

Living Water Association Exploratory Team
REPORT TO LIVING WATER ASSOCIATION
Saturday, November 1, 2025

Overview

The Living Water Association launched a self-study, an exploratory process, this summer to help the Association imagine its future in light of our current culture and changes happening across the wider church.

In the purview of the United Church of Christ, the Living Water Association (LWA) is unusually large. The Association is similar in size and budget to many mid-size UCC regional Conferences. Also, unlike other UCC Associations, Living Water (and all Heartland Associations) is independently incorporated as a 501c3. Given its uniqueness in the UCC, as well as cultural changes and transitions in other UCC judicatories, it has been determined that now is a liminal time to explore the future of LWA, and thus the formation of an Exploratory team.

Dr. Larssen has assembled a team of 5 people from diverse settings in the Association, all of whom volunteered to serve on the team:

- **The Rev. Ivy Beckwith**, retired from National Ministries
- **The Rev. Jeff Nelson**, National Ministries
- **The Rev. Dr. Oliver Kling**, Pastor of St. John's UCC in Massillon
- **The Rev. Emily Culp-Ashby**, Associate Pastor at Kent UCC
- **The Rev. Dr. Monica Dawkins-Smith**, Interim Senior Pastor at East View UCC in Shaker Heights [Convener]

The team has met four times, so far, on July 31st, August 28th, September 25th and October 23rd with the next meeting scheduled on December 4th. During our initial meeting, we worked together to clarify our goals and discern an approach to the work.

We determined that an important first step was to collect feedback and data about the Association - past, present, and future - from a wide range and diverse group of Association members with valued viewpoints. Stakeholders were selected by the exploratory team using the following criteria:

- Geographic (e.g. rural, urban, suburban, etc.)
- Demographic (e.g. race, gender, orientation, etc.)
- Vocational (chaplain, COM, National setting, GLAUCE, LWA staff, local agencies, etc.)

We worked together to develop interview questions and to identify 31 stakeholders for one-on-one interviews. The interviews are currently in process, and will be completed in October and November 2025. Here are the questions we're using for the interviews:

1. What is your interaction/experience with LWA? What is LWA doing well? What makes you excited about our Association's ministry?
2. What was a peak experience or high point in the life of our work together as an Association?
3. What are growing edges? What mistakes should we not repeat?
4. How has LWA changed pre/post-merger in 2017 (Western+Eastern)?
5. What are some of the shifts happening in churches that affect how we do our work? What are some emerging trends?
6. What is your experience with the Heartland Conference? What do you think of the covenant between Heartland and Living Water? What about our role as the home site of the National Ministries?
7. If we were called to be open to radical change, what might that look like? Where is God guiding us for the next chapter? Who are potential collaborative partners?

To date, we have completed approximately 50% of the interviews, so we are making good progress. As part of the data gathering process, we have included a demographic survey to be completed prior to each interview.

A member survey will be completed with all LWA authorized ministers and delegates in winter 2026 to collect feedback from the wider LWA community. Data from interviews and surveys will be collected and a final report, perhaps with recommendations, will be part of the output from our work that will be shared with the LWA Board in June 2026. The final report may also be shared more widely in focus groups.

We plan to provide regular updates on our progress at LWA Council meetings and Association meetings, when requested.

In closing, I'd like to share a very poignant quote from Dr. Larssen that she shared as a hopeful outcome from the work of the Exploratory team... ***“If we make the road by walking, perhaps we also make the Church by listening and asking God to grant us strength enough to respond in word and deed.”***

Prayerfully submitted by,
Rev. Dr. Monica Dawkins-Smith
Convener, LWA Exploratory Team