

MICHIGAN CONFERENCE



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2025 ANNUAL REPORT

GRANT NO. 2025-0199

Knitting together children and adults in worship and prayer

To strengthen the future of our local churches, this 5-year program invites congregations to engage children in worship and prayer, so that each of us can leave church more deeply connected with the spiritual and ready to find the sacred in our everyday lives.

PREPARED BY

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Michigan Conference United Church of Christ
03/01/2025 - 12/31/2025

The Mitten Project

2025 Annual Report

The primary goal of the Michigan Conference Mitten Project is to inspire a deep cultural shift in the Michigan Conference UCC to include children in worship and prayer with adults.

We seek to nurture the gifts and leadership skills of children, and to equip ministry leaders, parents, and caregivers to invest in training for forming faith in children under the age of 12. The relationships that are being built in the congregations of cohort churches, among pastors who learn together, children's ministry leaders who support one another, and parents & caregivers who can more deeply engage with their children, each have a sustainable impact on the worship and prayer practices of children.

The Michigan Mitten Project is strengthening the future of the church by making faith traditions relevant and accessible across multiple generations.

KEY 2025 OBJECTIVES

- Communicate the 5 key ways that local churches can participate in the Mitten Project
- Build interest and enthusiasm for participation across the Michigan Conference
- Establish a calendar, structures, and components for grant implementation

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Developed and implemented Conference-wide survey for year one Mitten Project data
- Created Cohort application and letter of agreement
- Sourced, packaged, and distributed 2026 Resource Kit themed for Worship and Prayer with Children in Nature
- Children wrote and offered Prayers of the People during Annual Meeting

BY THE NUMBERS

129

Resource Kits were sent to local churches to encourage worship and prayer with children

61

Local churches had at least one person complete a 2025 Worship Engagement Survey

26

Children shared input about their engagement in worship across the Michigan Conference

\$19K

Invested on resources given directly to churches for immediate use in worship and prayer with children

OUR TEAM



Jennifer Ringgold
Program Director



Rev Dr Lillian Daniel
Conference Minister



Rev Dr Lawrence Richardson
Associate Conference Minister



Rev Andrew Warner
Director of Finance and Development

MISSION

The Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ brings churches closer together and closer to God, equipping pastors and congregational leaders through ministries of support, guidance, and leadership development.

Strategic Themes/Priorities

Leadership
Connection
Vitality
Justice

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PROJECT PURPOSE

The primary goal of the Michigan Conference Mitten Project is to inspire a deep cultural shift in the Michigan Conference UCC to include children in worship and prayer with adults. The grant objectives of strengthening worship and prayer practices that attend to and respect how children (age 0-12 years old) experience God and express their faith, and enhancing worship and prayer practices that more intentionally connect with the daily lives of children and families in the Michigan Conference UCC directly relate to the mission of the Michigan Conference. Alongside the conference strategic themes of Leadership, Vitality, Connection, and Justice, the Mitten Project is helping to bring churches closer together and closer to God, and providing leadership development, support, and guidance to pastors and congregational leaders.

The project is specifically designed to promote collaboration and communication between churches and offers multiple opportunities for engagement and learning across the Michigan Conference UCC. During the 5-year grant-funding cycle, engagement opportunities range from passive to deeply committed, with targeted learning for five unique audiences each year. Leadership development and relationship building is designed strategically for pastors, children youth and family ministry leaders, parents/caregivers, children, and church attendees.

Through the Mitten Project, we are providing resources and programs that nurture the spiritual life and witness of our churches and ministers, partnering with our churches and ministers to address the moral struggle of effectively reaching the current and future generations of our congregations to ensure that our Christian faith lives on, and maintaining a network of communication with all levels of the church including local congregations, regional associations, and the national body and General Synod of the United Church of Christ.

GRANT ACTIVITIES

From March 1 through December 31, 2025 here are the activities taken on by the Mitten Project and the Michigan Conference:

- Press release and [conference communication](#) about grant funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.
- Hire new Communications Associate.
- Transition Jennifer Ringgold from Director of Communications to Program Director for the Mitten Project.
- Contract with APPRECOTS Applied Research Consultants.
- Develop and implement [2025 Worship Engagement Survey](#).
- Set 2026 Program Year Calendar.
- Design Cohort model, create online application, and select churches for participation.
- Promote engagement at Annual Meeting, Fall Association Meetings, and through individual conversations and invitations.
- Include children in worship at 2025 Annual Meeting.
- Choose and order resources; sort, pack, and send Resource Kits with [Welcome Letter](#) to the grant program.
- Design training about Assessment for first Cohort meeting.



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STORIES

1 MODELING WORSHIP WITH CHILDREN AT ANNUAL MEETING To practice including children in prayer, Program Director Jenn Ringgold collected prayers from all of the children who's families registered for Annual Meeting and wove them together to become the Prayers of The People during our Saturday morning worship service. Two of the children in attendance were willing to help voice the prayers, so we included time for a brief rehearsal with the microphones before worship.

The collaborative prayer included requests to “help people who are struggling and who are hungry, all bullying to end, and the world to have peace,” along with “thanks for water, life, and sports and friends; for family, friends, food and money, and for a great Michigan Conference!”



2 2025 WORSHIP ENGAGEMENT SURVEY was a key push for both promotion of the Michigan Conference Mitten Project and an invitation to churches across the state. We offered an incentive to reimburse registration to Annual Meeting for the churches who had the highest number of surveys completed AND for the churches with the highest percentage of participation based on church membership. This was a fantastic way to build momentum and interest. We had one church with 56% participation from their congregation and another church that completed 46 individual surveys. First year participation in the Worship Engagement Survey exceeded expectations with more than half of Michigan Conference churches involved and 410 church attendees sharing about how they engage with children in worship.



3 RESOURCING LOCAL CHURCHES Resources sent directly to churches for immediate use is a yearly priority of the Michigan Conference Mitten Project. Ordering, receiving, sorting, and repackaging over 1400 books was a gigantic undertaking that required many moving parts, learned lessons, and helpful humans! This part of the grant requires no action on the part of any church or leader. All Michigan Conference churches receive a resources kit.

We look forward to gathering data about engagement with these resources over the next several years.

4 THEMES FOR TRANSFORMATION Resource Kits are themed to support annual Mitten Project learning and engagement for people of all ages. For 2026, 10 books were included to offer Lent and Advent options, a Bible Storybook, children's books, two adult books for study, parent resources, and options for use across generations that encourage innovative worship and prayer.

“I didn't expect to receive a box of books because we didn't participate in the survey since we have no children in regular attendance at this time. Imagine my surprise yesterday morning when I checked the mail and found your box on the step! In worship, I had the box tucked under the pulpit, pulled it out and read the intro of the letter then held up the books one by one. After worship we had a potluck, and a couple of people carried the box to the fellowship hall, created a display of the books, and then people started brainstorming about how to use the books to connect more with the community. You brought so much excitement to the congregation! This box of books is filled with possibilities for more events to create the beloved community! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” ~ Pastor Loree Grinnell



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GRANT ACTIVITIES CONTINUED...

After talking with a few children during the grant application process, the Worship Engagement Survey was an incredible chance for us to hear directly from children about their personal experiences with worship and prayer. We know that direct responses from children are a gift, and it is our hope that as our investment in the Mitten Project and Cohort churches continues to expand, that our numbers of engagement with children will continue to increase, providing us additional insight into what children, families, and churches need to thrive.

Another great story from 2025 came from a local church pastor who took her laptop to the time of fellowship after worship and invited children in her congregation to have a conversation with her to fill out the Worship Engagement Survey. Pastor Patty Higgins chose to remove as many barriers as possible for participation and to learn directly from the children in her congregation. This is such a beautiful example of how building relationships with children and listening to children are an integral part of helping children come to know and love God and grow in faith.

We had originally intended to call the survey the Children's Worship Engagement Survey, but quickly realized that if we wanted the broad participation we hoped for across the conference, and to reach people in as many churches as possible, that we should update the survey title to Worship Engagement Survey. It is deeply important as we consider a cultural shift to recognize that this work is not only for children or the folks who teach Sunday School. This conversation is necessary across people of all ages in churches, and we are so glad that the title change helped us to enhance participation, including 410 church attendees across the Michigan Conference. Asking these individuals to consider what it means for them to include children in what they experience for worship is a big step in helping them to reconsider how they might support children in worship and prayer in their churches. Having adults and entire congregations actively considering ways to include children in worship and prayer is one way that we hope to inspire innovation and shared energy to design corporate worship services and prayer practices that more intentionally and fully engage children. We have already started to see transformative conversations happening about nurturing faith and life-long faith formation.

The Worship Engagement Survey was open for individuals of all ages to participate from August 1 - October 31, 2025. We had originally intended to close the survey on September 28, but decided to keep it open until after our Annual Meeting, and learned at that point in early October that we still had just begun to build interest and momentum, so continued to promote and collect surveys until the end of October. We had [initial insights](#) to share at a few of our fall Association meetings and newsletters as we were encouraging Cohort applications. The [full report](#) was published in conference communications in January 2026 because it took our research consultants longer than originally anticipated to collate all the qualitative data.

Prior to the Mitten Project, our faith formation communications were emailed to a targeted distribution list. We now have a monthly, conference-wide email dedicated to faith formation and the Mitten Project. This has substantially increased interaction and engagement. Our December campaign had 575 opens and a 2.7% click rate. We also utilize social media on Facebook and Instagram, share information on the conference website, and have found the deepest impact comes from direct communication with individuals.

What about going to church is hard for you? (ages 3-12)

"getting up in the morning"
"sitting through the whole service"
"understanding the lessons and the questions"
"singing hymns"
"it goes on forever"

Intentional Engagement Matters

Children Youth & Family Ministry Leaders believe children thrive when adults include them warmly and when teaching is creative, visual, and age-appropriate.

What helps you feel close to God? (ages 3-12)

"everyone around me"
"singing together"
"being in the church"
"helping people"
"I ...don't know"

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GRANT ACTIVITIES CONTINUED...

For Resources Kits, we worked with 8 different publishers to purchase 10 different resources, chose a local church as the shipping hub with a volunteer team, set up a place to store books and a date to open boxes, sort books, and repack kits to ship out. A coordinated pick-up was made with USPS to collect all 129 kits for mailing. Each kit included a [Welcome Letter](#) to the Mitten Project with ideas for resource use in local settings. It will be exciting to hear follow-up from churches about the value of these annual shipments.

The final activities of 2025 were related to the creation of an online application for Cohort churches, inviting churches to apply, and adjusting the original application timeline to give us more lead time to prepare agreements for congregational grant funding. 11 churches applied for funding that includes a \$5000.00 grant for a one year program implementation, and up to an additional \$5000.00 in travel expenses to attend Mitten Project Events during the cohort year. We will start the new year preparing Cohort Implementation Teams to build a program design with assessment strategies for their setting.

The churches invited to participate in the 2026 Cohort are:

- Kalamazoo First Congregational Church (UCC)
- Hope United Church of Christ
- First Congregational Church of Battle Creek
- St. Paul United Church of Christ, Chelsea
- Cadillac First Congregational Church UCC
- Salem United Church of Christ - Farmington
- Trinity United Church of Christ Northport
- First Congregational Church of Rockford
- Fellowship Chapel UCC
- St. Stephens Community Church UCC
- Bethel United Church of Christ, Manchester

All five of our Associations are represented and congregations are of different sizes, demographics, and geographic locations across Michigan. Program proposals range from intergenerational summer programs, to online material creation, to art for the liturgical year, to ecumenical partnerships, to antiracism curriculum, to parent support groups, and more...



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IMPACT

The preliminary impact that we have seen since introducing the Mitten Project is a uptick in excitement across the Conference and an increase in connection points and conversations with local churches in the organization. Often our first point of connection with church attendees is during a search for a new pastor, or when conflict arises, but we have been hearing from individuals in congregations regarding the possibilities offered by the Mitten Project in extremely positive ways.

“I recently completed the survey about youth involvement in our congregations. It was a great survey! I wanted to share something that a mother from my community, not at our church told me recently. Her family had recently moved here, and as I talked about our church, and included that we have a small number of children, she said, “no problem, same as the church we came from where many of the members of that church were like grandparents to my son.” She really appreciated that. We know many in our congregation don’t have nearby grands, and many families don’t have nearby grandparents. Unrecognized opportunity? Just a new way to look at how UCC congregations can be there for children. Moving beyond lamenting loss of Christian Ed. programs and number of youth - to interacting with the youth in new ways. Thanks for this survey.”

These are the exact type of comments that we hope will lead to congregational conversations that really dig into how a local church might be able to interact with children and young people in new ways, shifting church culture and programming to meet the daily life needs of children and families in their communities and to deeply engage in what it means for children and adults to worship and pray together.

There is also a feeling of excitement and comes through in applications from churches applying for the cohort and program funding. We are seeing a willingness to dream that has the potential to deeply impact ministry in the Michigan Conference.

“Through this initiative, we hope to embody our calling as a congregation of renewal, hospitality, and joy. With the Mitten Project’s support, we can continue to grow a ministry that helps families find rest for their bodies, renewal for their spirits, and inspiration for their daily lives—one sacred space at a time.” ~ St. Paul UCC, Chelsea

“We are approaching this project as a multifaceted journey recognizing our current resources and daring to dream of what could be possible” ~ UCC Cadillac

“What a blessing for adults to worship alongside children who can serve as their spiritual archetype. The church of the 21st century must embrace the unique qualifications of children in the worship space or risk certain irrelevance by default.” ~ Bethel UCC, Manchester

“The face of worship is changing. It is our job as the wider church to provide the resources that are needed to make these transitions. The Mitten Project is providing a vehicle for Rae of Sunshine to think outside the box and create opportunities for children to share their voices when it comes to their development of their walk with the Lord.” ~ St. Stephen’s Community Church, UCC

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REFLECTION

As we embark on the first year of programming for the Michigan Conference Mitten Project, local churches and survey participants have shared their thoughts, ideas, and voices through the 2025 Worship Engagement Survey. We are absolutely thrilled with the participation from across the Conference. **Our applied research consultants at APPRECOTS have collated and distilled data, both qualitative and quantitative, from over 500 individual responses and more than half of our Michigan churches that begin to paint a picture of how we can support participation across all-ages in worship and prayer.** It is such a tremendous gift to hear from and learn with our pastors, children youth and family ministry leaders, parents, worship attendees, and our children and youth.

Some of the key themes that are emerging include:

- Churches are creating a welcoming environment for children.
- Children need more support to feel a connection between church and their daily lives.
- Children and youth want to help more at church.
- Parents are worried that it will be more work for them to include children.
- People of all ages could use help to pray together.
- Children Youth and Family ministry leaders have ideas for including children and they are tired.
- Clergy are excited to learn more about engaging children in church.
- Relationships are key to helping children feel connected in church.

This first set of data begins to paint a picture of a deep desire to engage children in church with a gap in understanding for how we might successfully accomplish their inclusion. Much of what we know needs to happen is very hard for people to imagine because it is not how they have ever experienced church. We are learning so much and anticipate the incredible potential for expanded study over the five years of the Mitten Project. This will be hard and important work and we will need to do it together, in relationship.

Starting with the baseline that professionals who do ministry with children are exhausted, and parents are worried that including children in worship and prayer will be more work for them, makes it clear that we will need to devote time and energy to creating sustainable forms of ministry across ages that are more transformational and less transactional. This requires the work of the entire church and has the potential to re-energize and revitalize entire communities.

Local churches are seeking collaboration and multigenerational growth, but how exactly that is accomplished is unique to each setting of the church and the community with whom they engage. There is no one magic idea or strategy that will address all of what is emerging. This makes it imperative that we model and encourage a willingness to try new things and share broadly what we learn in order to help reduce the burden and burnout that is being experienced in many of our settings. Sharing ideas and excitement is necessary to generate sparks of hope and willingness to dream that we are finding from the spirit of abundance present within this grant

The future of the church depends on passing traditions down through generations and innovating to make traditions relevant to each new generation. We have a unique opportunity to continue a conversation that will lead to long-lasting engagement and innovative faith development for children by uplifting the experiences of children, providing training for pastors and children's ministry leaders, equipping parents and caregivers, and letting our local churches explore and innovate in ways that can benefit them and the wider church.

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PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND OUTCOMES

Anticipated outcomes include:

- Adults and children from 48 Michigan Conference UCC congregations with a unique, yearlong experience of learning, networking, and intentional focus on children's faith.
- Shared learnings and published resources that enhance worship and prayer practices to nurture children.
- Measurable connection to families and congregations regarding the impact of faith practices on the daily lives of children in churches of the Michigan Conference UCC.

We are partnering with APPRECOTS applied research consultants to help guide the collaborative selection and development of evaluation tools to:

- Equip the Michigan Conference UCC and individual congregations with the skills to design church-specific quality improvement questions and performance indicators.
- Assess the annual programming of targeted individual congregations.
- Evaluate the impact of cohort-based learning and implementation teams.
- Include children in the evaluation process.
- Examine the impact of resource kits on incorporating inclusive worship practices.
- Investigate the difference in impact between active and passive participation in online versus in-person training by clergy and supportive adults.
- Gather feedback from church members on the success of the Michigan Mitten Project.
- Measure changes in intergenerational worship among children, families, clergy, and other supporters.

We look forward to executing these evaluation tools over the remaining years of grant implementation.

Production of a resource manual that offers at least 30 implementation strategies, with examples from Michigan UCC congregations, for nurturing faith in children.	This will be built in stages each year with examples from Cohort churches in 2026, 2027, 2028, and 2029
80% of all authorized pastors in the Michigan conference will be able to define at least three critical aspects of intergenerational worship.	No measurable progress
Starting in year two of the grant, the number of UCC Michigan conference churches that report that children are actively involved in developing worship practices will increase by 10% annually.	Measurement will begin in year two with comparative data
At least 75% of congregational implementation teams will complete all cohort activities and be able to demonstrate that they met at least one of their congregation-specific performance indicators.	First measurable progress will be available after first cohort completion at the end of 2026

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NEXT STEPS

Ongoing assessment will allow the Michigan Conference UCC to share successful strategies, adjust and reimagine approaches as needed, and ensure that funds are used effectively. With formative assessment opportunities for each of our online training and onsite event opportunities, and the ability to adapt our learning objectives as needed for continued improvement, the Mitten Project has the flexibility to innovate and edit our programming to meet the needs of our local churches as they create the spaces where children can authentically connect and grow in relationship with God and their faith communities. As we engage with each key audience, we will utilize what we learn together to inform the next trainings and future events.

The momentum we have gained with the 2025 Worship Engagement Survey, and adding our first cohort of churches, will increase participation in future, annual Worship Engagement Surveys. This additional input from pastors, parents, ministry leaders, church attendees, youth, and children will help us to continue to adapt the ways that we share information and innovate with Implementation Teams in local churches who have the direct capacity to enhance worship and prayer with children and families.

The requirements for Implementation Teams to participate in trainings, events, develop and implement innovative programs, collect stories, utilize assessment strategies, and report to other cohort churches will inform the Program Director with time to adjust future events each year.

The relationships that are being built in the congregations of cohort churches, among pastors who learn together, children's ministry leaders who support one another, and parents and caregivers who can more deeply engage with their children, will continue to have a sustainable impact on the worship and prayer practices of children in the Michigan Conference UCC.

2026 Pastor Training

Michigan Conference Mitten Project

Pastors Nurturing Children in Worship and Prayer

Thursday, February 5, 2026
1:00pm - 3:00pm ET

Pastors hold a unique role in how the faith of children is formed. This Zoom training opportunity is specifically designed to share Mitten Project data and research with pastors and invite them to engage in the 2026 Mitten Project.



Children Youth and Family Ministry Leaders

2026 Training

Michigan Conference Mitten Project

Friday, March 6, 2026
12:30pm - 2:30pm ET

Children Youth and Family Ministry Leaders, whether they are volunteers or paid staff, have a pivotal role in nurturing children in worship and prayer. This Zoom training opportunity is specifically designed to share Mitten Project data and research with CYF Leaders and invite them to engage in the 2026 Mitten Project.



2026 Parent/Caregiver Training

Michigan Conference Mitten Project

Families Nurturing Children in Worship and Prayer

Sunday, May 31, 2026
2:00pm - 4:00pm

Parents and caregivers hold a unique role in how the faith of children is formed. This Zoom training opportunity is specifically designed to share Mitten Project data and research with family adults and invite them to engage in the 2026 Mitten Project.



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WHAT COMES NEXT: 2026

JANUARY

- Program Director connects individually with cohort churches and distributes Year One funding
- Two hours of online implementation team meetings - introductions, training, and assessment ideas

FEBRUARY

- February 5: 1pm - 3pm Two-hour online conference-wide training event for Pastors

MARCH

- Two hours of online implementation team meetings
- March 6: 12:30pm - 2:30pm Two hour online conference-wide training event for Children Youth and Family Ministry Leaders & Volunteers

APRIL

- April 18: 10am - 3pm Full Day conference-wide event onsite at Tower Hill introductions, training, and relationship-building with pastors, parents, caregivers, children, and CYF ministry leaders

MAY

- May 31: 2 - 4 pm Two-hour conference-wide online training event for Parents and Caregivers

SUMMER

- Work on 2027 Program Calendar
- July: Open cohort application for 12 new churches to apply for funding and cohort participation in 2027

AUGUST

- August 1: 10am - 3pm Full day conference-wide event onsite at cohort member church TBD training and relationship building with pastors, parents, caregivers, children, and ministry leaders.

SEPTEMBER

- Two hours of online implementation team meetings

OCTOBER

- Oct 1-3: MC Annual Meeting - (implementation teams may lead a workshop or give a presentation; encourage churches to apply for 2027 Cohort)
- October 21-22: Wednesday 12pm - Thursday 3pm Implementation Teams Adult Overnight Retreat Conference event onsite at Tower Hill. Culminations of cohort learning and knowledge sharing from year-long projects. Cohort self and group evaluations. Event will include a parting gift to introduce the theme for 2027.

NOVEMBER

- Purchase Church Resource Kit items, Intro letter for resource kit, invitation to training, how to use items in kit
- November 13: 2027 Cohort Applications due by 12:00noon ET
- Review Cohort Applications

DECEMBER

- December 1: announce 2027 Cohort Churches
- Send 2027 Church resource packages - Worship and Prayer with Children through Music and Art

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FINANCIAL REPORT

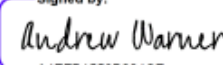
Michigan Conference United Church of Christ
Grant No. 2025 0199
For Period 03/01/2025 - 12/31/2025

Budget Categories	Approved Budget	Expenditures		Budget Less Cumulative
		For Period 03/01/2025 - 12/31/2025	Cumulative	
Personnel	\$ 204,914.00	\$ 24,760.00	\$ 24,760.00	\$ 180,154.00
Applied Research Consultants	\$ 125,000.00	\$ 10,417.00	\$ 10,417.00	\$ 114,583.00
Cohort Expense	\$ 480,000.00	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 480,000.00
All Church Resource Expense	\$ 173,600.00	\$ 19,822.00	\$ 19,822.00	\$ 153,778.00
Onsite Regional Events Cost	\$ 47,500.00	\$ 2,141.00	\$ 2,141.00	\$ 45,359.00
Online Trainer Stipend	\$ 48,000.00	-		\$ 48,000.00
Overnight Conference Event Cost	\$ 73,000.00	-		\$ 73,000.00
Resource Development, Materials & Technology	\$ 97,986.00	\$ 4,789.00	\$ 4,789.00	\$ 93,197.00
TOTALS	\$ 1,250,000.00	\$ 61,929.00	\$ 61,929.00	\$ 1,188,071.00

CASH SUMMARY

Total Grant Payments Received	\$ 1,250,000.00
Cumulative Expenditures (per above)	\$ 61,929.00
Cash Balance	\$ 1,188,071.00

Signed by: 
3/24/2026
818404100112455...
Jennifer Ringgold
Program Director

Signed by: 
3/23/2026
A4EFB1559B2246E...
Rev. Andrew Warner
Director of Finance and Development