



SPRING 2026
Vol. 4/No. 2

NEW Spirit!

UNITED METHODISTS OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
& GREATER NEW JERSEY

epaumc.org ■ gnjumc.org

Neurodiversity Ministries Blossom from Deep Listening

By Emily Wilton

In recent years, awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity—the reality that people’s brains develop and function in different ways—has grown significantly. Often associated with conditions like autism and ADHD, neurodivergence reflects a wide spectrum of human experience. Yet the church has not always embraced these differences as part of the diversity of Christ’s body, at times lacking understanding or even causing harm.

Increasingly, congregations are recognizing a call to more faithful ministry with and by neurodivergent people, creating communities that are not only more inclusive, but more whole. St. Luke UMC in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and Haddonfield UMC in New Jersey are two of those congregations.

St. Luke UMC, Bryn Mar, PA

St. Luke’s journey began a couple of years ago when the church was hiring for a new associate pastor focused on outreach to college students.

As the search neared its end, the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC)



Conference attendees mingle with vendors at Haddonfield UMC’s second annual Neurodiversity Conference. Photo by Emily Wilton.

settled on two final candidates, Rev. Qadry Harris and Rev. Brittany Whyte. Harris was a great fit for the college outreach ministry, himself a Ph.D. candidate at Temple University. Whyte was equally impressive, but she sparked something different and unexpected in the SPRC.

In addition to her ministry training and experience, Whyte spoke from her

experience as a neurodivergent person with autism and ADHD. As she did, the committee called to mind several families in the congregation with neurodivergent members. From there, a new possibility emerged: “Leadership felt we have a need here to do ministry for neurodivergent people that we didn’t

Continued on page 8



A member of Congers UMC engages in food ministry.

Pathways Bridges Inspires Congregations to Move “From the Table to the Streets”

By Ashley Wilson

Across communities, congregations participating in Pathways Bridges are reimagining what it means to be the church, shifting from inward-focused ministry to meaningful community engagement.

For many, Bridges has become more than a series of workshops. It is a community bonded by the desire for individual and communal transformation.

At Calvary UMC in Mohnton, Pennsylvania, the experience has been described as both “energizing and clarifying” by Rev. Nova Villa Vitug-Thomas. Under the coaching of Program Director Alyssa Ruch, members engaged in storytelling, small-group dialogue, and visioning exercises that helped them define a clearer sense of purpose and mission.

The enthusiasm was immediate and visible. Attendance exceeded expectations, requiring additional seating, and reflected a shared commitment to learning and growth. Through activities like a prayer walk at Mohnton Playground and collecting stories of faith beyond church walls, participants discovered the ways that “God is already at work in our community and that we are called to join in what God is doing,” Vitug-Thomas shared.

Continued on page 12

Imani Genius Lab Launches Foundational STEM Program in Camden

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

C A M D E N , N J

On Saturday, March 14, young people in Camden flocked to experience the start of something spectacular; a STEM program was launching in a church building that had once been abandoned.

“Anything that makes energy flow is a conductor,” proclaimed Pastor Tim Merrill to a group of students that clustered around him in the Genius Lab of Imani Hope Center. Pastor Merrill would know, since he himself is a master in creating new pathways for energy to flow.

After Bethel UMC closed its doors in the fall of 2023, Pastor Tim Merrill, during a walkthrough with Rev. Dennis Blackwell and Rev. Glenn Conaway, former District Superintendent for the Delaware Bay District, saw beyond the crumbling plaster and the leaky roof to possibilities for ministry yet to be realized.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Rev. Glenn Conaway, Rev. Kate Monahan, District Superintendent, and Pastor Tim Merrill pose for a group photo inside the Genius Lab. Photo by Sarah Borgstrom Lee.

Since that fateful day in 2023, the church building that was once Bethel UMC has been transformed into Imani Hope Center. Through Merrill’s leadership, the blood, sweat and tears of the community, and support from neighbors across the Delaware Bay District, the once empty building has become a bright and colorful

community hub. Today it hosts martial arts and music classes during the week and a Bible study on Sunday morning.

The Genius Lab represents the next step in embodying Imani Community Fellowship’s belief that transformation happens when people are not merely served but empowered. Children and youth are encouraged to see themselves as thinkers, leaders, and creators—capable of shaping their own lives and contributing to the common good.

For decades Rev. Merrill has lived out that vision, dedicating more than 30 years to mentoring youth in Camden and leading multiple leadership development initiatives.

Continued on page 11

INSIDE:

**Church Historians
Explore Racial and
Revolutionary Past**
PAGE 4

**EPA Awards Ceremony
Offers Testimony to
Faithful Ministry**
PAGE 5

**EPA & GNJ Annual
Conference Highlights**
PAGE 6 & 7

**The Ethical Act of
Safeguarding God
Within You**
PAGE 9

A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP

The Holy Work of Remembering

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi



I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
I will meditate on all your work and muse on your mighty deeds.
—PSALM 77:11-12

I was blessed to have two spiritually grounded, faithful parents. They taught us to interpret the world through a theological lens by frequently engaging us in theological reflections on life. I remember one conversation in which my father began by stating that he preferred preaching from the Old Testament rather than the New Testament.

Being the naturally curious child that I was, I asked, “Why?” My father explained that he liked preaching from the Old Testament because he was able to relate to Old Testament biblical figures much more than he could relate to New Testament biblical figures who immediately left their previous lives to follow Jesus, sold all their possessions, or subjected themselves to physical harm for the movement. He went on to say that, for him, the flaws, struggles, and temptations of the Old Testament characters made them more engaging and real.

My father was grateful that the biblical writers who recorded the historical narratives of the ancient Hebrew people did not hide the fact that they were all flawed, broken vessels. Every character had his or her struggles. Yet God used these flawed individuals to accomplish God's will.

Knowing that God could use these persons helped my father have confidence that God could use him and those who had been marginalized and judged harshly by society as well. These sinful Old Testament characters were shining examples

of God's sanctifying grace. Their stories revealed just how powerful the transforming work of the Holy Spirit really is.

As a child, that conversation with my father taught me that when we remove, ignore, or try to cover up the unpleasant and uncomfortable parts of our history, we actually dishonor God because we deny ourselves and others the opportunity to learn about the unrelenting, extravagant grace of God and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to visit the President's House Site in Philadelphia together with the Northeastern Jurisdiction's active bishops. While I stood in that place, I experienced the extravagant grace of God and the transformative power of God's Holy Spirit as I encountered the story of Ona Judge, a slave owned by George Washington.

It may be uncomfortable to learn that George Washington owned slaves, but he did. He took ownership of well over one hundred slaves when he married Martha. One of the blessings of the Old Testament is that it teaches us that two very different things can be true about a person at the same time. King David was a “man after God's own heart” and an adulterer. Moses was a faithful liberator, and he murdered a man. George Washington was a brilliant military leader and an excellent president, and he was also a man who owned slaves and, at times, treated them harshly.

While the White House was in Philadelphia, the state of Pennsylvania enacted the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, which provided that any enslaved person who resided in Pennsylvania for six months would be emancipated. While most of his slaves stayed in Virginia, George Washington had several enslaved people laboring at the White House. Just before they reached the six-month time limit, Washington would routinely send those caring for his needs in the White House back to Virginia for a short period and then have them return to Philadelphia, thereby resetting the six-month clock.

Ona Judge did not want to be sent back to Virginia, so, in her twenties, she took matters into her own hands and escaped from the White House, fleeing from one of the most powerful men in the world. Despite Washington's attempts to have her captured, which continued even after he left the presidency, Judge was never apprehended. Members of the African American community helped her escape and kept the easily identifiable Judge hidden in New Hampshire until her death in 1848.

Ona Judge's story speaks to the resilience and determination of a young woman. It also speaks to the unity of community, as both Black and White abolitionists joined in assisting her escape and keeping her location secret, even though they knew it put them at odds with the much-beloved President of the United States and the military force he commanded. The sacrifices made on behalf of this young woman and in service to justice demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to do far more than we think or imagine possible.

“No, I am free, and have,
I trust been made a child
of God by the means.”

—ONA JUDGE



NEWSpirit!

Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, Bishop

United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania & Greater New Jersey
205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune, NJ 07753

Sarah Borgstrom Lee, Director of Communications
sborgstromlee@epagnj.org

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

Emily Wilton, Content Coordinator
ewilton@epagnj.org

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

Corbin Payne, Video Producer
cpayne@epagnj.org

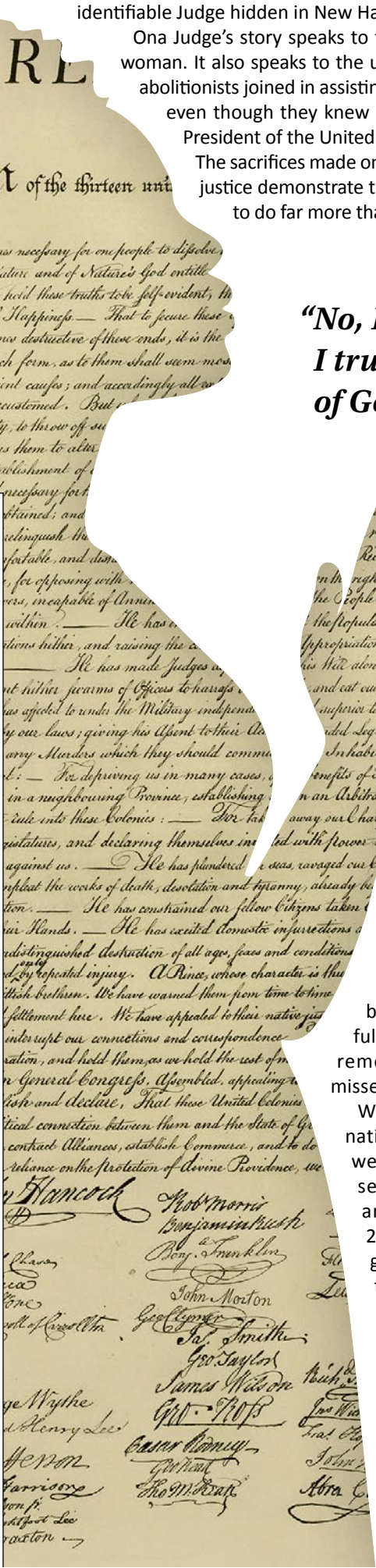
Christopher G. Coleman, NEWSpirit Designer
chris@cgcoleman.com

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

FOR ADVERTISING RATES, INFORMATION & PLACEMENT
Contact: info@epagnj.org

NEWSpirit (USPS 343-360) is published quarterly by the United Methodist Church of Greater New Jersey. Office of Publication: Office of the Bishop, 205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune NJ 07753. Periodical Postage Paid at Red Bank, NJ and additional entry offices. Mailed free to selected lay leaders and clergy of each church. Others may subscribe at the rate of \$10.00 per year.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to NEWSpirit, 205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune NJ 07753.



Peace and blessings,
Bishop Cynthia

Spring Confirmation Retreats Strengthen Faith and Community

By Apryl Miller & Carmen O'Shea

This spring, Gretna Glen Camp & Retreat Center and Pocono Plateau Camp & Retreat Center welcomed 82 confirmands and 33 adult leaders from 13 churches to their confirmation retreats.

These weekend-long retreats provided young people with opportunities to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith, discover their identity in Christ, and learn about the rich traditions, beliefs, and connectional ministry of The United Methodist Church.

Participants explored what it means to live as faithful disciples of Jesus while embracing their identity as United Methodists within the larger Church. The retreats also fostered meaningful relationships among youth and leaders from congregations across the Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey Conferences, strengthening connections through our shared ministry.

Through worship, small group discussions, interactive learning experiences, recreation, and fellowship, confirmation students explored foundational aspects of faith and discipleship while preparing to make the vows of confirmation at their local church.

The retreats encouraged participants to grow in their understanding of God's grace, the mission of the Church, and their role in living out their faith in the world. By learning alongside youth from other congregations, confirmands experienced the strength and diversity of the wider United Methodist connection and built friendships that will continue beyond the retreat weekend. The experience helped youth understand that they



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Confirmation youth get creative! Photo by Corbin Payne; Youth build Legos and relationships at confirmation retreat. Photo by Corbin Payne; Youth speak in front of a crowd outdoors at Gretna Glen Confirmation Retreat; Youth and leaders worship in a circle at Pocono Plateau Confirmation Retreat.

are part of something larger than their individual congregation—a connectional church united in mission and ministry.

Church leaders and mentors likewise benefited from opportunities to connect, share ministry experiences, and support one another in the important work of nurturing young disciples. Camp settings like Gretna Glen and Pocono Plateau provide a unique environment where faith formation, community

building, and spiritual growth flourish alongside fun and fellowship.

We are grateful to the pastors, mentors, volunteers, and congregations who participated and helped make these weekends a success. We celebrate the faith commitments being formed and strengthened through these retreat experiences and look forward to continuing this important ministry in the years ahead.

SAVE THE DATE

Save the date for next year's Confirmation Retreats! Gretna Glen Camp & Retreat Center will host its retreat April 9–11, 2027 and Pocono Plateau Camp & Retreat Center will host its retreat April 16–18, 2027. Churches interested in participating can learn more and register at gretnaglen.org and poconoplateau.org.

DISCIPLESHIP AT THE CENTER

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

Discipleship is a lifelong journey of loving Jesus more deeply and growing more Christlike in our attitudes and actions. It's an ongoing process, not a destination. And in this season of ministry in EPA & GNJ, discipleship is taking center stage, as a priority that has been both discerned by the people and identified by Bishop Moore-Koikoi.

When the Connectional Tables of EPA & GNJ met in January to discern priorities for each annual conference, discipleship was the top priority for GNJ. Strengthening the local church and leadership development, both of which are related to discipleship, were identified as priorities for EPA.

Then, at the 2026 Annual Conference in her State of the Church Address, Bishop Moore-Koikoi made her expectations about discipleship clear: "Every congregation must make a comprehensive plan for forming disciples of Jesus Christ who will transform the world."

It might feel scary to think about creating a discipleship plan; if everyone is already living in overwhelm, if our leaders are operating at max capacity, how can we, in good conscience, ask them to take on something else?

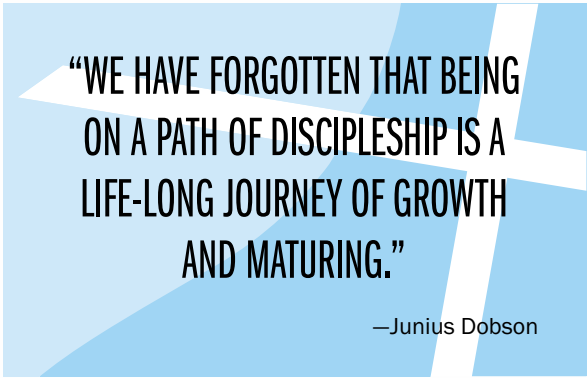
The truth is an intentional discipleship system is the only way forward as the church. Mike Breen said, "If you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples. But if you make disciples, you will always get the church."

The good news is, many churches already have the roots of a discipleship system in place. There are already activities designed to help people connect,

offer their time in loving service, and explore faith together. The invitation is to be more thoughtful and intentional about inviting people in our congregations to be deeply formed in the way of Jesus.

EPA & GNJ, as well as the larger United Methodist Connection, have tools designed to help you think about how to develop an intentional discipleship pathway.

The Connectional Ministries team created an excellent guide to building a discipleship pathway. This sim-



ple resource is designed to help your congregation build a more robust discipleship plan using programs and activities your congregation may already have planned.

You can download it at www.epaumc.org/connectional-ministries/congregational-ministry/congregational-evangelism or www.gnjumc.org/discipleship.

Discipleship Ministries has also created a resource called *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations*.

This booklet serves as an excellent first step, offering a framework for supporting people who are searching, exploring, beginning, growing, and maturing in their faith journey. It is available in multiple languages as a free download or for purchase at the Discipleship Ministries Store.

As you take the first step towards developing an intentional discipleship system, we invite you to reflect on these questions taken from *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations*:

1. What does the church offer that has helped me grow in my faith?
2. In what ways does the church encourage me to own my own growth as a disciple?
3. What could I do differently to take more responsibility for my growth?
4. Is our church doing everything it can to offer opportunities for disciples to grow and mature? Are we being intentional?

A faithful life isn't something that lives in our minds; it dwells in our bodies. As we study, as we worship, as we pray, and as we serve, we are formed more deeply in the way of Jesus. Take the next step, download one of the resources listed above and schedule a time to talk with your church leadership about what an intentional discipleship plan looks like in your context.



SCAN TO ACCESS DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES STORE.

Conference Historians Explore Racial, Religious and Revolutionary Past

By John W. Coleman

PENNINGTON, N.J.

Just before The United Methodist Church celebrated Heritage Sunday, May 24, denominational historians and archivists learned about the earliest history of both American Methodism and its host nation, which is celebrating its birth 250 years ago. That past includes still-present struggles with racism in church, state and society.

The Greater New Jersey Conference Commission on Archives and History welcomed over 50 attendees from nine conferences to the 2026 meeting of the Northeastern Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History on May 12-14, at historic Pennington United Methodist Church, established in 1774. Their theme was “Saving the Soul of Our Nation, State and Church.”

On the first day, they heard a trio of speeches on the sub-theme “Striving to End the Sin of Racism in Church and State: Contemporary and Historical Methodist Perspectives.” They learned about past racial oppression, present social challenges and determined hopes for a redemptive future.

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, who leads the Greater New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania conferences, Bishop Ernest Lyght, retired, and Rupert Hall, then vice-chairperson of Greater New Jersey’s Commission on Archives and History, reckoned with racial legacies of slavery, segregation and exploitation of Native American land and African American lives.

Moore-Koikoi centered her message on Methodist values inherited from founder John Wesley and Jesus Christ’s mission, as asserted in Luke 4:18-19, “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the imprisoned, to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind (and) to set free those who are oppressed...”

She described as imprisoned and blind those who deny or distort history and those who claim racial, religious or national superiority, particularly those who profess Christian Nationalism beliefs.

Referring to the concept of Jubilee years in ancient Hebrew society, when servants regained their freedom and others regained economic equality, Moore-Koikoi recalled modern years of Jubilee when the U.S. abolished slavery (1845), the Methodist Church ordained clergywomen (1956), and The United Methodist Church abolished its racially segregated Central Jurisdiction (1968). She called for a new Jubilee era today.

“Dismantling systems of economic injustice and inequity is how we bring hope



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi speaks during the Northeastern Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History annual meeting; Rupert Hall, vice chairperson of Greater New Jersey’s Archives and History Commission, discusses historical and ongoing economic injustice in America; Retired Bishop Ernest Lyght shares memories of the denomination’s history of racial segregation and integration. Photos by John W. Coleman.

and joy to those who are poor,” said the bishop, pointing to persisting racial bias in housing, healthcare, education, employment, criminal incarceration and other indicators of social injustice.

“Now is the time for us to listen to God and use the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us...to reset the social order.” She cited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s diagnosis of racism as “a deep-seated sickness that requires a profound spiritual awakening,” and his call for a “soul force revolution” in his 1965 speech “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.”

Historian Mark Sirak wears a Continental Army uniform during his historical presentation to the Northeastern Jurisdiction Archives and History commission members. Sirak is a member of Titusville United Methodist Church.

Photo by John W. Coleman.



Mark Sirak (left), a resource interpretative specialist and historian, recounts the 1776 landing of Gen. George Washington’s troops at Washington Crossing State Park in Titusville, N.J. Photo by John W. Coleman.

“Are you ready to do some soul work?” she asked, calling on listeners to remain awake. “Are you ready for the soul force revolution to break out all across The United Methodist Church?”

She urged Northeastern Jurisdiction Archives and History leaders to “lead us, because you know what the Methodist movement was able to do when it was woke. You can remind us of who we have been and who God has been for us. As we remember, we will gain strength and courage, confidence and reassurance to do what God has called us to do in this present.”

Bishop Lyght shared memories of the denomination’s former racial segregation. His clergy father served churches in the all-Black Delaware Conference, created in 1864, and the all-Black Central Jurisdiction, created in 1939 to segregate Black members when the North and South Methodist Episcopal churches merged to become the Methodist Church.

Many Black members remained loyal to the denomination, he recalled,

while the painful legacy of segregation, lynching and discriminatory Jim Crow laws diminished gradually with racial integration. But, he said, Black clergy and churches still wrestle with the lingering legacy of loss from social, professional and economic inequities that mirror those of secular society.

Ordained in the new United Methodist Church in 1968, just as his father was retiring, Lyght served predominantly Black and predominantly White churches in New Jersey as a pastor and district superintendent, before he was elected a bishop in 1996. He described

his cross-racial appointments as “sometimes rocky journeys.”

“Racism prevails in the hearts and minds of people, therefore dictating their actions,” explained the bishop, coauthor of three books that address race and racism in the church. “It is a struggle that must be engaged continually across all platforms in the church, the community and society.”

Following Lyght, Hall described historical and ongoing economic injustice in America, emphasizing the intertwined nature of racism and capitalism. He, too, referred to a speech by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Three Evils of Society” (1967), who noted the exploitation of black slaves and Native Americans.

“Race has been and is repeatedly used in this nation to advance economic systems that benefit some while oppressing others,” he said. “We gather here not merely to revisit the painful history, but to better understand the present and to help us shape a more just future.”

The founder and director of Hope for the City, a new urban outreach and empowerment ministry in Trenton, N.J., and formerly the pastor of Turning Point United Methodist Church in Trenton, Hall was elected May 19 by the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference as its Archives and History commission’s first African American chairperson.

Describing economic justice as “not simply a political issue but a moral and spiritual issue,” he lamented European settlers’ taking of Indigenous peoples’ land to acquire property and wealth across the continent. He said broken treaties, land theft and forced removal of Native peoples were all rationalized by denigrating them as “uncivilized, inferior savages.”

Asking “what shall we do with this history of economic injustice?” Hall responded, “First and foremost, we cannot heal what we refuse to confront.

“We cannot merely preach about heaven while ignoring suffering on earth. We are called to justice and to mercy and to courage” he said. “Despite all of America’s painful history, I still believe there is hope – hope when people come together across racial and economic lines; hope when churches become centers of justice and compassion; hope when communities organize for fairness and dignity; hope when young people refuse to inherit hatred. ... As long as there are people willing to stand, willing to speak, willing to pray, willing to organize, willing to love, there is hope for America.”

Some meeting attendees noted with irony that while the United States celebrates 250 years since its 1776 rejection of Great Britain’s monarchy to establish a land of liberty, the federal government is demanding removal of historical references to slavery and racial oppression in public signs and exhibits.

Meanwhile, decades of progress and policies to increase racial diversity, equity and inclusion in American society are being overturned by federal mandates and influence.

“What’s happening now nationally makes this event more significant and timely,” said the Rev. John Callanan, outgoing president of Greater New Jersey’s commission. “Trying to erase and white-wash our nation’s racial history, plus the absolute ignorance of perceiving DEI as something that diminishes us, is absolutely shameful.”

Continued on page 10



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Christ UMC in Easton receives #BEUMC Award; Rev. VK Macwana, chair of the Board of Trustees, poses with the Center for Urban Ministry, recipients of the Narberth Award; Rev. Myra Maxwell, Co-Chair of EPA's Urban Commission presents the Herbert E. Palmer Award to Clifton Heights UMC; Nueva Creación UMC were awarded the Herbert E. Palmer Award, Pastor Sue Kiefner poses with Rev. Bill Ritzenthaler, winner of the #BeUMC award for clergy; Rev. Steve Morton and Jennifer Lisowski pose for celebratory photo; Rev. Jack Tironi stands with members of Faith UMC Stroudsburg; Members of Clifton Heights sing together in the pews; District Superintendent Jenny Freymoyer poses with Pastor Manny Cruz and members of Boehms UMC: Willow Street; Pastor Sue Kiefer stands with Judy Ehninger, recipient of the #BeUMC Award. Photos by Sarah Borgstrom Lee.

EPA Awards Ceremony Offers Testimony TO FAITHFUL MINISTRY

By Sarah Borgstrom Lee

On a bright, sunny Saturday morning, church leaders from across the four districts of Eastern Pennsylvania gathered at Paoli UMC for the Annual Conference Awards Ceremony. The event is a quiet, unsung hero of the conference calendar. This unique worship service and awards ceremony hybrid is always filled with memorable quotes, inspiring ministry ideas, and powerful testimony to the impact of everyday faithfulness and the grace of God, who delights in surprising us.

Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, Director of Connectional Ministries for EPA and GNJ, welcomed attendees, and Rev. Dr. Andrew L. Foster III, District Superintendent and Dean of the Cabinet, offered the opening prayer. Voices rang out in praise as the congregation sang "Amazing Grace," and attention soon turned to this year's award recipients.

★ HERBERT E. PALMER URBAN MINISTRY AWARDS

The presentations began with the Herbert E. Palmer Urban Ministry Awards, which honor one church in each district for impactful ministry in an urban setting. This year's awards were presented by Rev. Myra Maxwell, co-chair of EPA's Urban Commission.

"These awards," she proclaimed, "are dedicated to congregations that have done extraordinary work in their communities. Your district superintendent sees you, and we see you."

Faith UMC in Stroudsburg received the North District award. The congregation made the bold decision to dedicate 19 percent of its annual budget to mission work and recently launched Faith Friends, a ministry that provides fellowship and support for individuals living with Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

The South District award was presented to Clifton Heights UMC. A group of church leaders accompanied Rev. Victor Gimenez to the podium. He acknowledged the contributions of each leader and extended a blessing to those gathered. "Doing ministry is difficult enough," Rev. Gimenez reflected. "It's wonderful to have people help you carry the cross. ... Bless God for the work you do everywhere."

In the East District, First United Methodist Church of Germantown was recognized as the 2026 award recipient. Although Rev. Alisa Lasater-Wailoo was unable to attend because the church was hosting a community program that morning, she shared words of appreciation and posed for a photo with Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm before the ceremony. "Urban ministry," she reflected, "is about discovering the power, beauty, strength, and resilience in places the world often overlooks."

Nueva Creación UMC received the West District award for its ministry within the community. Young adult leader Axia Preston accepted the award on behalf of the congregation. "Let's give thanks to God for this," Preston said. "God has placed these amazing people in the right place at the right time. Before we knew what was supposed to happen, God had already placed us there."

★ FOUNDATION FOR EVANGELISM AWARD

The celebration continued with the Foundation for Evangelism Award. Rev. Steven Morton, interim chair of the Congregational Development Team, described the presentation as "the annual joy of celebrating evangelism ministries."

This year's award held special meaning for him because he had known the recipient since her youth. Jennifer Lisowski of Hopewell UMC in Downingtown received the Foundation for Evangelism Award. "Jen invites people into transformation by empowering them to lead, to serve, and to see their contributions as an extension of Jesus' own ministry in the world."

★ ONE MATTERS AWARD

The One Matters Award celebrates the power of one profession of faith, one baptism, one new member—recognizing that every person is precious in God's sight. The 2026 recipient, Boehms UMC in Willow Street, was celebrating not just one new disciple, but many.

Rev. Manuel Cruz shared, "I prayed and thought about God's purpose for this church. Through prayer and discernment, I realized that the church needed to reclaim its calling to make disciples of Jesus Christ. ... Our God is a God of joy and fun. The church is made by God for joy—even for fun."

Pastor Cruz began building relationships with other Filipinos in the community and inviting them to church gatherings centered on fellowship and fun. The congregation now hosts regular karaoke nights and even creates dances for TikTok. Over the past

Continued on page 9

GNJ Annual Conference 2026 Highlights

By Emily Wilton

GNJ's 2026 Annual Conference opened with a joyful Celebration of Ministry service where Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi baptized three new siblings in Christ – Valor Sion Ahn, Liebe Lee, and Leon Shin.

The celebration continued as 15 retirees were honored and thanked for their many years of faithful service to the church and world.

These faithful servants passed the mantle on to the next generation of clergy leaders as eight people were commissioned as provisional elders: David Geller, Yeeun Kim, Daekyung Ko, Woo Lim Kwak, Gwiseok Lee, Janice McCrostie, Jun Gyu Park, and Junehee Yoon.

The Annual Conference also recognized the orders of William D. Carter III, receiving him as a provisional elder.

Three individuals were ordained to the Order of Elders in full connection: Tim Conaway, Peggy Holder, and Tayler Necoechea.

Mark Schol was received as an elder in full connection from the Northern Illinois Annual Conference.

Our global connection was also celebrated, as Moore-Koikoi ordained Josephine Tunda Maondo on behalf of Bishop Antoine Tambwe Kalema and the Board of Ordained Ministry of the East Congo Annual Conference.

We're Pressing on the Upward Way

The next day, in her State of the Church address, Moore-Koikoi called the Annual Conference to continue our work of healing and to live from a perspective of abundance rather than scarcity. Commending GNJ's commitment to social justice, she called the Annual Conference to keep educating and preaching about the gospel mandate to be an antiracist church and a more inclusive church, and to make our churches more hospitable to young people. In all of these things, she said, we are pressing on the upward way.

The John Wesley Vile Ministry Award

Toward the end of her address, Moore-Koikoi spoke about our call as Methodists to "become more vile," following John Wesley's example of preaching not just in church buildings but in the fields.

By way of encouragement and example, Bishop Moore-Koikoi highlighted the ministry of Rev. Isabel Quezada, whose community and congregation has been raided by ICE. Because her community cannot safely worship in the sanctuary, Quezada is bringing the sanctuary to them – engaging in house to house ministry at her own risk. Bishop Moore-Koikoi awarded her



Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi commissions Rev. David Geller as a provisional elder while the cabinet and supporters surround him in prayer. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.

the John Wesley Vile Ministry Award.

My Joy and Crown

In Monday's Service of Remembrance, the Annual Conference gave thanks for the lives of those faithful who have passed since we met last. Retiring elder, Rev. Tom Korkuch, proclaimed that just as Paul called the Philippian church his "joy and crown," so too are we the joy and crown of those who have finished the race and entered



GNJ Annual Conference attendees lift hands and voices in praise. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.

the Church Triumphant. Now they look on with joy and pride as we seek to faithfully follow their example.

Praise Generation!

That afternoon, the K-pop dance group Praise Generation brought the audience to its feet with a spirited performance to two contemporary praise songs. Made up of four teens—three of them pastors' children—the group's energetic choreography drew enthusiastic applause, cheers, and encouragement from the crowd.

Legislation

In the legislative sessions, the Annual Conference affirmed a new Parental Leave Policy that will guarantee 13 weeks of paid leave to clergy upon the birth or adoption of a new child with financial support from the Annual Conference for pastoral coverage.

A newly passed Domestic Violence Policy encourages churches to resource leaders to respond to incidents of domestic violence within their church community.

The Annual Conference also voted to form a Commission on the Status and Role of Queer People, marking a significant step toward embodying justice for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Both the Council on Finance and Administration and the Board of Pension and Health Benefits voiced concern over an increase of 23% (or \$6100) to the blended rate health insurance premium in 2027.

The Board of Pension and Health Benefits asked the Annual Conference for prayers and patience as they discern how best to manage this increase.

On the other hand, they celebrated that eligible part-time retirees will now be able to receive retirement benefits. Both the budget and the Board of Pensions recommendations passed.

SEEKING THE LORD

By Emily Wilton

"Seek the Lord while the Lord may be found; call upon the Lord while the Lord is near." These words from Isaiah brought the theme of prayer to life at the 2026 Annual Conference sessions of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey, from the opening Celebration of Ministry to the closing worship service.

In her powerful Celebration of Ministry message, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi called those gathered to "search for God wherever God can be found," with the important reminder that "God can be found everywhere and in everyone," from the unhoused person to the gated community resident, the citizen to the immigrant.

As we partner with God and with one another, we enter into the sacred work of building a new Jerusalem, said Moore-Koikoi, "where all God's children experience shalom, a place where every need is met."

Morning Bible Study

At Bible study each morning before conference sessions began, Bishop underscored the power of prayer not only to edify but transform.

While God's people were in the darkness and uncertainty of exile, the words of the prophet promised that if they sought God and listened, God would show them what they needed to do. Likewise, the bishop invited those gathered to wait, repent, and listen for God.

From this listening, flows discernment. "Discernment," said Moore-Koikoi, "is listening for God and to God and then adjusting your behavior based on what you hear." She called those gathered to daily conversion, to invite both the Holy Spirit's direction and correction.

Practicing Prayer

After Bible study, attendees learned about prayer practices rooted in the Korean tradition on day one and the African American tradition on day two.

Across the two conferences, Rev. Kyewoon Choi, Rev. Dr. Sukja Bang and Rev. Jisun Nam shared about powerful Korean practices like dawn prayer meetings, "tongsung kido" or praying aloud, and intercessory prayer. These practices are shaped by "han," the accumulated sorrow of a longsuffering people.

Rev. Dr. Dennis L. Blackwell and Rev. Latasha Milton taught about prayer in the Black tradition at GNJ's conference. On the EPA side, practices of African American prayer were shared by Rev. Towanda Connelly and Rev. Robert Johnson. Prayer is "a sacred act of worship, survival, resistance, lament, celebration and trust in God's power to deliver, sustain, overturn and liberate." It occurs not only in words, but in music and movement. It is not passive but "participates in God's deliverance."

Those assembled had the opportunity not only to learn about prayer practices in the Korean and Black traditions, but also to engage some of those practices themselves. They were blessed by the chance to experience God, in new ways for some, alongside their siblings in Christ.

Additional legislation passed:

- Safe Sanctuary Legislation
- Sexual Ethics Policy Update
- Church Closures
- Resolution to Amend a Journey of Hope
- Trustees Enabling Resolutions
- GNJ Nominations & Leadership Report
- Conference Advanced Specials
- Minimum Equitable Salary Recommendation for 2027
- Standards for Parsonages for 2026
- Arrearage Policy for Clergy Salaries

The following legislation was withdrawn:

- Revise Rule 19
- Transparency for a Safer GNJ
- Maintaining the Informational Integrity of the GNJ Conference Journal



Praise Generation K-pop dance group raises the energy level with performance at Annual Conference. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.



ANNUAL CONFERENCE

EPA Annual Conference 2026 Highlights

By Emily Wilton

EPA’s 2026 Annual Conference opened with a worshipful Celebration of Ministry service where Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi welcomed Yina Park as a sister in Christ through the waters of baptism.

The Annual Conference celebrated 13 clergy who are retiring from active ministry, having devoted years of faithful service to God, the church, and the world.

Those gathered were blessed by Aixa Preston and Ana Santiago of New Creation UMC whose liturgical dance embodied the movement of the Holy Spirit, transitioning from the celebration of retirees to that of commissioning and ordination.

Jessica Greene and Carmen O’Shea were commissioned toward the work of a Deacon. Six



Rev. Jeong Gyun Hong smiles onstage after his ordination as an elder in full connection, cheered on by the cabinet and supporters. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.

Saving a Seat for You

In the Service of Remembrance, the Annual Conference gave thanks for the lives of those faithful who have passed since we met last.

Retiring elder, Rev. Robin Hynicka, painted a picture of those beloved now seated at a table set by Jesus. Through their lives, they also set tables “in sanctuaries, at soup kitchens, in living rooms and hospital rooms... where people could come hungry and leave knowing they belong.”

Hynicka called us to honor them by continuing the feast they helped to prepare. We anticipated our reunion with them at the Lord’s table through the celebration of Holy Communion.

ORD TOGETHER

Looking to the future

Rooted in worship, study, and prayer, both EPA&GNJ entered into a time of holy conferencing.

In her State of the Church address, Bishop Moore-Koikoi reminded those assembled that her leadership style is to discern God’s vision alongside those she leads. To that end, the EPA&GNJ Connectional Tables, with input from the Annual Conferences, have identified focus areas, many of which overlap.

EPA’s focus areas are: strengthening the local church, justice/prophetic witness, leadership/discipleship, and youth and young adults.

GNJ’s focus areas are: social justice, discipleship, new and renewed expressions of faith communities, and young people’s ministry.

Goal setting is the next step for the Connectional Tables.

One goal that Moore-Koikoi already set forth in her address is that over the next year, every local church will develop a comprehensive plan for forming disciples. She pointed churches to the disciple-making mandate of Jesus and of The United Methodist Church.

At the denominational level, the Council of Bishops will be convening a Leadership Gathering in October 2026 where lay and clergy leaders will dream together about the future of the United Methodist Church. Zachary Holder, Linda Mier, and Rev. YoungHak Lee will represent EPA & GNJ in the gathering.

Ahead of the Leadership Gathering, the Council of Bishops wanted to hear from all United Methodists about their hopes for our beloved church. A survey was shared denomination wide. At Annual Conference, Holder, Mier, and Lee presented some key findings from this survey.

While youth and young adult engagement is the church’s highest priority, the number of young survey respondents was extremely low. There is also a connectedness gap, where a minority of US respondents feel connected to the global church whereas most Filipino and mid-African respondents do feel connected.

In view of these findings, the future of the United Methodist Church will require sharing power both across the newly regionalized denomination and across generations. Holder, Mier, and Lee called on the Annual Conferences not only to hope for the future, but to begin the work of realizing this future now.

Keep seeking

This year’s Annual Conferences may be over but the work of prayer, discernment, and faithful action in response to the Holy Spirit is daily and ongoing. Renewed by community and togetherness, Bishop Moore-Koikoi sent EPA&GNJ forth from our gatherings in joy and peace, “seeking out God who will always be found.”

individuals were commissioned toward the work of an Elder: Connor Felty, Sophy Driscoll Gamber, Derrick Gutierrez, Marcus Simmons, Jack Tironi, and Stephen Whitehead.

Heather Hammel, Jeong Gyun Hong and Jared Stoltzfus were ordained to the Order of Elders in full connection.

Legislation

In the legislative session, the Annual Conference affirmed several resolutions surrounding economic justice including, Ensuring Just Wages and Benefits in United Methodist Congregations, Transparency and Access to Benefits for Lay Employees and Deacons, and Exploring Pension and Health Benefits Coverage for Deacons, Deaconesses, and Home Missioners.

Members also engaged in meaningful discussion about the impact and basis of sexual education in



Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi baptizes Yina Park while her parents and big sister look on with joy. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.

We’ve Come This Far by Faith

The next day, in her State of the Church address, Moore-Koikoi highlighted Eastern Pennsylvania’s deep rootedness in tradition, reflecting that “We’ve come this far by faith.” These traditions serve as a foundation and springboard for where God wants the Annual Conference to go.

Moore-Koikoi called the gathered body to continue building leadership among young people by recognizing “our young people are not the future, they are the now.” She highlighted the way Camp & Retreat Ministry is already doing that with record numbers at this year’s confirmation retreats.

congregational life, ultimately affirming the Resolution on the Use of Comprehensive Sex Education Resources in Congregational Life.

Rev. Steve Cherry, CFA Chairperson introduced Danielle Andrews, EPA’s new CFO and treasurer, who presented the 2027 budget. While this year’s budget is largely the same as last year’s, Andrews said that 2026 and 2027 would be pivotal years to “reset our financial structure and foundation.”

Nevertheless, “the one thing I want you to take away from the budget that’s before you is that this Annual Conference is okay. The budget is balanced. All needs will be met,” said Andrews.

Andrews shared that it would not be possible to provide full audits due to the nature of the records that were kept but that an outside agency would do a full cash reconciliation and a five-year compilation of financial statements. Information will be shared once that work is complete. The budget was passed.



District Superintendent Rev. Hun Ju Lee and Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, Director of Connectional Ministries, serve Holy Communion during Service of Remembrance. Photo by Shari DeAngelo.

The John Wesley Vile Ministry Award

Toward the end of Moore-Koikoi’s address, she called us back to our Methodist roots of “vile” ministry – following John Wesley’s example of ministry that would be considered undignified by others, like preaching in fields and prisons.

She presented the John Wesley Vile Ministry Award to Rev. Bill Ritzenthaler whose own life was transformed by boundary-breaking grace and who now extends that grace to others through ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and community outreach.

- Additional legislation passed:**
- #2026-01: Updates and Changes to the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Rules of Order
 - #2026-02: Denouncing Dehumanizing Immigration Enforcement and Calling the Church to Faithful Witness
 - #2026-03: Supporting the Shelter First Act
 - #2026-05: Church Closures
 - #2026-10: Nominations and Leadership Report
 - #2026-11: Equitable Compensation
 - #2026-12: Rental Housing Allowances
 - #2026-13: Ministerial Pension Rate for Pre-82
 - #2026-14: Advance Special Applications

Neurodiversity Ministries

Continued from page 1

see before,” shared Rev. Mark Salvacion, St. Luke’s lead pastor. “It was a God-moment.” The church committed to the idea and found the resources to hire both Qadry and Whyte.

Whyte started—and continues—her ministry by deeply listening and connecting with the congregation’s neurodivergent members. As she listens, she is learning about the importance of flexibility in ministry with neurodivergent individuals. “A lot of time people go into a mission situation with a very concrete idea of what the needs are,” she shared, “and then they find out, well, every individual is going to have different needs and we need to be flexible and anticipate that.”

With Whyte’s leadership, the church is becoming more flexible and making subtle shifts in its culture that, over time, foster a more welcoming and inclusive environment. For instance, the congregation is learning to “be mindful in those moments before and after the service, particularly with people with sensory issues, that we don’t overwhelm them, that we ask if it’s okay to hug people and things of that nature,” says Whyte.

St. Luke is not only passionate about ministry to neurodiverse people but also by and with neurodiverse people in all areas of the church’s life. Whyte’s own leadership, for instance, is not confined to the neurodiversity ministry, but also encompasses preaching, worship and small group leadership.



Rev. Brittany Whyte of St. Luke UMC, Bryn Mawr poses for a photo. Photo by Emily Wilton.

Last year, the majority of the church’s delegation to Annual Conference was neurodivergent.

As we spoke, the sound of a piano could be heard in the sanctuary nearby. The piano tuner comes to the church regularly, shared Whyte. “Our Music Director is also neurodivergent. ... We like to have everything tuned for him because he will notice if it’s not tuned!”

Beyond creating a more welcoming environment and empowering neurodiverse leaders in the congregation, the centerpiece of Whyte’s ministry is a long-term project to create a sensory-friendly space in the church’s building. Many neurodivergent people have sensory issues and need either certain types of sensory input or reduced sensory input to regulate.

Whyte worked with the church’s trustees and other leadership to determine what space would work best to convert into a sensory-friendly room – taking historical, financial, and practical factors into consideration. They have settled on the old choir room that once stored sheet music and choir robes.

The room will be stripped down to the studs and rebuilt expressly as a sensory-friendly room. It will feature Snoezelen products that “help reduce agitation and anxiety, but they can also engage and delight,” (Snoezelen) through special lighting, sound, and textures.

This space will not only provide neurodiverse churchgoers with a place to regulate or take a break from the main worship space but will also help to build connections with the wider community.

The Holy Spirit is already at work building these connections. Recently, the church was seeking a new tenant to utilize their space during the week. At the same time, Jennifer Kempin of the Fáilte Academy, a microschool for neurodivergent children, reached out to the church in search of a space to use. Of all the churches she’d researched in the area, St. Luke was the only one to explicitly name welcome of people with diverse physical and mental abilities on its website.

The Fáilte Academy began using a classroom in the church’s Education Building in late March and will also use the sensory-friendly room when it is ready. But the partnership between the church and the school goes beyond building use.

When Kempin first inquired about the church’s space, she was delighted to meet Whyte and asked if she would be willing to spend a few hours a week talking with the school’s students. The idea was that spending time with an autistic adult who is thriving in pursuit of her purpose would be a powerful experience for the students.

Whyte is hopeful that the church’s relationship with the Fáilte Academy is just the first of many partnerships with community organizations that also serve neurodiverse people.

As Whyte looks toward her own future and that of the church, she is excited to see the ways that understanding, interest, and support for neurodiverse communities are blossoming. Whyte points to growing resources like the work of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and a recent explosion of books exploring autism and theology, including *Autism and Worship: A Liturgical Theology* by Armand Léon van Ommen.

For churches hoping to become more welcoming and inclusive, Whyte encourages a simple but profound starting point: listen to neurodiverse voices already present in your congregation and community, remain flexible, and create spaces where people can connect through shared interests and experiences. In doing so, churches may discover not only new ways of welcoming others, but new ways of helping people feel seen, valued, and less alone.

Haddonfield UMC, Haddonfield, NJ

Across the river, Haddonfield UMC has undergone a similar journey. Through their work with Pathway Bridges, which helps congregations reflect on the needs of their community, Haddonfield realized that there were many families with neurodivergent children in their orbit. They decided to host a neurodiversity conference.

On Saturday, January 31, Haddonfield UMC (HUMC) hosted their second annual Neurodiversity Conference – a time for neurodiverse individuals and their loved ones to gather, connect with community resources, and listen to a powerful keynote message.

The morning began with a resource fair set in the church’s Proport Café. During the fair, conference attendees had an opportunity to connect with a myriad of organizations serving neurodivergent people, from

Spectrum NJ, an organization run by autistic people that fosters independent living, socialization, and support groups, to Blue Light, a music program where instructors and audio engineers help people of all abilities bring their musical dreams to life.

Dr. Phil Fizur, a member of HUMC and psychologist who spearheads the conference, said bringing these organizations together in one space is a much-needed step toward breaking down the silos within South Jersey’s health and social service systems—allowing them to connect not only with those



Dr. Michael Hannon gives the keynote speech at Haddonfield UMC’s neurodiversity conference.

Photo by Emily Wilton.

they serve, but also with each other. He reflected, “As individuals we can do a lot of good work; as a unified community, we can do great things.”

Midmorning, attendees were invited to gather in the Fellowship Hall where Dr. Michael Hannon gave the keynote address. Hannon is a counselor and professor with expertise in providing care to Black boys, men and fathers of autistic people. His talk centered around his own journey as a Black dad to his autistic son, Avery, now 21 years old.

Hannon candidly shared how he and his wife learned, often painfully over the years, to listen and respond to Avery’s needs. Nevertheless, his message was one of hope. He encouraged those present to discover hope by listening to and learning from the neurodivergent people in their lives so they can be “the right kind of help.” He pointed people to hope through community, faith, and ultimately, through autistic joy. For Hannon and his family, that joy – Black autistic joy – has come through Avery’s love of music and dancing.

“When you have hope, a sliver of it, it provides inspiration,” said Hannon, “and I’m here to remind you that the neurodivergent people in your lives and the neurodivergent people here today are a source of hope, if we’ll allow it.”

In a question-and-answer period that followed, neurodivergent individuals and their families posed frank and honest questions to Hannon who responded with grace, hope, and practical advice.

The conference closed with a shared meal during which participants had an

opportunity to debrief, connect once more over discussion questions, and simply enjoy one another’s company.

HUMC’s second Neurodiversity Conference was a clear success. Neurodiverse people and their loved ones connected, found support, and were celebrated. However, the conference is only one part of HUMC’s much broader approach to ministry with neurodiverse people.

The church’s second floor features a sensory-friendly room, a quiet space filled with gigantic stuffed animals, sensory steppingstones, wobble cushions, foam balance pads, and even a massage chair. This space allows people to have the sensory experience they need when they are feeling dysregulated – for instance, during youth group.

For the past couple of years, the church has also launched a standalone Vacation Bible School program for neurodiverse kids. They are now exploring ways to do Sunday School differently so they can minister well to neurodiverse kids through their regular weekly programming.

Currently, all the Sunday School classes feature fidgets, wiggle seats, and kick bands to help with sensory and attention needs during class. There is also a buddy system where those who need extra support are paired with a friend in class who can provide that to them.

For Rev. Cricket Denton, Pastor of Student & Mission Ministries and Rev. Dr. Chris Heckert, Lead Pastor, ministry with neurodiverse people is both a matter of justice and an opportunity.

Heckert reflected on his own experience as a child with Tourette’s syndrome and ADHD whose Sunday School teachers did not know how to teach him well. Neurodiverse children have always been in church, he said, but there was nowhere for them to land. Too often, they were misunderstood, disciplined, or met with frustration rather than support. “We’ve gotten better at that,” said Heckert.

But it’s not just about doing what’s right. It’s about paying attention to the people who are already present in both the congregation and the wider community. Heckert noted that the Haddonfield



Giant plush toys, balance pads and a peanut ball adorn Haddonfield UMC’s sensory-friendly room. Photo by Emily Wilton.

area is home to many neurodivergent individuals and their families, perhaps due to the abundance of educational, medical, and family resources there.

At both Haddonfield UMC and St. Luke, neurodiversity ministries are works-in-progress, born out of deep listening to their communities and to the Holy Spirit. One thing is certain, both ministries are committed to honoring the image of God in every person, meeting people where they are, and celebrating the diversity of Christ’s body. 🌈

EPA Awards

Continued from page 5

year, the church welcomed three new members, all of whom traveled to Paoli to celebrate with their pastor.

As he concluded his remarks, Pastor Cruz boldly proclaimed, “There is no church that is too small to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

★ NARBERTH UMC LEGACY AWARD

The celebration continued as Rev. V.K. Macwana, chair of the Board of Trustees, presented the Narberth Legacy Award. The award was established when Narberth UMC voted to close and dedicated its remaining assets to seeding new ministries.

Rev. Macwana praised the congregation’s enduring legacy and invited attendees to consider the expansive possibilities of ministry.

“The church is never limited to bricks and mortar,” he said. “It lives wherever people respond in faith. Where is God calling us to let go so that something new might grow?”

This year’s award was presented to The Center for Urban Ministry, a new church start in Philadelphia. Rev. Myra Maxwell and leaders from the ministry came forward wearing their trademark “Hi Neighbor!” T-shirts to accept the award.

“God is love,” Rev. Maxwell shared. “That is truly what this ministry has been able to embody. We host healing circles and take great pride in our Healing Through Art ministry. Parents who first came on their own are now bringing their children with them.”

★ #BeUMC AWARDS

The ceremony then turned to a new recognition. Following the presentation of the Narberth Legacy Award, Pastor Sue Kiefer, chair of the Communications Committee, introduced the inaugural

#BeUMC Awards. The awards honor a layperson, a congregation, and a clergy member whose ministry reflects the denomination’s vision statement:

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

★ LAITY AWARD

Judy Ehninger received the #BeUMC Laity Award for her tireless work equipping a new generation of lay leaders.

Her district superintendent, Rev. Hun Ju Lee, praised her impact:

“Through events such as Days of Learning, leadership training, and foundational Christ Servant and Certified Lay Minister classes, Judy fosters growth in discipleship, spiritual formation, and practical ministry skills. She helps people of all ages discover and live out their callings in Christ.”

★ CONGREGATIONAL AWARD

Christ UMC in Easton received the #BeUMC Congregational Award for its ministry among people experiencing homelessness in the community.

Each year, the church operates a warming center from December through mid-March on Mondays and Wednesdays, offering breakfast and a safe place to gather. Their commitment has become well known throughout the community. When a local fire displaced residents, the Red Cross contacted Christ UMC to ask whether the church could provide emergency shelter.

The congregation quickly welcomed 22 individuals, organizing accommodations on short notice and even planning an impromptu Easter egg-dyeing activity.

Pastor Joseph Grasser summed up the church’s philosophy simply: “We try to be a Matthew 25 church. We try to be a blessing. And we find that as we bless others, we are blessed in return.”

★ CLERGY AWARD

Rev. William “Pastor Bill” Ritzenhaler received the #BeUMC Clergy Award. His personal testimony brought tears to many eyes and offered a powerful witness to God’s transforming grace.

“Thank you for presenting me with this award,” he began. “It is an award I do not deserve.”

He shared the story of how he first encountered Christ while sitting in a jail cell. When he appeared before Judge Fisher for sentencing, the judge issued an unusual requirement: he was to attend church every Sunday with the judge and his family.

That decision changed the course of his life. Rev. Ritzenhaler recalled the judge telling him, “The Spirit told me I would change your life today.” Indeed, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the faithfulness of one judge, his life was transformed.

Today, Rev. Ritzenhaler lives with the deep conviction of someone who knows he has been redeemed. His ministry is rooted in service and in inviting others to experience the same freedom he has found in Christ. Every Thursday, his congregation distributes approximately 16,000 pounds of food, serving more than 400 people. Food that is not distributed is shared with six additional feeding ministries throughout the community.

Yet the ministry is about more than addressing food insecurity. It is grounded in prayer. Volunteers pray for every person who comes through the line, and the congregation gathers weekly for prayer on Wednesday evenings.

“It’s time to pray with these folks,” he said. “It’s time to hear them. Whatever it is, we pray, asking God to enter their lives. We transform those lives, just as Judge Fisher helped transform mine.”

As Rev. Ritzenhaler’s testimony continued to resonate throughout the room,

Rev. Steve Pittman, superintendent of the South District, offered the closing prayer.

“Thank you for sharing the gospel,” he prayed. “It is one thing to proclaim the gospel, but another to live it through action. Thank you for the love of Christ that you have demonstrated.”

A Witness to God at Work

The service concluded with a stirring rendition of “Here I Am, Lord.” Following the hymn, Rev. Hun Ju Lee, superintendent of the North District, offered a final blessing and sent attendees forth to continue their ministries.

Long after the last word was spoken, what lingered was a profound sense of witness.

Throughout the morning, congregations shared stories of service, discipleship, outreach, and transformation. In the testimonies, the laughter, the singing, and the celebrations, the Holy Spirit moved among those gathered—refreshing weary spirits, inspiring new possibilities for ministry, and reminding everyone present that God continues to work in and through the people of The United Methodist Church.

The Annual Conference Awards Ceremony did more than recognize accomplishments. It bore witness to the faithfulness of ordinary people answering God’s call in extraordinary ways. From urban ministries and new church starts to evangelism, discipleship, community outreach, and leadership development, each award told a story of lives being changed through the love of Christ.

As attendees departed Paoli UMC and returned to their local churches and communities, they carried with them not only certificates and awards, but also renewed encouragement. The stories shared throughout the morning served as a reminder that faithful ministry is happening every day—and that God is not finished with the church yet. 🌈

The Ethical Act of Safeguarding God Within You

A Reflection on Etty Hillesum and 1 Thessalonians 5:17

By Alison VanBuskirk Philip

1 Thessalonians 5:17 gives the familiar encouragement, “Pray without ceasing.” Someone recently asked me what I think that means. It’s the kind of instruction that can make you feel like you aren’t praying enough if you aren’t thinking about prayer constantly. And how do you know if you’re praying well? The person I was talking with wondered whether prayer has to be emotional to count. What if she’s saying the words but not really feeling them?

Most of us are also aware that prayer is just one part of how we live out our faith. We aren’t asked only to pray. The United Methodist movement understands our faith in Jesus to include getting up, going out, and doing something in response to what we believe. Social holiness has been central to who we are from the beginning.

These tensions about unceasing prayer point me toward something from rabbinic tradition: Scripture doesn’t have one fixed meaning. God speaks not only through the words themselves but through our conversation about them. The rabbis would wrestle with texts and debate with each other, and those conversations were written down as midrash or additional teaching. The idea is that something holy happens in that process. God speaks as we bring ourselves to the text. A living interaction unfolds as we reflect, question, and wonder.

With that in mind, I want to introduce a contemplative voice that has shaped how I think about prayer. Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish writer whose letters and



Alison VanBuskirk Philip

diaries capture her moral and spiritual resistance during the Holocaust. She’s become a conversation partner for me on the question of unceasing prayer.

Hillesum describes prayer as “an uninterrupted dialogue,” a kind of interior attentiveness to the presence of God. Her writing itself embodies this attentive conversation in a way that gives texture to what “pray without ceasing” might look like. She suggests that responsiveness to the holy within and without nourishes us to be “a balm for all wounds,” to be “thinking hearts,” and to discover and offer glimmers of God’s love in a chaotic and

sometimes brutal world.

Living through the Holocaust, she is acutely aware of the evil and horror human beings are capable of. She reflects regularly on how she might not add to the world’s violence by letting hatred take up space in her own heart. Prayer is her way of staying human when others are trying to make her less than human. It’s an ongoing practice that “safeguards that little piece of God within ourselves.” In that framing, a personal, contemplative act is also an ethical one: to keep God alive within herself is to keep God alive in the world.

That resonates with how United Methodists understand our theological task (see The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 105, Section 4). Prayer connects us with the mysterious reality of God’s presence, peace, and power. That connection prepares us to participate in God’s work in the world.

So “pray without ceasing” isn’t about living with hands folded and eyes closed. It’s not a passive

stance. It can point to an active, ongoing attentiveness to God’s presence as we seek faithfulness in complexity and hope in despair. It can point to a simultaneously contemplative and ethical practice of staying in relationship with God so that God shapes our being, doing, speaking, and relating.

Here’s an invitation that flows from Hillesum’s writing: choose one simple prayer to hold within you. Maybe pick a line from the Lord’s Prayer or a short petition like “Lord, have mercy,” or “Peace, be still.” If you’re more visual, maybe it’s an image like the good shepherd or the bread of life. Let your prayer phrase or image be an anchor, a place you return to again and again as a reminder of God’s presence with you and within you. Put it on your mirror. Make it your phone background. Return to it when you get in the car, wash your hands, or settle in for the night. Let it draw you toward the mysterious but alive movement of the Holy Spirit.

That kind of anchoring expands prayer beyond words, feelings, or time set aside into a posture that holds personal and social holiness together. It sustains our being, doing, speaking, and relating. It keeps us open to encounters with the living Christ. 🌈

For more on Etty Hillesum’s spirituality, see Randall S. Rosenberg’s “Etty Hillesum’s Little Way for a Secular Age” at Church Life Journal (<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/etty-hillesums-little-way-for-a-secular-age/>), or read her letters and diaries, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*, published by Henry Holt Press (1996). Phrases from her writing quoted in this article come from her diaries and/or are mentioned in Rosenberg’s article.

Prayer As an Act of Love

By Gina Yeske

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”

—EPHESIANS 6:18

One of my favorite feel-good movie clips that lifts my spirits even on a tough day comes from the 1997 movie *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. You might know that scene...

“The moment I wake up
Before I put on my makeup
I say a little prayer for you...”

While it is a silly song, I actually embrace that idea of spending the day saying little prayers for others, a beautiful blend of prayer and love. Prayer is an act of love to the God of love, because God is love.

Nearly sixteen centuries ago, the great theologian Augustine of Hippo declared God loves each of us as if we were the only person on earth, yet God loves all as God loves each. There’s no one on earth today that God loves any more than God loves you, nor is there anyone God loves any less.

In a world filled with pain, hurt, distrust, and division, this is not an easy concept. Where is the love in our troubled world, our national situation, our neighborhoods, our church, the workplace, and even our family relationships? How do we cope with the struggle to love and understand one another?

One of the ways I grapple with this is through intercessory prayer. I bring before God the people and situations that weigh on my heart. This practice began early in my life. I remember being very young and praying nighttime blessings regularly. Even when we had been out for the evening, we would still pray together in the car as a family, for each other, for grandparents, for the poor, and for the sick.

Sometimes I kept prayer journals; other times I was part of prayer groups. Even in seasons when I was not closely connected to the church, I still found



Prayer requests on colorful sticky notes fill a room in the Yeskes’ home. Photo by Gina Yeske.

myself in an ongoing, prayer-filled dialogue with God.

During the months of the COVID-19 lockdown, feeling helpless and unsure, I hosted a GNJ morning prayer call. Each day, people from around the world would join and place their needs in the Facebook chat. My husband and I copied their names and placed them all over our living room and prayed for them daily. This was intercession in its most tangible form, holding each name, each story, before God in love. I can still picture those names covering the room. This was a sacred task.

Now intercession, like all prayer, is not a desperate attempt to convince God to do something. Instead, it is asking God to allow each of us to participate in the divine work by holding another in love while the Holy Spirit works. We are not changing anything but instead are being changed.

Intercession is not just praying for someone else’s needs; it is praying with the real hope and belief that God will step in and act. It is a commitment to hold someone before God over time.

There have been times when my prayers felt like they were hitting the

ceiling, when nothing I prayed for seemed to be answered and God felt silent. There was a season when I had come to a place of struggle with life’s course, with some individuals, with ministry, and even with God. What made this season unique was that, unlike other challenging times, I was just plain tired of praying for myself.

The turning point in that season did not happen because my circumstances changed, but rather because my hope was restored through the power of intercessory prayer, the prayers of others carrying me when I could not pray for myself.

In a beautiful act of love, my husband stood in front of the church and asked them to specifically pray for me. In some ways, this was very humbling, but it was a powerful gift. It was the prayers of the church that made a difference.

Look around. Who might be in need of prayer today?

I find myself wondering how we are praying deeply and intentionally for those who need hope today. I am aware that in recent years, “thoughts and prayers” can feel like empty words. And while I agree that prayer must be accompanied

by action, I also believe deeply in the value of prayer in every circumstance. If I say I am praying for you, I mean it. I will pray. Prayers of intercession, prayers of thanksgiving, and then prayers for direction toward what comes next.

Praying for another is one of the most beautiful things that we can do. In many cases, when we intercede, it is because we already care for the person we are praying for. But what if this practice could stretch us even more in the direction of love? Are we willing to move beyond prayer for those we like? Can the prayers we lift up for someone we are angry with, hold a grudge against, or simply dislike make a difference?

I was reminded of this in a very real way as I began praying each evening for peace in Ukraine. Over time, that prayer shifted, and I found myself praying not only for Ukraine, but also for Russia, not to excuse harm, but in hope for a softening where God might still work.

Jesus calls us to intercede even for our enemies. And perhaps this is where prayer does its deepest work, not in changing others, but in changing us. When we place even those we struggle with before God in love, something shifts. Over time, we begin to care more deeply. We hold them differently. Prayer shapes us, changing how we see people and moving us toward them in Christ-like love.

I know that one of the most important aspects of ministry for me was to learn to pray before I acted. I cannot tell you how many times God used that time of prayer to change my initial instincts.

What would it look like for your church to be known as a praying church? What if we, as an Annual Conference, committed everything to prayer?

First, the moment you wake up, ask God to bring someone to mind who needs the gift of love today.

Second, as you go through the day, pay attention to a situation around you, a place where something feels off, heavy, or uncertain. It might be something you hear in the news, something in your community, or something closer to home.

Hold these before God, even briefly. And then, say a little prayer. 🌈

Conference Historians

Continued from page 4

He lauded the commission’s efforts to increase its own diversity through the addition of several racial-ethnic members, including Hall, Cynthia Mosley (Lenni-Lenape-Nanticoke) and Korean-American member Meekyung Kim.

Callanan and Mosley began the meeting with a land acknowledgement ceremony, reading and co-signing an official statement that acknowledges “that our churches and facilities within the Greater New Jersey Conference stand on the unceded ancestral land of the Lenni-Lenape in Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.”

Mosley is a leader of St. John United Methodist Church, in Bridgeton, N.J., the denomination’s fifth oldest Native American congregation and a recognized Historic Methodist Site. “Joining the commission is a way for us to share our history of racial oppression and the struggles and survival of American Indians,” she said.

Meeting’s Second Day Features Tour of Key Sites

The meeting’s second day featured a bus tour of important Revolutionary War sites in central New Jersey. They

included Turning Point United Methodist Church, founded as First Methodist Church of Trenton in 1772. One of the state’s oldest Methodist churches, it was used to care for wounded soldiers. Today it hosts one of Trenton’s busiest free food distribution ministries.

The tour also featured several Revolutionary War battle sites in Trenton, Princeton and Monmouth, and the place where General George Washington’s troops landed after secretly crossing the Delaware River through a harsh winter storm on Christmas night in 1776. From there they marched about nine miles to Trenton to launch a successful, surprise attack on the British-Hessian garrison. It was a turning point in a war the Americans were losing until then.

Attendees also visited the historic Tennant Church in Freehold, one of the country’s oldest Presbyterian churches, where early Methodist circuit riders may have preached. And they viewed archival exhibits of resources from America’s pre-and post-war period housed at Princeton Theological Seminary’s Wright Library. The new library, built in 2013, is named for the seminary’s first African American graduate, the Rev. Theodore Sedgwick Wright, class of 1828.

In addition, they heard the Rev. Kevin Newberg, Ph.D., director of Christian and Methodist Studies at Drew Theological School, recount the enthusiastic lay preaching and evangelism efforts of Captain Thomas Webb. The colorful British army officer helped establish some of the earliest Methodist societies and churches in the Northeast, including the John Street Church in New York City and Historic St. George’s Church in Philadelphia.

The Rev. Bonnie McCubbin, an archivist and director of Museums and Pilgrimage in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, found Newburg’s lecture on Webb’s busy, dedicated life and unusual preaching style “especially informative and enlightening.”

But she was also “grateful for Bishop Lyght’s honesty and willingness to share so personally about his experiences growing up in the racially segregated Delaware Conference.

“This was the first time many heard someone talk so candidly about the Central Jurisdiction,” she said. “I heard comments from people who didn’t know how challenging it was. This isn’t just Black history. It’s everyone’s history.”

McCubbin, the pastor of historic Old Otterbein United Methodist Church

in Baltimore, recently highlighted racial experiences recalled by prominent Black United Methodists in her new book *I Love to Tell the Story: A Pilgrimage Towards Racial Justice in The United Methodist Church*.

“Our nation is looking forward to celebrating 250 years in July,” she said. “Yet, we sell ourselves short when we do not reckon with the past and wrestle with our own complicity in the racial divides that persist to this day.

“It can be painful to talk about the past. But if we don’t, we are cheating the present and future out of a true celebration where all people—no matter their skin color, heritage, socio-economic status, age, gender, sexuality or any other category that divides us—can claim freedom: freedom in the country and freedom in Christ.” 🌈

The Rev. John Wesley Coleman is a freelance journalist for United Methodist News and a licensed local pastor on loan to Greater New Jersey from the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. This article is an extended version of his UM News article “Conference historians explore racial and revolutionary past,” published June 3, 2026.

Imani Genius Lab

Continued from page 1

His time as a fellow at the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative and Harvard Innovation Lab helped inspire the Genius Lab. As Merrill sat and listened to students at Harvard pitch innovative projects, he realized, “My kids in Camden are just as smart. They just don’t have exposure.”

Motivated by that insight, he researched the importance of early STEM exposure and became convinced this was his next calling. He envisioned a program that would spark imagination while equipping young people with practical, lasting skills that could never be taken away from them.

Pastor Merrill explained, “A lot of STEM programs get kids building robots, but don’t help them understand what is an amp, an ohm.” The Genius Lab was designed to help students gain foundational knowledge of the science, mechanics, and engineering behind the projects, so that they could apply that knowledge in future settings.

With funding from colleagues and friends from the Harvard Advanced Leadership Institute, as well as from churches in the Delaware Bay District, the vision became a reality.

On the day of the grand opening, the sun shone brightly, reflecting the sense of new possibility. The Imani Hope Center welcomed neighbors to explore



Pastor Merrill helps students assemble a bread board. Photo by Sarah Borgstrom Lee.

held hands to complete the circuit and watched the light turn on—then off again when the chain was broken.

They experimented further, observing how insulators disrupted the current and how water, a conductor, allowed the light to remain lit.

Parents and community members looked on with excitement. Ms. Shakera Holmes watched as her son worked on his breadboard, reflecting on the value of spaces where learning becomes tangible. She remarked, “It’s good to have something positive to do. I’ve been sitting here for an hour already, learning something myself. Cultivating that sense of curiosity in community is so, so, important.”

She was not alone. The Genius Lab was full of adults like her who were passionate about equipping a new generation with tools they would need to thrive in the information age.

Merrill was joined by former mentees and community partners, including Wali Palmer, a Rutgers graduate and coding expert. Palmer gushed about what the project meant to him, “If you expose kids to

STEM education it can open new doors. It can change the trajectory of a child’s life... I didn’t know you could do that, by just doing this... That’s a skill set that you can never take from them.”

He wasn’t the only one who was excited to be there; a whole team of volunteers were on hand ready to help, including Theo Robinson who shared, “A STEM program like this is hard to find. It gives them a head start. I find it really fulfilling to have a hand in that.”

Miles Cream agreed, “One of the things about communities like ours is there aren’t always people to encourage young people to learn new skills that transfer to adulthood. Seeing those skills be taught at an early age is amazing. It’s a beautiful thing.”

District leaders also attended the opening, including Rev. Kate Monahan, District Superintendent for Delaware Bay District and Rev. Glenn Conaway, the former District Superintendent. Monahan was elated:

“The establishment of the Imani Hope Center is a God-sized dream come true on the Delaware Bay District, several

“ONE OF THE THINGS ABOUT COMMUNITIES LIKE OURS IS THERE AREN’T ALWAYS PEOPLE TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO LEARN NEW SKILLS THAT TRANSFER TO ADULTHOOD. SEEING THOSE SKILLS BE TAUGHT AT AN EARLY AGE IS AMAZING. IT’S A BEAUTIFUL THING.”

—Miles Cream

years in the making... I am so proud that as a district we decided to steward our gifts this Christmas to raise \$5,000 to help Imani launch their computer lab. The Genius Lab is going to give new generations in Camden, NJ the essential skills to become future leaders in technology and computer coding. I could not be more excited or hopeful than when our United Methodist connection chooses to work together to invest in the next generation of faith-informed leaders for our world. Ministry like this is why I get up in the morning!”

And Conaway agreed, “This was one of the dreams, to just get this far.”

The grand opening of the Genius Lab ended with food, as all great Methodist gatherings do. As the inaugural session came to a close, Merrill asked God to bless the food and all the young people gathered.

“God thank you for the geniuses that came today. Thank you for all the things they were able to learn.”

Friends, both old and new, shared a meal, laughter, and stories, reflecting on a day filled with discovery, connection, and hope. The program continues through June 2026. To connect with the Imani Hope Center and learn more about The Genius Lab, visit imanicamden.com. 🌈



Students watch in wonder as the electrical current passes through them to light the diode. Photo by Sarah Borgstrom Lee.

the newly created space, complete with modern technology, including multiple 3D printers.

The day began with students taking a baseline STEM assessment on computers. From there, the focus shifted

He explained “Anything that makes energy flow is a conductor. Take a hand. That’s electrons flowing through all of us.”

After learning the basics, students built their first circuits using bread-

“IF YOU EXPOSE KIDS TO STEM EDUCATION IT CAN OPEN NEW DOORS. IT CAN CHANGE THE TRAJECTORY OF A CHILD’S LIFE... I DIDN’T KNOW YOU COULD DO THAT, BY JUST DOING THIS... THAT’S A SKILL SET THAT YOU CAN NEVER TAKE FROM THEM.”

—Wali Palmer

to hands-on learning through real-life experiments.

Pastor Merrill beamed as students gathered early around the table for their first activity. Using a small diode powered by a safe electrical current, he demonstrated how circuits work. Students

boards, multimeters, and wire strippers. Adults and volunteers helped small hands learn how to strip wires and thread the wires through the breadboard to the LED lights, multimeter, and batteries. Cheers erupted as one by one each team got their diode to light up.

Pathways Bridges

Continued from page 1

That realization has reshaped how the congregation operates. Events are now intentionally outward-facing, including the 50th anniversary celebration of the church’s preschool, which welcomed alumni, neighbors, and families for a community gathering. Their 2025 Live Nativity, created in partnership with local churches during the borough’s Christmas Tree Lighting, drew a large and deeply moved audience.

Congregational leaders say Bridges has transformed how they communicate, collaborate, and connect, with a renewed focus on joining the work already happening around them.

A similar spirit of renewal has taken hold at Butler UMC in New Jersey. Rev. Iraida Ruiz de Porras describes her team’s experience as “enlightening,” particularly around the experiential learning like the “Human Library,” which emphasized listening with empathy, openness, and without judgment.

Bridges also fostered intergenerational collaboration. Children and youth played an active role in identifying community needs and imagining solutions alongside



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Community members join in Calvary UMC: Mohnnton’s preschool 50th anniversary celebration; (Left to right) Sen. John Kane, former Eddystone Mayor John Yannuzzi, Mayor Ron Hughes, Pastor John Lafferty at Eddystone UMC’s Narcan Overdose “Save a Life” Community Training; Members at Congers UMC unload food from a truck for ministry.



adult members, an experience leaders called both refreshing and inspiring.

This shift in perspective proved critical during a time of economic hardship. As financial assistance programs faced cuts, Butler UMC’s food pantry, “Loaves and Fishes,” continued serving more than 150 families each month. After a public call for donations and volunteers, the response from the community was overwhelming.

Contributions surged, volunteers stepped forward, and the church expanded its ability to meet urgent needs during the holiday season.

The experience illuminated a key insight: a church thrives when its community thrives.

For Rev. John Lafferty, Pastor of Eddystone UMC in Pennsylvania, Bridges has also highlighted practical ways churches can serve. In his congregation, conversations revealed a growing need for emergency

preparedness following the closure of two nearby hospitals.

In response, the church is working to become a community training hub, offering programs such as Active Shooter Prevention and Narcan overdose response, with plans to expand into CPR, First Aid, and “Stop the Bleed” training. These efforts not only address critical safety concerns, but also create new opportunities to welcome the community into the church space.

“Bridges has encouraged our church to dream beyond our sanctuary,” Lafferty noted.

In Congers, New York, the transformation has taken on a deeply personal and spiritual dimension at Congers United Methodist Church.

Their journey began even before Bridges officially started, during a 2023 congregational retreat where members identified four defining values: faith, family, fellowship, and music. Known for its warm, welcoming atmosphere, and generous shared meals, the church had long centered its ministry around the table.

But Bridges challenged them to think even bigger.

“What was once a blessing within our walls is now becoming a bridge to our community,” shared Bishop Alfred Johnson, Ret. The congregation has embraced a new vision: taking their “table to the streets.”

Though still in its early stages, that vision is already changing hearts. One member, initially hesitant to pray publicly, found the courage to offer prayer to a local shopkeeper in need, an act that was met with gratitude and became a turning point in her faith.

The church’s formal Bridges journey began on May 31, 2025, grounded in three affirmations: Our story matters. Our people matter. Our future matters.

What followed was a season of both honesty and hope. As members shared stories of faith, resilience, and tradition, they also confronted difficult realities: declining attendance, illness, and the painful departure of some members. Leaders made the tough decision to postpone a beloved youth camp to focus on strengthening the church’s foundation.

Yet even in the midst of challenges, momentum grew.

Partnerships with neighboring congregations opened new doors for collaboration. A November gathering centered on gratitude highlighted how far the church had come, while December brought acts

of compassion, including visits to homebound members and unexpected support from a partner church’s food pantry.

These moments planted seeds for future ministry, including plans to launch their own food outreach in the coming years.

As 2026 unfolds, the congregation continues to build on that momentum: resuming home visits, forming new partnerships, and exploring health-focused initiatives following a recent women’s retreat. Their upcoming prayer walk also represents more than a symbolic act. It is a declaration of purpose.

“We are not just walking the streets,” Congers member Shantelle Williams Johnson reflected. “We are walking into our calling.”

These are just a few examples of how Bridges is making a difference. Across communities in EPA and GNJ, the message and impact of Bridges is clear: the ministry of the church is not confined to its sanctuary. It is found in relationships, in listening, and in meeting people where they are.

Curious about Pathways Bridges? Join us at one of two virtual open houses this summer – July 18 at 9:00am or August 3 at 6:30pm. Learn about the program, the upcoming Fall cohort focused on intergenerational ministry, and have an opportunity to ask your questions. Scan the QR code to register.

To learn more about Pathways Bridges, visit pathwaybridges.org or Contact Ashley Wilson, Program Coordinator, at awilson@epagnj.org.



Donations at Butler UMC’s “Loaves and Fishes” food pantry.

GREATER NJ BEACH/ BAY

WORSHIP SERVICES!

Cape May UMC The Cove, End of W Beach Ave, Cape May, NJ Sundays @ 8:00am June thru August	North Wildwood UMC 499 E 2 nd Ave. North Wildwood Sundays @ 8:00am May thru September
Faith Community UMC (Bayville) Ocean Gate Beach (Wildwood Ave. Pier) 223 E Longport Ave, Ocean Gate, NJ, 08740 Sundays @ 8:00am June thru September	Seaville/ Sea Isle City UMCs JFK & the Promenade, SIC Sundays @ 8:00am May thru September
First UMC Avalon 21 St. Pavillion and Boardwalk, Avalon, NJ Sundays @ 8:00am June thru August	St. Paul’s UMC (Bay Head) Karge Street Beach, Bay Head, NJ Sundays @ 8:00am May thru August
LBI UM Churches 9 th St. & the Bay in Beach Haven (Behind Schooner’s Wharf) Sundays @ 8:30am June thru September	St. Peter’s UMC (Ocean City) 11 th Street & Boardwalk Sundays @ 8:00am June thru August

