risks within the homeless population, we provide integrated health services, education, and care coordination onsite, provided by community health workers who are employees of the Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas' (CHC/SEK).

Wesley House is not only a place for the community to receive services, but it is also a place for the community to engage and share their gifts through volunteering and organizing educational and skills-building programs.

Food Pantry

In 2023, Wesley House had the privilege of serving 8,162 food pantry guests seeking nutrition assistance, which is 20.9% of Crawford County's population. Compared to the year before, Wesley House experienced a 40% increase in families accessing food pantry services and 30% increase in use overall. Reducing waste and increasing access to fresh produce, more than 137,800 pounds of rescued food from local sources were

distributed during pantry throughout the year.

Shelter

Thanks to one-time opportunities Wesley House kept our doors open during the coldest months of the year during the winters of 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. We have experienced the power of food and a safe night's rest. In 2023, 78 of the 154 unhoused individuals served obtained permanent housing — a 110% increase from the year before.

Judicial Diversion

We have also instigated a judicial diversion program within the Pittsburg, Kansas municipal court, and the city prosecutor works with our staff to engage people who have non-violent charges, often considered "crimes of poverty/homelessness" (trespassing, failure to appear, loitering) in a diversion program, so that instead of time spent in jail the offenders are court ordered to participate in our housing services. In the six months of the program, nine of the 23 participants have moved into housing, avoided additional time and costs in the judicial system, and experience increased pro-social cohesion.

There are no prerequisites to human dignity. With the support of the Great Plains Conference, we are able to expand and increase access to services community members in crisis need and deserve. Those accessing our services have reason to mistrust institutions like healthcare, social services, and education, often related to a history of negative experiences with the system. Wesley House is a unique space that offers a safety net for meeting basic needs through which relationships are established that restore trust and then direct access to long-term services in the same physical space. The last year has brought organizational growth in partnerships and coordination of services. We are eternally grateful for the support and proud to be a part of the mission agency recipients with The Great Plains United Methodist Conference to continue and grow the good work.

Ministries with the Poor

The following organizations submitted reports for the annual conference.

Big Garden

Tom Neal, Executive Director

Greetings, Great Plains friends of The Big Garden!

I am very excited for what 2024 has in store for us at The Big Garden! Before I get too far into looking ahead though, let's take a look back at some of the highlights of 2023.

Teaching

We set a goal to teach more children in 2023 than we had in 2022. It was a tall order, but our educational series for children really sets the stage for a lifetime of growing healthy food, healthy children and healthy communities. In 2022, we had 4,497 students of various ages attend our classes. For 2023, we increased that number by 6% to 4,752, most coming from elementary students when we restarted the Farm to Table program! We actually taught more classes in 2023 — 646 compared to 444 in 2022 — but found that with a smaller teacher-to-student ratio, we could spend more time with each student, getting a much more fulfilling experience for each child. For 2024, we will continue to grow these educational programs, with a goal to top the 5,000 mark!

Building

After 17 years of adding new community gardens and fruit tree groves, we saw that there was a need to repair several beds at various locations to keep them viable as growing sites. We still added four new locations, but overall, we impacted 26 locations, compared to 14 in 2022! We also adopted that for groves, adding 40 more trees, mostly to existing fruit tree sites. In total, we have built more than 300 community gardens and another 50 fruit tree groves in areas of need!

Growing

With the addition of a growing site within 10 minutes of our campus, we grew more than 6,000 pounds of fresh produce that was then given to food banks, pantries and shelters to help those with an immediate need for food. That is compared to 3,407 pounds of produce in 2022, a whopping 78% increase!

We also held 15 farmstands this year, working in partnership with Whispering Roots, giving out coupons nearing \$25,000 to be used with local growers for fresh produce. We taught adult education classes at local sites, covering such subjects as seed saving, small space gardening and planning your garden space. We did all these great things with the help of more than 500 volunteers! We also had our ninth annual seed share, giving 264 people the opportunity to get new seeds for their home gardens, free of charge!

As I look forward to 2024, I will continue to focus on growth. Growth of food, growth of our programs and growth in supporting those who need us the most. I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to everyone who helped support us through donations, grants, volunteerism, social media messaging and gifts in kind. Thanks for buying your plants at our annual plant sale and thanks for keeping us in your thoughts and prayers.

We couldn't do all these things without people like you!

Immigrant Legal Center and Refugee Empowerment Center

Erik Omar, executive director

Through the long-standing support of the Great Plains Conference, Immigration Law and Justice Network, and United Methodist Committee on Relief, Immigrant Legal Center + Refugee Empowerment Center (ILC+REC) continues to advocate zealously on behalf of immigrants and refugees of all

backgrounds, with an emphasis on the highest need. As the region's largest nonprofit legal service provider, ILC+REC plays a key role in our community's immigration response by taking the most complex case referrals, educating stakeholders in legal matters, and systemically advocating on behalf of our most vulnerable community members.

ILC+REC has increased the total number of cases worked each year from 3,963 in 2021, to 5,064 in 2022, and 5,942 in 2023. In 2023, ILC+REC served 2,572 clients with legal services alone and averaged a 95% success rate.

Amid unprecedented global human migration and a changing immigration landscape, ILC+REC's approach remains responsive to our client's unique needs. Since Jan. 1, 2017, there have been nearly 1,000 distinct changes to immigration law or policy, and the changes continue. ILC+REC has diligently navigated President Joe Biden's new asylum and parole programs for Afghans, Ukrainians, Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans, and Nicaraguans seeking permanent status in the United States. In preparation, we built customized programs to serve each arriving population with respect to their unique culture, language, and needs. ILC+REC launched its Afghan Family Assistance program and

Afghan Legal Services Project, staffed by individuals who speak Dari, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi and understand Afghan culture. In addition, ILC+REC built its Ukrainian Family Assistance program, staffed by Ukrainian nationals, and its Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) program for asylees arriving from Cuba and Haiti, staffed by a native Spanish speaker. Each of these programs mirrors the standard resettlement programming that traditional refugees receive, providing equitable access to services for all new arrivals to Omaha. In response to the new parole programs and extended TPS made available to certain vulnerable demographics and nationalities, ILC+REC also now has a direct referral line for clients eligible for Office of Refugee Resettlement benefits that have complex legal needs.

A recent powerful client testimonial revolves around a

courageous woman from Venezuela. After enduring years of abuse in her homeland, she escaped to the U.S. with her two children in hopes of finding safety and security.

She arrived in rural Nebraska eager for a fresh start, but faced an uphill battle as a Spanish-speaking immigrant. She lived in constant fear of being separated from her children and forced to return to Venezuela. Upon connecting with ILC+REC's asylum-based legal team, this client was able to quickly obtain a work permit to access better, safer job opportunities. Despite Omaha's immigration court having the lowest approval rate for asylum cases in the U.S., our client was recently granted asylum, bringing her tumultuous, years-long journey for safety and security to a bright, new beginning.

High-quality immigration legal services create a pathway to citizenship, legal permanent residence, work permits, family reunification and, more importantly, safety and self-empowerment. The need for immigration legal services is well established and reflected in how ILC+REC serves more than 2,500 clients with legal services per year while consistently having a waitlist ranging from 300-600 individuals. ILC+REC thanks the Great Plains Conference for the continued financial support and partnership in this work.

Ogden Friendship House of Hope

Cathy Austin, executive director

January – December 2023

Food Pantry

- Number of Clients that received food from our pantry: 1,552 (individuals)
- Total Number of Household: 617
- Total number of meals served: 1,487

Thrift Store Client Log

- Total: 2,882(individuals)

Benevolence voucher/ Gas cards

- Gas Vouchers total: 52
- Benevolence voucher total: 26 (rent, utility bills, medications, etc.)
- Household/Clothing Vouchers: 43

Report of Ogden Mobile Food Pantry

- Total of people received food: 5,318
- Total of Household: 1,239
- GW: 57,781lbs.

Being in this field, seeing different walks of life, and hearing people's stories almost every day, I feel very blessed to have this opportunity to be part of the United Methodist outreach ministry. Last year, we had a couple, fresh out of the emergency shelter. This was right before Thanksgiving. Around the corner of the holiday season, they both came in, and I had a chance to interview them and hear their story. They didn't have anything. We gave them a household voucher, which works like a gift card that they can use to shop around the store. They found a lot of items that they can use, from clothing to household and kitchen items.

Sadly, we don't have any bigger furniture. We never accept furniture donation since we don't have space for them. I tried to point them to different organizations that might help them with that matter, but them not having a vehicle made it very challenging.

But being a Christian, I should've known better. God moves in

mysterious ways. He provides. The next day, we received a call from a lady who is trying to clean out her garage who happened to have a futon and a couch and also willing to deliver since she has a truck. She was able to deliver the furniture to this family the next day. What a blessing. I call it miracles. I am blessed to witness these miracles by doing my job and seeing people take a leap of faith.

I know these people that rely on our programs just need people to see them, that they're trying. Yes, they made bad choices, but they are doing their best now, and I think that really matters. I believe that's what our ministry is about: spreading hope, sharing faith, making them feel that they've got this. We can't all preach the word of God, but we can definitely be a living example of it.

United Methodist Open Door

Rev. Deann Smith, executive director

Open Door is a proud covenant partner of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church. We are part of the 1% mission giving to institutions and agencies throughout Kansas and Nebraska.

Open Door is a public charity that provides food, clothing and shelter to those in need in south-central Kansas.

The agency:

- Operates the largest food pantry in the Wichita area.
- Distributes government commodities to elders in 11 Kansas counties.
- Operates a day shelter for the homeless that serves approx. 130 a day.
- Provides housing to homeless families.
- Operates a free clothing store, with all types clothing and small household items.

In 2023, Open Door served almost 30,000 unduplicated

individuals agency wide. That is more than the population of Garden City, Kansas, or Fremont, Nebraska.

As I reflect on the year 2023, I want to thank you for all the ways your support has made a difference in the lives of those with whom we serve. While the economy has improved after the pandemic for most of us, there continues to be some who haven't found a way back out of the struggle to make ends meet.

The numbers served in our programs has grown as compared to pre-COVID time periods. The most notable was the record number of households that came for the annual Thanksgiving turkey distribution. Over 3,700 families received a frozen turkey and "the fixings" to help make their holiday a bit brighter. Through the generosity of donors, volunteers and other supporters — some at the last minute — Open Door was able to meet the needs of our community.

Open Door will continue to put the necessities of our most vulnerable population, those living in poverty, as our first priority. Over the past year, staff, the board of directors and volunteers have been participating in city of Wichita/Sedgwick County discussions about how to address the needs of our neighbors who are unhoused. We look forward to discovering the ways Open Door can contribute to a more sustainable solution(s). We believe big things are coming this year!

South Central Jurisdiction

Lydia Patterson Institute

Carla Cardoza, president

I am delighted to share with you the progress and achievements of Lydia Patterson Institute (LPI) over the past year. Your dedication and generosity have played a vital role in our journey towards providing quality education to all, and I am immensely grateful for your ongoing support.

Currently, we serve 240 students, reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of our community. Our impact is significant and transformative, as evidenced by testimonials and academic data showing progress in language proficiency and achievement. One such student, Fernando, exemplifies the resilience and determination of our students. Despite facing challenges in Ciudad Juarez, Fernando finds sanctuary and purpose at LPI. He represents the countless students whose lives have been positively impacted by our programs.

In academia, our primary focus has been on enriching our curriculum and cultivating innovative teaching approaches to provide our students with a comprehensive education. We're proud to report a 100% graduation rate, with all students fulfilling their educational requirements on time and pursuing further studies. Thanks to partnerships with organizations such as the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), we offer scholarships to support students seeking higher education opportunities in United Methodist institutions. To ensure our students are well-prepared for both their careers and college pursuits, we've implemented various initiatives, including professional development programs for teachers and curriculum enhancements. The safety and functionality of our facilities are paramount, and we've invested in maintenance, security, and regular inspections to create a secure learning environment.

We recognize the importance of addressing the diverse needs of our students, which is why we offer comprehensive

support services ranging from counseling to extracurricular activities, prioritizing holistic development and well-being. Financial sustainability is crucial, and we've established robust controls and streamlined budgeting processes to ensure transparency and accountability. In terms of growth and outreach, we're actively expanding our reach through targeted fundraising campaigns, donor stewardship initiatives, and community engagement efforts. By forging strategic partnerships and leveraging support from our community, we're dedicated to providing our students with the resources they need to thrive. As we look to the future, we remain committed to excellence in all areas of our work. Our mission is to empower students in a Christian setting, providing educational opportunities to underprivileged students facing scarcity and inequality.

Despite ongoing challenges, especially within our aging facilities such as asbestos contamination, outdated lighting, insufficient athletic equipment, and transportation deficiencies, we remain steadfast in our commitment to address these pressing issues. Resolving these critical matters demands substantial financial resources. Thus, we implore you to contemplate backing our initiatives through donations, in-kind contributions, or volunteering your time and expertise. Through collective action, we have the power to positively impact the lives of students and families, equipping them with the necessary support to flourish.

You can support us by texting GIFT or LPI to 915-292-2200, visiting our website at www.lpi-elpaso.org, through Advance #531523 or sending a check made payable to Lydia Patterson Institute to 517 S. Florence St, El Paso, TX 79901. For any questions or additional information, please don't hesitate to contact us via email at info@lpi-elpaso.org. Your generosity is greatly valued. Thank you for your continued support of La Lydia. With your help, we can continue to empower futures and transform lives through education.

Seminary Reports

The following seminaries submitted reports for the annual conference.

Boston University

G. Sujin Pak, dean

Your partnership, prayers, and support are a cherished gift as BUSTH seeks to serve the church and the world! In a year like 2023, BUSTH's commitments to equip transformational leaders for peace and justice are all the more necessary and significant. We are hopeful and vigilant in our continued partnership with you.

NEWS:

- **Students:** Our academic year 2023-24 entering class was among our most diverse, with 86 new students enrolling, 34% of whom are international students.
- **Faculty:** In September we welcomed visiting faculty member David Anderson Hooker, Visiting Associate Professor of Religion and Conflict Transformation. Two new faculty searches are underway — an Assistant Professor of Religion and Society and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Religion and Black Studies.
- **Expanding Online Programming:** BUSTH's first fully online master's degree—the Master of Religion and Public Leadership (MARPL)—continues to expand after welcoming its first students in fall 2022. MARPL seeks students who wish to be prepared for leadership roles that creatively engage the challenges of public life. Learn more at bu.edu/sth/marpl.
- **Faculty Research:** Associate Dean Cristian De La Rosa received a Lilly Parenting Grant for \$1.25 million. Our faculty members published more than 75 books, scholarly articles, op-eds, and book reviews during 2023. Many were interviewed by media publications for their work on academics and activism, fat liberation, caring for creation, responding to congregational trauma, and the spread

of Christianity in Africa. Selected stories can be found at bu.edu/sth/research/faculty-research/.

- Scholarships: We continue to offer free tuition to UMC-registered candidates for ordained ministry and leadership fellowships that support students in ethnic, gender, and sexuality studies. New funds include the Research & Teaching Fund and Affirmation & Empowerment Fund. We have newly endowed funds for DEI, Theology & the Arts, and Doctor of Ministry.
- Accreditation and Curriculum: BUSTH received a renewed full and unqualified listing by the University Senate of the United Methodist Church. BUSTH is concluding a curriculum review for the MDiv and MTS programs which will launch in fall 2024.
- Online Lifelong Learning: BUSTH offers online courses for professional and spiritual enrichment of religious leaders. Recent offerings include “Sustaining Spirits while Empires Crumble” and “Preaching Mark with Different Voices.” To learn more, visit bu.edu/sth/oll.
- Development: Recent accomplishments include endowing the Faith and Ecological Justice Fund, and new funding for student scholarships and academic programs.

Commitment to Justice and Compassion:

- BUSTH’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offers webinars on timely inclusion efforts, such as “Increasing Participation of Students of Underrepresented Backgrounds.”
- This year’s Lowell Lecture topics explore the role and responses of theological education for the challenges of today with lectures from Rev. Dr. Ted Smith (fall) and Dr. Keri Day (spring).
- Work continues to improve accessibility, sustainability, and responsible investing as written in our 2030 Strategic Plan. BUSTH is the first certified Green School at BU and is active in the Green Seminary.

Candler School of Theology

Office of Communications, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Since 1914, Candler School of Theology at Emory University has educated faithful and creative leaders for the church's ministries throughout the world. An official seminary of The United Methodist Church,

Candler holds true to the Wesleyan value of ecumenical openness, enthusiastically welcoming students from more than 40 denominations, with nearly half of Master of Divinity students coming from the Methodist family, including United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Wesleyan, Free Methodist, Church of the Nazarene, and others. Our student body reflects the diversity and breadth of the Christian faithful, with an enrollment of 419 from 12 countries and 38 states, and 44% persons of color. This diversity is a blessing, enriching our life together and providing a "learning laboratory" for ministry in the 21st century — ministry that cultivates community across difference, welcomes all to contribute and belong, and embodies Christ's love in and among us.

Candler offers six degrees (Master of Divinity, Master of Theological Studies, Master of Religion and Public Life, Master of Religious Leadership, Master of Theology, Doctor of Ministry) and 10 dual degrees, most of which are available in hybrid or online formats. Response to our new hybrid-format Master of Divinity, which launched in fall 2023, has been strong: 65% of 2023's MDiv entering class chose the hybrid model, blending online classes and in-person intensives. Plus, around 20% of MDiv students participate in Candler's Teaching Parish program to earn contextual education credit as they serve as student pastors in local churches. Our proven DMin program — with a near 90% completion rate — is 90% online as well. These flexible options plus Candler's recognized academic excellence and hands-on learning opportunities are opening possibilities for even more people to follow God's call to ministry.

Reducing student debt through generous financial aid is a top priority for Candler. In 2023-2024, we are on track to award \$6.3 million in scholarship support, with 100% of MDiv students receiving aid. All MDiv students who are certified candidates for ordained ministry in the UMC receive full-tuition scholarships, and all MDiv, MTS, MRL, and ThM students receive a scholarship covering at least 50% of tuition. MDiv students also receive financial coaching and complete a financial literacy program to strengthen their budgeting skills and reduce debt. That knowledge will serve them — and the ministries they serve — well into the future.

Candler is growing in exciting directions as it creates avenues to bring high-quality theological education to a wider audience. It is a hub of Christian learning with multiple entry points. Those who aren't seeking an advanced degree can engage in learning through The Candler Foundry, our innovative program to make theological education accessible to the public through short courses, events, and related activities; the United Methodist Course of Study to educate licensed local pastors; the new Candler Center for Christian Leadership to refine business-related skills of United Methodist leaders; and La Mesa Academy, offering diplomas in pastoral leadership via a two-year hybrid program with courses in Spanish, English, and Korean.

One of the biggest news items of the year for Candler is the announcement that after nearly 18 years, Dean Jan Love will step down from Candler's deanship in the summer of 2024. Through Dean Love's transformational leadership, Candler has expanded to offer three new degrees, five new dual degrees, and more online and hybrid options, including the highly successful hybrid MDiv and DMin degrees. She has increased the diversity of Candler's faculty and student body, continued the school's tradition of world-class scholarship in hiring 75% of the current full-time faculty, and grown the number of endowed professorships.

Her efforts have enhanced Candler's ability to fulfill its mission in a rapidly changing environment, and she leaves

the school in a strong position. The next dean of Candler is expected to be named by early summer.

Candler depends upon your prayers, partnership, and support. Thank you for the countless ways you advance this essential ministry in the life of our denomination. We invite you to visit us online at candler.emory.edu.

Drew Theological School

**Rev. Edwin David Aponte, PhD, ThD (honorary), Dean
and Professor of Religion & Culture**

Drew University Theological School educates and mentors pastors, preachers, deacons, activists, teachers, thought leaders, and change agents for ministry and service in the church and society. Drew Theological School is diverse in theology, vocations, age, as well as racial, ethnic, national, and international identities. Many Drew students are just beginning their ministry, while others come to graduate theological education with prior ministry experience.

The latter reflects a growing trend among all theological schools in the United States and Canada. Drew holds in-person classes in Madison, New Jersey, several classes meet exclusively online, while other meet in hybrid fashion, i.e., partially online, partially in-person. This is also the case with chapel worship which originates in Seminary Hall, but also is livestreamed so that students around the world participate. Drew Theological School is a global seminary with a global student population serving the worldwide church.

In Fall 2023, Drew Theological School welcomed 104 new students in all degree programs, with total student enrollment (by head count) growing from 364 students in Fall 2021 to 407 in the Fall 2023 semester. Enrollment of international students at Drew increased from 120 students in Fall 2021 to 169 students in Fall 2023. This number includes students who are studying full-time in the United States on a student visa, students who are studying online from their home country,

and students in the South Korean Cohort of the Doctor of Ministry program.

Drew's interdisciplinary degree programs provide real-world apprenticeships, promotes adaptive leadership skills, and encourages innovation through team-taught core courses as well as a variety of electives that integrate theological disciplines and faith practices. The Drew faculty's shared values are infused across all aspects of the teaching and learning:

- A commitment to anti-racism.
- Gender and sexual-identity equality.
- Eco-sustainability and environmental justice.
- Interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Drew Theological School has an increase in United Methodist students. Additionally, Drew has many United Methodist Global Fellows pursuing further education for ministry. UMC graduates are serving in conferences across the United States, and especially within our nearby regional United Methodist conferences of Greater New Jersey, Eastern Pennsylvania, and New York Annual Conference.

Duke University Divinity School

Edgardo Colón-Emeric, dean

Duke Divinity School can attest to the work of God's Spirit to usher us into a season of hope and continued faithfulness to the mission and calling to serve the church, academy, and the world. In 2023, the Duke University president and provost appointed Dean Edgardo Colón-Emeric for a full five-year term.

The Office of Black Church Studies (OBCS) commemorated its 50th anniversary. The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale (D'79) received Duke University's Distinguished Alumni Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions in ministry and service. The Hispanic House of Studies (HHS) celebrated its quinceañera. HHS was created by the Divinity School, with support from

The Duke Endowment, to support the formation of ministers to Hispanic/Latinx congregations and communities in the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Annual Conferences and beyond. These efforts extend throughout our academic and ministerial programs. For instance, we now offer the “Rediscovering the Heart of Methodism” course in Spanish on Divinity+.

This fall, we welcomed 215 entering students from 35 different states and 16 other countries. The Master of Divinity program gained 104 new students, with 54 residential students and 50 in the hybrid program. The Master of Arts in Christian Practice enrolled 13 new students; the Doctor of Ministry, 22; Master of Theology, 11; Master of Theological Studies, 29; the Doctor of Theology welcomed five new students to campus, and five special students enrolled. The Certificate in Theology and Health Care welcomed 11 residential students to campus and 15 in the hybrid program. Across all degree programs at the Divinity School, 31 percent of the incoming class identified as a race or ethnicity other than white.

Duke Divinity School continues to invest in pathways to support Methodist leadership and pastoral formation. Divinity+ launched the Church Administration series focused on developing practical skills for church leaders. More than 1,000 learners have enrolled in the first two courses, “Theology and Time Management” and “Strategic Management.” We inaugurated the Certificate in Chaplaincy, designed to prepare students to provide spiritual care in a variety of settings such as hospitals, hospice, prisons, higher education, and the military. The certificate can be earned as part of the residential M.Div., Th.M., and M.T.S. degree programs.

The school has also welcomed new leaders who bring their gifts to the work of advancing the mission to serve Christ and the church. The Office of Black Church Studies is led by the Rev. Dr. Eric Lewis Williams (D’05), assistant professor of theology and Black Church Studies; and the Anglican Episcopal House of Studies has named the Very Rev. Timothy Kimbrough (D’83), Jack and Barbara Bovender Professor of the

Practice of Anglican Studies. Key members who have joined our staff team include Anita Lumpkin, executive director of enrollment management; and the Rev. Sarah Belles, a Duke Divinity alumna and ordained elder in full connection with the Western North Carolina Annual Conference, as the director of student life.

With gratitude to funding from the Lilly Endowment, the Divinity School has launched the Transformative Preaching Lab to prepare creative, culturally competent preachers who can reach audiences in effective and engaging ways. It will expand preaching training for students in the hybrid M.Div. program with new courses and preaching laboratories and new capacities to explore and engage digital tools for community worship and preaching. The Transformative Preaching Lab also provides new opportunities for formation in trauma-informed preaching and preaching in immigrant communities.

The Theology, Medicine, and Culture initiative has launched the Mental Health Track for Christian mental health practitioners as part of its Certificate in Theology and Health Care. This hybrid certificate program offers spiritual and theological formation for mental health clinicians in a range of disciplines. The research and programming from Duke Divinity initiatives, including Theology, Medicine, and Culture; Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts; Leadership Education at Duke Divinity; and Thriving Rural Communities, continue to provide numerous opportunities to bear witness to God's creativity, compassion, and care for communities and congregations.

Gammon Theological Seminary

Rev. Dr. Candace M. Lewis, president and dean

Gammon Theological Seminary is the Interdenominational Theological Center's United Methodist constituent member in Atlanta, Georgia. The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) is a Christian Africentric ecumenical consortium of seminaries and fellowships that educate students to com-

mit to practicing justice and peace through a liberating and transforming spirituality to become leaders in the church and local/global communities.

Gammon was founded in 1883, bearing the name of the Rev. Elijah H. Gammon, a generous clergyman, businessman, and philanthropist. Rev. Elijah H. Gammon invested

and endowed the founding of Gammon Seminary in partnership with Bishop Henry Warren and the Freedman's Aid Society. Gammon has educated Black clergy for almost 140 years, with graduates serving every level of the church, including as bishops, superintendents, general church leaders, conference staff, and clergy in every jurisdiction.

Gammon/ITC offers the following degree programs: Master of Divinity, Master of Arts in Religion and Education, and Doctor of Ministry. The support given to The United Methodist Ministerial Education Fund by United Methodist conferences continues to enable Gammon students to be grounded in the Wesleyan tradition of theological education.

Our 17th president/dean, Rev. Dr. Candace M Lewis, and the Gammon staff team continue to lead innovatively in chartering a "Brand New Day" for Gammon's recruitment, retention, research and resources, fund development, and scholarship endowments in her first two years of service.

Our new initiatives and celebrations this year, 2023-2024, at Gammon, include:

- In May 2023, Gammon held our first Student Scholarship Fundraiser Golf Tournament, receiving \$70,000 in donations to assist students with their tuition, which also helped Gammon build more relationships and partnerships.
- In June 2023, The Rev. Walter H. McKelvey Endowed Scholarship Fund was launched by Dr. Loretta F. McKelvey (wife of the late Rev. McKelvey) and Dr. Walter Kimbrough with a \$50,000 matching gift in partnership with the South Carolina United Methodist Foundation.

- In June 2023, The Florida Conference raised and donated over \$60,000 to the Rev. Geraldine McClellan Endowed Scholarship Fund, which is now fully endowed by the Florida United Methodist Foundation.
- In July 2023 and December 2023, Gammon hosted the Ebony Exploration Event for 75 young adults under 35, increasing participation and forming strategic partnerships with external organizations to enhance the program's reach and impact.
- In December 2023, we celebrated our 140th Founders Day Event/Pastors and Leaders Conference, with over 200 persons attending workshops (in person and virtual) and our Scholarship Gala Dinner, hosted at IMPACT Church in Atlanta, GA.

The greatest challenge facing Gammon Seminary is the rising cost of theological education and the significant debt our students incur as they answer their call to full-time ministry. Therefore, Gammon is committed to raising a million dollars in the next two years to offer full-tuition scholarships to students called and committed to full-time ministry in The United Methodist Church. We are grateful to this annual conference for your support of theological education and your commitment to ensuring pastoral leadership is theologically trained to lead us forward in the Wesleyan tradition.

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

For 170 years Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has been in service to the Church and the Wesleyan/Methodist connection through the formation of Christian leaders in ordained and lay ministries. As the result of a new strategic planning process that seeks to position the seminary more fully and purposefully in service to the global church, Garrett adopted a new mission and vision that will focus our work to this end: Forming courageous leaders in the way of Jesus to

cultivate communities of justice, compassion, and hope ... for the thriving of the Church and the healing of the world.

During this past academic year, Garrett also welcomed its largest entering class in over a decade, with 124 new students, and a current enrollment of 314 students representing 37 states and 21 nations from across the globe.

We have experienced particular growth in students from the African continent and the Indian subcontinent, adding to an already richly diverse student body. While our denominational diversity also continues to grow, we also proudly welcomed growth in our United Methodist students, who constitute more than 50% of our student body.

Of particular importance in the past year has been the partnership we have entered into with Phillips School of Theology of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME). Phillips students are now also fully Garrett students, and together we are preparing the next generation of CME leaders in a robust pan-Methodist/Wesleyan context alongside UMC, AME, and AMEZ students. Phillips President, Dr. Paul Brown, is now also affiliated with our faculty, teaching CME History, Doctrine, and Polity, as well as spiritual formation and organizational leadership courses. It is our hope and intention to continue to grow this partnership and foster a truly pan-Methodist/Wesleyan ethos, which includes our growing global Methodist partners in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Additionally, last year, all

Garrett degree programs were made truly hybrid so that students can study with us and earn their degrees either on our Evanston campus or in virtual learning spaces around the globe. This has added an amazing breadth of experience and contexts to our classrooms, where we seek to address real-world challenges with gospel inspired solutions or responses.

Garrett's world-class faculty continue developing curricular innovations that are responsive to the church's growing needs, while also contributing a significant body of scholarly work to their respective fields. Our faculty are also at work developing

The Garrett Collective, an online platform of theological learning and resources for churches and partner organizations inspired by our faculty's research and/or strategic partnerships.

Finally, at this critical juncture in the history of United Methodism, faculty leaders are providing essential guidance to UMC students, while also continuing to envision with hope the next expression of Methodism that is responsive to the Spirit's call for such a time as this.

Perkins School of Theology

Bishop Michael McKee, Leighton K. Farrell Endowed Dean, ad interim

Perkins celebrates our vital connections with the Great Plains Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

- Three students affiliated with the Great Plains Annual Conference are enrolled at Perkins, all Master of Divinity students.
- During the 2023-24 academic year, three students from the Great Plains Annual Conference received funding from the PACE (Perkins Annual Conference Endowment) grant, with the average overall financial aid award per student totaling \$1,320.
- One Perkins student from the Great Plains Annual Conference currently is taking part in internship.

Enrollment Update

Enrollment at Perkins for the 2023-24 academic year totaled 293 students. The Houston-Galveston Extension Program, in its sixth year of providing a combination of online and residential classes leading to the M.Div. and M.A.M. degrees, totaled 87 students during the 2023-24 academic year.

Institutional Highlights

- The SMU Board of Trustees voted at its December 2023 meeting to authorize Perkins School of Theology to offer a new hybrid format for its Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Ministry degrees. The new modality, open to those enrolling in Fall 2024, provides students the flexibility to join the Perkins community while minimizing the need for extensive on-campus presence.
- Dr. Elizabeth G. Lobo, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, has convened a committee to search for the next dean of Perkins.
- Christina Rhodes, who has served a variety of roles in development and enrollment management at SMU since 2017, has been appointed Assistant Dean of Enrollment Management at Perkins.
- Dr. Frederick Aquino joined the Perkins faculty as Professor of Systematic Theology in August 2023.
- The Rev. Dr. Thomas J. Pace III (M.Div. '82) and Rev. Dr. Clayton Oliphint (M.Div. '88, D.Min. '96) were selected as recipients of the 2023 Perkins Distinguished Alumnus/a Award.
- Eleven congregations were selected for the third and final cohort of the Lilly Endowment-funded Testimony HQ initiative to develop thriving congregations through the practice of testimony as community engagement.
- More than 3,500 people visited Bridwell Library in April 2023 to view the Codex Sassoon, one of the most important and influential works of global religious and cultural history.
- The installation of the Caren and Vin Prothro new chancel organ in Perkins Chapel — a project that has been ongoing over the last two years — has been completed by the Ortloff Company of Needham, Massachusetts.
- Dr. Paul Gavrilyuk — an internationally renowned theologian, philosopher and author — will deliver this year's William J. Abraham Memorial Lecture on Oct. 3.

- We are saddened to announce the death of Rev. Dr. Charles Aaron, co-director of the Perkins Intern Program, who passed away unexpectedly Nov. 29.

The highlights listed above are reflective of the vibrant engagement of Perkins faculty, staff and students. Our mission is to equip persons for faithful leadership and Christian ministry in a changing church and society; to educate those seeking a deeper understanding of the Christian faith; and to strengthen the church, academy, and world through service, scholarship and advocacy. We thank our many colleagues, friends and alumni in the Great Plains Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church for your generous support, including referrals of prospective students.

Saint Paul School of Theology

Jay K. Simmons, President

Educating tomorrow's leaders by offering on-campus, online, and hybrid learning courses at a FLEXible schedule, Saint Paul School of Theology is a seminary serving a diverse community committed to the formation of people for innovative, creative ministry through rigorous academic life. Grounded in the academic study of faith and ministry, theology is practiced in a traditional classroom and remote spaces. Our contextual curriculum features Ministry Collaboration Groups, Practicums, Spiritual Formation Retreats, and Seminars. Students learn from dedicated faculty, experienced pastors, and community leaders about best ministry practices, leaving our graduates with the tools and first-hand experience necessary to meet the needs of a changing world.

At the core of our mission at Saint Paul is the formation of people for innovative, creative ministry through rigorous academic life. In 2024, we are launching two exciting new programs to revitalize current pastors and preachers and prepare seminary students for music ministry. First, with the help of Lilly Endowment's Compelling Preaching grant and the

leadership of Dr. Casey Sigmon, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship and Director of Contextual Education and Pause/Play Center for Preachers, Saint Paul

School of Theology is creating a center that addresses the risk of losing heart and prophetic imagination as a preacher in this divided world. The Pause/Play Center for Preachers' mission is in its name: to hold space for busy preachers to pause and play their way into a renewal of their vocation as preachers of the Good News. Second, for Fall 2024, as part of our Master of Arts in Christian Ministry (MACM) degree program, we will launch a first-of-its-kind specialization in Modern Worship Music. Saint Paul will partner with The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection and their COR Worship Collective to prepare students to write, produce, and perform modern worship music. Students will integrate a worship leader's skills with their study of theology, the Bible, history, and worship in a diverse, inclusive, and spiritually enriching environment. Lastly, we recently completed the (Theo)Logic Studio on our Oklahoma Campus. The Studio is for creating, recording, and editing digital media resources for the ministries of students, staff, faculty, and alumni. The Studio is a place for content development, from podcasts and video resources to digital graphics.

For the 2023-2024 academic year, we brought 41 new, faithful theologians from across the world to our learning community. International students from South Korea, Belgium, and Mexico added to the global learning environment on both campuses and online. Twenty-seven percent of incoming students identified as a race or ethnicity other than white, and 53 percent identified as female.

The 2023-2024 Fiscal Year brought a change in leadership to the Seminary. Rev. Neil Blair '80 retired as President on Dec. 31, 2023, and President Jay Simmons, formerly Vice President of Institutional Advancement, took the helm at the start of 2024. In addition, Saint Paul Board of Trustees' Chair Dr. Amy Hogan stepped down as Board Chair, with Ms. Sharon Cleaver assumed the position until the end of June 2024. Our current strategic plan is set to conclude within the coming year.

Consequently, the Board of Trustees formed a task force several months ago to prepare the next iteration of our strategic plan. While we are still too early in this effort to comment on any specific initiatives, the plan ultimately endorsed by the board will guide all our efforts for the next several years. Therefore, this effort is critical in defining how we ensure that Saint Paul remains a vital and vigorous seminary committed to preparing our students for creative and innovative ministry.

For the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Saint Paul Course of Study (COS) School educated 250 individual students, including 79 new students, with approximately 600 registrations and offering 46 classes. Serving 31 Conferences, 89 Districts, 116 full-time and 126 part-time

Licensed Local Pastors comprised these registrations. Seventy percent of these students are taking more than one course. To help offset student costs, 20% of all students received aid from their conference or church. COS School continues to attract a diverse student body. We helped 23 students finish the 20-course program this year. With approval from GBHEM, the school has continued its course offerings in both asynchronous and synchronous online formats.

Saint Paul is a financially healthy seminary. We operate with a balanced budget, no debt, and an endowment that is 9-10 times the size of our annual expenses. Sustainability has been our focus over the past six years, and we have achieved our goal. As always, we continue to be grateful for donations from the community that provide technology, scholarships, and evolving academic programs to students. Saint Paul School of Theology is blessed to be your partner in ministry and help those seeking to discover more and answer the call.

Your advocacy for the seminary and generous financial support have been vital in realizing our accomplishments. Many thanks for the innumerable ways you have helped Saint Paul. Your prayers and actions on behalf of the Seminary are a blessing to all of us.

United Theological Seminary

Kent Millard, President

For more than 150 years, United Theological Seminary has prepared men and women to serve as faithful and fruitful Christian leaders who make disciples of Jesus Christ. In the 2022-2023 academic year, the seminary served 547 students, representing 36 states, 20 countries, and 43 denominations, with 38% of students identifying as United Methodist. United in Christ, the student body is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial community that is 43% African American, 27% White, 18% international, 9% Hispanic, and 2% Asian or Pacific Islander. During the 2022-2023 academic year, 120 graduates completed their programs.

Houses of Study

United's academic programs include seven Houses of Study for denominational, church renewal, and/or language- and culture-based ministry, including online Spanish and Korean houses of study. These houses of study have enrolled over 120 new master's students in the United States and around the world.

Bishop Bruce Ough Innovation Center

In 2023, the Bishop Bruce Ough Innovation Center, directed by Rev. Sue Nilson Kibbey, engaged more than 5,000 participants through 64 resourcing events and activities. The Center partnered with the Black Methodists for Church Renewal Laity Advocacy Committee to conduct the 2023 Laity Leadership Institution. The center also launched a Dynamite Prayer movement, based on the guidebook "Dynamite Prayer: A 28 Day Experiment (Invite

Resources, 2022)" by Rev. Kibbey and Rev. Dr. Rosario Picardo. Multiple United Methodist conferences and more than 90 congregations across denominations committed to be part of a Dynamite Prayer Wave and received resourcing on the practice of "breakthrough prayer."

New Faces at United

Over the past year, the seminary welcomed several new members to the United community. Bishop James Swanson, most recently bishop of the Mississippi Conference of The United Methodist Church, was installed as United Methodist Bishop-in-Residence. Dr. Pauline Paris Buisch and Rev. Dr. Xavier L. Johnson joined the faculty as Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Assistant Professor of Preaching and Black Church Studies, respectively, and Dr. Eliseo Mejia came on board as the Academic Oversight Officer for the Hispanic House of Study.

Reducing Student Debt

Finances shouldn't stand in the way of a seminary education. That's why United has launched the "Fresh Wind: Where the Spirit Takes Flight" campaign to add \$10 million to the scholarship endowment, which will dramatically increase the seminary's capacity to provide scholarships to students for many years to come. As of January 2024, the seminary was more than 70% toward the \$10 million goal.

Wesley Theological Seminary

**Rev. Dr. David McAllister-Wilson, President, and Lyvonne Briggs,
Director of Strategic Communications and Marketing**

The mission of Wesley Theological Seminary (WTS) is to equip persons for Christian ministry and leadership in the church and the world, to advance theological scholarship, and to model a prophetic voice in the public square.

Despite the challenges posed by the global landscape, WTS continues to flourish, driven by our commitment to excellence in theological education and community engagement: Master of Divinity, Master of Arts, Master of Theological Studies Degrees: We offer pathways to meet the needs of a variety of students. Whether traditional, brick and mortar, in-person study or a flexible, online, hybrid model (Wesley FlexMA), WTS is committed to curating space for theological reflection,

academic inquiry, and practical application. Learn more at <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/study/>.

Doctor of Ministry Degree: WTS is a leader in DMin education offering specialized tracks of study for scholars going into parish ministry, global missions, or military chaplaincy. <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/doctorofministry/program/>.

Wesley Innovation Hub: WTS received a \$1.2M grant from the Lilly Endowment and will embark on groundbreaking initiatives that harness the power of technology, entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary collaboration. <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/wesley-innovation-hub/>.

Center for Public Theology: WTS received a generous grant from the Trinity Wall Street Foundation to launch “The Public Theology Fellows Program,” an innovative initiative to bridge gaps between faith communities and political action. <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/ice/programs/public-theology/>.

Community Engagement Institute: WTS received a generous grant from City Seminary in New York City for the innovative, immersive study and praxis of urban ministry. <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/ice/about-us/overview-2/>.

The Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion: WTS is thrilled to share two new exhibits, “Sacred Ground,” which focused on the intersection of community-engaged art and spirituality; and “Paradise Lost,” a captivating exhibition highlighting transcultural, multicultural, and interreligious narratives. <https://www.luceartsandreligion.org/>.

Lewis Center for Church Leadership: The Lewis Center conducts leading edge research for the local church. WTS is pleased to report a growing demand for transformative leadership training within religious communities. <https://www.churchleadership.com/>.

Call us: (202) 885-8659 Email us: admissions@wesleyseminary.edu. Follow us: Facebook/IG: @WesleySeminary and LinkedIn: @WesleyTheologicalSeminary.

Ministry Partners

The following ministry partners submitted reports for the annual conference.

Kansas Methodist Foundation

Rev. Dr. Dustin Petz, President and CEO

In 2023, the Kansas Methodist Foundation, KMF, lived out our values of being good stewards of resources and growing generosity to make a difference in the Church and beyond.

We want to give great appreciation for the many churches and organizations that partner with us to grow resources for ministry. We also want to thank the many new families that are using us to steward their living and legacy giving to make a difference in the world because of their faith. We are honored to serve together in our unique ministry within our connection.

Putting Your House in Order

Last year we launched our new Putting Your House in Order program with just under 100 participants joining. It is a program to help families learn and act on estate planning, legacy giving, and memorial planning. The participants have improved their lives that fit their desires in these areas and have made a “gift of love” that their families can receive and follow. The outcome is a win-win situation for everyone.

We continue to find many across Kansas who want to learn more about how best they can support their church and other charitable causes through their estate. KMF is poised as a holistic partner to come alongside many to help them create a plan, to find the technical advice, and to then steward gifts given to make a lasting impact on the church and the world.

Growing Ministry Partners

The ministry of KMF was strong in 2023. We were able to build 50 new relationships and accounts with churches, organizations, and families. New deposits totaling over \$2.78 million came into KMF for both current and new accounts.

Additionally, we distributed over \$3.9 million for ministry in our churches and beyond. As of Dec. 31, 2023, KMF was stewarding a total of \$75 million. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve Methodist families, churches, and institutions to grow ministry now and into the future.

Account System Update

A new change that will impact our ministry in 2023 and beyond is an update to our accounting system, which was a large behind the scenes effort in 2022. This new system will allow greater services and connections to our partners, once fully utilized. We are grateful for patience for our partners as we further grow into this new system.

Finally, we give thanks to our 2024 Board of Trustees for their faithful service: Gary Beach, Manhattan; Lance Carrithers, Derby; Randy Clinkscales, Hays; Andrew Conard, McPherson; Sue Dondlinger, Wichita; Duane Dunn, Wamego; Evelyn Fisher, Wichita; Janice Frahm, Colby; Ron Holt, Wichita; Sandra Holt, Overland Park; Richard Martin, Topeka; Jo Mead, Wichita; Steve Morris, Hugoton; Melinda Parks, Lenexa; Mark Queen, Manhattan; Steve Schulte, Overland Park; Carol Shelton, Wichita; Garth Strand, Hutchinson; Michael Tomson-DeGreeff, Topeka; and Shawn Wyatt, Hutchinson.

The Kansas Methodist Foundation is honored to serve the larger church as we together grow in our relationship with God through stewardship and generosity of our resources. Thank you for our ministry together. If we (Dustin, Tyler, Gloria, or Ali) can help support you personally, or through your church or organizations, please connect with us. Find us at kansasmethodistfoundation.org or 620-664-9623.

Nebraska United Methodist Foundation

Kristine Roberts, Executive Director

The Nebraska United Methodist Foundation exists to help your church and ministry grow well into the future! The foundation's purpose is to offer you resources that strengthen the ability of

Methodists across Nebraska to advance Christian ministries.

Whether you've deemed it time to create a permanent endowment fund, to initiate a planned gifts program, to provide gift and estate planning opportunities for your members, or to explore more diverse investment options for church funds, know that it's our mission to help you however we can. It is our pledge to you to always provide the best possible stewardship of the funds that you entrust to the foundation.

In 2023, we managed \$56 million in total assets, with over \$2.9 million going back to churches and ministries through distributions from their invested funds. Over \$510,000 was distributed to Nebraska churches, ministries, related organizations, pastors, and seminary students through avenues such as grants, donor-advised funds, and scholarships.

Thank you for the continued good stewardship of your gifts. We look forward to continuing to be "Your Partner in Ministry" for many years to come.

Investment Services

The foundation provides investment services to help churches save and grow funds for ministry, capital needs, emergencies, and mission opportunities in the community and beyond. Our focus is to help Nebraska Methodist churches and related organizations and ministries accomplish their goals and support their vision for the future.

An Endowment Fund & Legacy Giving Ministry for Your Church

The foundation is grateful to provide education, training and valuable resources to pastors and church committee members. We continue to develop new tools and resources to help sustain and grow your ministry. A favorite resource of churches is the foundation's detailed campaign on how to create and grow an endowment fund and a legacy giving ministry within your church.

Estate Planning and Creative Giving for Church Members

The foundation assists individuals with their estate and gift planning at no cost and with no obligation on the part of the individual to make a charitable gift. While we recommend individuals visit with their attorney, accountant or other planning professional, the foundation can often help individuals in the early planning stages of giving. Consider starting a charitable gift annuity, creating a named endowment fund to honor a family member, or consider a donor-advised fund to benefit your church or favorite ministry. We are happy to meet with you to discuss in further detail how a little planning can make a big impact.

New Start/New Faith Community Grants, Mission Grants & Ministry Grants

Every spring, the foundation awards New Start/New Faith Communities financial support in the form of grants. These grants are available for three years to conference-approved new starts. New this spring and every fall, the foundation accepts applications for its ministry grant program. NUMF has supported over 100 churches, camps and related organizations to create and grow new ministries and outreach. Because of the generous donation from Dr. Dean and Keitha Thomson, we continue to provide a grant for individuals to do mission work outside of their local community.

Seminary & Course of Study Scholarships

The foundation manages 26 scholarships for seminary and course of study students. Course of study scholarships are offered year-round.

Workshops, Seminars, and Stewardship Sermons

The word “stewardship” typically leads the average person to think of the offering plate passing by on a Sunday morning. But comprehensive Christian stewardship is about much more

than that. The foundation is here to help educate and motivate your church to support the future of the church through stewardship events, workshops, and Sunday sermons.

We are thankful to be “Your Partner in Ministry.”

United Methodist Health Ministry Fund

David Jordan, President and CEO

Thank you for the opportunity to share the progress we made in 2023 in our work to improve the health and wholeness of all Kansans. The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund was established in 1986 by the former Kansas West Conference, now the Great Plains Conference of The United Methodist Church, using \$30 million of the proceeds from the sale of Wesley Medical Center in Wichita. Our mission — Healthy Kansans through cooperative and strategic philanthropy guided by Christian principles — shapes our approach as we seek to realize our vision: “All Kansans are physically, spiritually and mentally healthy.”

Through Healthy Congregations, the long-running flagship program of our Engaged Congregations and Communities strategic focus area, we partnered with churches throughout the conference to help them plan and carry out effective health ministry programs to improve congregational and community health. Healthy Congregations is also where work in our other two focus areas — Thriving Children and Access to Care — intersect at the local level. We also focused on helping lift up faith voices for state-level change that aligns with our mission and strategic areas of funding.

Ninety two participants from across the conference gathered for learning, sharing, and fellowship in Manhattan at the two-day Healthy Congregations Retreat. This annual event resumed after a three-year gap due to COVID-19.

Sixty one congregations renewed their annual \$1,000 Healthy Congregations grants, and we are excited by the great work of

the many volunteer teams and individuals partnering with local organizations to meaningfully improve community health. Examples include partnering to ensure all children have food during the summer break, developing community gardens and orchards to provide fellowship and healthy calories, and working to address social drivers of health. Seventeen people participated in a five-week As For Me and My Body training integrating spiritual and physical health, while 166 individuals completed Mental Health First Aid (Adult and/or Youth) at no cost through Health Fund sponsorship. We continued our fruitful partnership with the Neighboring Movement to help churches become community connectors and move from a mindset of needs and scarcity to assets and abundance.

Our Thriving Children focus area supports the healthy starts, safe and stable families, and early development and learning that are necessary for every Kansas child to thrive. Our 2023 highlights include significant gains in supporting breastfeeding for optimal infant and maternal health, support for evidence-based home visiting programs aimed at ensuring healthy development during the crucial early years of life, efforts to streamline and consolidate early childhood services, research and support to increase affordability and availability of child care, and more.

Our Access to Care focus area continues our sharp focus on strengthening coverage and services, supporting innovative care delivery and workforce development and ensuring sustainable financing, statewide but especially in rural and underserved communities. In 2023, we partnered to strengthen Medicaid coverage, support best practices during the state's MCO procurement process, and minimize unnecessary coverage loss as pandemic-era rules ended and families had to re-apply for the first time in three years — a complicated and confusing process.

We continued efforts to build sustainability for Community Health Workers — frontline public health workers who serve as culturally-competent liaisons helping clients navigate health systems and access needed services.

In partnership with Kansas Hospital Association, we held community conversations across the state on rural health and hospital sustainability, workforce, child care, and mental health, and facilitated conversations in two communities around the new Rural Emergency Hospital model which can help keep rural hospitals open.

In all, the fund made 117 grants totaling \$1,969,296 in 2023, helped secure \$4 million in federal grants to improve health in Kansas and since inception has awarded more than \$79 million to improve the health of all Kansans.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our annual report. To learn more, please visit www.healthfund.org.

United Methodist Communications

Dan Krause, General Secretary

As the communications agency for The United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications seeks to increase awareness and visibility of the denomination in communities and nations around the globe. United Methodist Communications also offers services, tools and resources for communications ministry.

In 2023, United Methodist Communications (UMCom) saw continued change that presented opportunities to celebrate the impact of communications ministry. UMCom countered disinformation by providing clear, unbiased and relevant news and information. The agency continued to share the #BeUMC message that reinforces and celebrates our core identity as United Methodists. Through it all, UMCom remained committed to guiding the worldwide United Methodist Church in effective communication efforts, equipping and training church leaders, collaborating with other church entities and exploring and embracing innovation. All this helped the UMC continue to share the hope, peace and love of Christ to people around the world.

These numbers highlight some of the agency's accomplishments in 2023:

- 10.68 million web page views
- 1.68 million social media followers
- 2,098 local churches served
- 2,228+ church leaders trained
- 418 million national advertising impressions
- 344,000 newsletter subscribers
- 184,000 messages sent/received through UMConnect text messaging services
- \$153 million in designated and apportionment giving
- 12,890 queries handled by Ask The UMC

In fact, in the past three years we've been able to assist local churches within the Great Plains Annual Conference on 65+ projects.

UMCom helps promote churches and programs through marketing and advertising, such as billboards and digital campaigns, as well as reinforcing denominational unity and identity through multifaceted initiatives such as #BeUMC. Thanks to the adoption of the #BeUMC denominational brand-identity campaign by the Great Plains Annual Conference and others, it has successfully rallied members and leaders to recognize and celebrate the core values that connect the people of The United Methodist Church. With a reach of more than 86 million and 370,000 engagements in the first 24 months since its introduction, #BeUMC invites members to embody those values and remain faithful to The United Methodist Church. Among those who have heard of the denominational brand identity campaign #BeUMC, 61% say it is something they would participate in at their local church, empowering and unifying.

In the coming year, UMCom is moving forward with a renewed spirit to help reenergize and equip churches and individuals to embrace our common values across the connection and focus on ministry and mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and furthering the mission and ministry of The United

Methodist Church. The agency is excited for the future of The United Methodist Church and is honored to help share the story of the denomination, local churches and members as they put faith into action.

Learn more about the agency's work over the past year at <https://ResourceUMC.org/communications>.

Whenever UMCCom can be of assistance to you and your efforts on behalf of the UMC, please reach out.

Here is a list of helpful resources:

- Local Church Services – <https://ResourceUMC.org/LCS>
- Training opportunities – <https://ResourceUMC.org/Training>

To share stories of faith in action, get publicity assistance or media training contact:

- PressCenter@UMCom.org.
- Website, domain and hosting services – <https://UMC-churches.org>.
- Leader resources – <https://ResourceUMC.org>.
- Member and seeker information – <https://UMC.org>.
- UM news from around the world – <https://UMNews.org>.