

# Innovation and Inspiration: WHAT'S NEW IN THE UCC?!



UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST



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An overview of the innovation of the UCC granting process for the New and Renewing Spiritual Communities grant from Local Church Ministries, and stories of common inspiration through the themes shown in the applications and grantees.



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## INNOVATION:

In the spring of 2017, a dedicated group of volunteers from across the United Church of Christ gathered to determine how to innovate the granting process for New and Renewing Congregations to make it equitable and accessible. The goal was to put everything on the table, change what was needed, and refine what was left to better serve not only the denomination as it is presently, but the denomination as it can be imagined, and beyond.

After the applications were received, an evaluation team was formed consisting of a diverse group of church planters, laity, conference, and national staff, with some overlap to the volunteer grant innovator group. They had the difficult task of reviewing highly creative and inspirational work. The team was attentive to the vision, mission, and purpose of the United Church of Christ while using the values identified by the guidelines for funding.



THE GRANT INNOVATION GROUP

In addition to the convening leadership of Rev. Dr. Chris Davies of the UCC National Setting, the group was aided by the skilled facilitation and wisdom of Rev. Jennifer Bailey of the *Faith Matters Network* who helped the efforts to draw out values and metrics by which these innovative ministries could be highlighted. The granting process for the New and Renewing Spiritual Communities with the Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ was a clear opportunity for the denomination to invest in its values.

In conversation with the **Vision, Mission, and Purpose of the UCC** (see page 3), the group highlighted and defined the following values, in order of importance: **Love, Spirituality/Faith, Community, Justice, and Creativity**.



PURPOSE, VISION, & MISSION:  
The United Church of Christ



**The purpose statement from the Gospel of Matthew:**

To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength  
and our neighbor as ourselves.

**The vision:**

United in Christ's love, a just world for all.

**The mission statement:**

United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace,  
we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.

## United Church of Christ Values

### **LOVE**

Right relationships define love. Love is a communal experience enacting love of neighbor, self, and God. Love has a narratable timeline; something happening drawing one out of oneself, and extending self. The community speaks love through a narration of their story including presence to both joy and pain in the midst of loving.

### **SPIRITUALITY/FAITH**

Communities which are connected to something bigger than themselves, and the great cloud of witnesses (past, present, and future), while adding to the Christian story.

### **COMMUNITY**

Gathering body of individuals that speaks to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ. Community means interdependence, connection, honoring of difference, with the equal distribution and sharing of power and resources for all.

### **JUSTICE**

Justice speaks truth to power. Justice is what love looks like in public, and through the eyes of God. Justice creates opportunities for wholeness and health in individuals and communities. Justice is connected to the surrounding community in the building of coalitions and partnerships. Justice is intersectional; so the faith community is also facing outward. Justice ensures the voice of the voiceless and serves the underserved, inviting the tradition and wisdom of voices historically excluded and/or undervalued. Justice repairs the breaches, and restores right relationships. Justice is the equitable allocation of resources for God's beloved children.

### **CREATIVITY**

The ministry takes a bold and innovative approach, and/or applies the old model in a new way to address a particular need within the community.

The granting innovation group moved the granting process to be indicative of how missional resources are used in the United Church of Christ to invest in the kingdom of God and the world, according to these values and our vision. Application questions were pointed towards each of the values defined above, as well as the impact that each ministry had in the local community. The vision, mission and purpose of the United Church of Christ was taken into consideration while determining how to grant. Further, the granting innovation group covenanted that 50% or more of the funding for this cycle would go towards communities of color and/or communities led by people of color. This commitment was later met, awarding 60.4% of the total money to communities of color and communities led by people of color. In addition, the granting innovation group called for the grant to slightly weight funding towards new and renewing ministries which had less access to resources, in order to have a greater impact in areas of both need and viability.

Innovation is an ongoing process and is still in the midst of testing and refinement. The granting application and process will continue to shift as it makes space for the learning and growth, as well as feedback from the community.

Even with this first year of experimentation, the applications inspired and awed the team. There is so much to learn in the applications about what is New in the UCC. From the process to the content, the stories of hope of innovation, inspiration, and participating in the renewal of Christianity are certainly worth sharing!

## JUST THE FACTS, MX.\*

**C**ASA's New and Renewing Spiritual Communities 2017 grant cycle accepted 78 applications May–September 1st, 2017, which was a 400% boost in applicants compared to the year prior. For all those who applied, communities were **seeking over \$1.5 million in funding**. The grant is sourced through the Strengthen the Church offering, taken on or around Pentecost each year; an endowment supporting the effort; and a small portion is earmarked for multi-racial multi-cultural congregations through Make A Difference (MAD) fund.

### Facts

#### 2017 GRANT CYCLE

78 applications, a **400%** increase over 2016  
Some \$1.5 million sought

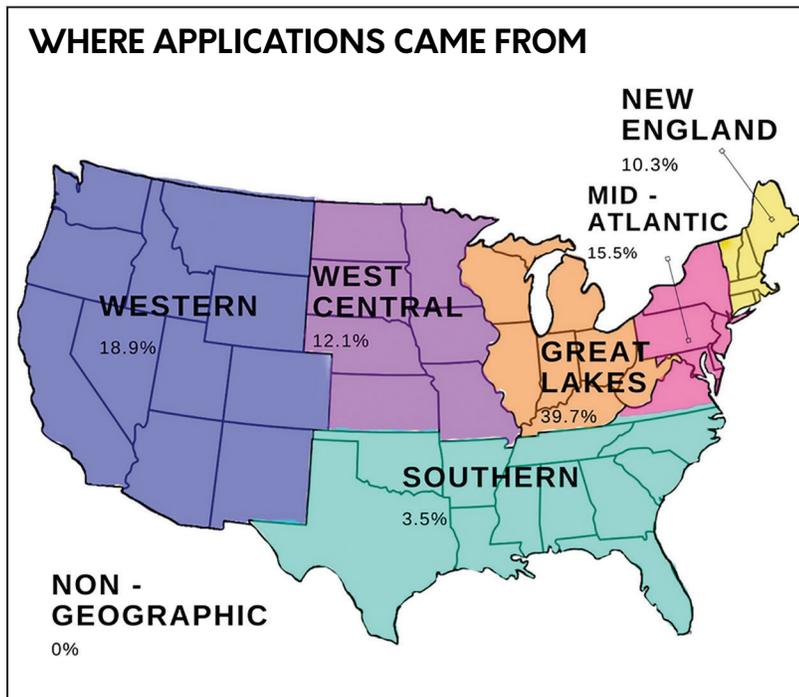
**AVAILABLE GRANT MONEY: \$350,000**

\*Mx (pronounced "mix") is a gender neutral honorific, such as Ms. or Mr.

## APPLICANT THEMES

It is worth noting that these themes are self-selecting: they represent those people in or associated with the United Church of Christ seeking further financial support for their projects. They have already demonstrated some measure of a willingness to work for the vision, and to think carefully about how to execute it. Statistics were pulled from the applications and the Data Hub:

- ◆ 40% of applications were from self-identified communities of color, 13.3% reflecting multi-racial multicultural communities.
- ◆ 25% of applicants listed an endowment >\$200,000 associated with their project. Of this 25%, half or 50% articulated actively investing in their own vision.
- ◆ 35% of the applications were from areas that are rural or suburban; 65% from urban settings.



- ◆ Most notably, 65% of the applications articulated an explicit commitment to being a welcoming place towards the LGBTQ community, regardless of the location (urban or suburban), or the racial ethnic makeup of the congregations.
- ◆ Easily extended into the second major theme of the new and renewing applications was a desire to make home again, and/or find a space of healing towards those who have been wounded by institutional Christianity in some form in the past. As one application wrote towards these two themes: "Our ongoing work is to uplift the most marginalized in our community and call for continued work towards justice and equality."

Interestingly, the next themes that arose to the surface include ministries that are NOT focused on a Sunday morning, and/or ministries that include an intentional aspect of interfaith community development in the fabric of what they seek to do. A full 20% of applications were associated with a mission organization connected to a congregation, and living out the purpose of the congregation in the wider community.

For more specific themes, see the table on next page.

Themes across applications	% of ministries reflecting this theme
Specific articulation of Queer support	65%
Religious healing/making new religious home	51.67%
NOT focused on Sunday morning	23.33%
Interfaith aspects	20.05%
Missional organization connected to a church	20%
Food justice	18.33%
Digital and/or online ministries	16.67%
Specific focus on youth/children	11.67%
Focus on homelessness and/or ending poverty	10%
Bilingual	8.33%
Focus on small groups	6.67%
Storytelling	6.67%
Explicit activism and community organizing	5%
Specific focus on Native/Indigenous support	5%
Bar-based ministry	5%
Revitalizing Sunday worship	5%

## ADDITIONAL FUNDING

### Outside of the New & Renewing Spiritual Communities Grant

This grant isn't the only place communities are seeking funding; communities have also reported seeking support from other places. Let's take an overview of where they have already received financial support as a collective whole. Spiritual Communities are creative in how they pull together granting sources, with many beginning in the local community. Applicants cited "local foundations" in a generic way, but also specifically pointed to local partners in other spiritual communities: whether the nearby synagogue through a justice-oriented grant, another church in town wherein the values align, or the Association of churches for the area, communities reach out for help and find support.

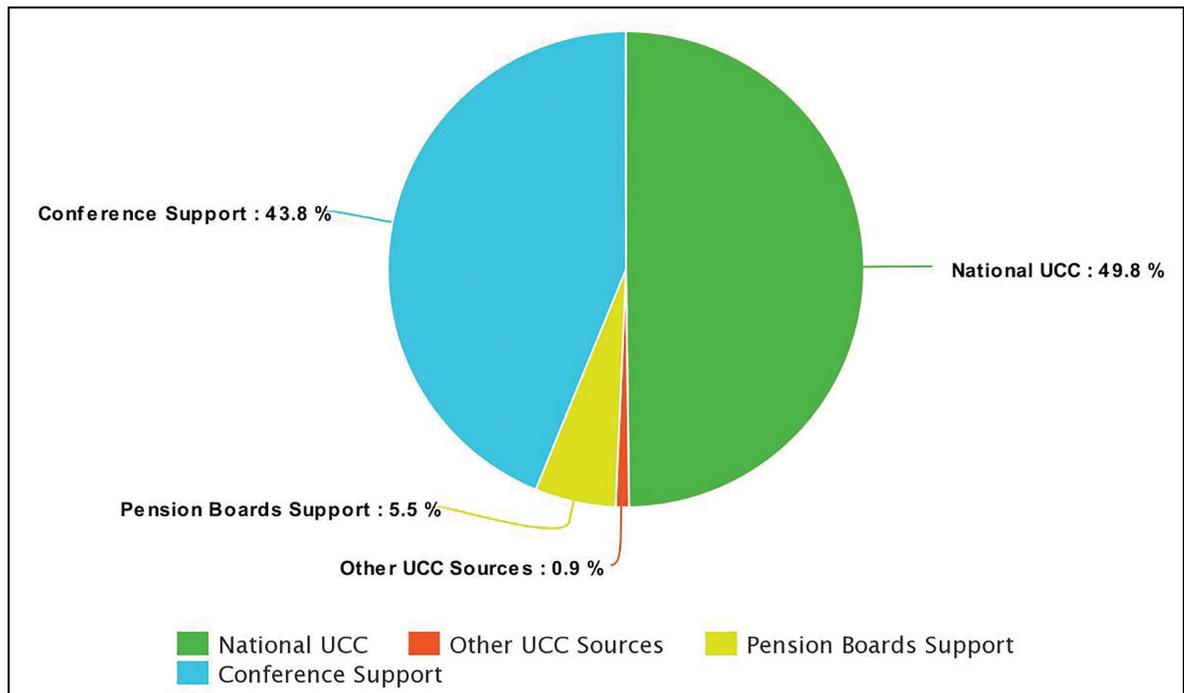
Communities sought resources through outside foundations, from the national to the local. Some mentioned include but are not limited to: the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Deaconess Foundation, Innovation Grants through Duke University, the BTS Center (the mission successor to Bangor Theological Seminary), United Way, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the CapRock foundation, and many more, specific to local communities and/or

projects. For example, those churches working in arts and spirituality sought support through Arts Councils, local collectives, and community partners with aligned interests. Those projects pertaining to farming or gardening were equally as creative in seeking financial support through means outside the church in community partners, other dedicated parties, and beyond.

The UCC as a denomination has invested into the future of the church substantially. The following is not reflective of the entirety of that which has been invested, only what those who have applied *reported* in their applications. (Note: about **48% of applicants reported no previous support from UCC entities** at the local, conference or national level.)

The following chart represents the nearly 52% who reported some level of outside or previous support. The chart does *not* represent the timeline of the support and when it was previously distributed. (See Chart 1)

CHART 1



Many of whom applying for a New and ReNewing Spiritual Community Grant have seen the benefit of funding from the National Setting, or their conference previously. In other words: of the communities that have received UCC support in the past, they have seen about *half* of their total previous support from National, and about *half* from the local conference.

## INSPIRATION:

The following were recipients of the New & Renewing Spiritual Communities Grant

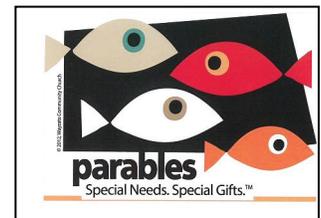
**THE LIGHTHOUSE CHURCH OF CHICAGO** is a 4-year-old church plant called by God to be, “passionate about Jesus and serious about Justice.” Lighthouse is a predominately African American LGBT-inclusive church that welcomes all people. They follow the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus Christ, believing that God has offered the greatest love story in all of human history: the story of a God who has come to us in human form, lived, died, rose, and is soon to come again. From faith, Lighthouse takes serious the call towards Justice. Lighthouse welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, races, ethnicities, and class—beloved not in spite of the gospel, but because of the gospel.



And anywhere they experience -isms or -phobias at work in the world, they commit to work to uproot them, inspired by the example of Christ. Pastor Jamie Frazier says of the Lighthouse Church of Chicago: “It is wonderful to be so utterly supported by all levels of the United Church of Christ, including National! Words cannot express the pleasure and honor it is to pastor the incredible folks at Lighthouse.” Lighthouse has previously received a small start-up grant from the National UCC.

Learn more about their growing ministry here: <http://www.lighthousechicago.org>

**PARABLES: ALL ABILITIES INCLUSION WORSHIP** is a ministry of the 160-year-old Chelsea First Congregational in Chelsea, MI, focusing on creating a worship and support space for people living with disabilities in physical and/or mental capacities and their families. Parables is unique because it fosters a new way to practice belonging to each other in Jesus Christ, where people who are traditionally at the margins of society due to disabilities become the “indispensable weakness” (1 Cor. 12:22) at the center of our meaning-making in the body of Christ. The service is specially designed for people who find that they and their family members don’t always swim in the same direction as the mainstream. The four main aspects of this community are:



1. We’re invited to swim like “red fish” — with the values of Jesus — often in a different direction than mainstream society.
2. Diversity is a necessary part of the Body of Christ, as the most vulnerable part of our community is essential to everyone’s balanced wholeness.
3. Inclusivity is essential in Christian community Oneness, because each of us is a living, breathing puzzle piece in the meaning-making we are all doing with our lives.
4. Transformation is what happens to us when we face change in our lives with Christ awareness at our core. Letting go of what was while trusting in the Love that holds us all together is the cornerstone of resurrection. We become “new creatures.”

Parables is an empowerment ministry, not an offer of pity — it is designed to challenge the societal assumption that people with disabilities need “typical” people, but not the other way around.



However, in the words of Rev. Leslie Neugent, author of *Red Fish Theology*: The disabled ones in our midst are like walking, breathing “parables”: The parables of Jesus turn our understanding of the world upside-down, and so do the realities of sharing life with people who have differences that challenge our thinking about what it means to be a full human being.

When asked about the impact of Parables, leader LeAnn Seto speaks of the “second passing of the peace ...” which occurs when people make connections at dinner following the programming that they might not have

otherwise had.

Learn more about their ministry, here: <http://www.chelseafcc.com/ministry-within-the-margins.html>

**CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE JUSTICE AT LYNDALE UCC** in Minneapolis, MN is a bold ministry of the 135 year old congregation seeking to create spiritual community in the midst of intersectional, local activism. Since the spring of 2015, the Center for Sustainable Justice has helped build the movement of religious leaders and communities working together on LGBTQ, racial, food and climate justice in the Twin Cities and across the Midwest. They do so rooted in an understanding that movements for justice are strongest and most successful when there is simultaneous work in four areas:

- ◆ setting and sharing the vision of how the world ought to be,
- ◆ helping individual organizations work better and creating and tending the “connective tissue” between organizations,
- ◆ mobilizing people for ethical spectacle, direct action and/or campaigns, and
- ◆ cultivating healthy people (bodies, relationships, communities).

Their work places particular emphasis on work at the intersections, relationship-building over the long-haul, connecting and building coalitions between people and organizations.



The Center for Sustainable Justice emerges out of the reality that much religiously-based justice work is “siloeed.” Folks tend to either work in ecumenical and multifaith ways around one justice issue or within one movement (e.g. Pro-LGBTQ, environmental justice, racial justice) or they work within their own religious community on one or a variety of justice issues. But there are not many spaces where people are invited

together around an ecumenical and/or multifaith vision of justice that includes the dreams of

many different people and bodies (in other words, that is intersectional). This is true in the Twin Cities, in the Midwest and nationally. The Center for Sustainable Justice convenes, organizes, learns, and offers healing in the presence of their communities.

Learn about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://www.lyndaleucc.org/justice/>

**LIBERATION UCC** is a 10-year-old church plant in Seattle, WA, a first-time grant recipient, and a multicultural, multiracial, and multigendered congregation that is welcoming to all. Described as a “living breathing example of the kingdom of God on earth,” they reach to the most marginalized through Sunday services as well as their fellowship opportunities such as: an annual Gospel Drag show, special worship services centering women and/or trans preachers in the last words of Christ, Martin Luther King Day service that calls for continued work against racism and white supremacy, as well as a Watch Night celebrating the emancipation of American slaves.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <https://mylucc.org>

**FIRST UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND CONFERENCE CENTER** is the first worshipping congregation in virtual reality universe to have full standing, and gathers online on the platform of SecondLife. For about 5 years, they have been reaching hundreds of people who come to them because they are the only church they can access in safety and confidence. Many are in the LGBTQIA communities, others deal with physical or emotional limitations, and still others are geographically isolated. Through their ministry, people find worship, support groups, community, and pastoral care. The impact that FCCSL has in the digital age is innovative and inspiring, and reaching those who wouldn't otherwise find a church home.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://firstuccsl.org/>

**EMPOWERMENT ENTERPRISE II** is a community-based non-profit born from a missional call from Community Church, in Washington, D.C., who has also been a recipient of UCC granting funds in their start-up about 9 years ago. EE2 creates community and is designed to provide life skills, coaching, facilitation, and motivational speaking to young adults and community organizations. They employ staff with experience in coaching, college success and workforce readiness, which allows for an effective, measurable program. The program has grown to encompass college preparedness, team building, and musicology-based programming, after the youth asked for more, and is serving to empower youth in Wards 7 & 8 in D.C. into adulthood.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <https://www.ee2dc.org>

**OMO HOUSE:** Out of Many, One (An interfaith/Multifaith Healing Conversation) is both a virtual and multi-site worship space in the line of church unusual, following a café model of gathering. They gather in spaces as relational beings who understand that intimacy and vulnerability is what is required to have the difficult conversations. Their spiritual theology



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is inclusive of ALL LIFE, complementing the Good News of the strongly political, yet loving messages of Yeshua, The Christ with “wise words” from various communities of faith. OMO HOUSE is both a virtual sanctuary as well as emergent physical locations attuned to their contexts, with the largest in Denver, CO.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://omohouse.org>

Gathered in 2014, **UNITED FAITH COMMUNITY** in Buffalo, MN, arose in a mostly conservative location wherein a progressive faith community was needed. With a group of leaders, this congregation emerged to do regular mission activities in alignment with their faith, and worship together, and provide a safe space for LGBTQ families in the area.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://ufcucc.wixsite.com/unitedfaithcommunity>

**MULTILINGUAL AND CROSS-SECTIONAL WORSHIP MINISTRIES** are held at The Park, a 208-year-old congregation in New York, NY. It is a revitalization worship seeking to construct and develop a liberating experience deeply rooted in the biblical calling and theological foundations of social justice for all. They seek to design worship services that offer a “radical welcome” following models such as *Proyecto Encuentros de Gracia y Bienvenida* — a UCC Latinx project seeking to engage the faithful in prayerful dialogue regarding sexual orientation. Worship includes reflecting through languages, rhythms, liturgical styles, hymnody, visibility and participation, worshiping styles, engaging not only congregants, but those who we desire to invite to praise and make church with us. These ministries seek to comfort the afflicted, and challenge the comfortable while empowering us all, cross-sectionally, to proclaim and be witnesses in action of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this opportune Christian time. Many voices shout “Amén” to this vision of a Multilingual and Cross-Sectional Worship ministry: the Latinx who are already part of this community, the Latinx who visit us for the first time, “language lovers,” immigrant communities, new visitors in their 40’s, 30’s and 20’s, congregants who vibrate with this type of worship, parents of bilingual children, parents who desire to raise their children bilingually, adults who desire to be part of a multilingual community, our social justice ministries, and the New York Conference.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <https://www.parkavenuechristian.com>

**SALUS CENTER UCC** in Lansing, MI aims to radically express and embody God’s redemptive work and transformative presence in the world, through an LGBTQ focused community center and place of respite for queer people seeking connection and support. Organized in 2017 with an intersectional approach at the core, Salus Center UCC brings queer people together outside of the normative experience of gathering in bars to support each other, learn together, and share resources. All of this stems out of their core values of Loving, Growing, Being, Transforming, and Questioning — with an explicitly spiritual service once a week, and gatherings that leave space for those who have been wounded by religion in other services. In the words of Rev. Phiwa Langeni, “In the widest sense of the word, queerness will save us; the kind of queer that disrupts business as usual and presents opportunities for us to love bigger (than we realize we can) and turn away from hate and fear. We have a long line of queer folk

These ministries seek to comfort the afflicted, and challenge the comfortable while empowering us all

who began the journey we're on now, both in the Bible and in culture. Shiphrah and Puah. Esther. Mary. Jesus. The Syrophenician Woman. The Good Samaritan. Shaka Zulu. Steve Biko. Nelson Mandela. Harriet Tubman. Sojourner Truth. Bayard Rustin. Ruby Sales. Marsha P. Johnson. Sylvia Rivera. Koach Baruch Frazier. Brittany Ferrell. Alexis Templeton. Leelah Alcorn. James Baldwin. God."

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://www.saluscenter.org>

**KNITTING4PEACE** is an interfaith and global community dedicated to knitting together the Beloved Community, and based out of Park Hill Congregational UCC, in Denver, CO. They are woven together and intentional about incorporating an element of 3 in every thing that is created: symbolizing the person who creates the item, the person who receives it, and the Mystery of Creation that creates and unites all of Creation. 3 also symbolizes the importance of the Abrahamic faith traditions to global peace. Their work of crafting and delivering Hope, Healing, and Peace constitutes the third "3" of the Mission's founding commitments. Knitting4Peace has delivered requested items to more than 140,000 people living in communities across the United States and 70 countries around the world: through groups gathering, creating, and knitting (known as Peace Pods), and systems of delivery run by volunteers. They share patterns for pieces, and pattern the world for peace.

Learn more about their ongoing ministry, here: <http://www.knitting4peace.org>



... an interfaith and global community dedicated to knitting together the Beloved Community



**PATHWAYS TO HEALTH & WHOLENESS MINISTRY** through Rivers of Living Water UCC, is based in New York and seeks to create healthier environments by offering help, hope and opportunity to the most vulnerable in our community: specifically LGBTQI people of color. Pathways is committed to being a trauma informed community which embraces the idea that trauma impacts everyone. This ministry is a community counseling service using small groups which has been providing services over the last six years, with the church as the connecting agent. They believe that the world is their workshop and stay involved with ministry on the margins, in such a way that the cosmos becomes the altar. This ministry is a vitality project of Rivers of Living Water, and seeks to lead from the margins towards the impacted communities that they seek to serve.

For more information about their continuing ministry, see: [www.rolwny.org](http://www.rolwny.org)

This report, and the funding towards the ministries that have been supported, is made possible in part through donations towards the *Strengthen the Church* offering of the United Church of Christ. It is our hope that this report, and reports like it, become part of a series of identifying what's new, what themes emerge, and how the United Church of Christ can partner with communities finding Gospel in creative contexts and methodologies.

Thank you for your donations to the *Strengthen the Church* offering.

*I can't even begin to find the words. May the Spirit who has guided your generous spirits bless you with the same generosity in your own life endeavors. I feel your hope and belief in this deep calling that has been just between me and God for a long time, but now is receiving the blessing of so many more who also dream of a world shaped by a Just Peace church. I feel that your extended hands of blessing will protect us from the storms of doubt and dry spells when they come, keeping us hopeful as we wait faithfully for God's leading.*

— LeAnne Seto, Parables: All Abilities Inclusion Worship

For more information about the  
UCC's New and Renewing  
Spiritual Communities Grant, or  
to apply, please see:

[ucc.org/grow-your-church](http://ucc.org/grow-your-church)

*Many who have joined The Lighthouse are hearing and experiencing Christ and Christian community that liberates, includes, and loves for the first time. Your financial support is making this work and healing possible. We are grateful for your generosity and are doing our best to be good stewards of your resources.*

— Pastor Jamie Frazier, The Lighthouse Church of Chicago

*We have chosen to act on the belief the Church is most like the Church when it is rooted in the gospel, remembering the worship in the sanctuary and present in the streets, the City Council chambers, the State House and the places of power witnessing to the message of Love and Justice. Your support of our ministry emboldens, empowers and allows us to step out in faith. We are grateful beyond words—both for the money and for the faith and prayers the money represents, without which we would not be able to do our work. Thanks be to G-d!*

— Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel, Center for Sustainable Justice at Lyndale UCC

Rev. Dr. Chris S. Davies  
Congregational Assessment, Support and Advancement (CASA)  
United Church of Christ

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