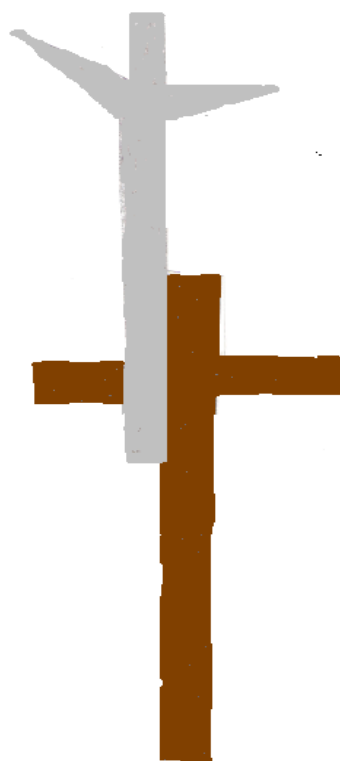


# United in Faith

The Journey Continues: Years 21 - 25  
2018 - 2023

**PIVOT**



**United in Faith Lutheran Church**

A Congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • Metropolitan Chicago Synod

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore, we will not fear,  
though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in  
the heart of the sea; though its  
waters roar and foam, though  
the mountains tremble with its  
tumult. Psalm 46:1-3

The period of years 21 through 25 would require new thinking of how to be the church and God's hand, feet and voice amid a pandemic with lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing. In-person contact was replaced by online meetings and broadcasts. Ministries were suspended, restricted or adjusted for the new reality. Worship went from in-person to online broadcast to a hybrid of live streaming of the in-person service. The benefits of some of the changes will carry into the future as they became new positive ways of being the church.

### STAFFING

Pastor Carla Thompson Powell continued her ministry at United in Faith until February 2023 when she accepted a call to the Synod office as Director of Evangelical Mission. Much of her professional growth during this period centered on how technology can support and promote ministry.

Pastor Jeanine Reardon began as Interim Pastor in March 2023.

The congregation welcomed the opportunity to host students as part of their seminary education for the mutual learning experience it offered. In Fall 2018 and 2020, Dalton Ruggieri and Rachel Perkins, respectively, were assigned as Ministry in Context students for 1 year terms. Rachel Perkins provided insights to the US immigration process as she awaited the arrival of her fiancé from Swaziland who was then not admitted despite appropriate paperwork.

In 2021 Jason Schultz, a Word and Service deacon intern was welcomed for a 6 month term His focus on and experience with anti-racism and accessibility

provided valuable information and training for the congregation

Worship music direction for our traditional service was led by an organist who also served as choir director. The Praise service was led by a band consisting of volunteer and paid musicians and song directors. When one service was held, as during summers, the music alternated weekly between traditional and Praise. When one service was restored in September 2021 the service had blended music with alternating musicians.

The Administrative Assistant position turned over in 2019 with the return of a former employee in that position

The Church Health Team along with its consultant, the Rev. Dave Daubert, was instrumental in planning for each challenge of the pandemic and for the post pandemic reality.

### THE CONGREGATION

Official membership statistics indicate that the number of confirmed and baptized members at the end of 2022 was 89 and 100 respectively (losses of 46% and 43% over 5 years). As a congregation that stresses discipleship over membership, several in the congregation are not included in the official counts.

### Purpose and Guiding Principles

Throughout this period, our Purpose and Guiding Principles remained the same and continued to direct our ministries.

#### Our Purpose

We are to be God's hands, feet and voice in the world.

#### Our Guiding Principles

Jesus is Lord and Savior  
Reflect God's love  
Pray and Listen for God's guidance  
Continue to strengthen faith  
Include all in God's work  
Meet people where they are

## STRUCTURED FOR OUR PURPOSE

### **Governance and Committees**

Church Council  
Executive Committee

Audit  
Call  
Education Endowment and Scholarship  
Finance  
Intern  
Mission in Context Lay  
Deacon Intern Lay  
Mission Endowment Fund  
Mutual Ministry  
Nominating  
Property Management

Computer Administrators  
Future Building Use  
Landscape  
Thrivent Coordinators

### **The Ministries of United in Faith**

#### **Christian Formation**

***Christian Education***  
Confirmation  
Sunday School  
Vacation Bible School  
Youth

#### ***Spiritual Growth***

Bible Study  
Faith Development  
Prayer  
Men in Mission  
WELCA  
Worship & Music

#### **Outreach**

#### ***Public Relations***

Marketing  
Social Media  
Website

#### ***Community***

Gay & Straight Together  
Justice  
Mom's Group  
(Outside Groups)\*  
(St Cyprian's Food Pantry)\*

#### **InReach**

#### ***Member Care***

Volunteer Coordination  
Communion Visitation  
Shepherds Staff  
Stewardship

#### ***Congregational Care***

Altar Guild  
Church Health Team

\* outside organizations hosted and supported by  
United in Faith

Ministries no longer had Ministry Coordinators for each area of focus. The leader of each ministry met quarterly for planning purposes. Some ministries were not active during this period, either due to pandemic restrictions or lack of members.

A Mom's Group began as a source of support and sharing, especially important with the challenges of the pandemic.

Partnerships were developed with St. John's Episcopal Church, Eden UCC church and Faith in Place as we all share common values. An Electric Vehicle (EV) Car Show was held jointly with St. John's and Faith in Place. A gathering for LGBTQ+ Seniors and friends was held jointly with Eden UCC. We hosted a Faith in Place indoor winter Farmers Market.

## Funding

The Education Endowment and Scholarship Fund continued to provide annual scholarships and tuition to students.

The Family Crisis Fund, administered by the Pastor and Executive Committee, is supported by the congregation and provides funds to meet critical financial needs.

Cash income continued to be less than cash expenditures with investment income and occasional bequests offsetting the cash deficits. Several large bequests were received during this time.

AmazonSmile was used as a way to provide additional funding.

The Shelby system was used for online giving.

Council developed a Gift Acceptance Policy.

## Communication

During the pandemic, council members kept in touch with members of the congregation by telephone, as did home communion visitors with their assigned shut-ins. These calls reinforced the connection to the church and alerted the church to any issues.

Pastor Carla began weekly newsletter emails, which contained news, upcoming events, worship schedules, and the worship plan for that week.

OneCallNow was used to notify the congregation by telephone and email of timely news.

Online conferencing (ZOOM) was used extensively for meetings when face-to-face interactions were prohibited or not recommended. It continued to be used when face-to-face meetings were held, as it allowed people to be a part of a meeting despite not being in the area (traveling) or illness.

Worship services were broadcast on Facebook and posted on YouTube when in-person was prohibited. They continued when in-person was restored as some people were hesitant to return physically. It was an opportunity for non-members to find us on Facebook and participate.

VBS was held virtually online with materials dropped off at participants' homes.

Sunday Coffee Hour was held via ZOOM and was a major way for people to stay in touch with others.

A Wednesday evening ZOOM became another outlet for conversation and dialog. Often these had a community organization focus. In light of a difficult year, a year-end gathering was called 'Kick 2020 to the Curb'.

Congregational forums, sponsored by council, to open the lines of communication and update the congregation on current and upcoming activities forums continued to be held on the fifth Sundays of a month when worship was offered in-person.

Facebook, Twitter, our website and neighborhood social media (e.g., Nextdoor) continued to be used to establish a presence and to publicize events.

Invitations for special events and services were created for distribution.

## Property

Major replacement projects included: a stove in the kitchen, HVAC over Fellowship Hall, and a garage door.

Major maintenance projects included: cleaning of sanctuary chairs, window caulking, tuckpointing, water damage repair in the Resource room, painting of the large cross in front of the building, and external building painting.

The Girl Scout troop created 2 Peace Poles which were placed at the front and back entrances.

Outdoor banners (2' x 6') at the front and in the back parking lot continued to be utilized to publicize events that could be of interest to the community and the worship schedule.

*We Believe Black Lives Matter* signs were put at the front and back entrances of the church after the summer riots of 2020 protesting the shooting of Black people by police. When the signs disappeared they were replaced.

Rainbow 'All are Welcome' banners was installed by the outside entrances.

An Eagle Scout project to landscape the front of the buildings was completed in 2018.

A Prayer Room, a quiet space to center your heart, was created in a small office complete with meditation aides, devotionals and inspirational materials and activities.

A plaque honoring those who achieved Eagle Scout through the years was mounted.

A MEVO camera and software was acquired for the broadcasting of worship services.

### **Worship and Music**

Our worship schedule at the start of this period continued with a Traditional service and a Praise and Worship service each Sunday morning except when there was a fifth Sunday in a month when one service was held followed by the congregational forum. During the summer months, one service was held. The one service Sundays used a blended format combining elements from both the Traditional and Praise services. Sunday school was held during the year except during the summer months. The music and liturgy continued to be

highly regarded - varied, spirit-filled, and celebratory. The choir sang occasionally at the traditional service. Our Praise band, The Voice of the Turtle, continues to lead music at the Praise and Worship service. The bell choir performs occasionally.

The two services schedule was maintained during the pandemic with the first service being broadcast with only the pastor and one musician present. The second service was in-person when allowed. Before the pandemic, discussions were held about moving to one blended service year round. In September 2021 the one service schedule was implemented with in-person worship, which was also live streamed.

In-person worship was suspended in March 2020, resumed in September 2020, suspended again in November 2020, and resumed in March 2021. The decision was always made for the safety of our people. People were slow to return to the in-person services and were mostly those who were not able to participate in online services. The availability of vaccines saw more people returning.

The pandemic altered worship at various times with: sign in sheets, temperature checks, hand sanitizing, social distancing, minimal music, no singing, masking required, masking recommended, no food or drink, drink only no food, communion by a sealed unit of wafer and juice, communion by at-home viewers providing their own elements, parking lot drive up communion, no physical touching for the passing of the peace, Lent-To-Go kits.

By September 2021 the in-person service started to feel like pre-pandemic times with more people returning and less of the restrictions.

A pre-recorded Wednesday evening Prayer service was broadcast.

The Decorative Arts team added many new items to celebrate the seasons of the year.

Seasonal worship materials from various sources were themed and accompanied by spiritual artwork.

The new hymnal, All Creation Sings, was purchased in limited quantities for song use by the choir and for occasional worship.

Hearing assist devices were purchased for use by individuals.

A 'Kidspace/PrayGround' was created in the sanctuary with a play carpet, baby bouncer, kids picnic table and activities to welcome younger babies and children and allow them to be beside their guardians. Spark Story Bibles were added to the hymnal cart.

Average Sunday worship attendance in 2023 was 50 (28 in-person and 22 online), down 21% from 5 years ago.

In August 2022 an additional worship experience was started to supplement Sunday worship. The Messy Church movement is based on five values which coincide with our guiding principles: creativity, hospitality, all ages, Christ centered and celebration. Its fresh expression of the church targets our own parishioners and non parishioners with its motto of 'church but not as you know it.' All ages meet together to learn about Christ through games, crafts and activities, music and storytelling from the Bible. A simple meal at the end builds relationships with each other, God and the world. Messy Church was scheduled every six weeks.

- \* Season of Creation liturgies in September with assorted dioramas
- \* Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Sunday celebration in January
- \* Faith Promises Sunday
- \* Epiphany Star Words
- \* Children burying an 'Alleluia' banner for Lent and unveiling it on Easter
- \* Children assisting in the collection of the offering at services
- \* Seasonal, holiday and special event Fellowship and Outreach dinners and pot lucks
- \* Fall Rally Day/Kick Off, often combined with God's Work/Our Hands Day, with worship, food, music, games, service events and fellowship
- \* Explore Belonging classes for people interested in learning more about United in Faith
- \* Cookie Baking and Walk in December
- \* Girl Scout cookies!
- \* Annual Spring Cleaning
- \* Collection of Back to School Supplies for St. Cyprian's Food Pantry
- \* Special St. Cyprian's Food Pantry collections of food and funds for Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas in addition to regular donations
- \* Donations for the children of St. Cyprian's Food Pantry of Christmas gifts and Easter baskets
- \* Support to Phil's Friends and Kids Above All
- \* Recognizing birthdays and anniversaries the first Sunday of each month at worship and with cards sent by Shepherd's Staff

## LIVING OUR PURPOSE

### Continuing Traditions

Some of our traditions, created over our 25 years, continued as best they could under pandemic restrictions. Some were suspended, some fell away as needs and passions changed, and new events were held to add to the traditions.

- \* Blessing of the Animals in October
- \* Longest Night (Blue Christmas) service
- \* Thanksgiving eve worship service followed by pie
- \* Midweek Lent and Advent services
- \* Weekly/monthly community prayer services as part of emphasis on prayer in newsletter articles and sermons and with a Prayer Weaving and God Box for prayer requests

## Serving

A member of the congregation developed an Eagle Scout project to prepare for the return of people to the building after lockdowns by making stands for hand sanitizers which were placed at the entrances. The sanctuary chairs were also placed in small group units for social distancing. Signage with protocols was posted.

Our **Twenty For Twenty** service projects for the community in celebration and thanksgiving for our 20th anniversary concluded in fall 2018 with a final anniversary celebration.

The church family and ministries continued their dedicated work as permitted under pandemic restrictions:



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- \* Sunday Church School
- \* Weekly Bible/book studies including online Bible studies, Bible journaling, a monthly book club
- \* Vacation Bible School and incorporated service projects
- \* Monthly communion visitation to those unable to attend church (replaced by phone calls during pandemic restrictions)
- \* The Family Crisis Fund collection and disbursement
- \* Building and landscape maintenance and upkeep including computer infrastructure and our online presence
- \* *The Lutheran* magazine subscriptions to all families
- \* Daily devotional booklets available to all
- \* Preparation of the altar for each service and maintenance of the paraments, vestments, and linens; seasonal decorations
- \* Greeters for Sunday worship services and 'coffee and' supplied for Sunday morning fellowship, plus special desserts for celebrations
- \* Counting, recording and deposit of offerings
- \* Preparation of youth for confirmation
- \* Raising up stewardship topics
- \* Supplying items for the Little Free Library box on site
- \* Various craft projects (e.g. quilts, fidget pillows) donated to those in need
- \* Host for Faith In Place indoor winter Farmers Market
- \* Promoting Justice issues (Fair Trade, hunger, environmental, immigration, racism) including a monthly newsletter article 'Caring for God's World'
- \* Donations for refugees
- \* Service days at the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Feed My Starving Children
- \* English Conversation gatherings to assist people wishing to practice their English speaking skills
- \* 'Cyber Safety for Older Adults' seminar
- \* 'Being a Trans Ally: Unscrambling LBGTQIA+' seminar
- \* 'Anti-racism/Critical Race Theory/Intersectionality' seminar
- \* 'Disability and Accessibility' presentation

United in Faith continued to host these organizations:

Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts\*  
Girl Scouts and Brownies

Golden Rebels  
St. Cyprian's Food Pantry  
New Life for Old Bags  
Alcoholics Anonymous  
Al Anon  
Survivors of Incest Anonymous  
Knitting Group  
Ladies Group Discussion

\* At the end of 2022 the BSA Troop 166 disbanded.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

*Reflection by Pastor Carla*

United in Faith celebrates a past that has been marked by mission, connection with the community, and radical inclusion. We expect to continue with these same goals, but UIF's future is still to be determined. We are at a very important crossroad. The work of renewing our church is not passive, and we cannot sit idly by hoping that a turnaround will come easily. You know all this, but as long as the services continue and the lights are still on, it is easy to ignore the evidence in front of us. We can't just cross our fingers and hope that doing the same thing we always did will produce different results and new growth.

A REVEAL survey of our members and active participants identified UIF as a "complacent congregation." A summary from the Center for Church Renewal in 2021 stated (based on what our members and active participants reported): "United in Faith is a congregation that hasn't lost hope for the future. She is well-served by a small but zealous group of volunteers and a godly leadership team that has the respect of the congregation. Having said that, the ministry headwinds are significant with an aging congregation, few young families, a continuing loss of membership, financial resources that barely cover expenses and few visitors or new persons showing interest in membership. Still, the Gospel is preached, programs are attended, facilities serve the community and fellowship is sweet. United in Faith must now decide to either retool or celebrate a life well-lived and find a creative way to complete and bless." When the Center for Church Renewal says "retool," they mean praying for God's transformation, growing deeper in faith, learning

new strategies, developing new skills, meeting new people, and trying new things.

The headwinds blowing against United in Faith's success and future as a congregation are strong. During the 2020-2022 pandemic seasons, United in Faith experienced some of the same attendance attrition that almost every U.S. community of faith experienced. Even before 2020, we had few visitors, older average age, and lower average weekly worship attendance each year. Making services available online meant that our average worship attendance did not diminish as much as we would have expected from 2020-2022.

The only way toward a fruitful and promised future growth for United in Faith is to move with gusto toward renewal and revitalization with a renewed sense of vision. Without significant change, we will continue to reach few new people, few unchurched people, and few younger people. If we do not actively seek changes toward renewal, we will continue to decline, moving toward closure that is an all-too-common pattern among many smaller ELCA congregations.

When the Sunday school numbers began to be inconsistent (zero one week, three another), Sunday morning Sunday school was stopped in order to re-group our children's ministry. Our Annual Vacation Bible School also stopped during this time period (due to less volunteer availability and lower numbers of children participating). With that in mind, United in Faith offered Messy Church events as an ongoing opportunity for all generations. Messy Church is an endeavor (consistent with our congregational guiding principles) that has sought to offer a worship-inspired, Bible-focused, and fellowship opportunity beyond Sunday morning. Because Messy Church (a world-wide movement) is focused on intergenerational, creative, and inclusive ministry, this felt like another way to include younger and older members of our congregation in new ways. This alone will not be a magic bullet to growth, but so far, Messy Church has allowed our current members (with some visitors and guests) to engage with scripture in a slightly different way.

With smaller numbers of active members and lesser congregational energy, partnering with other communities of faith (not consolidation or mergers, not necessarily Lutheran) can expand the type of

programming we are able to offer or participate in. New ventures are needed, and thankfully, our congregation has a base of financial investment that will allow implementation of some of these grand visions. Our deep desire to be an integral part of the surrounding community and our outward focus toward mission in the world around us will guide us well on new roads and new endeavors. We encourage every member to find ways to be a part of the important work of renewal in the days ahead. Attendance, inviting, praying, seeking God's voice, learning, and growing are the tasks of all of us as we seek a bright and promised future working in God's kingdom.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrod, through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

LBW Evening Prayer

United in Faith openly **welcomes** and values every person who walks through our doors, regardless of race, nationality and ethnic origin, age, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, marital status, social and economic situation, ability, cultural reality and need. Further, United in Faith supports efforts to share with all: God's gifts of love, acceptance and grace; invites all people, uniquely created by God, to experience the word of God, communion and promise of the risen Christ; and, encourages all people to participate fully in the ministries of this congregation, which are based on its core values.