

## **Grace Place Campus Ministry at NIU – DeKalb, Illinois 2023 Annual Report**

**Northern Illinois Synod ELCA • Episcopal Diocese of Chicago**

### **Where we've been**

While there has been a Lutheran Campus ministry presence at Northern Illinois University since the 1950s, Grace Place Campus Ministry at NIU, a joint Episcopal and ELCA Lutheran ministry, was formed in the wake of the 2008 NIU Shooting out of a desire for a united ecumenical outreach to students. The ministry was headquartered at 401 Normal Road across from the NIU student center. Along with their Wednesday night meals, worship, and fellowship ministries, Grace Place housed a student food pantry that became a vital resource for struggling college students.



In 2016, thanks to the ministry and advocacy of the Grace Place “Hungry Huskies” food bank, NIU took over and expanded the program in a different location. While this was the right move for the campus community, Grace Place went into a time of redefining its ministry. To try and fill the gap, First Lutheran Church in Dekalb launched a “lunches to go” program at Grace Place in which they would hand out readymade lunch bags to students, which, at its height, was distributing around 150 bag lunches each Monday. Still, student numbers began to dwindle as Grace Place worked to reinvent itself. In 2017, Rev. Amy Fallon announced her departure from Grace Place after five years of ministry.

Under the leadership of interim Rev. Bob Hanson, the ministry was faithfully maintained. In the interim year, it became apparent that the building maintenance was significantly deferred, and an effort was made to renovate. However, it became clear that serious structural issues would need to be addressed, including a leaky roof that had plagued the building for years after multiple attempts to remedy the problem.

In August of 2019, Pastor Mack Patrick brought a new sense of excitement through new outreach on campus and social media. Participation increased, and the future of the campus ministry looked promising. Sadly, the pandemic of 2020 and a move to online classes at NIU stunted the growth of the newly energized ministry. Pastor Mack worked hard to stay connected and built a solid online community through social media, zoom meetings, pastoral care phone calls, and the occasional socially distanced one-on-one meeting. However, online classes meant students stayed off campus and home with their parents to save money. Students didn't return to in-person classes until Spring of 2021, still under fairly strict mask mandates and socially distancing precautions. It was not until Fall 2021 that Grace Place could resume a regular schedule after a summer of vaccinations. However, because students had been distant, an interesting demographic shift started to happen in which Grace Place Campus ministry started to attract not just students but local young adults nonaffiliated with Grace Place. The 2021 -2022 school year was another era of steady growth, including a new partnership with the Inclusive Collective, a ministry of the United Methodist church.

In the summer of 2022, the roof again began to leak after significant rainfall and caused considerable damage. After spending tens of thousands of dollars to fix and refix the structure, this was a disappointing outcome. Furthermore, after an inspection, we learned that the slab on which Grace Place sat was cracked and started to shift. Estimates showed that it would be more

financially viable to tear down the structure and rebuild than to fix the building. In August of 2023, the HVAC system partially failed, and the Board decided to leave the building and move into St. Paul's Episcopal church. After further review of our financial and fundraising capacity, the Board agreed to sell the building. Finally, in November 2023, Pastor Mack announced he would begin working for the Northern Illinois Synod as the Assistant to the Bishop for communications.

The Board immediately began searching for a new Campus Minister working with the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago and the Northern Illinois Synod. The Board scrambled to continue the ministries of Grace Place by dividing responsibilities and leaning heavily on St. Paul's Episcopal Church to continue to host. Father Scott Lybrand Zaucha and Vice President of the Grace Place Board filled in for many of the Wednesday night suppers and other pastors in the Dekalb area. At the same time, the task of cleaning out and selling the building was underway.

This period was taxing for all involved. This, combined with the news from various funding sources that their future support might be in doubt, led the Board to pause ministry operations for the Summer/Fall of 2024 while a new course could be determined. In July of 2024, the Grace Place building was sold.

### **The Future**

After some evaluation and conversation with both the Episcopal and Lutheran bishops, we came to some important conclusions:

1. There is still a need for Grace Place Campus Ministry.
2. Evidence has shown us that the need for a young adult ministry goes beyond the students of Northern Illinois and includes local community colleges and young adults not affiliated with a college or university.
3. The traditional funding sources from denominations and affiliated organizations will likely decrease in the coming years.
4. Ecumenical partners in the area are eager to join our ministry to young adults.

With these truths in mind, the Grace Place Board met and revised the constitution to allow board members outside of the ELCA and Episcopal churches and are in the process of reforming a new Board of Directors with ELCA Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist representation. Furthermore, we have been in contact with the ELCA Gather network to copy their prayer, service, and fellowship model that will draw participants from young adults from different walks of life into an intentional community. Once the Board is reestablished, we look forward to hiring a part-time coordinator. Although St. Paul's will remain our mailing address, these meetings will float around participating churches and community spaces. And finally, we will be rebranding these small groups as "Faith Now." Our goal is to launch *Faith Now* formally on Pentecost 2024 with a bonfire at Salem Lutheran Church in Sycamore. Faith Now will attend different summer community gatherings, such as Dekalb Pride. In the Fall of 2024, Grace Place will return to the orientation welcome fairs and gatherings at NIU and community colleges in the area. We sincerely hope the Faith Now model can be replicated in other parts of the region if successful.



**Faith Now**  
**An Ecumenical Young-ish\* Adult**  
**Community**

We are an ecumenical, open and affirming, community for young-ish\* adults in Dekalb County. Our goal for this community is to create space for young-ish\* people to come and explore what faith means today, here and now. We are for the doubters, believers, questioners, the churchd and unchurchd, the nones and the dones and anyone in between. Through conversations and discussions, service to the community, and worship and prayer opportunities, we will build a community where all feel they belong.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Preston Fields  
Board President

**What does Young-ish\* adult mean?**

We don't know, this category is constantly changing, like the rest of the world. We care less about the category and more about the people. Young-ish\* could include college students, young professionals, parents of young children, Gen X through Gen Z, or anybody who looks around their church and feels "I'm too young for this crowd."

We are for you!

