LIVING WATER ASSOCIATION, OHIO NORTHEAST
HEARTLAND CONFERENCE, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

2026: Cultivate, Enough, Courage
Be a resource and support for the health and wellbeing our congregations,
that we may grow into communities of healing and grace
embodying Christ in the world
2027: Arise, Stability, Service

I write this not knowing how the elections will go the week before we gather for Annual Meeting.

The instability of 2026 has meant that our churches, clergy and lay professionals, and specialized ministries have each regularly needed to find the strength and ***cultivate enough courage*** to live out their ministries. There have been times without enough of anything, and times when there was so much that courage could have been subsumed.

The brilliant service of our Members – Authorized Ministers and Local Churches – inspires me. The faithfulness of our lay members touches my heart. We are so blessed with wonderful people, and it is their love for their ministries that shows God is still speaking. Rising up among us are ministries of power and grace, leaders of confidence and diligence, and energetic service to our local communities. The Gospel is alive in the deeds of our people in this Association.

2026 asked us to be courageous together. 2027 calls us to arise in service to the Gospel, showing how God makes a just world for all.

Key Milestones

January – February – March – LWA produced the first Annual Report since the pandemic! Machelle Miller's Annual Treasurer's Workshops at the SPIRE Center empowers ~40 congregation's leaders on finance and best business practices for churches. The Heartland-Indiana Kentucky Regional Discernment Project draws in Living Water Council Members for dreaming about the future. The Association said thank you to Michael Howard after seven years of deeply impactful ministry, with gratitude for the fully-operational "Faith In Action" program that he built in his time with LWA.

April – May – June – Our German Partners spend two days at Bellweather Farms with LWA and Heartland friends, talking about the Church's role in uplifting younger leadership during times of political instability. The Spring Vitality Festival makes us laugh and think at the same time! General Synod 35 is held online to elect Jennifer Sowell as Associate General Minister for Love of Church. Outdoor Ministries season kicks off with strong support from LWA congregations.

July-August-September – The LWA Council receives reports from the Exploratory Team, Human Resources Taskforce, and approves the search for a refreshed Association-Associate Minster role called *Minister for Faith Engagement.* Regional Discernment accelerates with two gatherings for visioning.

October-November-December – Healthy Practices, Heartland Conference Annual Gathering, and new ecumenical efforts with the Presbytery (PCUSA) bring *The Great Lakes Call Finder* into our Search and

Call program. Annual Meeting brings us together for an installation, and the Committee on Ministry gathers for their second Annual Training Retreat.

Key Indicators of Ministry Fulfillment

Church Vitality and the Spring Vitality Festival featured popular UCC author Molly Phinney Baskette and her co-minister Kelly Colwell, sharing stories of ministry that were both heartfelt, hilarious, and inspiring to hear. Our current set of Church Vitality Grant recipients included two youth-ministry related grants (Suffield UCC and Sports Camp-Heartland) that help families and kids be outdoors for fun and community building.

The SPIRE Center had a banner year, with 93 enrollees for Michael Howard's course on *Place Based Ministry,* in addition to our regular program of seminars. Focusing on local talent and peer resourcing has meant that our SPIRE speakers are presenting original material for us, while strengthening our community.

Heathy Practices featured two events in 2026. In March, Jon Komperda (newly installed as the NorthWest Association Minister) presented on Herrmann Brain Theory. Our Fall plan was disrupted by the presenter's illness, so we pivoted with presentations by Allan Harris (World Café) and myself (Communications Ethics).

Communities of Practice have been reworking in the last year, with new leadership by Kelly Brill (Lead Facilitator) and four new group leaders who will be launching new groups in early 2027.

Committee on Ministry is tremendously productive with very strong leadership. The three subcommittees - Authorization, Credentialing, and Oversight – manage a pipeline of leadership and manage policies and processes that impact every Authorized Minister and Local Church directly and indirectly.

Heartland Conference has engaged extensive discernment work regarding the potential consolidation of Heartland and the Indiana Kentucky Conference. In 2027, Living Water will conduct focus groups to further discuss the possibilities related to this emerging proposal and Heartland will visit LWA for Town Halls that further develop the concepts of unification. LWA offered direct and in-kind support to Heartland like a grant to Sports Camp, the loan of a rental vehicle to Outdoor Ministries, funding for financial analysis, and specific staff time for Interim Training, Regional Discernment, Synod pre-planning, Adult Conference, Great Lakes Staff Retreat planning, and received significant support from the Conference Response Team.

Member Consultation continues to be the quiet backbone of our ministry, including the extensive work of Search and Call, addressing opportunities and challenges, vocational counseling, financial consults with Machelle Miller, and more.

Council continues to bless us with strong guidance and a sense of confidence in the future. In addition to regular duties, Moderator Gloria Sturghill and Vice Moderator David Hill have provided insight to our HR/Search work, OCWM oversight, and support as the Conference's work with IKC has accelerated.

Deepest thanks to our moderator, Gloria Sturghill, whose insight and support is a blessing. And gratitude for our wonderful team, who make so much possible: Machelle Miller, Finance Administrator; Kellie Ramirez, Search and Call Coordinator; Rev. MiMi Chamberlain, Bridge Minster for Faith in Action.

Heartfelt thanks to all who form the Association and make this an influential community of leadership in ministry. It is a joy to be in ministry with you!

Faithfully, Elena Larssen