



Creeks & Valleys

December 2025
January 2026

Inside This Issue

Church News	2-4
Willow Valley Finance News	5
Rev. Jeanne Jones	6-8
1952 Gift to Ithaca Church	9
Birthdays and Anniversaries	10
Monthly Calendar	11

Jeremiah 29:11 “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Dear Family of Christ’s Church,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! As we enter the Christmas season, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the busyness of shopping, wrapping, attending parties, and striving for perfection in our decorated homes and Christmas dinner menus. While that’s fine to a point, it can make us miss what Advent truly symbolizes. Advent calls us to look beyond the culture around us and beyond the despair within us, so we can see the goodness of God breaking into our world. It invites us to find in Him the deep, steady joy that springs up from within—joy that no circumstance can take away.

Are you really waiting for His coming?

Advent means *coming*—the coming of Jesus Christ into our world and into our lives. Advent is a season of holy waiting:

- Waiting with **expectation**, because God has promised to act.
- Waiting with **hope**, because darkness will not have the final word.
- Waiting with **joy**, because Christ is Emmanuel—God with us.

Waiting with **preparation**, because His coming calls us to make room in our hearts. Advent reminds us that we are not just counting down the days until Christmas. We are preparing our souls.

We are tuning our hearts to hear God’s whisper.

We are watching for His light breaking into our darkness.

We are living in the tension between what God has already done and what God will yet do.

So the question for all of us is this:

Are we merely waiting for a holiday... or are we waiting for a Savior?

May we all be ready for his coming! Amen.

May each one of us be able to hear the bells on Christmas morning and experience the joy that comes from inside of our hearts when we realize that God is indeed here with us. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, confessed this in his final days and hours: “*The best of all, indeed, is that God is with us.*” God’s goodness is more powerful than the world’s evil, and the hope He gives is stronger than any despair. May God bless you and your family during this season of Advent!

In the Lord Christ’s Love,
Pastor Grace

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“Ash Creek Church”

“Willow Valley Church”



Report from the Church Office

Contributed by
Logan Willis

As I worked on this newsletter, I couldn't help but reflect on the history of the ACWV churches. With the church having physical and digital archives on site that I am expected to manage and maintain, I often review documents after I scan them so that I may know how to categorize each piece of our history. Some portions of our history are a bit thinner with fewer articles to study, but even those missing pieces point to fascinating turns in our church's history. One of my own personal fascinations was reading the documents pertaining to the 1970 merger of the Ithaca, Sextonville, and Loyd churches into the Ithaca building as one congregation. This merger was the reason the Ithaca church was renamed to Willow Valley, and many of our elder congregants probably remember that time; my great-grandfather had been in correspondence with the church during that time on behalf of the Loyd Cemetery during its acquisition of the Loyd church building. What really comes across to me is that it can be easy to forget just how much good will and charity our ancestors put into our churches and our communities and just how important it is to preserve the knowledge of these instrumental contributions to the longevity of these churches: both the people and the buildings.

On a personal note, I will be taking some time off during the holidays season this year.. My wife Chay and I will finally be taking our honeymoon and will be traveling overseas to the Mediterranean coasts of Spain and France. While out in Spain, we will be spending a few days with my father's cousin Bruce Harper and his wife Veronica in Valencia and will be spending

Christmas Eve in Spain with Vero's family. I will be returning on January 4 and expect to be back to work that week.

This means that I will be out of the office from December 22 through to January 4 (potentially on January 5 as well, depending on how hard jet lag hits me), from Christmas Eve through New Year's Day. If there are any concerns with the churches that arise during that time that are not matters for Pastor Grace, church leaders like Barry and Kay Ziegahn, Annette Louis, and Marty Richards will be able to assist in these matters. I thank them all for their help in taking this time for my honeymoon and make it the kind of trip Chay and I have wanted for years.

In the event of any church concerns, you may contact:

Barry Ziegahn (AC) - (608)-475-2214

Kay Ziegahn (AC) - (608)-604-1528

Annette Louis (WV) - (608)-475-7312

Month in Review

This newsletter is serving jointly as the December 2025 edition and the January 2026 edition. I hadn't planned on it being longer, but two stories in particular—pertaining to ACWV church and building history—necessitated a longer than usual publication.

On November 2, one of our long-time friends of the church, Rev. Jeanne "Jeannie" Jones, passed away in Arizona. She had long been an instrumental force of change and energy for the Ash Creek and Willow Valley churches and congregations, and she remains our longest-serving pastor of the past 50 years, having served our churches from 1997 up until 2007. Willow Valley is particularly grateful to her work in the church's building additions, which helped to make the building handicap-accessible. She was also

the first pastor I had come to know, having been baptized by her in March of 1999. The Ash Creek and Willow Valley church leadership and congregations extend our condolences and gratitude to Pastor Jeannie as her family mourns their loss. On pages 6 through 8, you'll find another long-time friend of the church Rev. John Sumwalt, writing about stories from and his experiences with Pastor Jeannie.

On November 23, Willow Valley hosted the annual Thanksgiving Ecumenical Service, our yearly Thanksgiving tradition of a joint service between the Willow Valley UMC and the Catholic Church in Keyesville. During this service, \$405 in cash and two baskets of food were collected for the benefit of the Richland Food Pantry. A photo of the baskets can be seen on the right. Thank you to everyone who was able to make this possible.

Throughout the early portion of December, the Growing in God kids have been making and packing shoeboxes for the annual shoebox donations. These shoeboxes, which contain a number of self-care items like toiletries and snacks, will be taken to Madison and disseminated among needy Wisconsin recipients. Thank you to the GIG kids for their help with creating these shoeboxes, and thank to everyone who contributed the items that were packed.

The other historical Willow Valley received a gift from Paul Murphey of the Richland Center United Methodist Church. In 2019, he had found an artifact of Willow Valley's in the archives of the First Congregational Church in Dalton, WI. The artifact—a canvas of the face of Jesus with names inscribed on the back—was gifted to the Ithaca Evangelical United Brethren Church by the Torch Bearers from the Sunday School class of 1952; this was before the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren with the Methodist Church in 1968 that created the United Methodist denomination, but Ithaca EUB was one of several denominations that



the building oversaw before becoming United Methodist in 1968 and being renamed Willow Valley in 1970. The names on the back include many of the current congregants' parents and elder relatives, of which at least two are still living; it has since been cut from the canvas's back and adhered to a stiffer cardboard material to better preserve its integrity. The occasion of the gift was to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the ordination of Rev. Mayte Richardson and Rev. Sara Mouer, who had jointly served at the Ithaca EUB Church in the early 1950s even during a time that the United Brethren didn't recognize female clergy.

Paul Murphey had tracked down the history of the item and how it managed to be stored in the First Congregational Church of Dalton, which closed in 2018. Rev. Mayte's sister Leota Vernie Richardson Dalton, whose inherited much of Rev. Mayte's possessions after her death in 1963, was a long-time member of the Dalton church. Following Leota's passing in 1965, many of her belongings, including those of Rev. Mayte, were donated to the Dalton church; the Head of Christ portrait was among these items, where it was subsequently placed in storage for many years.

Among the other items that Paul Murphey had come to be given was Rev. Mayte's personal Bible,



Sara Mouer - Mayte Richardson

one she had used to study for her sermons. It was originally gifted from Leota to Rose Murphey and then to Paul; he then gifted it to the now-closed Peace UMC in 2007, where she would have likely been a regular attendee and possible substitute clergy between Rev. Sara's passing in 1959 and Rev. Mayte's passing in 1963. Now, as the newest step of these items' history, both the portrait of Jesus and Rev. Mayte's Bible have been gifted to Willow Valley by Paul Murphey.

Since its receipt, I have begun the process of archiving and digitizing the important documents and restoring the gifts to their proper places. For those who are interested, page 9 has the scan of the back of the canvas; a scan of a photograph of Rev. Richardson and Rev. Mouer from around the same time can be seen above. It is my hope that the portrait will be made available for viewing soon.

The Month Ahead

With this newsletter being our sole publication for the months of December and January, our next issue will not be until February of next year. During

the next two months, here are some events to keep on the horizon.

Coming up on Sunday, December 14, the Willow Valley chapter of the United Women in Faith will be hosting a coffee reception after service. We hope you may attend this get-together at the church. GIG will be performing its annual Christmas Pageant on December 17. The pageant will be an evening event, with the specific time yet to be announced.

The church's Christmas Eve services are also coming up. Willow Valley will be holding its service at 4:00pm—a little earlier than in previous years in order to allow for services for Ash Creek as well as Richland Center. Ash Creek's service will then follow at 5:30pm.

Looking ahead to the new year, the Richland Concert Association will be presenting the second half of its concerts. The first on February 15 features one of my friends, Abbey Atwater. She is a clarinetist of a fierce and dedicated talent; she is by far the most exceptional clarinetist I've ever known. Her performance with pianist Elizabeth Vaughan promises to feature some exciting classical repertoire! The performance will take place on February 15 at 2:00pm at the Richland Center Seventh-Day Adventist Church; tickets can be purchased at the door for \$15 per adult and free admittance for any children.

And, as always, if any of you have events, fundraisers, or other info that you would want known by the Ash Creek, Richland Center, or Willow Valley churches, please reach out to us! We're always open to voicing our support for our neighbors' projects!

Willow Valley Finance News

WV Financials (through November 30):

Nov. Giving: \$4,763

Year-to-Date Giving: \$75,192

Nov. Church Expenses: \$9,921

Year-to-Date Church Expenses: \$87,895

Checking account balance: \$3,872

Year-to-Date Cattle Center Income \$8,690

Year-to-Date Shortfall of \$4,013

On the day after Thanksgiving, Annette Louis, Rhonda Louis, and several G.I.G. kids were in the Willow Valley sanctuary putting up the 12 foot high Christmas tree. This is a labor of love, as each branch must be "fluffed" before being manually inserted into the tree trunk, followed by attaching the light strings, all with the careful use of a ladder. Rhonda questioned how much a new, pre-lit, artificial tree would cost and began checking prices online; she learned that a quality tree of that height would run about \$2,000, even at Black Friday prices. As the decorating work continued, the office phone was heard ringing in the next room. Annette answered what turned out to be a call from a member who was wanting to make a year-end donation and who wondered if there were any special church needs that they could contribute towards. Annette laughingly told them that a new Christmas tree would be very welcome. The member then told her that they were planning to donate \$2,000.

Annette was stunned as she went back into the sanctuary and told her helpers there what had just happened. They hadn't even stopped to pray for

this request, as it was only a few minutes old! But God knew exactly what was needed and had already providentially set things into motion for that member to call at that moment with that particular gift. She said she hopes the kids will never forget the feeling of awe they felt as they realized what had just happened in their presence.

We thank that generous donor, and we pray that all of you will be open to God's hand in your lives during this Advent season. When you feel the prompting of His Spirit to share some of your resources of energy, money, or time with others, trust Him that He knows exactly the right moment and the needs that they have, even if you don't know what they are.

Willow Valley Finance Committee

Barb Clary, Annette Louis, Bonnie Jones,
Suzanne Anderson, Pastor Grace Cho

Christmas Eve Services:

Willow Valley:

Dec. 24 at 4:00pm

Ash Creek:

Dec. 24 at 5:30pm

Rev. Jeanne Jones:

The Taste of Music



Jeanne Murray Jones (1941-2025) told of a healing experience at a retreat which left her profoundly changed: "For several months afterwards, every time I closed my eyes, Jesus with his arms outstretched was imprinted on the inside of my eyelids. I also experienced great joy and odd sensations, such as being able to taste music. I could suddenly 'play by ear' instead of just reading music."

Contributed by John Sumwalt

Upon hearing of the passing of my friend, Rev. Jeanne Murray Jones this week, I remembered the day she told me a remarkable mystical story. She mentioned it in passing as she showed me around the newly renovated Willow Valley United Methodist Church in Ithaca, Wisconsin. Willow Valley is my home congregation, and I was back to do a storytelling program in the new sanctuary.

Jeanne was pastor at Willow Valley from 1997 to 2007 and led the congregation in a major renovation of the church building. My grandfather, James Archie Sumwalt, had worked on an earlier renovation of the building in the 1930s when the family farmed on Little Willow. Jeanne and her late husband, Maynard, had helped to build the Prescott Valley United Methodist Church in Prescott Valley, Arizona, where they lived for many years before both accepting a call to pastoral ministry in 1991. They enrolled at my Alma Mater, the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, where they received Master of Divinity degrees in 1994. Jeanne knew that I was working on a book of vision stories, and so, as we walked through the beautiful new sanctuary after worship that day, she told me this touching personal story, which I later included in the book:

"When we lived in Arizona, my mother-in-law, Frances, lived in the apartment below ours in the house my husband, Maynard, built. He knew of her love for flowers and built her a greenhouse on two sides of her living room.

One evening, the three of us returned from an outing. As we entered her apartment, prior to going upstairs to ours, both she and I were astounded at the odor of flowers. There were no flowers in bloom in either of our apartments, but she and I could suddenly smell so many flowers it was almost overpowering.

Frances told me, "This is what my mother's house smelled like." Maynard couldn't smell a thing, but Frances and I shared that gift of love. I don't know why we were given that particular gift. Who knows,



Rev. Jeanne Jones lead the Willow Valley United Methodist Church congregation during a major renovation project between 1997 and 2007 when she served as pastor.

perhaps it was the scent of heaven!"

I wrote to Jeanne the following year when I began work on "Sharing Visions," the second book in the three part series, to ask if she had any more stories to share. She sent me a memorable personal account of her call to ministry, to which she gave the title, "The Taste of Music."

Music was a very important part of Jeanne's life. She had been a church organist and choir director, and she played the baritone horn for over sixty years.

Jeanne wrote,

"The whole thing began when I was asked to be the song leader for a Walk to Emmaus retreat in 1988. I was a kindergarten teacher and sang in the choir, but no one had ever asked me to lead singing for adults, and I was amazed at having been chosen. I felt comfortable with the task. It didn't require a really good voice, as the singing was mostly used to gather people together after break time and as a time-filler if needed.

"I had a back-up guitarist who had a good voice, and I knew the leadership team

could all sing, so I attended the training sessions and felt really happy and excited about the weekend. But when I arrived in Phoenix, I got sick. I had a stomachache, and it wouldn't go away. I ate Tums, I ate crackers, I sipped water... I felt lousy. If I had been stressed, I could have blamed that, but I knew I wasn't stressed. At times I felt that there were two of me, one going through the motions of enthusiastically leading the singing, and the other watching me and wondering what I was doing since I was so sick.

"The retreat started Thursday night. By Saturday, I decided that if I wasn't better by Sunday, I would go to the hospital and see if I had an ulcer, instead of starting for home 100 miles away.

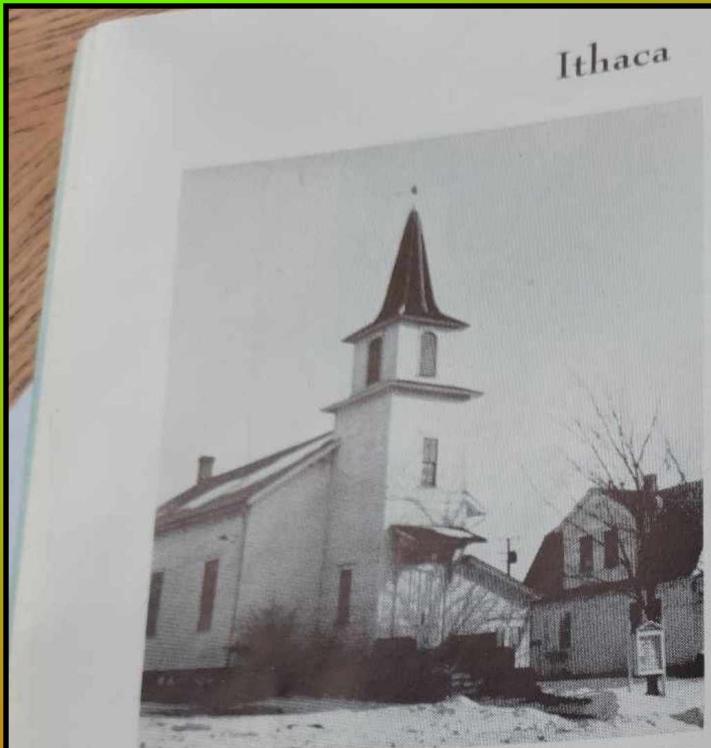
Saturday night we had a Healing Service, and I asked for forgiveness. The thought popped into my head that I needed to forgive my mother for not loving me. This was strange, because intellectually, I suppose I knew that my mother really did love me in her own way, although she was not demonstrative. Apparently, I carried those feelings inside and needed to let go of them, because the minute I said that I needed to forgive her, I was healed.

I know that God was working in my life that weekend. I think I could say that I had an 'infilling' of the Holy Spirit, although I didn't know what that phrase meant before that time. I do know that when we were ready to leave, those who were the participants in the Walk were asked to stand up at the last gathering and tell what the weekend had meant to them and what they were going to do about it.

"Though the leaders were not expected to

say anything, I got up and said that my life had changed. Not only was my pastor there, so were my husband and 18 members of my home church. Most were enroute to Mexico for a mission trip. My husband could see such a change in me that he wondered if I was okay to go home while he went to Mexico. I was. I had Jesus with me.

"For several months afterwards, every time I closed my eyes, Jesus with his arms outstretched was imprinted on the inside of my eyelids. I also experienced great joy and odd sensations, such as being able to taste music. I could suddenly "play by ear" instead of just reading music. It was as



THE ITHACA CHURCH - 8 Miles East of Richland Center on State Highway 58, Richland County

The Willow Valley United Methodist Church in Ithaca, WI circa 1960. John Sumwalt's grandfather, James Archie Sumwalt, worked on an earlier renovation of the sanctuary in the 1930s when the family lived on a farm in Little Willow.

though the barrier between the left side, and the right side of my brain was broken down and the two sides were integrated somehow.

"I went from being a very organized left-brained person to being a person who couldn't remember what day it was! Fortunately, that didn't last for too long, and I feel a greater sense of wholeness now than was ever possible before. Another joy was that the scriptures were 'opened' to me, so that what I read earlier as words became full of life and meaning. I truly love to read scripture now and feel God's presence in new ways each time.

"As I said, it was a strange weekend. After a year of Spiritual Direction, I felt that I was to leave teaching and go into ordained ministry. God had indeed blessed me in many ways."

Rev. Jeanne Murray Jones (1941-2025) served the Gays Mills & Seneca and the Ash Creek & Willow Valley charges in the Wisconsin Conference of The United Methodist Church before her retirement in 2007. Finding retirement not to her liking, she asked the bishop for another assignment and ended up serving interim appointments in several more Wisconsin churches in Colfax, Tainter, Blue River, Avoca, Racine, Elkorn, and Richmond. Rev. Jones was devoted to mission work. She served as a leader in the Wisconsin Volunteers in Mission, going to Biloxi Mississippi three times to help with clean up after Hurricane Katrina.

John Sumwalt is a retired pastor and the author of "Sharing Visions: Divine Revelations, Angels And Holy Coincidences," john-sumwalt@gmail.com, phone (414)-339-0676, write to W172 N7735 Shady Ln # 932, Menomonee Falls, WI 53051

A Slice of WV History: from the back of a Portrait of Jesus Christ, dated 1952

Creeks & Valleys Page 9

Rev Richardson and Mowen
from

Torch - Bearers Sunday School Class

of Ithaca

1952.
Lem and Merle Miller
George and Nona Ackley
Donald and Agnes Anderson
Leland and Gladys Anderson
Floyd and Helen Denman
Dennis and Mildred Ferguson
Milo and Eala Flanane
Clarence and Violet Mayfield
John and Lynette Richards
Bob and Marie Rakow
Eldene Fritz and Wylma Truesdale.



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HEAD OF CHRIST

ASH CREEK

Birthdays:

Kelsey Mae Stibbe—12/10
Chris Stibbe—12/18
George Nachtigal—12/22
Mollie Lineberry—12/25
Emmitt Anderson—12/29
Sue Stibbe—01/03
Daria Deckert—01/04
Katylynn Heisz—01/07
Kegan Stibbe—01/14
Cathy Unbehaun—01/15
MaryLou Hanold—01/17
Lea Ziegahn—01/17
Brenna Mae Schmidt—01/23
Cheri Evans—01/28
Megan Unbehaun—01/31

Anniversaries:

No anniversaries during December or January,

WILLOW VALLEY

Birthdays:

12/05—Aaron Richards
12/11—Shery Nelson
12/12—Bodyn Louis
12/12—Alana Nelson
12/13—Rick Manning
12/15—Jeff Meyer
12/17—Brady Nelson
12/24—Harold Coppernoll
12/25—Shirley Ewing
01/02—Peyton Brown
01/05—Arianna Louis
01/07—Paul Denman
01/12—Wesley Nelson
01/13—Chay Willis
01/14—Declan Miller
01/16—Dan Willis
01/16—Deb Cooprider
01/17—Dave Brock
01/17—Jim Connors
01/20—David Cooprider
01/20—Aaron Jones
01/21—Lisa Clary
01/23—Katie Burnley
01/23—Juanna Miller
01/23—Courtney Willis
01/23—Donnabel Willis
01/24—Marj Willis
01/26—Heather Dickey

Anniversaries:

12/14—Tom & Patty Louis
12/21—Logan & Chay Willis
01/24—John & Cheryl McNurlin
01/26—Rick & Deb Manning

December

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
			GIG 5:15pm @ WV			
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
WV 9:00 AM RC 10:00 AM AC 11:00 AM			GIG 5:15pm @ WV			
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
WV 9:00 AM WV UWIF Coffee Hour after service RC 10:00 AM AC 11:00 AM	WV AD Council Meeting @ 6:00pm		GIG 5:15pm @ WV GIG Christmas Pageant			
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
WV 9:00 AM RC 10:00 AM AC 11:00 AM AC Ad Council Meeting @ 10:00am			WV Christmas Eve @ 4:00pm AC Christmas Eve @ 5:30pm			
28	29	30	31	Jan. 1	2	3
WV 9:00 AM RC 10:00 AM AC 11:00 AM						

Ash Creek & Willow Valley United Methodist Churches

Willow Creek UMC & Charge Office

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Ash Creek UMC

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Richland Center, WI 53581
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Address Service Requested

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!
HAVE A HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

Upcoming Administrative Council Meetings:

Ash Creek:

Next Meeting is December 21 @ 10:00am

Willow Valley:

Next Meeting is December 15 @ 6:00pm

AC Worship Time:

Sundays at 11:00 a.m.

WV Worship Time:

Sundays at 9:00 a.m.

G.I.G. Time:

Wednesdays 5:15 p.m.—7:00pm
(September—May)