

2024-2025 Missional Report Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

At last year's annual conference, we heard the words of the prophet Isaiah reminding us that we need not fear because God has redeemed us. God has called us by name saying, "You are mine." We hear those words echo in our hearts this year as we are reminded that God FIRST loved us and because of that, we are able to make God's love alive and complete when we love others. We were created to love BOLDLY! This isn't just an annual conference theme or logo—it is our identity and purpose—a calling that Dakotas United Methodists have been living passionately this past year.

Living the love of Christ means a commitment to healthy boundaries and safe spaces. Conference Safer Sanctuaries trainers, Brenda Lint and Beata Ferris, followed up a robust annual conference workshop with live and virtual trainings across the Conference, equipping local churches who are committed to protecting children, youth, and vulnerable adults who engage in their ministries. In addition to this work with churches, a clergy boundaries and ethics training ensured that our pastors are caring for themselves in order to care for their congregations.

That theme of comprehensive and wholistic well-being as a part of our discipleship extended into our Conference focus physical health. Whole & Holy blogs, cohorts, and resources from our Area Director of Clergy Well-being, Diane Owen, and her team are a powerful tool for clergy and laity alike as we care for the temples God has entrusted us with. Epiphany Gathering, Scripture Circles, affinity Cohorts and the clergywomen's retreat added to that spirit of mutual love and support as we journey together.

God's love was seen in powerful ways through our youth this year. Our annual DakYouth gathering became an incubator for innovation as middle and high school youth were challenged to think of new ways to Identify and name ministry needs that they see through mental health and amplifying youth voices. Winter Connection events in Mitchell, Rapid City, and Bismarck spread that spirit of incarnational love to different corners of the Conference and that commitment to connection expanded as over 80 youth and adults gathered at Lake Poinsett for a two-day confirmation retreat. Our Dakotas Camps continue to provide powerful experiences of God's love made real as they hosted nearly 1000 campers last summer. These encounters with Christ, Community and Creation are possible because of the generosity of Dakotas United Methodists through both apportionment giving and through direct support through camp scholarships.

God's love was lived most powerfully and seen most completely in our communities and local churches. Churches like Linton and Mitchell Fusion welcomed children, youth, and college students back to school in new ways. Mission to their community was the emphasis of Piedmont Grace's

Hoses and Hallelujahs, and Mandan's VBS mission focus modeled a commitment to being ON mission and IN mission with our neighbors. Activities like Waffles and Jesus at Grand Forks Zion, Bring Your Own Banana at Milnor, Coffee and Conversation at Watertown First, Love Harrisburg, or Candy Land and Jesus at Fargo First fostered a culture of open hearts and doors as churches put relationship first as a way of sharing God's incarnational love.

But this is just a snapshot. We want to give YOU an opportunity to share some of the ways you or your church are seeking to make God's love visible and complete. Let's take the next 3-5 minutes at your tables to share.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

The Holy Spirit continues to stir in us, reminding us that we are Created to Love Boldly, and empowering us lead courageously in the spirit of love. The Holy Spirit sparks new and creative ways to be in mission and ministry together.

Our Dakotas Connection Rural Ministry Initiative is committed to cultivating a spirit of innovation. Harnessing the power of connection and relationship to maximize resources has been pivotal to this work. Abundance Parish and Miller-Highmore-Harold continue to explore ways to reimagine the multi-point charge model. Churches like Murdo-Draper-White River, Drayton, and Britton are utilizing Rural ministry grants to discover how technology can break through the barriers of geography to provide quality preaching. And churches like Alpena, Virgil, Broadland, Henry, Frankfort, Carpenter, Gayville-Volin, Rugby, Camp Crook, Pembina, Humboldt are utilizing clergy-lay team ministry models to ensure that vital ministry continues in some of our smallest communities.

This model of sharing gifts and resources in new ways has extended into sharing administrative staffing resources. Al Roll is working with several congregation to share the services of a financial secretary to ensure best practices in the area of financial management and stewardship. Rapid City First and Canyon Lake UMC are also stepping into this sharing model, as they share a youth and family ministries staff member who facilitates the youth ministry programs at each church.

We experimented with a six-month regional strategist role to give concentrated focus on the mission field in and around Brookings, S.D. This partnership with the district superintendent offered an intentional time of exploring rural communities in the area, demographic shifts in the growing population, and opportunities for campus ministry development. This project also offered insights for conference leadership as we look to models of staffing and superintending.

Although this past year has brought some unexpected changes and loss, including the death of Solar Oven Partners Director, Christopher Sylvah, we continue to see God's faithfulness and the Spirit's movement in the area of staffing and leadership and God has raised up new leaders to direct our

missions and camps ministries—ensuring that these incarnational ministries are stewarded well and continue to make an impact.

In order to build bridges of connection with those clergy called beyond the local church, an extension ministry Higher Ground cohort has been meeting this year, reminding us that being connectional and missional go hand in hand. This Holy Spirit movement of bridge-building is also happening in Plankinton, South Dakota, as Renuevo launched a new bi-lingual contemporary worship service on Sunday mornings, providing a place for encountering the Spirit and building relationships with our neighbors.

The Holy Spirit is alive through the witness of young people in our midst. Elisha and Samuel internships continue to provide an opportunity for youth and young adults to explore vocational ministry. Inspired by the connectional ministry of conference youth events, youth leaders at Sioux Falls First and Asbury, created a Youth Night for area teens. Dakota Wesleyan also fueled this connectional youth ministry with an Area Youth Night last fall. Local churches like Philip United Church and Jamestown St. Paul's, the Spirit is raising up a next generation of bold spiritual leaders. And multiple churches are making "Pray-grounds" or "Grace Spaces" in their sanctuaries as a tangible way to say, "All Are Welcome" in worship.

Maybe you were a part of one these things or have experienced the Holy Spirit sparking something new in your midst. Let's take a few moments at your tables to share where you sense that Spirit moving.

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

In a world that is often overcome with fear, our call and purpose to Love Boldly is vital. We give thanks for the churches and conference ministries that are stepping out in faith to serve joyfully and to drive out fear with the bold love of Jesus.

The 2024 Annual Conference Miracle Offering set the tone for the year as our bold act of generosity resulted in the four recipients – Abbott House Therapeutic Foster Care, 31:8 Ministries with survivors of human trafficking, recovery ministry in the Dakotas, and clergy care fund – receiving \$10,000 each. This spirit of generosity continued as we responded to the Hurricanes in the Southeast U.S. through our Thanksgiving offering. We are also excited that Sioux Falls Asbury has stepped up to be a collection site for Midwest Mission Distribution Center, one of our United Methodist Mission depots. This provides an even closer link to our connectional work. These partnerships with the work of UMCOR will continue through this year's miracle offering as we seeking to be like Jesus in bringing hope and healing to hurting places through the power of connection.

The commitment to our greater connection was seen not only in these special offerings but also through the faithful giving to apportionments as nearly 92% of our churches made this a priority in their regular giving. We also saw creative acts of stewardship and generosity this year like Mitchell Fusion challenging their congregation to participate in a Reverse Offering—giving \$3000 to church members to multiply and impact their local community; or Sioux Falls Wesley hosting a gleaning event where excess produce was gathered from gardens across the city and local chefs created things like salsa and marinara sauce for distribution, an act of stewardship that addressed food insecurity and creation care.

An annual conference workshop on building relationships with our Native American brothers and sisters laid the groundwork for continued learning through an online cohort as well as through a Dakotas United Women in Faith event focusing on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives. Our commitment to our Indigenous Siblings continues to be lived out through our ministries at Spirit Lake Ministry Center and Tree of Life, including through the Shoebox Christmas Ministry that seeks to share the story of the incarnation through tangible signs of love and care. Spirit Lake Directors, Kim and Paulette Paulson, and new Tree of Life Director, Sandra Spotted Tail, are ambassadors of bold, incarnational love, creating opportunities for individuals in the Dakotas and beyond to love God and their neighbors through these ministry sites.

We saw the power of connection in driving out fear as churches in the southwest district came alongside our brothers and sisters in the Murdo-White-River-Draper area as they became a beacon of light and love during the Power Dam Road fire. Ministries and outreach such as Impact Fargo, the Sturgis Feeding program, Brandon Baby Blessings, Rapid City Knollwood Heights and Fargo Faith Food Pantries, After School programs in Lake Preston and Hettinger, jail ministry in Faulkton, and the combined Christmas Offerings through Bismarck McCabe and Legacy UMCs are just some of the examples of Dakotas United Methodists loving boldly in a way that makes the goodness of God visible to a watching and hurting world.

We thank you for taking this time to share and celebrate with us all the ways that Dakotas United Methodists are boldly sharing the incarnational love of Jesus. We pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to stir in your hearts, in your churches, and in our communities that others might know and experience this bold love through us!