

Compelling Preaching Initiative Cohort Application 2027-2028
DUE Nov 1, 2026



The Compelling Preaching Initiative, through a generous grant from Lilly Endowment, seeks to build the capacity for bold, innovative preaching within Arkansas United Methodist clergy to transform churches and communities. Programs through the initiative will support the individual preacher who can transfer a honed skill set to meet the needs of each appointment.

Arkansas United Methodist clergy under a full-time or part-time appointment (elders, deacons, local pastors, and associate members) are welcome to apply for a 2-year cohort with 12 participants. Cohort applicants will be chosen at the beginning of the 2-year experience (2024, 2025, 2026, and 2027). Selection will be based on a written application and 2 recommendations (direct supervisor and SPRC or equivalent representative). The CPI Advisory Board will give careful attention to diversity and inclusion as the cohort is selected.

The CPI grant will allow participants to receive significant educational and travel experiences at no cost with a \$1000 stipend awarded per year. Therefore, if selected, participants and the leadership of the ministry setting must agree to prioritize and full participate in every aspect of the program.

2-Year Program

Year One

- The cohort will attend the **“Practice of Preaching” Retreat (Feb 2027)** at Winthrop Rockefeller Institute on Petit Jean Mountain. The retreat will focus on formation in the roles of public speaking, completing a short oral assignment for evaluation from a Preaching Coach, peers, and CPI, preparation and sharing of ideas, relationship building, sabbath keeping, hikes, worship, and rest.
- The cohort will divide into three groups of four to design an **“Innovation in Preaching Pilgrimage”** to learn from practitioners in the US. Each group will have \$20,000 and must complete the proposal and budget in the form of a grant request to the CPI Project Director and Advisory Board for review and approval. Proposals will include the purpose of the pilgrimage, evidence of initial conversations with practitioners, a budget, and travel plans. Pilgrimage grant proposals no later than May 31st with cohorts making the pilgrimage during the late summer/early fall.
- The cohort will travel for the **second retreat** to Sedona, Arizona for five days and four nights for **“Finding Your Voice and Creating Resiliency for Preaching.”** This retreat experience will help pastors wrestle with shame and perfectionism, discover a deeper sense of resilience, and show up more authentically in the pulpit. Traveling to Sedona allows participants to retreat from the constant expectations of work and life, experience a different landscape filled with majestic beauty, have the opportunity to hike and explore, and be fully immersed in spiritual growth and renewal. The content of the retreat will have two main foci: The Enneagram and The Daring Way Curriculum.

Year Two

- The cohort will gather for a **third retreat (April 2028)** to **present innovation in preaching findings** to the cohort (three days and two nights at Winthrop Rockefeller Institute on Petit Jean Mountain) by preaching to their peers in a retreat setting with the cohort, Project

Director, and Preaching Coach offering written and oral feedback. The Preaching Coach will provide ongoing coaching as clergy return to ministry settings. **A practitioner with expertise in sharing a digital or social media presence as a medium for preaching** will also be available to troubleshoot and provide best practices for an online presence in preaching.

- Returning home, clergy will **participate in a pulpit swap** to engage a congregation in a different ministerial context and try one of the innovative preaching findings gleaned from the retreat. The hope is that congregations that host a cohort participant will be open to (and qualify as a different context for) the pulpit exchange. In preparation for the pulpit swap, the details of mileage and accommodations, a post-worship fellowship meal, videography, and an assessment survey will be provided. Cohort participants **will also preach the same sermon to their home congregations**. The Congregational Coaching Team will invite the congregation to fill out a survey on the practice of preaching and the effectiveness of the new form in communicating the gospel message. A video of both sermons will be shared with the Preaching Coach for feedback and follow-up conversation.
- The cohort will **present pilgrimage learnings** at the **“Innovation in Preaching Workshop”** held annually at the John and Marjem Gill Preaching Workshop at Hendrix College. A nationally recognized preacher or practitioner will also provide a workshop for clergy gathered around the state on the second day of the event. A celebratory meal at a local Conway, Arkansas restaurant will be held at the end of the second day of the workshop for the cohort participants.

Please answer the following questions:

1. Describe your current ministry setting and how long you have served.
2. List ministerial appointments (name of congregation/setting, position title, dates of service.)
3. Please indicate your availability to commit to a 2-year program (Jan 2027-Dec 2028)
2027
 - 1 retreat in Arkansas (Feb 5-8, 2027)
 - one pilgrimage trip in the US (summer/early fall)
 - one week-long trip to Sedona, Arizona (Nov. 8-14, 2027)**2028**
 - 1 retreat in Arkansas (April 21-24, 2028)
 - Pulpit Exchange (summer 2028)
 - Innovation in Preaching Workshop at Hendrix College (fall 2028)

Please answer the following questions:

1. What led you into pastoral ministry? How do you understand your leadership role both inside and outside of your congregation or ministerial setting?
2. Why do you want to participate in the Compelling Preaching Initiative? Does something in your current or past ministry setting relate to those reasons?
3. How have you experienced a calling specifically to preaching? What have been your most significant moments in preaching, including your most joyful moment and the most difficult

moment? Do you currently have a vision for preaching in your current setting? What is your usual preaching style? What are your current challenges in sermon preparation and delivery?

4. What issues in your specific geographic area/locale do you see as most central for the church and pastoral leaders to address? How are you currently involved in these issues?
5. What is the most difficult situation you have faced as a minister, either in a congregation or beyond, and what did you do?
6. When you complete this program, how do you anticipate your preaching and ministry will improve? How will your congregation/ministry setting improve? What do you hope will be the improvements to your personal and spiritual life?
7. Are there any special circumstances regarding your application that you would like to explain?

Recommendations/Letters of Support

1. **Please provide a letter of support from your immediate supervisor** (lead pastor, executive pastor or district supt.) that both outlines your gifts for engaging in the Compelling Preaching Initiative and their understanding of the level of commitment.
2. **Please provide a letter of support from the SPRC in your current appointment**

Include in your letter:

- How long has the applicant been appointed to your congregation?
- Please describe the ministry experience and leadership skills this person demonstrates.
- Please confirm that your congregation agrees to and will support the applicant's participation in this two-year program for 2027-2028 (see below)

Congregational Support includes:

1. Allowing your pastor to attend 2-3 retreats/workshops per year which includes missing Sundays for those experiences.
2. Working with the applicant to provide a "Congregational Coaching Team" from your congregation of 3-5 persons who will provide assessment and feedback.
3. Helping to administer the survey to the congregation to provide feedback on an "innovative" sermon. The survey will be provided by the CPI.
4. Hosting a "pulpit swap" with another clergy in the CPI cohort. Mileage, accommodations, a post-worship fellowship meal, and details for videography will be covered by the grant and arranged through the Project Director, Rev. Whitney. No honorarium from the congregation is required as the participant will receive a stipend.
5. Continued prayer for your pastor and the other clergy of the cohort.

Please submit application and ask recommenders to send letters to Rev. J.J. Whitney, Project Director, at jwhitney@umfa.org or mail to the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas at 601 Wellington Village Road, Little Rock, AR 72211.