

THE JOURNEY

Incline your ear
and come to me; I
will make with you
an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast love. For
my thoughts are not your
thoughts, nor are your ways
my ways, says the Lord. For
as the heavens are higher
than the earth, so are my
ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than
your thoughts.

—ISAIAH 55



Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



A Year of Adventure, on a Path Carved By Grace

Dear Friends in Christ,

For three years now, we have wandered and wondered in faith. The pandemic set us on a wilderness odyssey filled with challenges and opportunities to adapt and change.



While an extraordinary experience for us, this was nothing new for God's people. Our spiritual ancestors journeyed into the great unknown time after time.

Moses led the Hebrew people in their escape from Pharaoh's

oppression only to spend 40 years in the Sinai wilderness. There, God brought forth signs of safekeeping: water from the rock, quail and manna for sustenance. Elijah experienced the "sheer silence" of God's presence, but only after the terror of whirlwind, earthquake and fire. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness "making straight the crooked path" for the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus was tempted and tested in the desert.

All photos were taken at Daycholah Center unless otherwise noted.

THE JOURNEY

GOD STILL PROMISES TO JOURNEY WITH US THROUGH THE WILDERNESS, WITH SIGNS THAT WILL GUIDE US IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.



God still promises to journey with us through the wilderness, with signs that will guide us in the right direction. As followers of Jesus, we trust in God's prevenient grace, which goes before us and prepares the way.

This Annual Report of the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ illuminates the paths we are taking toward the discovery of God's future Church. Along the way, we will encounter sacred surprises "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8)

The journey to 2023 was an adventure. The Conference invested \$2.3 million in United Church Camps, Inc., sold the Trost Center in DeForest and moved the Conference offices to Daycholah Center. Our dynamic and talented staff has managed this transition remarkably well, and we are excited to strengthen our partnership with UCCI and to continue our commitment to the Ho Chunk Nation whose ancestors first belonged to this land.

This report points to the enduring and vital ministries of our Conference life, all made possible by our congregations' commitment to Our Church's Wider Mission. While we continue to grow additional streams that will help sustain our ability to resource and equip pastors and parishioners for ministry, OCWM remains key to our future.

Yours in faith,

Franz Rigert
Conference Minister



**CONFERENCE MINISTER FRANZ RIGERT
AT DAYCHOLAH CENTER**



Support for People and Congregations

At the heart of the Wisconsin Conference's mission is a commitment to connect, support and resource local congregations and leaders as they discern the path of Jesus in the 21st century.

Accompanying Congregations During Times of Transition

The Conference staff has no more important task than to walk with congregations during the search-and-call process. In the past year, our associate conference ministers and other staff members have accompanied 74 churches experiencing pastoral transitions. Twenty-one transitions have resulted in settled calls, with the rest still in process.

The team also worked with lay leaders to identify creative solutions to worship leadership during sometimes long seasons between settled pastors. This includes equipping laypeople to lead worship, brokering shared ministry agreements in which two congregations share one pastor, and working with ecumenical partners to provide bridge ministry.

Jill Riemann, co-chair of the search team at First Congregational UCC in Oconomowoc, speaks fondly of her church's experience working through the process with Associate Conference Minister Rachel Bauman.

"Rachel cared a lot about us and made us feel special," Jill says. "Just knowing you had a resource to reach out to at any time was very comforting."

Nurturing Innovation

The Catalyst Grant program in 2022 awarded grants totaling more than \$31,000 to 10 congregations and church organizations to support innovative ministries that pushed beyond church walls. The grants encourage congregations and individuals to build partnerships with community organizations to maximize the impact of their ministries.

The projects funded by the Catalyst program included Feeding the Hungry, a program of the United Church of Christ in Neillsville that addresses food insecurity in the community, and Anti-Racism for Youth, spearheaded by the Rev. Laura McLeod, pastor of Brookfield Congregational UCC. The program is designed to empower a rising generation of social justice advocates.



“Just knowing you had a resource to reach out to at any time was very comforting.”

So far in 2023, the Catalyst Team has awarded grants totaling more than \$33,000 to 10 projects. Additional grants will be awarded in the fall. If your congregation has an idea for creative service to the community, contact Mary Kuenning Gross, coordinator of grants and scholarships for the Wisconsin Conference, at mgross@wcucc.org.

Supportive Ministries

A team of dedicated clergy and lay people assists the Conference staff in the work of supporting our authorized ministers. The group publishes a monthly newsletter, *Renewing the Soul of the Beloved Community*, and hosts a monthly Zoom conversation.

Here are some other supportive programs:

Communities of Practice. These professional peer support groups are facilitated by clergy or other professionals who have a deep, abiding understanding of ministry. Groups meet monthly for worship, reflection, support and growth.

Clergy Coaching. Coaches help pastors grow in particular ministries in the local church setting.

Conflict Transformation Team.

Trained clergy and lay volunteers help congregations navigate conflicts in church life.

Continuing Education Scholarship.

Not every congregation can afford the continuing education required of clergy. The Wisconsin Conference provides scholarship support to make continuing education affordable.

Educational Debt Reduction.

The Conference offers a robust educational debt reduction program for authorized ministers. Each year we retire thousands of dollars of debt for our clergy.



THE REV. RACHEL BAUMAN IS THE ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER FOR THE SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST ASSOCIATIONS.



Listening to the Needs of Others

FOLLOWING JESUS REQUIRES PAYING ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.

To follow a path, you have to engage your senses. For the Justice Working Groups of the Wisconsin Conference, following Jesus requires seeing and listening to the needs of others, particularly those on society's margins. Some examples:

- As Wisconsin considers becoming a WISE Conference for Mental Health – that's short for Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged – the WISE Team has spent the past year supporting and providing resources to congregations as they study mental health needs in their communities. In the coming year, the team will continue to watch and listen for ways to help churches striving to respond to local mental health challenges.



- The Immigration Working Group offers informative, empowering Zoom workshops that help congregations by explaining the challenges facing immigrants and the complexities of our immigration system and by preparing churches to advocate for policies that support a faithful approach to immigration reform. The focus in coming months will be on the importance of supporting fair trade and how our purchases of goods as common as coffee can influence whether an individual needs to migrate.
- A new working group is emerging focused on Palestinian-Israeli relations. Right now, the group is developing an understanding of the complex issues involved and faithful ways Christians can respond, with a goal of engaging Wisconsin Conference congregations.

“Every time we drink a cup of cheap coffee, we’re one of the reasons migrants come here,” says Lisa Hart, associate conference minister for faith formation and justice ministries. “They can make in three to five weeks (in the U.S.) what they would make in a year growing coffee in Mexico.”

In January, Lisa traveled to the U.S.–Mexico border to learn how congregations can better serve immigrants in their local communities.



LISA HART, ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER, WAS JOINED BY A “SAMARITANS” GROUP THAT PROVIDES HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO ASYLUM SEEKERS.



CREATION CARE



Going Green, Following Jesus

“Green” is the sign of the forward movement of the calendar when winter gives way to spring. “Green” also is how we describe Wisconsin Conference ministries of environmental care, one of the important ways we follow Jesus, who sprinkled his teaching and preaching with images drawn from nature.

Thanks in part to the leadership of the Creation Care Team, green initiatives are unfolding across the Conference, powered by the energy and ideas of congregations and financial support from the wider church. Some examples:

- First Congregational in Wisconsin Rapids, Plymouth and First Congregational in Madison and Grace Congregational in Two Rivers are among the most recent churches to adopt solar power, with more congregations to follow soon.



- Union Congregational UCC in Green Bay, Plymouth in Eau Claire and First Congregational in Ripon are among Wisconsin congregations that are reworking their properties to be more sustainable.
- Bethel-Bethany UCC has emerged as a green beacon in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood, serving as trusted community partner and leader in education and advocacy.

These initiatives are merely the tip of the iceberg, as more and more congregations are witnessing to their local communities that a Kairos moment is at hand, and the time has arrived to repair, renew and restore God's sacred Earth through the Creation Care ministries of the Wisconsin Conference.

The core team, led by the Revs. Bob Ullman and John Helt, is planning two Creation Care retreats this fall, one at Daycholah Center and one at Moon Beach. You can stay on top of news from our Creation Care ministries by subscribing to the every-other-month *Kairos* newsletter.

THE TIME HAS ARRIVED TO REPAIR, RENEW AND RESTORE GOD'S SACRED EARTH.



**THE REV. MICHAEL JONES IS OUR NEWEST
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER AND
SERVES THE NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION.**



Equipping Disciples for the Journey

We follow Jesus in a community of disciples whose faith is formed continually as we interact with one another. The Wisconsin Conference emerged from the trials of the past three years focused on providing the support required by clergy and lay leaders charged with facilitating faith formation experiences. The Conference provides a number of avenues for expanding the capacity of Christian educators and opportunities for faith formation:

Networking opportunities. These include Communities of Practice for faith formation and youth ministry practitioners, plus a Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Leader Cohort on the Damascus Project Network, which provides an online community of support and a platform for sharing resources. Twice a month, we offer a Zoom gathering for anyone engaged in faith formation.



Youth retreats. Knock Knock and Youth Faith Formation Retreats were met with enthusiasm when they returned after the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of retreat participants over the past year exceeded the pre-pandemic totals of 2019-2020. Youth and adult participants have shared many stories of life- and faith-changing experiences at the retreats.

Partnerships. We work with United Church Camps, Inc. and other Conference partners to offer faith formation opportunities that support the needs of Wisconsin Conference congregations. This includes offering training for Our Whole Lives facilitators and a membership in Practical Resources for Churches, which gives congregations access to free or reduced-cost training resources. And we're exploring creation of a retreat-based confirmation program at Daycholah Center.

THE CONFERENCE IS FOCUSED ON PROVIDING THE SUPPORT REQUIRED BY CLERGY AND LAY LEADERS CHARGED WITH FACILITATING FAITH FORMATION EXPERIENCES.



ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER LISA HART SUPPORTS CLERGY AND LAY LEADERS ENGAGED IN FAITH FORMATION.



DAMASCUS PROJECT



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Damascus Project: One Path to God’s Future Church

To say that the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Perdew has an ambitious vision for the Damascus Project would be an understatement. In fact, the cutting-edge quality of the project is part of what led her to accept the call to lead the project in early 2023.

“The Damascus Project had been on my radar for a few years,” Stephanie says. “I’m really impressed by the thoughtfulness with which the curriculum has been created and sophistication of the online platform. I feel I’m inheriting a well-designed project that’s ready to live at the next level.”

A lifelong member of the United Church of Christ and enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Stephanie has served as a parish pastor and holds a doctorate in church history.

In his introduction to this Annual Report, Conference Minister Franz Rigert writes of the paths we are taking

**THE APOSTLE PAUL EXPERIENCED
GOD’S TRANSFORMING CALL TO WALK
IN NEW DIRECTIONS AND NEW FAITH.**



“The possibilities on this path and platform depend only on the interests and creativity of our clergy and laity, as we seek to learn from and with each other.”

toward the discovery of God’s future church. The Damascus Project, which grew out of the former Lay Academy, was created as one of those paths, taking its name from the Damascus Road on which the Apostle Paul experienced God’s transforming call to walk in new directions and new faith. The project provides an online educational path for those seeking authorized ministry in the UCC, for lay people who want to enrich their theological worlds and for clergy seeking continuing education.

Already in 2023, the Damascus Project has offered core courses in Faith Foundations, Ministry Studies and Leadership Skills, and launched the first Exploring Implicit Bias cohort, a course designed to fulfill the United Church of Christ’s requirement that all authorized ministers take part in periodic anti-racism and diversity, equity and inclusion training.

The richness of the Damascus Project includes a free, private progressive social media space where seekers, lifelong learners, pastors and lay people have developed an online community. Creation Care advocates,

Faith Formation directors and others use the platform to network and share resources. You can join this community of learners today by creating a free account at <https://learning.the-damascus-project.org>.

“The possibilities on this path and platform depend only on the interests and creativity of our clergy and laity, as we seek to learn from and with each other, share energy and vision, and walk further along the trail of God’s future church,” Stephanie says.

“The project is infinitely expandable.”



THE DAMASCUS PROJECT IS “READY TO LIVE AT THE NEXT LEVEL,” SAYS THE PROJECT’S DIRECTOR, THE REV. DR. STEPHANIE PERDEW.



FINANCIAL REPORT



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Financial Reports Tell the Story of How We Answer God’s Call

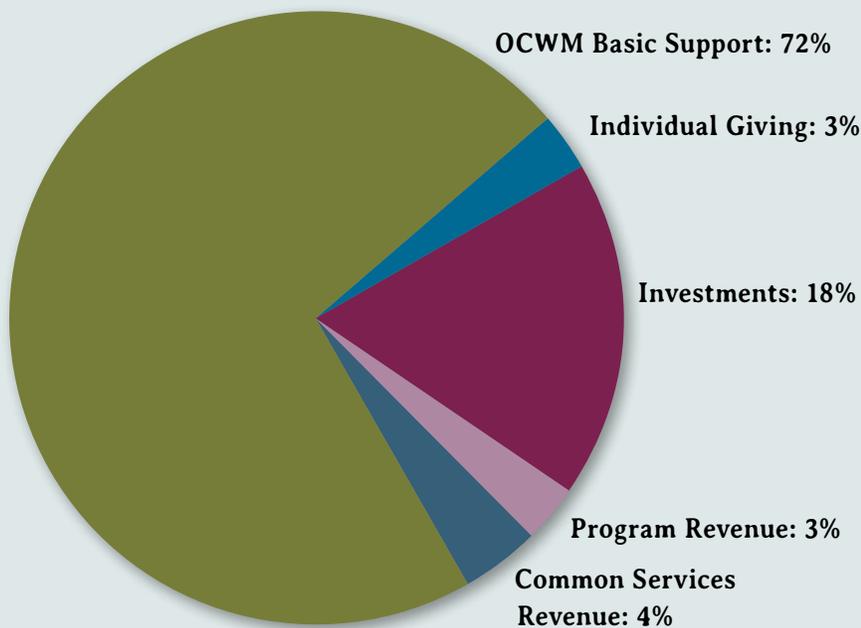
Our answer begins in the hearts of our members and friends as we hear the Gospel, see the world, and imagine together a just world for all. In sacred moments, we pray and sing and experience the Holy Spirit moving inside us “with sighs too deep for human words” (Romans 8). Generosity arises from that movement of the spirit in our hearts.

The people of Wisconsin have responded generously. Over the course of 2022, people gave \$24,573,446 to their local congregations. And local congregations gave on average 5.6% of those gifts, or \$1,378,518, to the Wisconsin Conference as Our Church’s Wider Mission Basic Support for our shared ministry.

The income side of our financial reports expresses in dollars and cents the heartfelt generosity of people. It came in many forms—congregational gifts to OCWM Basic Support, of course, but also individual gifts, support of the Strengthen the Church Offering, and responses to special appeals such as disaster relief or at ordinations.



Sources of Support



INCOME

OCWM Basic Support	\$ 1,400,000.00	71%
Other Gifts	\$ 66,000.00	3%
Investments	\$ 359,000.00	18%
Program Revenue	\$ 52,000.00	3%
Common Services Revenue	\$ 75,000.00	4%
Total Income	\$ 1,952,000.00	

EXPENSES

Programs	\$ 217,000.00	11%
Staff	\$ 928,264.00	47%
Wider Church	\$ 577,500.00	29%
Basic Operations	\$ 249,695.00	13%
Total Expenses	\$ 1,972,459.00	

Gain (Loss) \$ (20,459.00) 0.005%



Called to Support Local Congregations

Our answer to God’s call next takes shape in what we do with the generosity of our friends. As the Conference, we hear five core priorities: developing leadership skills, supporting congregational vitality, helping churches through pastoral transitions, advancing our justice commitments, and resourcing crucial partners like United Church Camps, Inc., the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the National Setting of the UCC and more. An understanding that God calls us to strengthen local congregations shapes all of these priorities.

The expense side of our financial reports speaks to all the ways the Wisconsin Conference supports local congregations and their leaders as we strive together to be the Church.

Looking Ahead

We face a crossroads. Many congregations face ever tighter budgets. OCWM Basic Support may look like a luxury. “Can we afford it?” gets asked at congregational meetings. At the same time, congregations need more support from the Conference and one another as we find our path in an uncertain time: a stressed pastor turns to a community of practice for support, a congregation sends a young person to the Conference Confirmation Retreat, a search committee relies on an associate conference minister to develop a shared ministry plan, and another seeks help starting a new program. The truth is, we can’t afford to go it alone.

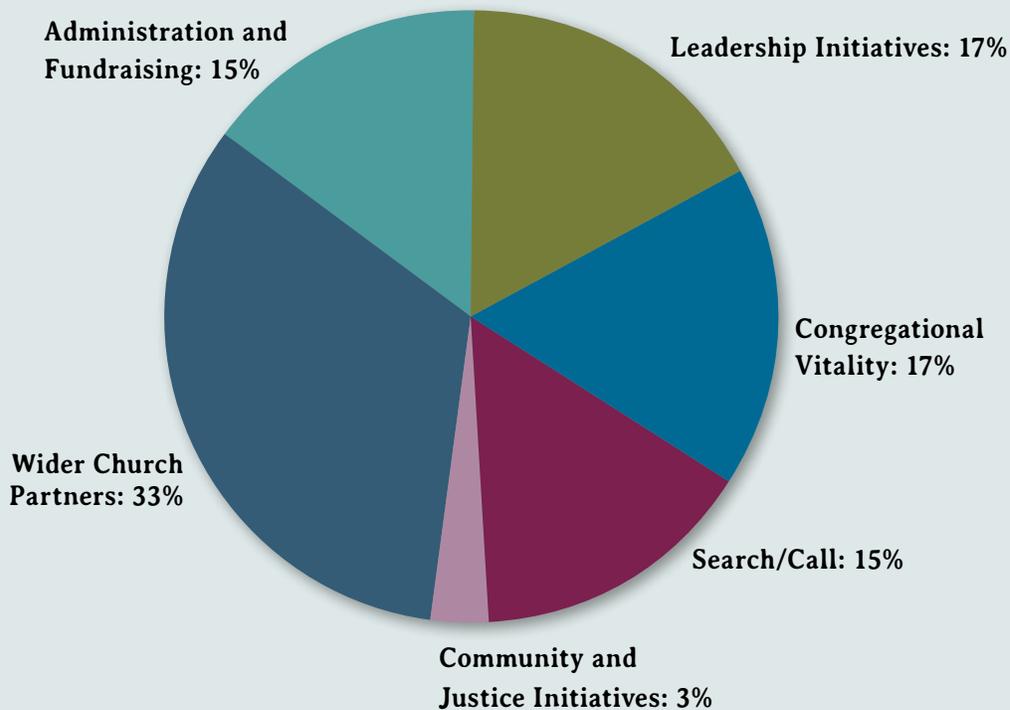
Together, generously, we can discern our path forward.

EXPENSES

Programs	\$ 217,000.00	11%
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Total Expenses	\$1,972,459.00	
Gain (Loss)	\$ (20,459.00)	0.005%



Uses of Funds



EXPENSES

Leadership Initiatives	\$ 343,263.90	17%
Congregational Vitality	\$ 331,484.31	17%
Search/Call	\$ 296,145.54	15%
Community & Justice Initiatives	\$ 58,897.95	3%
Wider Church Partners	\$ 648,177.54	33%
Admin & Fundraising	\$ 294,489.75	15%
Total Expenses	\$ 1,972,459.00	
Gain (Loss)	\$ 1,952,000.00	0.005%

LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES	CONGREGAL VITALITY	SEARCH/CALL	COMMUNITY/ JUSTICE	CHURCH PARTNERS	ADMIN	FUNDRAISING	
\$ 72,333.33	\$ 72,333.33	\$ 72,333.33					
\$ 213,500.72	\$ 204,218.08	\$ 176,370.16	\$ 46,413.20	\$ 55,695.84	\$ 167,087.52	\$ 64,978.48	
				\$ 577,500.00			
\$ 57,429.85	\$ 54,932.90	\$ 47,442.05	\$ 12,484.75	\$ 14,981.70	\$ 44,945.10	\$ 17,478.65	
\$ 343,263.90	\$ 331,484.31	\$ 296,145.54	\$ 58,897.95	\$ 648,177.54	\$ 212,032.62	\$ 82,457.13	\$1,972,459.00
17%	17%	15%	3%	3%	11%	4%	



Leadership Matters: Seeing Visions, Dreaming Dreams

“Your youth shall see visions, and your elders shall dream dreams.”

At the first Pentecost, Peter turned to the words of the prophet Joel: “God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your youth shall see visions, and your elders shall dream dreams.” We try to live this reality in the United Church of Christ. We celebrate the capacity of all people to be leaders. Such leadership emerges whenever a person names a problem faced by a community, explores how to create a solution, and rallies others to engage in the work.

Vibrant local congregations encourage everyone in the community to grow as leaders. And, facing unprecedented change across the Church, we especially need gifted leaders today.

LEADERSHIP
FORWARD



LEADERSHIP

Lakes Cabins
Woods Cabins
Bathhouse

Stream
Challenge Course
Labyrinth

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
OUTDOOR MINISTRY



Expanding Leadership Capacity

The Leadership Forward Campaign brings together congregations and individual donors across our Conference to raise resources to expand leadership capacity in our congregations.

To ensure all kinds of leaders have the support they need to succeed, we will create an endowment to fund the Damascus Project. The classes and groups of the Damascus Project help lay people and authorized ministers learn.

To provide those leaders with the resources to innovate, we will expand the Catalyst Grant program. More churches will be able to experiment with ways to connect with their communities more deeply.

To care for our authorized ministers – crucial leaders in our congregations and ministry settings – we will support the Ministerial Assistance programs of the Pension Boards. These programs help authorized ministers at every stage of their service to the Church, from first call through retirement.

You Can Help

Volunteers with the Leadership Forward Campaign will reach out to congregations and individuals. Please prayerfully consider a gift to the campaign. Together we can ensure the leadership we need for the church today and tomorrow.



THE REV. ANDREW WARNER, AT DAYCHOLAH WITH HIS FURRY FRIENDS, IS DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT FOR THE WISCONSIN CONFERENCE.



SACRED SPACE

After the Storm, a New Beginning for Outdoor Ministries

UCCI’s outdoor ministry sites offer sacred, Spirit-filled places for all who seek a closer walk with our Creator.

When he looks out over Moon Lake or Daycholah — the Ho Chunk name for Green Lake — the Rev. James Schleif is reminded of the gospel story of Jesus walking on water.

“There is darkness, rough water, storms and fear for life, but Jesus reaches out to his friends and calms their fears and the seas,” says Jim, who is executive director of United Church Camps, Inc. “Peter walks briefly on the water until his fear overcomes his faith. Jesus’ outstretched hand guides him safely back to the boat.”

The biblical story is an apt metaphor for UCCI’s experience over the past 18 months as it navigated an organizational and cultural shift in the face of financial challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The result is a lean, efficient organization poised to follow Jesus in the 21st century by engaging in the work of social justice and care for the Earth and by providing inclusive gathering places for all.



"DAYCHOLAH" RECOGNIZES THAT THE LAND ON WHICH THE CAMP SITS WAS AND REMAINS A SACRED SPACE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, AND UNDERSCORES UCCI'S UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO RESTORE THE VOICE OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR STEWARDSHIP OF THE SACRED PLACE.

"The sale of Daycholah Center to the Wisconsin Conference UCC has given UCCI a financial lifeline to pivot toward a sustainable and forward-looking outdoor ministry," Jim says. "The move of the Conference headquarters to Daycholah Center is fostering a more direct working relationship between us. UCCI is very grateful for this partnership as friends and colleagues."

Already, UCCI's Moon Beach outdoor ministry site is seeing a resurgence in family camp and retreat registrations. Daycholah Center is working aggressively on a reboot of its summer youth camp ministry and opening pathways to new development and

waterfront expansion. Cedar Valley is seeing the return of art studio sessions and retreats. Improved financial management and business development will produce a 2023 UCCI bottom line significantly better than the past three years. But the UCCI sites need something more to be successful: you.

"Please come. All are welcome," Jim says. "Outdoor ministry offers the time and space to connect with God and others in nature as we follow Jesus forward in this work."



THE REV. JAMES SCHLEIF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF UNITED CHURCH CAMPS, INC., HAS HELPED GUIDE UCCI THROUGH A PERIOD OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE.

TOGETHER IN MINISTRY

Congregations Across Wisconsin Follow Jesus Through Their Ministries



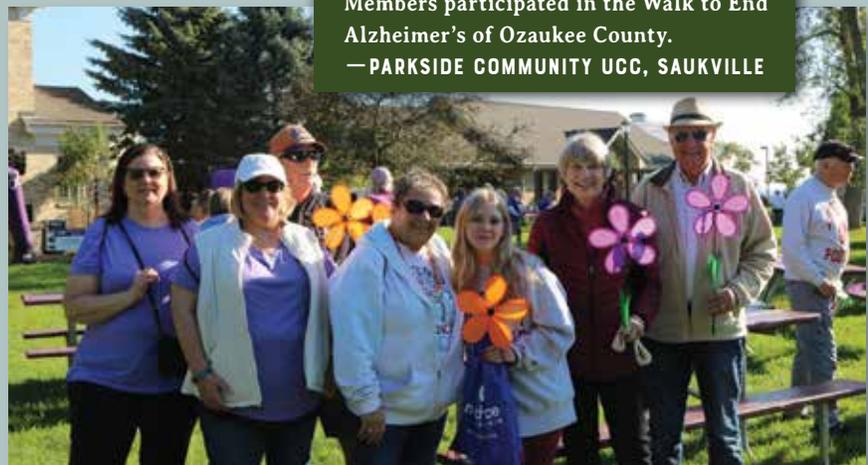
Our church's food pantry garden produced over 6,000 lbs. of produce this year, donated to local pantries. — COMMUNITY OF HOPE, MADISON



Confirmation kids receive a Servant of Christ apron with their name on it. We tell them to get it dirty in service. Here they are serving at our annual Giving Thanks Meal. — FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC, RIVER FALLS



Members participated in the Walk to End Alzheimer's of Ozaukee County. — PARKSIDE COMMUNITY UCC, SAUKVILLE



The choir and musicians shared "Sing Joy to All the World" Christmas Cantata by Lloyd Larson under the direction of Carra-Lyn Conger. — FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC, SHEBOYGAN



One of the projects at our Service Sunday this spring was doing landscape work for the Habitat for Humanity family we helped get into their own home.
— CONGREGATIONAL UCC, NEENAH



The Music for Ukraine Community Fundraising Event organized by our church raised over \$18,000 for the displaced women and children affected at the beginning of the war.
— FIRST CONGREGATIONAL, JANESVILLE

Alliance @4200 is melding our two congregations into this space by creating a woven stole to hang around the large cross that centers our worship space.
— LAKE EDGE UCC AND CHRIST THE SOLID ROCK, COLLECTIVELY ALLIANCE @4200, MADISON



Our Sunday School created rainbow crafts for Valentine's Day.
— ST. PETER'S UCC, KIEL



Members provided turkeys and gave their time to feed many at the free Community Thanksgiving Dinner. The middle-school group made over 250 dessert bars.
— FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC, SHEBOYGAN

Rev. Rob Van Ess was installed as Pilgrim's third settled pastor on Nov. 5, 2022.
— PILGRIM, FOND DU LAC



OUR MISSION

THE WISCONSIN CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONNECTS, SUPPORTS, AND RESOURCES LOCAL CONGREGATIONS AND LEADERS AS THEY CREATIVELY AND VIBRANTLY LIVE OUT THE VALUES OF JESUS IN THIS TIME AND PLACE.



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

www.wcucc.org

To learn more about the programs and services described in this report and about how you can help strengthen your local congregation, go to wcucc.org or email resourcecenter@wcucc.org.