

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

Charles Jefferson, Jr.

Communication and News Manager

United Church of Christ, National Ministries

P: 216-736-2131 | [jeffersonc@ucc.org](mailto:jeffersonc@ucc.org)

### **Rev. Jennifer Sowell nominated to serve as next Associate General Minister, Love of Church**

February 9, 2026

CLEVELAND - The Rev. Jennifer Sowell, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ with more than two decades of pastoral leadership experience, has been nominated to serve a full term as the next Associate General Minister, Love of Church. If confirmed by the General Synod of the UCC, Sowell would fill a role that has been vacant since the [December 2023 departure of the Rev. Traci Blackmon](#).

The search committee was relaunched right after the conclusion of General Synod 35, [when the original search committee, which began its work in August 2024 came up short in identifying a candidate](#). The search committee unanimously voted to choose Sowell as their nominee. The next step is to present her to the United Church of Christ Board at its March 2026 meeting, and then to a special call of the General Synod on May 9.

Sowell, who currently serves as senior pastor of [St. John United Church of Christ in Collinsville, IL](#) says this call to serve the national church is deeply personal.

“I still believe the church is the first place of resistance to and healing from the brokenness of our world,” Sowell said. “It is where we celebrate the rainbow of God’s diversity, repent when we fall short, and offer real healing to those who have been rejected. A thriving church can transform both lives and communities.”

## Of the local church, in the local church

The Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, UCC General Minister and President/CEO said Sowell's experience at the local church level made her the ideal candidate.

"She comes with experience of the local church, and in the local church," Thompson said. "Much of her career has been in different types of churches across the UCC, both geographically and in size."

The Rev. Cean James, senior pastor of [Philadelphia's Salt & Light Church](#), and search committee chair said Sowell's service to the local church positions her as someone who can understand and connect with those on the ground carrying out their church's mission.

"Rev. Sowell comes to us as someone who has spent her entire career faithfully serving the local church," James said. "The breadth and diversity of churches that she has served gives her a broad and unique perspective of what local churches and pastors are facing. She brings to the National Ministries a voice that knows what is occurring at ground zero as our churches faithfully serve their communities."

Sowell's current church is a 500-member Open and Affirming congregation, where she has led strategic planning initiatives, expanded children and family ministries, strengthened staff structures, shepherded the church through pandemic recovery, and expanded digital worship access. Prior to her tenure at St. John, Sowell served congregations in Maryland, Florida, and New York where she grew membership and community engagement, strengthened financial and governance structures, and built intergenerational and multi-faith partnerships.

Throughout her career, Sowell, who was ordained at [Broadway United Church of Christ in New York City](#) in 2005, has dedicated her vocation to helping churches become places of sanctuary, justice, and hope.

Before taking over as senior pastor at St. John in 2020, Sowell served four years as the senior pastor at [Pilgrim Church, UCC in Wheaton, MD](#) where she built a pipeline between older generations of congregants and younger members, encouraging them to take on leadership roles in the church, facilitated repairing the church's reputation with the Conference and the National Ministries, and revitalized children's programming, writing the curriculum to offer a creative, experiential approach to learning about the themes of God's unconditional welcome.

Sowell also served churches in Catonsville, MD, St. Pete Beach, FL, and Rockville Centre, NY, as well as a stint as an assistant editor for the John Milton Society for the Blind in New York City.

## Passion for the local church

Thompson is particularly excited about Sowell's passion for the local church and her ability to integrate into the work of the National Ministries. Thompson noted the diversities of the church, how the UCC is not monolithic, and how Sowell's work and experience is best suited to lead the work of Love of Church forward.

"There's such a range, both in terms of what we look like and what we do," Thompson said of the diversity of UCC congregations and the many services and programs they offer beyond a typical Sunday worship service. "Resourcing the church must be at that level. It must be collaborative with our Conferences. I believe that [Sowell] comes with a capacity to hear, to collaborate, and to guide the staff in creating what we need for the church at this moment, working with the vision of the General Minister and President."

Among some of the workshops and programs Sowell has shepherded herself have been ***Deeply with Jesus***, which was a weekly Lenten potluck, discussion, and worship focusing on the many Gospel examples of Jesus dining with strangers and friends, ***Eco-Club***, an eight-week afterschool program for children that included activities, crafts and prayers teaching them about creation and stewardship of the environment, and ***Popular Culture and Theology***, a discussion group using elements of pop culture TV shows and movies to illustrate theological insights.

Nurtured and formed in the life of the church from a young age, Sowell describes the local congregation as the place where she first experienced belonging, encouragement, and God's call on her life. Across every setting, churches under her leadership have experienced renewed energy, deeper inclusion, and measurable growth.

## What Happens Next

Because there was no candidate called in time for General Synod 35, a special session of the General Synod will convene in May to consider and then vote on Sowell's nomination. She would need a 60 percent majority of the nearly 700 voting delegates to be confirmed for a full term.

Sowell holds a Master of Arts in Theology and Ethics from Union Theological Seminary and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Religion from the University of Richmond. She completed doctoral coursework in pastoral care and counseling at Wesley Theological Seminary. She maintains ministerial standing in the Illinois South Conference of the United Church of Christ.