



Lead Forward

Building Stronger Leaders. Empowering Stronger Churches

An Initiative of the Midwest Episcopal District of the A.M.E. Zion Church

Ministry Capacity Micro-Grants 2026

A Lead Forward Program of the Midwest Episcopal District of the A.M.E. Zion Church | Funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Empowering Local Innovation and Stability across Indiana congregations through seed grants designed to be accessible, streamlined, and focused on real ministry outcomes.

REV. AUSTIN J. YOUNG, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

BISHOP DARAN H. MITCHELL, PRESIDING BISHOP

Program Overview

Across the Midwest Episcopal District, pastors and lay leaders have repeatedly named the same challenge: local congregations are carrying a great deal of ministry responsibility with limited financial capacity. Chronic underfunding has become one of the most significant barriers to sustained ministry impact. Churches often have vision, willing leaders, and deep commitment to their communities — yet they struggle to access resources that are timely, flexible, and responsive to real needs on the ground.

The Dual Reality

Many congregations shared two realities at the same time. First, they want to do more than maintain what has always been done — reaching new people, responding to emerging needs, and trying fresh approaches. Second, they face urgent challenges that drain energy and slow momentum. When these needs go unmet, churches can become trapped in survival mode.

What This Grant Is

The Ministry Capacity Micro-Grant provides small seed grants — ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000 — to help Indiana congregations take a meaningful next step in ministry. Depending on the lane you choose, that could look like launching a monthly dinner series that builds real connection with your neighbors, piloting an eight-week mentoring program for young adults in your congregation, making a critical facility repair that has been keeping people away, or closing a curriculum gap that has stalled your children's ministry. We also want to say this clearly: you do not have to stay inside the lines. If you have been sitting on an idea that feels a little different, a little unconventional, or unlike anything your church has tried before — this is the grant for that idea. The need does not have to be large to be real, and the approach does not have to be familiar to be faithful. This grant is for the church that has the vision and the will — and just needs a modest investment to move from 'we've been talking about this' to 'we actually did it.'

Our Response

The Ministry Capacity Micro-Grant Program was created as a direct response to those concerns. It provides small seed grants to empower congregations across Indiana to strengthen ministry capacity in practical ways. These grants are intentionally designed to be accessible, streamlined, and focused on real ministry outcomes.

At the heart of this program is a simple goal: to help congregations move from **"we want to"** to **"we did."**

- 📄 All funded projects must be completed within the grant period: **November 1, 2026 – October 31, 2027**. A midpoint check-in is required by April 30, 2027, and a final report is due no later than January 31, 2028.

Funding at a Glance

\$24K

Total Funding

Available to award in the 2026 grant cycle

2

Grant Lanes

Innovation or Stabilization — choose one

3

Award Tiers

\$2,000 / \$3,500 / \$5,000 — choose one

1

App Per Church

Each church may apply for one micro-grant per cycle

Awards are competitive and will be made based on clarity, readiness, stewardship, and expected ministry impact. All applications select one grant lane and one tier amount.

Tier 1 — \$2,000

Focused Spark — Best for a single, well-defined need or a small pilot with a clear plan.

Tier 2 — \$3,500

Strong Build — Supports a moderate project with multiple components, broader reach, or more coordination.

Tier 3 — \$5,000

High Impact Pilot — Intended for the highest-impact proposals with clear readiness, strong reach, and a well-defined plan.

Lane A: Innovation Micro-Grants

Dare to Dream, Try Something New

Lane A is designed for congregations that are ready to step beyond what is familiar. These micro-grants support new ministry experiments, fresh approaches, and bold pilots that respond to real needs in your church and in your community. Strong Lane A proposals are shaped by what you are learning from your context — not just by good ideas.

Evidence We're Looking For

- Congregational surveys or ministry assessments
- Community listening sessions or conversations with local leaders
- Neighborhood insights and observable needs
- Participation patterns — who is missing and where drop-off happens
- Pastoral care trends that reveal recurring needs
- A specific ministry gap you can name with clarity

What We're Looking For in Your Proposal

- What you're trying, and why it matters
- Who it will serve and reach
- What will be different after the pilot
- What success will look like in practical terms
- What you will learn that could help other churches

Lane A Examples

Ministry on the Move

A rotating pop-up presence in community spaces with prayer, listening, and a clear next step into connection

The Neighbor Table

A monthly dinner series that builds belonging through shared meals, story-sharing, and a short faith conversation

30-Day Blessing Challenge

Teams adopt a block or community site for consistent acts of care, ending with a neighborhood celebration

Mentoring Pods

Eight-week intergenerational groups mixing life skills, scripture, and accountability

The Listening Campaign

A structured season of neighborhood interviews that leads to one new ministry pilot based directly on what was heard

Sabbath for the City

Monthly rest and renewal gatherings combining practical support, emotional wellness, and prayer

Lane B: Stabilization & Relief Micro-Grants

Strengthen What's Needed to Sustain Ministry

Lane B is designed for congregations that are carrying real strain and need practical support to stabilize core ministry capacity. These grants provide relief for urgent needs that, if left unaddressed, will continue to limit the church's ability to gather, serve, and lead effectively. This lane is not about cosmetic improvements or long wish lists — it is about removing a clear barrier that is affecting ministry right now.

What We're Looking For

- The barrier you are addressing, and how it is currently limiting ministry
- Who will benefit once the need is resolved
- A simple, achievable plan and timeline
- A clear budget with realistic costs
- How you will sustain progress after the grant

Lane B Examples

- A ministry-critical facility repair that directly affects worship, gatherings, or community ministry — such as restroom access, safety, or minor repairs
- Accessibility improvements that expand participation and make ministry more welcoming
- Closing a program gap preventing a ministry from continuing — such as supplies, curriculum, or insurance
- Ministry readiness support — training costs, background checks, hospitality readiness
- Community care supplies and resources connected to a focused ministry plan

📄 **Not sure which lane fits?** Contact the program team before applying at specialprojects@jwamezsouthfield.org. If your project doesn't clearly fit either lane, the team can help you determine the best path forward.

Ineligible Activities

The following activities and expenses are **not eligible** for funding through the Ministry Capacity Micro-Grant program. Review this list carefully before preparing your application.

→ **Ongoing Staff Salaries**

Long-term personnel costs are not eligible. Short-term stipends tied to a defined, time-limited role within the project may be considered if clearly justified.

→ **Technology Equipment**

Technology equipment purchases should be directed to the Technology Equipment Matching Grant, which is a separate program.

→ **Capital Improvements or Major Construction**

Large-scale building projects or capital campaigns fall outside the scope of this micro-grant program.

→ **Already Fully Funded Activities**

Activities that are already fully funded through other sources are not eligible for this program.

→ **Recurring Annual Programs**

Programs that are an extension of regularly recurring annual activities, rather than something new or a documented stabilization need, are not eligible.

→ **Indirect Costs or Overhead**

Organizational overhead and expenses that primarily benefit individuals rather than the broader congregation or community are not eligible.

Timeline & How to Apply



Who Can Apply

Indiana congregations within the Midwest Episcopal District. Each church may submit one application per cycle. Applications must include pastor and one lay leader affirmation.

Application Format

The main application narrative, excluding appendices, should not exceed **five pages**. All submissions must use a minimum 12-point font, one-inch margins, and be paginated. Appendices do not count toward the page limit.

Appendix Requirements

Appendix A

Church Profile (one page max): year established, address, average Sunday attendance, annual operating budget, paid staff count, pastor tenure

Appendix B

Key Personnel Biographies: project lead and any named team members with defined roles (150 words each max)

Appendix C

Organizational Chart: key leadership with names and roles (one page)

Appendix D

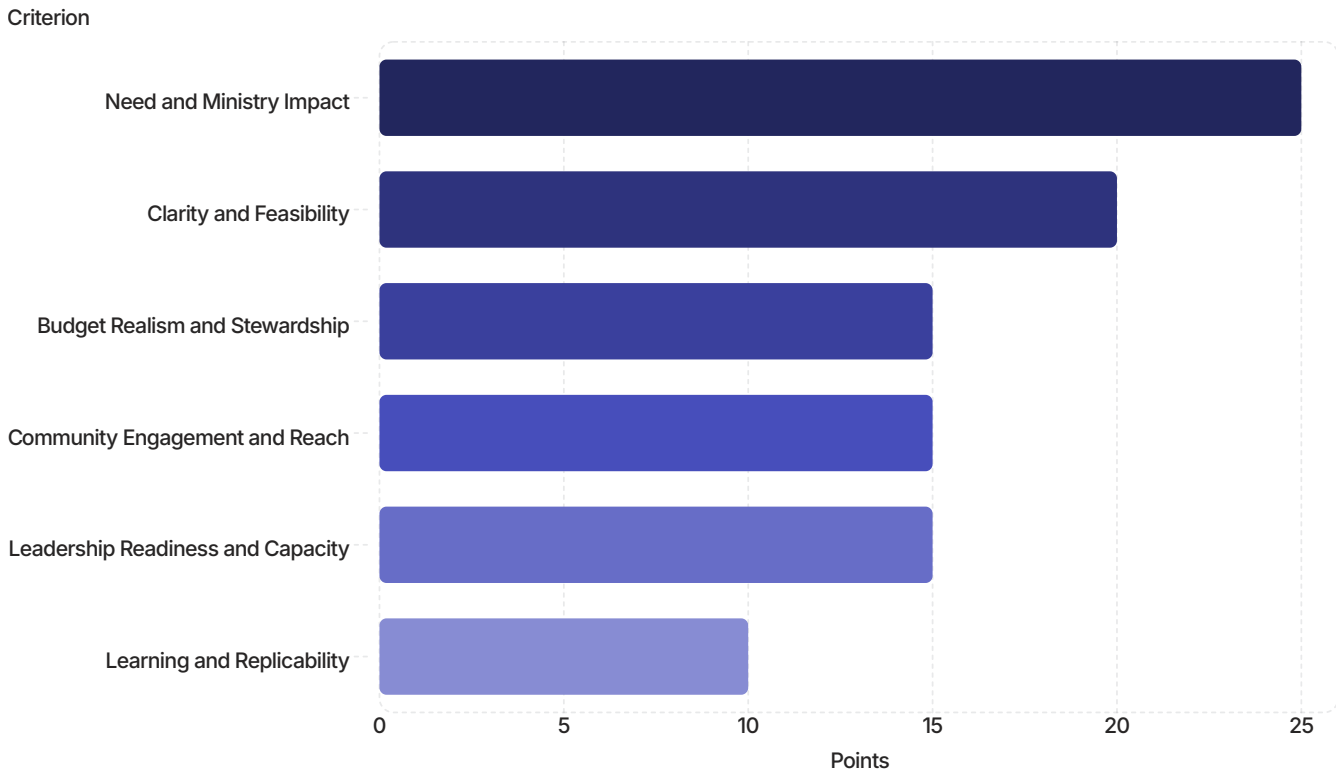
Community Engagement Evidence (Lane A only): brief narrative of surveys, conversations, or data that shaped the idea (one to two pages)

What to Submit

1. Completed application form
2. Lane selection (Innovation or Stabilization)
3. Tier selection (\$2,000, \$3,500, or \$5,000)
4. Project summary — what you will do
5. People plan — who will lead and implement
6. Work plan — three to five steps with a simple timeline
7. Budget — line items and amounts
8. Outcomes — two to four measurable indicators
9. Sustainability — what continues after the grant
10. Learning plan — how you will share what you learn

Selection Criteria & Rubric

Applications will be reviewed using the following priorities. **Total: 100 points.** Need and Ministry Impact carries the greatest weight, reflecting the program's core commitment to real, measurable outcomes in congregations and communities.




Measurable Outcome Examples— Lane A (Innovation)

- 30 community members attend at least one event during the grant period
- At least 5 new households make initial contact with the congregation through the pilot
- 8 participants complete the full program and provide written feedback
- The church produces one written summary of lessons learned for sharing with the district

Measurable Outcome Examples — Lane B (Stabilization)

- The identified barrier is resolved and ministry activity resumes or increases within 60 days
- Average weekly attendance in the affected ministry increases by a defined number
- All volunteers complete required training or background checks within the project period
- Ministry leaders describe a measurable reduction in operational strain, captured in the final report

 **Score Sharing:** Scores are not published publicly, but applicants who were not selected may request their score and a brief summary of reviewer feedback by contacting the program team within 30 days of the award announcement at specialprojects@jwamezsouthfield.org.

Funding, Reporting & Shared Learning



Disbursement

80% upfront upon grant agreement execution.
20% after midpoint check-in is completed and accepted.



Midpoint Check-In

Due **March 30, 2027**. Short update: what has been completed, what is working, what challenges remain, any budget changes.



Final Report

Due **January 31, 2028**. What was completed, participation counts, outcomes, a brief story or testimony, photos, and lessons learned.



Shared Learning

Each recipient agrees to share learning through a short written story, a brief video, or a presentation at the October 2027 Mid West Refresh Conference.

Each grant is also an invitation to learn and to share, so that what works in one context can inspire and bless others across the district.

FAQs & Contact Information

Frequently Asked Questions

Can a church apply for both lanes?

No. Choose one lane and one tier per application cycle.

Can we use funds for ongoing salaries?

Generally no. Short-term stipends tied to a defined project may be considered if clearly justified.

How many churches will receive funding?

With \$24,000 available, the program expects to fund multiple churches at varying tier amounts, depending on tier selections and application strength.

Can we change the budget once approved?

Minor adjustments are allowed. Major changes should be requested and approved before funds are reallocated.

Can a church apply again in a future cycle?

Yes, as long as prior reporting requirements have been completed and the new proposal represents a clear next step.

What happens to leftover money?

The district may fund additional applications at a lower funding level or carry remaining funds forward to the next grant cycle.

Contact Information

Learn More:

www.midwestamez.org/leadforward

Questions:

specialprojects@jwamezsouthfield.org

Program Team

- LaTascha Moses, Administrative Assistant
- Miah Powell, Financial Assistant
- Rev. Austin J. Young, Program Director
- Bishop Daran H. Mitchell, Presiding Bishop

Key Dates

- **Applications Open:** April 1, 2026
- **Applications Due:** August 1, 2026
- **Awards Announced:** October 17, 2026