

# LEADERSHIP ACADEMY PREACHING INSTITUTE (LAPI)

## *Conference Report for EPA & GNJ 2024*

### **Background**

In September 2023, Lilly Endowment approved 81 grants to organizations across the United States through its Compelling Preaching Initiative. The aim of the initiative is to help Christian pastors strengthen their preaching so they can better inspire, encourage, and guide people to live their faith more fully. The Greater New Jersey Annual Conference, in collaboration with the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference, applied for and received a \$1.25 million grant for this purpose, 2024–2027.

### **Mission**

Through our Leadership Academy, the United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey strive to grow transformational leaders who are leading congregations and ministries to make disciples of Jesus Christ and grow vital mission congregations for the transformation of the world. Supported by the Compelling Preaching Initiative Grant, the **Leadership Academy Preaching Institute (LAPI)** seeks to empower ordained clergy, commissioned clergy, local pastors, lay preachers, and congregational leaders to cultivate compelling preaching that leads to congregational vitality.

### **Project Summary**

Compelling preaching has been a hallmark of the Methodist tradition throughout its history. In times marked by widespread economic hardship, ongoing health threats, and a society aching for moral and spiritual guidance, the broadly accessible preaching of figures like John Wesley, George Whitefield, Richard Allen, William Otterbein, Jacob Albright, Harry Hosier, Francis Asbury, Jarena Lee, Sally Thompson, and Phoebe Palmer sparked widespread, transnational spiritual awakening that traversed the borders of class, race, gender, and theological difference. Today's world is no less in need of spiritual awakening, and the UMC has a profound opportunity to speak into the current world's ache for a word of hope through a renewal of our longstanding commitment to compelling preaching.

The UMC is at a critical inflection point in its history. As the largest Mainline denomination in the United States, it remains a major influence in the American religious landscape today. It is also a connectional body that bears the scars of decades of membership decline. This culminated in a schismatic rending that has produced far more national headlines about the denomination's internal conflicts than headlines about its continually transformative work of making disciples of Jesus Christ all over the world. The Eastern Pennsylvania & Greater New Jersey Annual Conferences ("EPA&GNJ") recognize the urgent need to live into our Wesleyan legacy of homiletical zeal and connectional innovation by equipping passionate preachers to deliver messages of hope to a watching and waiting world.

Through the Compelling Preaching Initiative grant, EPA&GNJ plan to expand upon the strengths of our existent Leadership Academy by adding a robust preaching component to our continuing education program. The Leadership Academy Preaching Institute ("LAPI") is a hybrid continuing education program designed to cultivate compelling preaching that leads to congregational vitality.

The Preaching Institute will offer (1) a hybrid 10-month intensive certificate program through which preachers chosen as LAPI Fellows will focus on honing their craft alongside exceptional preachers, instructors, and intergenerational cohorts; (2) congregational coaching for the development of collaborative preaching practices and effective feedback loops for preachers; and (3) short-term online courses, for both lay listeners and preachers, that will empower the cultivation of contextual practices of proclamation and holy listening.

### **Goals**

1. The 10-month certificate program will be offered three times from 2025 through 2027.
2. Over the course of those three years, total engagement goals in the program include:
  - 250 LAPI Fellows, including clergy and lay preachers.
  - 1000 laity from 250 congregations participating in Collaborative Preaching Workgroups and online

LAPI courses.

- 25 trained clergy facilitators/coaches from EPA&GNJ.
- An additional 125 laity leaders engaging in online courses offered through LAPI.
- An additional 125 ordained, commissioned, licensed, and lay preachers engaging in online courses offered through LAPI.

### **Anticipated Outcomes**

Preachers and SPRC members, key church leaders, and clergy colleagues (Listeners) will be empowered and equipped in the following ways:

- Preachers will cultivate practices and develop skills that enable them to engage congregations, both in-person and online, in compelling ways that lead to measurable congregational vitality.
- Preachers will become more adept at delivering sermons that effectively reach more diverse listening communities, addressing gender bias and including cross-generational and cross-cultural/cross-racial Listeners.
- Preachers will view the craft of preaching not as having a goal of “arrival,” but one that requires ongoing reflection and lifelong learning, as they adapt their practice to various contexts, seasons of ministry, and the demands of a hurting world in need of the gospel.
- Preachers will learn how to incorporate the practice of listening and watching sermons from other preachers (as well as their own) to develop their own skills and strategies in the pulpit.
- Listeners will cultivate practices and develop skills that enable them to provide timely, honest, thoughtful, and insightful feedback, leading to more effective preaching.
- Preachers and Listeners will have a clearer understanding of the role of preaching in the life of the church and its direct impact on congregational vitality.
- Preachers and Listeners will learn how to work together to develop preaching that is relevant to their specific context, speaks to the needs of their community, and provides a true reflection of the all-welcoming reign of God.

### **Get Involved!**

During 2024, the Leadership Academy Preaching Institute will gather data through focus groups and surveys, to assess needs within both conferences. In June 2024, applications for the LAPI Certificate in Compelling Preaching program will be open. Selected participants will be notified in September, and the program will launch in February 2025.

We look forward to directing and coordinating this multi-year initiative within EPA & GNJ and cultivating a renewed ethos of faithful and compelling preaching within United Methodism.

The Rev. Dr. Darryl W. Stephens, LAPI Director

Mary Cranwell, LAPI Coordinator

The Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, Assistant to the Bishop, Leadership Development, Director of EPA Connectional Ministries

Visit our webpage at <https://www.epaumc.org/leadership-academy/lapi/>