



# FAITH IN ACTION

2024 Annual Report

**PREPARED BY**

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Living Water Association, Ohio NorthEast  
Heartland Conference  
United Church of Christ

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# Summary

Dear Living Water Association,

Our Association is the vibrant landscape of Northeast Ohio, stretching south of Lake Erie and embracing the richly varied places of the Appalachian foothills, the Rust Belt, and the Midwest. Our congregations, too, are rich variety: from bustling urban centers and small towns to rural farming communities, each bringing unique strengths and challenges. This collection of covenanted faith communities—large, small, wealthy, and working-class—forms a powerful Body, rooted in shared purpose and a commitment to justice, compassion, and the transformative power of life together in Christ.

This year, building on our already existing community initiatives, we are working in partnership with a number of local organizations to continue to live into the vision of supporting local community development ministries. Our aim remains steadfast: to foster resilient, interconnected communities rooted in justice and faith.

We are grateful for the dedication, courage, and unwavering faith of our congregations, whose commitment to caring for their communities brings life and hope to neighborhoods across our Association. Together, we are building a legacy of faith and action, one community at a time.

In all of these efforts, our aim is steadfast—to support and resource our congregations in building strong, resilient, beloved communities—one neighborhood at a time! When it comes to Faith in Action, our congregations have been faithful!

I am deeply grateful for each of you—your passion, courage, steadfast commitment, tireless pursuit of justice, spirit of collaboration, and enduring faith. Thank you, profoundly, for all that you bring to this work!

*Faithfully Yours,*  
—Rev. Michael Howard  
*Minister of Faith in Action*



Rev. Nannet Pitt (right) from the City of Akron interviews Leah Rothstein as part of this year's Just Action initiative.



Strongsville UCC's "Free Lunch for All" program provides nutritious meals weekly, prepared in-house by volunteers from several churches



The Little Cuyahoga Explorers' Camp gather to experience nature in their neighborhood



Khalilah Worley, Senior Organizer of Greater Cleveland Congregations with Rev. Michael Howard, Minister of Faith in Action, and Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Director of the Ohio Council of Churches

## Our Faith in Action Vision

### Building Strong, Resilient, Beloved Communities

Our Faith in Action vision is rooted in a commitment to support and resource congregations for prophetic witness and meaningful community engagement. The kind of community engagement we foster is anchored in our aim to help congregations grow strong, resilient, and beloved communities in the places they live, work, and worship.

When we say “strong,” we mean building communities that focus on an appreciative approach—highlighting “what’s strong, not what’s wrong.” This involves mutual justice rather than toxic charity, and encourages congregations to use methods like appreciative inquiry, asset mapping, and power-based community organizing. Our approach emphasizes building on existing strengths, drawing out potential, and investing in the capacities that already exist within each community.

“Resilient” communities are those that can endure and adapt, even in the face of adversity. This resilience is cultivated by equipping congregations to work collaboratively and effectively in their neighborhoods, fostering a sustainable capacity to face future challenges.

“Beloved” is a term drawn from Dr. King’s vision of the Beloved Community—a community grounded in love, compassion, and justice. By nurturing these values, our congregations aim to create spaces where people feel seen, valued, and included, building neighborhoods that work for the wellbeing of everyone.

To realize this vision, the role of our Minister of Faith in Action, Rev. Michael Anthony Howard, encompasses five key areas in our portfolio:

1. **Supporting and Resourcing Individual Congregations** – Providing direct support to help congregations thrive in their prophetic witness and community efforts, tailoring resources and guidance to their unique needs and contexts.
2. **Wider Church Engagement** – This includes our work in interfaith and ecumenical partnerships, as well as collaboration on a national level. Through these connections, we aim to bring fresh perspectives and shared wisdom to our local communities, strengthening our role within the larger church community.
3. **Faith in Action Grants Program** – Offering congregations access to grants that serve as a resource to fund and energize their community-centered initiatives, enabling them to make a tangible impact in their neighborhoods.
4. **The SPIRE Center** – Serving as a central hub for our Association’s workshops, educational programs, and congregational resources, the SPIRE Center is where we gather, learn, and grow together. This center equips our congregations with the tools, knowledge, and skills needed for impactful ministry and community engagement.
5. **Direct Local Community Engagement** – Focused primarily in the Summit County area, this direct work supports local nonprofits and city initiatives. A key focus is our work with the Cascade Commons Community Development Corporation, an emerging entity designed to build community resources and strengthen local neighborhoods.

Together, these areas represent our collective work as an Association. Our Faith in Action vision is not simply a set of programs; it is a shared commitment to empowering our congregations to become catalysts for justice, resilience, and love in their communities. We are grateful for the dedication of every congregation, partner, and supporter who joins us in building a stronger, more compassionate world.

## Resourcing the Ministry

### Faith in Action Grants Make Ministry Happen

The Faith in Action Grants Program has experienced tremendous growth, reflecting the increasing needs and innovative spirit of our congregations. As applications pour in, it's inspiring to see the diversity and scope of projects that churches are undertaking to serve their communities. While we celebrate the opportunity to resource so many impactful ministries, the reality is that our funds remain limited, and we cannot meet every need. This gap is a call to expand our program, so we can continue empowering congregations to transform their neighborhoods.

The response to our grants program demonstrates a shared vision for community development that goes beyond traditional ministry. Congregations are seeking support not only for food and shelter needs but also for economic sustainability, community engagement, and urban projects. As we assess each application, we ask ourselves: "Where are the pain relievers? Where are the capacity builders? How can we help?" The need is evident, and our congregations are more than ready to lead. They want to leverage these grants to launch new initiatives, hire grant writers, conduct feasibility studies, and even partner with architects to make their spaces more welcoming for new community activities. Our challenge now is to build upon this momentum and expand our capacity to provide even more support.

This year, our Faith in Action Grants Program was able to provide vital funding to congregations committed to serving their communities in impactful ways. While the needs were extensive, we are grateful to have supported a range of ministries, from food distribution and community engagement to accessibility enhancements and outreach initiatives. Below is a list of congregations that received grants, as well as the amounts awarded. These grants represent our shared commitment to resourcing ministries that embody our vision of strong, resilient, and beloved communities.

- **West Park United Church of Christ** to support the Community Club Food Pantry, the primary food source for over 200 families: \$2,087.70
- **Trinity United Church of Christ (Wooster)** to support the Breakfast Program Kitchen Initiative, serving a daily hot breakfast, to update their appliances and refurbish the service area: \$3,616.22
- **The Bath Church (Akron)**, to support adding American Sign Language interpretation to 4-5 Music at Bath concerts: \$2,000.00
- **Archwood United Church of Christ (Cleveland)**, to support Denison UCC hot meals program, providing a weekly meal to the shelter and a monthly Sunday meal: \$3,000.00
- **Middleburg Heights Community United Church of Christ**, to support Community Food Assistance program, through the Outreach Team at MHCUCC and their established mission partners—Edna House, Denison UCC, and the MHCUCC Little Food Pantry: \$1,550.30
- **Mt. Olivet United Church of Christ**, to support the purchase of a food trailer needed to help haul items needed to cook ministry meals on site: \$4,000.00
- **Grace United Church of Christ (Canton)**, to support Just in Time (JIT) Food Ministry Repairs to continue providing direct service to Stark County residents: \$3,616.22
- **First Congregational Church of Tallmadge, UCC** to support the Summer Youth Mission Experience with Project Shine Akron to refurbish a house in the Kenmore Neighborhood: \$4,000.00
- **Strongsville UCC** to support the Free Lunch for All that provides nutritious meals weekly, prepared in-house by volunteers from several churches: \$1,549.31

Here are some examples of the impactful work that Faith in Action grants have already enabled this year:

- **Mt. Olivet UCC** used its grant to purchase a trailer that serves as a mobile meal distribution site. Twice a month, the trailer brings food to a local distribution center, serving meals to approximately 75 people. This ministry has expanded its reach through partnerships, recently joining with ACTION's Mobile Market in Mahoning County to provide meals for additional community events.
- **Bath Church** initiated a concert series with American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, opening new opportunities for engagement within the hearing-impaired community. The project, supported by our grant, has fostered partnerships with Cleveland Hearing & Speech and other local organizations, creating inclusive spaces for both congregation members and the wider community.
- **West Park UCC** received funds for its Community Cupboard food pantry, which distributes food twice monthly. With the end of COVID-related subsidies, the demand for food assistance has surged, and the Faith in Action grant has helped keep their pantry stocked, covering about 10% of their annual budget.
- **Strongsville UCC** continues to make a significant impact with its "Free Lunch for All" program, providing hot meals weekly. The program serves over 100 meals each week and has become a vital source of nourishment and companionship for the community. The Faith in Action grant has supported essentials like food and take-out containers, helping this ministry address food insecurity and social isolation.

While these stories demonstrate the power of the Faith in Action grants, they also underscore the need for greater resources. Every application received represents a congregation ready to invest in their community, but with limited funds, we are often forced to make difficult choices. Expanding our grant program would allow us to say "yes" more often, fueling ministries that bring life and hope to neighborhoods across our Association.

This year, we are asking our association to consider how we can increase our commitment to this program. By growing the Faith in Action Grants, we can equip more congregations to become catalysts for change, support new businesses, hire experts, and provide essential resources for sustainable growth. Together, we can empower these congregations to embody Christ's love in tangible, transformative ways.

MT. OLIVET UCC  
MOBILE MEAL DISTRIBUTION



STRONGSVILLE UCC  
"FREE LUNCH FOR ALL"



WEST PARK UCC  
COMMUNITY CUPBOARD FOOD PANTRY



THE BATH CHURCH  
MUSIC AT BATH



# Faith in Action Grants

## Program Overview

### The Year in Review

The Faith in Action Grants Program received requests totaling \$49,710 from various congregations. Of this, we were able to fund \$25,419, supporting 9 congregations in their community-focused initiatives. Of those awarded, more than \$10K went to Prophetic Community Engagement initiatives. In the coming year, the Faith in Action Grants Team will be working closely with the Faith in Action Steering Team to develop a plan for strengthening and expanding our support.

### Their Legacies Lives On

Our two Faith in Action Grants are funded by a number of generous donations. As congregations have closed over the years, many have wanted to leave a legacy of care and healing through community service and action. We are grateful for their decision to allow the Living Water Association to carry their legacies forward.

In 1984, Trinity Congregational Church on Pepper Pike in Cleveland closed, sold their building, and donated funds from the sale to the Association for the expressed purpose of "mission ministry." Similar donations came in 1996 from North Olmsted Congregational Church and in 2014 from Trinity UCC on West 25th St. in Cleveland. Though these congregations have closed, the legacies of their ministries live on.

### Two Grants, One Purpose

Our Faith in Action Ministry aims to encourage congregations to move away from the problematic and confusing language of "mission." Instead, we chose to use the language that helps us better differentiate between the two approaches to community outreach that our grants represent. The result is one grant that supports Direct Community Service, and another that supports Prophetic Community Engagement.

## Faith in Action Grants Program

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- **Direct Community Service Grants**

*(Formerly, Mission Ministry Grant)*

Our Direct Community Service Grants support congregational ministries that provide vitally needed direct services to their surrounding communities.

- **Prophetic Community Engagement Grants**

*(Formerly, Community Engagement Grant)*

Our Prophetic Community Engagement Grants support ministry programs that go beyond direct service and build social capital, form community partnerships, increase capacity, and implement strategies that bring about social change.

- **One Grant Cycles**

Our program offers **One Cycle**. Applications will open in March with a deadline of May 1.

For more information, visit [livingwaterone.org/faithinaction/grants/](https://livingwaterone.org/faithinaction/grants/)

## Planting Trees of Life

### Collaboration Creates Spaces of Healing



Families gather at Elizabeth Park to plant trees to honor their loved ones during the Tree of Life Ceremony.

This past April, the Community Life Collaborative hosted the Tree of Life Ceremony at Elizabeth Park in Akron. It was a heartfelt gathering to honor lost loved ones, deepen our connection with one another, and celebrate the resilience of the neighborhood. Part of the *Our Nature* series, hosted by the Community Life Collaborative, in partnership with the Living Water Association, and the Environmental Justice Care Network of the Heartland Conference, the ceremony provided a meaningful space for community healing and reflection in a natural setting. Participants gathered not only to remember lives but also to strengthen their shared commitment to restorative and compassionate community engagement.

The event was enriched by numerous community partners who joined in solidarity. Representatives from Greater Cleveland Congregation, Ohio Council of Churches, Moms Demand Action Against Gun Violence, Guidestone and numerous other groups, as well as several of our UCC congregations.

In a place marked by its own history of hardship, we gathered to remember 16 lives—each represented by a tree planted in their honor. Holding the ceremony at Elizabeth Park allowed us not only to memorialize these individuals but also to honor the land, weaving a story of loss, resilience, and hope. This act of planting trees reflects our commitment to preserving and restoring public spaces as sites of remembrance and renewal, grounding our communities in places that inspire healing and growth.

Through the Tree of Life Ceremony, our Faith in Action mission comes alive in a tangible way. With partners who support those impacted by trauma, incarceration, and violence, we are building a network of care that bridges communities and honors both people and place. We are grateful to all who contributed to this sacred gathering, reinforcing our shared mission to nurture beloved, resilient communities.





## An Ecumenical Call for Just Action: A Community-Wide Focus on Affordable Housing



Author, Leah Rothstein (left) answering questions from Akron Chief of Strategy, Rev. Nannette Pitt (right)

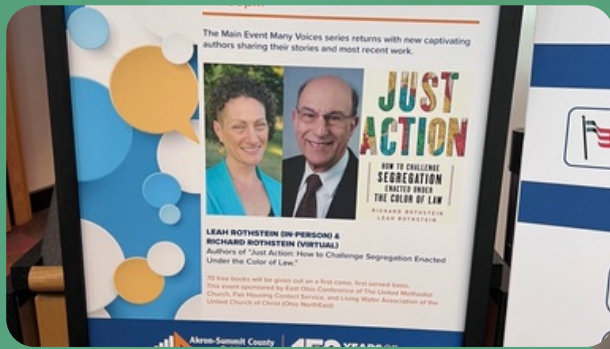
As part of our commitment to fostering justice-centered community engagement, the Living Water Association, in partnership with the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church, Fair Housing Contact Service, and Akron-Summit County Public Library, hosted authors Leah and Richard Rothstein for a powerful discussion on racial segregation and housing inequality. Their latest book, [Just Action: How to Challenge Segregation Enacted Under the Color of Law](#), builds on Richard Rothstein's influential work, [The Color of Law](#), by outlining practical, actionable steps that communities can take to address segregation's enduring impact. This event drew a diverse crowd of community members, faith leaders, and local activists who are committed to creating more equitable and inclusive neighborhoods.

Throughout the evening, the Rothsteins provided a historical overview of discriminatory housing practices that have contributed to ongoing racial and economic segregation. They focused on how federal policies and urban planning decisions have systematically disadvantaged marginalized communities, reinforcing inequities that persist today. The Rothsteins challenged attendees to reflect on Akron's own history and present-day realities, urging

everyone to consider their role in advocating for structural changes that promote housing justice.

The event was a catalyst for deep discussion and community reflection. The Rothsteins shared specific strategies for local action, such as advocating for fair housing policies, supporting reparative initiatives, and building partnerships across sectors. Attendees were encouraged to consider the role that congregations and community organizations can play in advocating for equitable policies and supporting efforts to revitalize underserved neighborhoods. This aligns with our Faith in Action mission, as we seek to empower congregations to become active agents of change in their communities.

This ecumenical and community collaboration with Akron Main Library offered a valuable platform for discussions on race, equity, and justice in housing—core issues in our Faith in Action mission. The event highlighted the vital role of ongoing advocacy and community involvement in dismantling barriers to equity, reinforcing our commitment to building beloved, resilient communities across our Association.



## SPIRE Center Offerings for Faith in Action Resources for Community Catalysts



Building Community Resilience is the second part of the SPIRE resource series on Building Strong Communities.

This year, the SPIRE Center focused on resourcing congregations for community development, encouraging them to use their spaces and partnerships creatively. While we are still building a comprehensive framework, this shift is underway, with a commitment to helping congregations make meaningful impacts in their neighborhoods.

We started with a presentation featuring United Church of Christ resources, including the Church Building & Loan Fund, the Council for Health and Human Services (CHHSM), and United Church Homes, showcasing how collaboration can empower even small congregations to drive substantial change. Attendees learned how shared purpose and creative use of resources can transform their mission.

The SPIRE Center also offered a session on public grants, guiding congregations on partnering with community organizations to access funding. Many are now exploring ongoing collaborative

projects, a shift we are excited to support and expand upon this coming year.

This fall, we are hosting series on building strong, resilient, beloved communities equipped congregations with tools to articulate their vision and connect effectively with community partners. Resources from these sessions, including worksheets and recordings, will be available by the new year to help congregations communicate their mission clearly and deepen community impact.

This year's offerings demonstrate our ongoing commitment to supporting congregations ready to embrace new roles in their neighborhoods. As we move forward, we look forward to expanding these resources and nurturing the prophetic potential of our congregations.

## Little Cuyahoga Explorers Camp

### Experiencing the Biodiversity in Our Neighborhood



Little Cuyahoga Explorers and First Serve interns learning about the ecology of their neighborhood with the Conservancy for CVNP.

The Little Cuyahoga Explorer Summer Camp celebrated its third year this past July, continuing to bring young explorers from the neighborhood together for a week of discovery, connection, and outdoor adventure. Since its start in 2022, this camp has offered a space for children to engage with nature in their own backyard, exploring the wetlands and streams of the Little Cuyahoga River and learning about the wonders of their local ecosystem.

This year, we were fortunate to once again partner with First Serve, an outreach program from First Congregational Church in Hudson, which provided dedicated interns who supported the camp's mission. Returning counselor Kevyn, a education specialist from the Conservancy, brought his signature enthusiasm and led the children in both classic and new games. With many campers now returning for their third summer, we found that the group was already familiar with each other, forming lasting friendships as they reconnected with the songs, activities, and camaraderie of camp.

One of the highlights of camp this year was the wetlands exploration, where campers, guided by their trusted counselors, eagerly

discovered and identified local wildlife. Armed with magnifying glasses and nets, the kids caught insects, studied plants, and shared their findings with excitement. The camp's theme song, "All the Rivers Run," became an anthem for the group, echoing through the wetlands as they celebrated the rhythms and beauty of their neighborhood ecosystem.

Watching these young explorers observe nature and share their excitement with each other is a powerful reminder of the importance of connecting children to their natural environment. Each day brought opportunities for them to raise their hands, tell stories, and express wonder at the small but captivating discoveries around them, building a sense of pride and belonging in their community.

The intergenerational aspect of camp—welcoming kids from ages 6 to 11, supported by teens and college interns—has made Little Cuyahoga Explorer Summer Camp an especially cherished program. We are grateful to all who help make it possible and look forward to building on this legacy of exploration, learning, and friendship in the years to come.



## Love is Louder

### Uniting Voices in Worship and Action



Rachael Ward (Left), stands by as Rev. George Graham gives the opening welcome at the Love is Louder Worship Service

This year, the Love is Louder Worship Service marked a profound moment of unity and healing within our Association, bringing together UCC congregations from across the region to launch a campaign centered on radical love, justice, and inclusivity. The service was not only a call to action but also a powerful testament to love's ability to heal past hurts, especially for those who have experienced rejection within religious spaces. Speakers courageously shared personal stories, recounting painful experiences of excluded and intentionally misgendered, and how these past encounters with rejection shaped their journeys. The Love is Louder event was a space where they, and others, could be fully seen, celebrated, and embraced without conditions.

This worship service emphasized that our calling as a faith community is to extend a deep and genuine welcome, especially to those who may have been turned away in the past, and to become a source of healing.

Throughout the event, leaders shared the vision behind Love is Louder, encouraging participants to take up this mantle of love and to amplify it within their congregations. The campaign challenges UCC congregations to embody love in visible, actionable ways—through social justice initiatives, community outreach, and direct support for those most affected by inequity and exclusion. This event set a strong foundation for the work ahead, uniting our congregations around the call to be louder in love, hope, and healing.

As we move forward, Love is Louder will continue to be a guiding principle for our Association, shaping our shared vision and encouraging us to engage courageously in the work of justice. This campaign reminds us that when love is louder, it changes lives, transforms communities, and reflects the heart of our faith.



## Michael's Sabbatical Reflections: From Disorganized Passion to Intentional Growth



Rev. Michael Anthony Howard, Minister of Faith in Action, with his daughter, Joey, at Red River Gorge.

*"If you are faithful with just a few things, big things can happen."*

— Rev. Ollie Mae Wicker

Before her departure, our former Association General Minister, Nayiri Karjian, reminded me of a core principle that has impacted the way I think about managing my energy: "You have to invest in where you want to see growth." She said this often when I first arrived in 2019, and it stuck with me. As I stepped away for my work responsibilities for my Sabbatical, I realized how much I needed the time to pause, to feel the weight of my own restlessness, and to acknowledge the tiredness that often goes unspoken in ministry. There is a particular exhaustion that comes not just from the work itself, but from the quieter struggles—like anxiety, loneliness, depression, grief—that many of us carry in silence.

One of the unexpected gifts of my Sabbatical time was the freedom to be fully present with my daughter. We were on a constant adventure, uninterrupted time together. I found a sense of calm and joy that I hadn't felt in a long time. And I knew

clearly that it was not because I was away from work; it was because I was present with her. It wasn't just refreshing—it was grounding. It reminded me where my energy truly belongs and affirmed that nurturing this relationship feeds my spirit in a way that nothing else can. These moments with her became a natural remedy for the anxiety I so often carry, revealing to me the power of investing my time and attention in what brings life.

My Sabbatical time might be summarized by a single reflective question: How can I bring this sense of purpose and presence into my ministry? Nayiri's words carry an important answer: intentionally invest in what you want to grow. Going forward, my commitment is to focus on areas where we need to grow, especially in support of what is working well. How can I be faithful in my work to ensure that my energy is directed toward fostering growth in our shared mission. Where does my time and attention go? Post-sabbatical, I am cultivating a sense of intentionality in everything we do together, that we can become not only stronger but more grounded in purpose and spirit.





I want to extend my deepest thanks to the Living Water Association for the extraordinary gift of a three-month sabbatical. This dedicated time allowed me to reflect on myself, my relationship with God, and the precious bond I share with my daughter. I am profoundly grateful for the support and love I received, which made this time of renewal possible. I can't think of any other community or role where such a gift would be given—a gift born out of genuine care for each other's well-being and growth.

Though I wish I had some wise words to offer in return, I am simply left in awe of the love and generosity that defines our association. Thank you for this gift of time, space, and trust. It has renewed my spirit in ways I could never have anticipated.

**THANK YOU!**



## Upcoming...

### ***Creating Good Places • Monday, January 6 , 6:30-8 PM A Community Engagement Showcase (Hybrid, TBA)***



On Monday, January 6th, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m., join us for an inspiring hybrid event (in-person location TBD, with Zoom access available) as we showcase impactful community engagement initiatives from across Northeast Ohio. This event features a conversation with a collective of ministry leaders exploring our faith's relationship to the places we live and God's call to care for our communities. We'll also hear the story of author Scott Myers, who has created guides to inspire community building rooted in God's vision for good places for all. Don't miss this chance to engage with others passionate about faith, place, and community transformation!

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## THANK YOU!!

All year, our Faith in Action Steering Team has given their time, wisdom, and talents to help keep us moving in the right direction. Their leadership helps make this work possible.

### **The Faith in Action Steering Team**

- Maren Koepf, Rev. Mike Bone, Rich General, Rev. Janet Ross , Rev. Rachel McDonald

A special thanks also goes out to our Faith in Action Grants Team. Their work has helped fund ministries that care for communities across our Association.

### **The Faith in Action Grants Team**

- Larry Becker, Rich General, Patsy Harris, Rev. Roberto Ochoa, Rev. Kevan Franklin, Julie Gilliland