Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ
2020 Annual Report

Lake Edge UCC and Christ the Solid Rock Baptist Church celebrate their covenant

Connecting, supporting, and resourcing local congregations
Some months ago, I intended to write this annual report through the lens of “climate change in the ecosystem of the Church,” reflecting on the many ways we continue to adapt to decades of decline. Little did any of us know we would be thrust into a time of isolation requiring immediate and radical transformation. Everything is different during these unprecedented times of social distancing, as we worship virtually and face the reality of a “Zoom” Annual Conference Meeting. It seems this pandemic has superseded everything else in life.

Yet, fighting Coronavirus and combating climate crisis are not at cross purposes. Over the past three months our world has not only flattened the curve of Covid-19 but also curbed the impact of climate crisis, though both will be temporary if we don’t act wisely and continuously. The theme for this year’s Annual Meeting—Healing our Earthly Home—feels more urgent than ever. Here are some reflections about our Conference life set in the context of climate crisis.

**Interconnectedness**

In facing climate challenges and pandemic scares, we quickly recognize the importance and vulnerability of human interconnectedness. In the global human ecosystem, we are both dependent upon (and responsible for) one another. We CAN stop a pandemic and we CAN heal this fragile earth, but only when the people of this world band together to take the necessary steps.

After years of climate change in the ecosystem of the Church (institutional decline), we are witnessing a remarkable increase in covenant and collaboration. Perhaps out of necessity, we are discovering how much we need each other—we are stronger together! The anguish of social isolation has dramatically reminded us that community is a precious gift. Thus we have found new ways to stay connected even while apart.

All across the Conference, we are living into deeper covenant connections. Shared ministries are thriving! Community-based partnerships are meeting essential human needs! Clergy collegiality and support is high! Webinars, Zoom gatherings, and live streaming are fostering exciting new connections! Your Conference staff is dialed into clergy care and concerns, and congregations are supported through guidance and grants. At our best, the wider Body of Christ is an interconnected web of loving and supporting relationships.

**Sustainable Practices**

Over the coming decade in our Conference life, we intend to work together to implement climate-saving practices through a commitment to the Kairos Call to Action. This is a national UCC effort, mobilizing conferences, congregations and family units to address climate concerns and the accompanying social inequalities. Bottom line: we must tamp down harmful habits and ramp up sustainable practices.

So, too, in our congregational life we are at a Kairos moment of adaptive change. Virtual meetings can enhance our in-person gatherings by allowing wider accessibility and much more efficiency. Imagine the ways we will teach the
faith and nourish spiritual lives in this “both-and” future! Together we are learning new ways to share our lives in the light of the Gospel . . . and these are sustainable practices!

Lay Academy and The Damascus Project will be fully capable of offering online coursework and virtual conversations, while always relishing the chance to gather in person! Our many Communities of Practice (COP groups) have continued to meet via Zoom throughout the pandemic, and for many this has been an incredible blessing. The digital ministries of cell calls, text messages, emails and Facebook have been life sustaining for all, life saving for some!

We now regularly offer a wide array of webinars, from Creation Care to Stewardship best practices, from Governance Protocols to Immigration Advocacy. Boundary training is shifting to an online platform and many future meetings will remain via Zoom. These are organizational and earth-sustaining changes.

Through our Fund Development efforts we are guiding congregations toward financially sustainable practices as we adapt to ministry that takes place beyond church buildings. And we have established the Wisconsin Foundation (United Church of Christ), with funds managed by the Pension Boards, as an excellent option for your church endowments and investments. Indeed, financial sustainability.

Conference Footprint

The most dramatic harm to the global climate has to do with our carbon footprint. We expel too much exhaust and emit too much greenhouse gas. So we are slowly migrating to electric cars and solar panels and wind turbines. And many in the United Church of Christ are leading the way!

Similarly, you and I share a spiritual footprint across the state of Wisconsin. We offer values of inclusion and hospitality, kindness and compassion, peace, and justice. Our commitment to the teachings of Jesus leaves a loving imprint and a lasting impact. It builds community and brings people together. These values lift the poor, dignify the disenfranchised, and prioritize space and voice for the marginalized. Together our faith footprint helps create a healthy human ecosystem rooted in the golden rule and great commandments.

Hopeful Signs

Finally, progress may be slow, but it is sure. In the wake of the death and devastation of the coronavirus our world has also witnessed surprising signs of hope for the earth as a result of burning less fossil fuel. Pollution is down and air quality is improved—20% better in Wuhan, China, and in New York City a 50% drop in carbon monoxide! Blue skies in portions of India now make it possible to see the Himalayan Mountains, and the waters in the Venice canals are the clearest they have been in 60 years!

So, too, amidst illness and death, economic devastation, and social isolation we see some hopeful signs. Church bells are ringing, birds are singing, and a gentle kindness pervades the air. New friends are checking out virtual worship and our beloved faithful are as generous as ever. We are fostering new ways of being the Church, exploring new ideas and developing fresh skills. We are even wondering together about ways the Church is emerging into a new expression of God’s love and grace.

With deep gratitude and high hope, blessings in the risen Christ!

Franz Rigert
CONGREGATIONAL AND MINISTERIAL CARE

We are here to journey with you! Throughout the pandemic, the Conference ministerial staff has extended extra care and support to pastors and steady guidance to congregations. As churches face an uncertain future, they can count on the Wider Church to be a key resource for addressing challenges, analyzing ministry scope and mission, and providing best practices in leadership and governance. The field ACM staff continues to prioritize pastoral transitions, with the help of our gifted cadre of interim ministers. In light of the Coronavirus, we offer special gratitude to our UCC chaplains throughout Wisconsin, serving with courage and compassion at hospitals, military posts, detention centers and retirement communities.

In the past year, the field Associate Conference Ministers and Conference minister have:

- Preached and worshipped with over 75 churches
- Supported 68 searches
- Recommended 49 interim ministers
- Attended 51 ordinations, installations and ecclesiastical councils

“Our Search Committee feels a huge sense of appreciation toward the dedicated Conference staff who have played an integral part of our Search and Call process. The Conference provided the needed materials and resources, posted our Local Church Profile on the national portal, met with us on multiple occasions, and answered numerous emails and calls. One word that comes to mind in assessing the Conference’s value to our church and committee is their complete accessibility. The Conference staff are available and ready to answer questions and to provide encouragement and support all along the way. For that we are very grateful!”

–Amy Gilhooly, First Congregational Church, Port Washington, Search Committee

BUILDING A BETTER WORLD

Conference-wide Justice Working Groups focus on a wide range of justice issues, including climate, racial, immigration, sexual assault, human trafficking and others. Powered by people with a passion to make the world a better place, these groups harness and connect ideas and people around transformational concepts and actions. Working groups create an access point for churches to find resources and combine forces with others to maximize our collective impact.

Arguably the most critical issue facing our world today is the climate crisis. In January, the United Church of Christ introduced the Kairos Call to Action, a 10-year initiative mobilizing people of faith to address the intertwined crises of climate and inequality. This year’s Annual Meeting will be the launch point for the Conference’s Kairos initiative, led by the Creation Care Working Group. A year-long rollout of the 10 objectives in the UCC Kairos Call to Action is being planned, with resources to support and engage local churches.

History shows us that every person can make a difference. Today we hear the voice of the young Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who declares:

“We are now standing at a crossroads in history.
We are failing but we have not yet failed.
We can still fix this. It’s up to us.”
GROWING MINISTRY BY CULTIVATING GENEROSITY

The Wisconsin Conference Board of Directors created the Generosity Program to support the fundraising efforts of the Conference and congregations in the conference. Churches now have access to exceptional resources and support to build annual and long-term giving programs. A strong emphasis in the program's first year has been stewardship education, with 9 workshops and 229 people attending in the past year. Participating congregations have reported measurable improvement in their annual campaigns.

Guiding congregations in developing legacy giving is a major focus of the Generosity Program. A planned giving program can help churches grow endowments to provide for the long-term financial support of the mission and ministry of your congregation. Several congregations have already made commitments to this initiative.

The Wisconsin Foundation UCC was started with the invested assets of the conference, and offers a competitive option for congregations’ endowments and investments, with fund management by the Pension Boards. Over time, through the planned giving initiatives and prudent investment management, endowments for the Conference and UCC congregations will grow and expand.

Responding agilely to the immediate challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Conference created the Emergency Response Fund to support congregations impacted by the Coronavirus. Additionally, the Conference partnered with the Cornerstone Fund to create a pool of money that can be lent to congregations at a reduced interest rate.

Emma Ledbetter was among a group from First Congregational UCC, La Crosse, that attended Andrew Warner’s “Stewardship Boot Camp” stewardship skills workshop last summer. Using concepts learned in the workshop, the church planned a Mission Sunday service in October. The Message was testimonials from members about how individual people were helped or changed by the work of eight of the missions of the church. They also used the pledge campaign theme and templates that were provided in the workshop.

Emma reports on their experience: “We set a goal of increasing the number of pledges by 10%. After decreases for the last few years, we were thrilled with our results—we surpassed our 10% increase goal in pledges and total amount! Andrew really inspired us. Thank you so much for your suggestions and encouragement.”

Photo: pledge campaign materials
Despite the decline in people and resources, churches have increasingly found passion points, often around community ministries. Congregations are finding new ways to build on the opportunities that their context presents them with—to develop new partnerships, extend existing partnerships and connect with needs in their local communities that match with the congregation’s gifts and strengths.

Catalyst resources this passion and energy. The Catalyst Team works to spur, spark and stimulate innovation and creativity in congregations throughout the Wisconsin Conference. Catalyst Grants are available to congregations in the Wisconsin Conference that are developing vital and innovative ministries that transform lives.

First Congregational Church’s student interfaith ministry in Ripon is an example of this. The church built on an existing partnership with Ripon College, using their Catalyst Grant to create a welcoming space for international college students to gather and build community, as well as a comfortable space for students to practice their own religious traditions and cultures. Pastor Jeffrey A. Dodson reports, “The Spirit of unity in the midst of diversity is alive and well in and through this project.”
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Damascus Project

The Damascus Project has added a new dimension in spiritual formation for the Conference. Dedicated to equipping spiritual leaders and seekers to navigate a changing world and a changing church, the program values lifelong learning for licensed and ordained clergy and other church leaders. Damascus Project courses incorporate an outcome-based, action-reflection model of teaching and learning. The goal is to grow and deepen in faith and develop tools and competencies for ministries of all kinds. In 2019 we offered 5 courses and reached 36 people.

2019 was a year of staff transition and ongoing development for the Damascus Project. We welcomed Rev. Abigail (Abby) Henderson as the new Director for Leadership Development in the Minnesota Conference in the fall. Tisha Brown and Abby spent the last quarter of 2019 reviewing every aspect of the Damascus Project since its inception. Through this review process, they honed in on three key audiences: lay leaders, Members in Discernment and Continuing Education for Clergy and renewed the Damascus Project’s commitment to developing robust learning opportunities to enrich the whole Church. Their efforts will lead to a more comprehensive launch of the Damascus Project in 2020.

“I think the Damascus Project is a very valuable and much needed resource. Thank you for making it possible, affordable, and helpful!”
—Damascus Project participant

“I learned many new things and my ability to serve a congregation was enhanced through this course.”
—Damascus Project participant

Damascus Project participants
**Spiritual Formation**

**Lay Academy**

In its 26th year, Lay Academy continues to provide an opportunity for people who long to grow in faith, discover new ways to serve God and their community, and deepen their knowledge of Christian tradition, ministry and mission. Lay Academy alumni are equipped to provide stronger, more faithful leadership in their congregations, with a large percent of alums engaging in youth ministry, mission, church leadership roles and service to the wider church. Thirty-nine students from 33 congregations participated in Lay Academy courses in the past year.

2020 brings exciting changes for Lay Academy, as we move to an online format. This change will open new possibilities and expand the horizons of the program beyond the boundaries of the Wisconsin Conference. Additionally, the Lay Academy is coming under the umbrella of the Damascus Project and the two programs will increasingly become one. We envision a one-stop shopping kind of experience for lay people, members in discernment and clergy—spiritual formation, theological learning and leadership development for all of God’s people.

"I believe one of the most valuable things we have all gained is a greater ability to verbalize our faith and be able to share those beliefs with others and to put those newfound skills into action, not only to benefit ourselves, but to benefit our local churches and others we meet in our day to day lives."

—Cathy Benjamin, on her Lay Adacemy experience

**Youth Ministry**

Conference Youth Ministry serves to better equip local congregations with curriculum resources, a wide array of spiritual practices, and emerging models for children and youth ministries. Additionally, in collaboration with United Church Camps we bring quality programming to youth to help them grow in their faith and empower them to be leaders in their congregations. Four events were held this year, with 201 participants. In the coming year, Jesus Core, the program for high school youth and young adults, will be reintroduced under a new name.
Faith Formation Resources

**Forming Faith For All** is a monthly online gathering for adult faith formation and youth leaders to learn, share resources, connect with and support other faith formation leaders. Each session focuses on a specific topic related to faith formation or youth ministry in the church. Sessions include presentations and discussions and are recorded and posted as a resource. Forming Faith For All is co-hosted by the Wisconsin and New York Conferences.

**Coaching** is also available for faith formation leaders wanting to undertake a new endeavor or create a path forward in response to a challenge. Coaches listen, ask questions and offer support to help the person being coached discover and take action on the strategies, goals and ideas they identify within themselves.

United Church Camps, Inc.

United Church Camps, Inc. (UCCI) has been serving the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ since before there was a UCC! Pilgrim Center (est. 1902) and Moon Beach (est. 1957) merged into UCCI in 1967. This year we expanded our reach and added Cedar Valley in West Bend. Originally part of the Cedar Community, Cedar Valley is an Adult Retreat Center that geographically and programmatically rounds out UCCI’s offerings. It gives us a splendid position in the Southeast Association to teach, serve, and care for adult retreatants. The 100-acre facility offers spa-like amenities with great food, comfortable individual occupancy rooms, and wonderful hospitality.

Even in this unsettled time, Cedar Valley, Pilgrim Center, and Moon Beach are positioned to serve the churches of the Wisconsin Conference for years to come. We welcome groups of all types and sizes to join us as we identify as the regional purveyor of Outdoor Ministry for the Wisconsin Conference and its ecumenical partners.

“Fitness B4 Forks” at Pilgrim Center
OCWM Basic Support—The voluntary contributions of churches to the ministry of the Conference remains our primary source of support. We anticipate 2020 will be a challenging year for both OCWM and investment earnings. The Conference will continue to focus on growing other sources of support, especially appeals and individual contributions, program revenue, and common services.

SOURCES AND USES OF SUPPORT

Seventy-four percent (74%) of Conference expenses are used in Conference ministries that directly support our congregations and clergy, while 26 percent of expenses support the wider church missional ministries.
Conference ministry, similar to congregational ministry, involves a significant investment in people. Our staff works to connect, support, and resource congregations every day. Our Conference also invests in crucial strategic partners for our work, including United Church Camps Inc., the national setting of the UCC, and many statewide agencies and programs.

![Wisconsin Conference - 2019 Uses of Support](image)

Local Church Expense Breakdown—While every congregation varies on its ministry and mission priorities, this chart shows the average expenses of a UCC congregation. How does your congregation compare? Over the last several years, local church expenses and capital payments came to take on an increasing percentage of church budgets. Instead of cutting missions beyond the local church, consider how you can partner with the Conference to cultivate generosity in your congregation.

![Average Wisconsin Congregation Expenses](image)
Wisconsin Conference UCC 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.