



FAITH IN ACTION

2025 Annual Report

PREPARED BY
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Minister of Faith in Action
Living Water Association, Ohio NorthEast
Heartland Conference
United Church of Christ

NOVEMBER 1, 2025

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Summary

Dear friends and partners in ministry,

This has been a year of movement and meaning—a year when faith once again met the challenges of our time with courage, creativity, and compassion. Across our congregations, we have seen faith become tangible: in the planting of trees and rain gardens, in the voices raised at the Statehouse for food security and justice, and in the acts of service that continue to hold communities together through seasons of uncertainty.

Our Faith in Action Grants Program continues to be one of the most visible signs of that faithfulness. Through the generosity of congregations like Avon Lake UCC, and with the partnership of local ministries throughout Northeast Ohio, we have been able to equip congregations to feed their neighbors, strengthen their communities, and create spaces of belonging and hope. Each grant tells a story—of small churches with large hearts, of innovation born out of love, and of the Gospel made visible in neighborhoods and towns.

This has also been a year of discernment. We faced difficult choices, including the need to cancel our Our Whole Lives facilitator training and to pause our summer camp. These were not signs of decline, but reminders that ministry has its seasons. Even in rest, we prepare the soil for what comes next. And in the same year, we celebrated new growth in our partnerships with UPCaM, the Environmental Care and Justice Network—each one a seed of future promise.

As we look ahead, I am filled with gratitude and expectation. The Spirit is still moving in the Living Water Association—calling us to listen deeply, to act boldly, and to trust that even in hard times, God's dream for creation continues to unfold. Thank you for being part of that dream, and for helping to make ministry happen.

*With faith, hope, and love,
—Rev. Michael Anthony Howard
Minister of Faith and Action
Living Water Association, UCC*



Lisa Yeagley leads the youth group from Christ Church UCC in Orrville at their winter retreat with the Community Life Collaborative.



CVNP Ranger Arrye Roger gives a talk at Joy Park Community Center in Akron during a local tree giveaway



Living Water congregations march together during Pride in the CLE 2025



Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan gives an inspiring keynote at this year's Faith and Legislative Luncheon

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 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’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** – We are committed to working in partnership with local nonprofits and engaging in community initiatives.

Together, these areas represent our collective Faith in Action 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.

Faith in Action Grants Program

Resourcing Ministry, Empowering Communities

The Faith in Action Grants Program remains one of the clearest ways our congregations turn vision into ministry. Across the Living Water Association, churches are discerning where God is calling them to serve—and these grants help them act with courage and care. Applications this year reflected growing needs as well as creative new models of ministry: food security, accompaniment of migrants and veterans, neighborhood revitalization, and renewed partnerships that lift up our most vulnerable neighbors.

While we celebrate these stories, we also see that the need outpaces our resources. Each cycle brings more worthy proposals than we are able to fund. This gap is a call to grow the program's capacity so that more congregations can respond faithfully to the needs right outside their doors.

2025 Awards at a Glance

12 grants • Total awarded: \$32,748.66

- Archwood UCC (Cleveland) — Hot Meals Program: \$4,000.00
- Bainbridge UCC (Geauga Co.) — Mission Sunday: \$2,000.00
- Chatham Community Church (Medina) — Blessing Box: \$2,000.00
- First Christian Church/Church Square (Cuyahoga Falls) — Church Square: \$4,000.00
- Middleburg Hts UCC (Cleveland) — Mission Enhancement: \$2,000.00
- Mt Olivet UCC (North Lima) — Food Vision: \$4,000.00
- Newbridge Place (w/Chatham Comm. Church) (Lodi/Medina Co) — Supported Housing for Vets: \$4,000.00
- Old South UCC (Kirtland/Lake Co.) — Food Pantry Gen'l Support: \$2,000.00
- Pilgrim UCC (Cleveland) — Food Pantry Gen'l Support: \$2,000.00
- Pilgrim UCC/Interreligious Task Force (Cleveland) — Migrant Accompaniment: \$3,000.00
- Sheffield Lake UCC (Lorain Co.) — How the Gospel Makes Difference: \$3,000.00
- Students with a Goal (Akron) — Life Skills & Wellness: \$748.66

Why This Matters

These grants embody our shared commitment to strong, resilient, and beloved communities. They help congregations feed people with dignity, accompany neighbors through transition, build welcoming spaces, and strengthen local partnerships. Together, we're helping ministry happen where it's needed most.

With Gratitude and an Invitation

We give thanks for a generous \$5,000 gift from Avon Lake UCC, whose Mission Committee partnered with the Faith in Action Grants Program this year. Their support enabled us to expand the number of congregations we could fund and grow the impact of ministries across our Association. Their leadership reminds us that we are stronger together.

As the needs in our communities continue to rise, we invite other congregations and partners to join Avon Lake UCC in supporting this shared ministry resource. When we invest in one another's callings, we multiply the presence of Christ's love in our neighborhoods — helping ministry happen where it's needed most.

Food Security & Community Care

Across Northeast Ohio, congregations are witnessing rising hunger and increasing costs for basic necessities — challenges often hidden but deeply felt. Faith in Action Grants help churches step up with compassion to ensure that families, seniors, and neighbors have access to nutritious food and a place where they are known and welcomed.

Archwood UCC (Cleveland) partners with Denison UCC's daily hot meals program, helping serve neighbors who may be experiencing homelessness or food insecurity. Volunteers deliver love alongside nourishing meals — and attendance continues to grow each week.

Middleburg Heights Community UCC partners with the Berea Area Ministry Network to support families with essential weekly food assistance during the summer months — helping close the gap when school meals are unavailable and ensuring children have what they need to thrive.

Mt. Olivet UCC (North Lima) provides hot meals on-site and through a mobile meal trailer that brings food directly to where people gather — from addiction recovery and AA meetings to home-delivered meals for shut-ins. Their ministry not only feeds bodies, but builds relationships and restores purpose by connecting volunteers and recipients in a shared expression of God's love, one meal at a time.

Other impactful ministries supported this year:

- **Newbridge Place (Lodi/Medina Co.)** — supported housing with wrap-around care for low-income, mentally ill veterans
- **Pilgrim UCC + InterReligious Task Force (Cleveland)** — equipping congregations to accompany migrant families through legal support, solidarity, and relational hospitality
- **First Christian Church — Church Square (Cuyahoga Falls)** — re-envisioning a shared campus as a hub for accessible housing and community-centered ministry

At a time when state and federal resources for food access, housing, and community care are being reduced, congregations are increasingly on the front lines of responding to growing need. Faith in Action Grants help ministries move quickly and faithfully, without waiting on systems that are stretched too thin. Your congregation's support — whether through designated offerings or annual commitments — allows us to say "yes" more often and help even more churches meet urgent needs in their neighborhoods.

Thank you for helping ministry happen where Christ's love is needed most.

KITCHEN AT ARCHWOOD UCC USED FOR DENISON MEALS PROGRAM



MT. OLIVET SERVES THOUSANDS OF MEALS EVERY YEAR



CHURCH SQUARE IN CUYAHOGA FALLS MAKES PLANS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Faith in Action Grants

Program Overview

The Year in Review

As the world changes around us, congregations continue to show up with the love of Christ in practical and powerful ways. This year, the Faith in Action Grants Program awarded 12 grants totaling \$32,748.66 to support ministries that embody justice, mercy, and neighborly care. Through food security programs, housing support, migrant accompaniment, and community partnerships, congregations are sharing God's abundance where it is needed most.

Their Legacies Lives On

Our Faith in Action Grants are enabled by the legacies of generous donors and congregations who chose to invest in ongoing ministry even as their local chapter closed. Their gifts continue to bear fruit in the lives of neighbors and communities across Northeast Ohio. We are especially grateful for a new \$5,000 gift from Avon Lake UCC this year, which expanded the number of ministries we were able to support.

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

- **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/

Young Leaders, Bold Visions

Faith in Action Youth & Community Formation



Lisa Yeagley leads youth from Christ Church in Orrville as part of their 2025 winter retreat with the Community Life Collaborative

This past January, Living Water Association had the privilege of partnering with the Community Life Collaborative in Bainbridge and the youth of Christ Church UCC in Orrville for a retreat focused on justice, imagination, and community transformation. Traditionally, the Orrville youth gather at Tempel Hills for their annual retreat. In need of an alternative, the Community Life Collaborative graciously opened the Family Life Center of Federated Church of Chagrin Falls, as a new education space. It turned out to be the perfect setting for what unfolded.

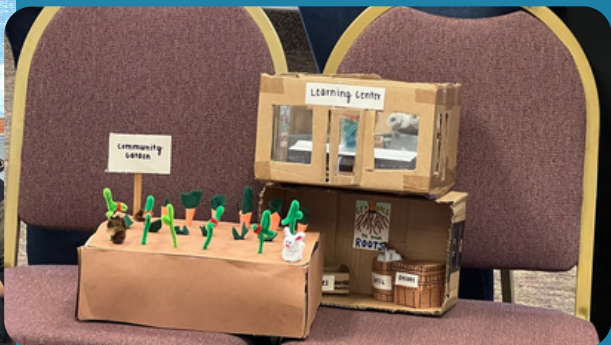
Together with Destinee Burse, Director of the CLC, and volunteer, Maren Koepf we led the youth through a community dreaming exercise. We began by exploring the gifts God has given each of them — the skills, passions, and callings that already shape their lives. From there, we turned our attention outward, mapping the places in Orrville

that matter to them and to their community. They identified where people gather, where people struggle, and where God's love is longing to take root.

The theme that became the focal point for the retreat was food. Not just eating together, but access, dignity, and justice.

We discussed the strain that hunger can place on families, especially when public support becomes less reliable. So in small groups, they began working on creative ministry prototypes that could help nourish their neighbors in ways that honor their dignity. Some teams designed hands-on activities that children could lead at church. Others imagined storefronts or gardens that uplift and advocate for food justice in their community. Their ideas were not only thoughtful — they were inspired.

This is what Faith in Action looks like — seeing our communities with love and daring to imagine what's possible.



Rooted in Justice, Growing in Hope

Joining in creation care and community witness



Participants in the Akron Pilgrimage of Hope for Creation pose for a photo on the splashpad at Elizabeth Park in Cascade Valley

On Earth Day, Living Water Association joined a growing network of community partners working for creation justice across Akron. What began as a simple act—giving away trees—became a witness to the shared work of restoring our common home.

In April, the Environmental Justice Network of Akron launched its first Tree Giveaway as part of the “Nature Includes You” exhibit with the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The project invited residents to imagine what wholeness looks like when both people and place are included in the story of renewal. By season’s end, more than 130 trees had found new soil in Akron’s East and South neighborhoods, and another 130 will take root this fall, on November 17, as the partnership continues.

The Living Water Association continued to support the work—helping convene conversations between faith communities and civic leaders, and standing alongside neighbors who gave public testimony at the Ohio EPA hearing on the proposed Alterra industrial site. The hearing drew over thirty in-person testimonies and more than a thousand written statements from across the state, calling attention to the sacred responsibility of protecting air, water, and the health of all who call this region home.

A spirit of collaborative witness continued into the fall through the Pilgrimages of Hope for Creation, organized in partnership with the Catholic Commission of Summit County and the Diocesan Social Action Office of Cleveland. As part of the 2025 Jubilee Year, these walks invited people of faith to pray with their feet—to encounter the stories of the land, its people, and its wounds.

Throughout 2025, Living Water Association has partnered with the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition, which recently received a substantial NOAA grant to establish a regional Resilience Hub linking more than thirty community-based organizations. This initiative is building capacity in neighborhoods most affected by poverty and climate vulnerability, fostering collaboration and climate literacy across Northeast Ohio. They have hosted Reimagining Community Conversations all across the region, including partnering with the Community Life Collaborative in Bainbridge and Medina UCC.

From tree giveaways to pilgrimages and public testimony, our faith continues to take root in place. The Living Water Association continues to stand with neighbors, nurturing resilient hope until the promise of Creation’s renewal becomes visible among us.



Pride in Faith, Pride in Love

Living Water Association celebrates inclusion, witness, and belonging at Cleveland Pride 2025



Pilgrim Congregational UCC of Cleveland leads the way with their enormous Progress Pride Flag as they march in the Cleveland Pride '25

On Saturday, June 7, the streets of downtown Cleveland filled with color, music, and joy as members of the United Church of Christ joined thousands for Pride in the CLE. This year, Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Tremont and Plymouth Church UCC in Shaker Heights co-hosted a Pride Worship Service on Sunday, June 1, welcoming people from across Northeast Ohio to celebrate God's boundless love. Together, we lifted songs of liberation, prayed for courage, and gave thanks for the Spirit who draws all people into the circle of belonging.

The following weekend, the Living Water Association helped coordinate a unified UCC presence in the Pride March—an intergenerational, ecumenical, and joy-filled expression of faith in public life. We began the day with prayer, then walked shoulder to shoulder in a sea of rainbow flags, members of congregations from across the region embodied what it means to be a church that puts its faith in to action.

This year's Pride partnership aspired to deepen connections between local congregations and the national setting of the UCC. We aim to strengthen our shared witness for inclusion and justice. From livestreaming the worship service to organizing logistics for our collective march, every detail was an act of care. Thank you to everyone who offered their time, energy, and resources! Our presence at Pride was a reflection of the faith we share and an act of hope for the kind of community we are becoming together.

As we continue this journey, I pray we all celebrate not only the boldness of visibility but the quiet courage of community. Pride is our annual reminder that the work of justice is not a single event, but a way of life—one that keeps expanding the table until everyone knows they belong in God's love! May the Spirit that gathered us in Cleveland continue to move among us, widening the circle of love until everyone knows they belong.



Faith in Action in All Seasons

Building relationships, tending creation, and learning through pause.



Students join together for Dinner Church with UPCaM (United Protestant Campus Ministries) at Case Western Reserve University

Ministry takes many forms—sometimes it looks like gathering for a summit or planting something new in the ground, and sometimes it looks like waiting, discerning, or learning to let go. This season has held all of those moments for our Faith in Action work.

In October, we joined the **Environmental Care and Justice Network Summit** at Camp Christian, a statewide gathering that brought together congregations and green teams from across the Heartland Conference. Participants from UCC, UMC, DOC and Catholic communities across Ohio shared stories of energy audits, native plant gardens, Wild Church, and climate education. It was a day of learning and encouragement, a glimpse of what creation care can look like when our commitments are shared and ecumenical.

Also this fall, at the **Community Life Collaborative** in Bainbridge, dozens of volunteers and community partners gave

of their time and effort to install a rain garden on the grounds of Federated Church of Chagrin Falls' Family Life Center. This project deepened the ministry's connection to the land and improved the site's natural ecology. It was days of praying and planting—acts of gratitude—a visible sign of what it means to care for creation together.

This spirit of collaboration extended into new spaces as well. Living Water is working to strengthen our relationship with **United Protestant Campus Ministries (UPCaM)** at Case Western Reserve University. We will be looking soon to explore a renewed partnership with **United Campus Ministries at Kent State**. These relationships are helping connect college students to justice and community engagement, forming young leaders who care deeply about faith and the world around them.

Opportunities to direct congregational connection this fall included tabling at **Mount Zion Congregational UCC's**

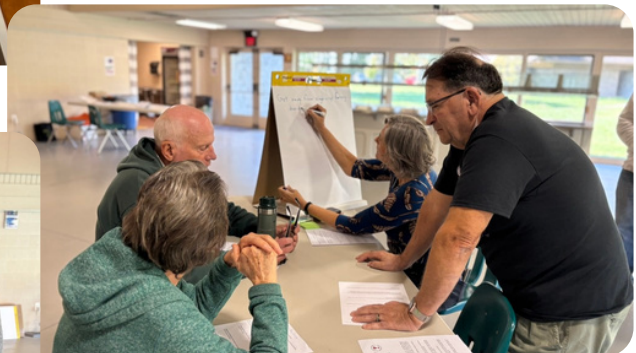
community fair in Cleveland—a joyful day of conversation, sharing resources, and building bridges between congregations and neighbors.

In August, **Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church UCC** hosted a worship service and civic reflection. I was grateful to partner with Rev. Francis Miller and his congregation in exploring how faith communities can help shape a more compassionate civic life.

Not every plan came to fruition. We had to cancel our **Our Whole Lives** facilitator training and pause our **summer camp** with Cuyahoga Valley National Park this year. Those decisions

were disappointing, yet they also reminded us that ministry is a living thing—it breathes, changes, and waits for the right season. Even in what feels like fallow time, the Spirit is preparing new growth.

Each of these experiences—whether planting rain gardens, walking alongside students, or resting plans that need time to root—reveals the same truth: Faith in Action is about presence. It's about showing up with love, learning from creation, and trusting that God is still at work, bringing life out of every season.





Faith in Action at the State House

Standing together for justice, compassion, and daily bread



Food Ministry Leaders from Living Water Association join at the Statehouse in Columbus for the Legislative Luncheon

On May 1, Living Water Association joined faith leaders from across Ohio at the Third Annual **Faith and Legislative Leaders Lunch**, hosted by the Hunger Network in Ohio (HNO) at the Statehouse Atrium in Columbus. The luncheon gathered clergy, lay leaders, and legislators to explore how faith communities can help shape public policy that serves the common good.

This year's gathering came at a pivotal moment. With statewide hunger on the rise and major changes to SNAP and food-bank funding on the horizon, faith-based organizations gathered to advocate for justice and equity. We heard presentations from Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries and the Church for All People in Columbus about how congregations are partnering to build affordable housing and provide pathways out of poverty. Legislative leaders spoke candidly about the budget challenges ahead while ensuring that every Ohioan has access to food and shelter.

One of the most moving voices came from **Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan Jr.**, Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches, whose ministry has long called people of faith to confront injustice with courage and hope. As he prepares for retirement, his words reminded us that advocacy is a spiritual discipline—an act of love that demands persistence, partnership, and prayer. His example continues to inspire all who work for justice in Ohio's public life.

In the shadow of food insecurity and growing need, this year's Advocacy Day reaffirmed that faith in action is not only about feeding the hungry but about transforming the systems that make hunger possible. As we listened, learned, and connected with partners from across the state, we carried home a renewed conviction: that the work of justice is always a shared work, and that if we want to ensure every table has enough—we will have to do it together.





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PLACE **FREE**

A SPIRE Winter Workshop equipping leaders and congregations to develop community engagement plans for building strong, resilient, and beloved communities.

STRONG **RESILIENT** **BELOVED** **COMMUNITY**

REGISTER TODAY **Mondays via Zoom 6:30-8**
livingwaterone.org/spirecenter Jan. 12 & 26, Feb. 2, 9, 23, and Mar. 2

Facilitator: Rev. Michael Howard. This winter, the SPIRE Center invites clergy and lay leaders to join a six-session, online **Place-Based Ministry Workshop**. This series helps participants reimagine how faith communities engage their neighborhoods through asset-based development and community resilience. Each participant or team will walk away with a practical community engagement plan rooted in their local context. Sessions meet via Zoom on Jan. 12 & 26, Feb. 2, 9, 23, and Mar. 2.

Register Online Today at livingwaterone.org/spirecenter



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. Kevan Franklin, Ellen Kaliber, and Marty Culbertson