

Lake North church leaders consider adaptation at LEAD 2026

More than 80 attendees gathered for Lake North District LEAD 2026 on Feb. 7 at the United Methodist Church of Libertyville. This year's theme, "Leading Your Church in Changing Times," focused on encouraging local church leaders to acknowledge current realities and practice adaptation amid the challenges and demands of modern ministry.

"What a joy to witness local church leaders, both lay and clergy, joining for a time of shared learning and meaningful connection," said the **Rev. Victor Melad, Jr.**, Lake North District Superintendent. "Our program was diverse in subject matter, yet the spirit of our United Methodist vision – to love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously – served as the common thread through each session."

During a Fireside Chat moderated by **Rev. Nancy Blade** of Euclid Avenue United Methodist Church, **Rev. Melad** shared his personal experience as an immigrant clergy member and gave encouragement to local church leaders and clergy, especially ones serving ethnic congregations.

Kelly Wittich and **Jodi Benacka** of Wespeth Benefits and Investments covered clergy health and well-being trends and discussed how local churches can influence a pastor's well-being.

Joash Mencias, member of the Lake North District Shepherding Team, shared how churches can faithfully discern the role of artificial intelligence within their congregation, urging local church leaders to articulate their needs around AI and create the conditions for collective understanding and transparency.

A panel moderated by NIC Director of Congregational Development **Rev. Christian Coon** featured **Rev. Clayton Edwards**, Deerfield campus pastor at Kingswood United Methodist Church, **rev. dr. abby mohaupt**, director of the Garrett Collective at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and **Rebekah Coffman**, executive director of Church Properties Reimagined. Panelists tapped into their individual experience and expertise to offer insights with attendees seeking to adapt and innovate within their churches.

The UMCL team led by **Rev. Jeffry Bross** provided a welcoming environment for all attendees.

"We are incredibly grateful to the United Methodist Church of Libertyville for going above and beyond in hosting LEAD 2026," said Rev. Melad. "Thank you to Rev. Bross, the staff and the volunteers who offered such warm hospitality and kindness. We could not have done this event without such a wonderful host."