

Biography of the Rev. Jennifer Sowell

Rev. Jennifer Sowell is the Associate General Minister for Love of Church. She was recently elected to this position at a special online meeting of the General Synod on May 9, 2026.

Rev. Sowell has over 20 years of proven pastoral experience as Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor of United Church of Christ congregations in three Conferences. Her experiences in programmatic design and implementation are intergenerational. She has served in small town congregations, in large congregations and brings a broad experience and understanding of the church that reflects the diversity of the wider church. She currently serves as the Senior Pastor of St. John United Church of Christ in Collinsville, IL, a town of approximately 24,000 people, east of St. Louis, Missouri, in the Illinois South Conference.

St. John is a 500 member ONA church, with a history of progressive vision and programming which continues under the leadership of Rev. Sowell, with a staff of ten persons and dozens of volunteers. As senior pastor she supervises the staff team and collaborated with church leadership to revise staff job descriptions and the employee handbook. She is also responsible for working with the church board in developing and implementing the budget. Rev. Sowell organized the strategic planning process with the congregation to implement the vision for the congregation's future in the community. And, she led the congregation through the final stages of the Open and Affirming discernment process which resulted in a positive vote.

During her six-year tenure, Rev. Sowell re-energized the congregation's outreach ministries with focus on an inclusive model of service and belonging, her ultimate goal: "blur the line" between those who serve and those who are served—widening the definition of what it means to be a member of the church. This focus on outreach and mission is a personal commitment she holds for her ministry. She teaches art during the church's 8-week day camp/feeding program. And launched an annual Community Art Show.

Her commitment to multi-generational ministry has increased the participation of children and young families in the congregation. Rev. Sowell started a weekly liturgical Children's Procession and created a quiet play space at the front of the sanctuary. Reflective of the Love of Children's playground, this space for children and related initiatives have centered the children as a vibrant part of worship at St. John.

Her presence is well known in the community. She launched the community's only Veteran's Day service with the American Legion. She is a spiritual presence, providing prayer at city council meetings and other community events, she supports the local library's Drag Queen Story Time. She also has a funeral ministry in her community, working

with four local funeral homes to provide pastoring to families who do not have a church home but want to remember their loved ones in a faith-based service.

Before arriving at St. John in 2020 mere months into the pandemic, Rev. Sowell served as Senior Pastor in the Central Atlantic Conference for over 10 years in two congregations – Pilgrim Church UCC in Wheaton, MD for over four years and St. John’s UCC in Catonsville over 6 years. She also served in ministry with Pass-a-Grille Beach Community Church and with United Church of Rockville Centre.

During her years in ministerial leadership, she taught Bible study, led confirmation classes, and designed children’s programming and curriculum with a creative experiential approach. At Pilgrim Church UCC she implemented “Fifth Sunday Mission Program” with the congregation’s Mission board which invited members of all ages/abilities to do mission activities in church, 4 Sundays per year, following a brief worship. In her words: “The mission is our sermon!” She also brought in a professional special needs educator and music therapist to train volunteers to have better interaction with the growing number of special needs children in the congregation. And she led the youth program in absence of volunteers to support the program.

Her 6 years at St. John’s UCC showed success worth noting, and is consistent with her focus on outreach, spirituality and a commitment to care for the church and community. She ably worked to build the church’s reserves and budgeting practices, as she grew the congregation from a monocultural membership to a diverse congregation in age, race, culture, and sexuality.

Her 20 years of ministry include building congregations and intergenerational ministries that produced thriving spiritual engagement. She brings a working knowledge of governance and the importance of best practices for having sound bylaws and governance documents. She believes the church at work in the world is beneficial for discipleship and supporting communities. Hers is ministry at the grassroots, with connectional opportunities with ecumenical, interfaith and community partners.

Her commitment to justice has been realized through programmatic commitments and missional engagement. She is a strong advocate for disabilities ministries, gender justice, racial justice, immigration justice and the intersections of these and other challenges to people and communities. Her ministry has consistently served to expand inclusion and belonging with congregations enriched by growing diversities. Her creation of programs and services for members of the church and the communities she has served reflects her love of God and love of neighbor.

She has reconnected congregations with the Conference and with the National Ministries. She has served on Committees on Ministry with demonstrated understanding of UCC polity and theology, and she has also served as a General Synod delegate.

Rev. Sowell was ordained in 2005 in the Metropolitan Association of the New York Conference. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English and Religion in 1996 from the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia and her Master of Arts in Theology and Ethics in 1999 from Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Workshops & Programs Designed by Rev. Sowell

Create in Me a Clean Heart: program and liturgy to help children and adults understand the spiritual practices of Mardi Gras/Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, and Lent.

Dinner with Jesus: weekly Lenten potluck, discussion and worship focusing on the many Gospel examples of Jesus dining with strangers and friends.

Feast Stories of the Bible: weekly Lenten potluck, discussion and worship using the feast stories in Hebrew scriptures.

Women's Spirituality & Theology: introduction to the world of women's spirituality and feminist theology included expanding participants' images of God, the connection between Jesus and Wisdom/Sophia, and the important roles of women in scripture.

Eco-Club: an 8-week afterschool program for children that included activities, crafts and prayers teaching them about creation and stewardship of the environment.

People of the Passion: adult program/discussion of the texts, traditions, and artistic depictions of the people who were friends of Jesus—Peter, Mary Magdalene, Thomas and Judas.

The Historical Jesus: program for adults including what we know and how we know about the historical Jesus, largely summarizing the work of Jesus Seminar scholars.

Popular Culture & Theology: discussion group using elements of pop culture tv shows and movies, Star Trek, Lost, The Apostle, to illustrate theological insights.

Practicing Hospitality: workshop, book discussion, movie, worship—multi-faceted approach to understanding the richness of this deeply rooted ancient biblical tradition, and implementing these ideas in our personal spirituality and church community.

Stone Soup: Thanksgiving liturgy/worship based upon the story of Stone Soup.

Open Table Thanksgiving: all age inclusive liturgy and communion using themes of hospitality, celebrated around the dinner tables at our Thanksgiving potluck.

All about Communion: after-church program for children and their parents to learn what to expect and why to celebrate Eucharist and World Communion Sunday.

Introduction to the Labyrinth: multi-age program about the spirituality of the labyrinth, leading participants in walking the sacred path, using indoor or outdoor.