

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

-JOHN 10:10

Response.

Resilience.

Adaptation.



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

ANNUAL REPORT 2021



Dear friends in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ,

2020 was a year of survival. We counted many losses and gave up many beloved pastimes. If ever there was a year when we could legitimately claim *scarcity*, this was it! Not enough lives saved. Not enough vaccines available. Not enough people wearing masks. Not enough honest leadership. Not enough justice for people of color. Not enough space between endless zoom meetings. Not enough patience in this prolonged time of isolation!

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

-JOHN 10:10

Yet, the life and teachings of Jesus invite us to reframe such challenging times in a reflecting spirit of gratitude. Is it not true, that God’s ever-present grace is recognized especially in the midst of hardship? Jesus said, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10) We have witnessed incredible blessings in the midst of struggle, and abundant grace in the face of despair. We saw extraordinary things happen in an unprecedented year of difficulty.

So many prayers. So much neighborly care. Amazing medical professionals and dedicated essential workers. More ministry adaptation than most of us ever dreamed of! We saw generous contributions to food banks and CaringBridge sites, and unbelievable responses to an urgent *Keep the Fires Burning* appeal from United Church Camps, Inc. (UCCI).

Indeed, we carry immense gratitude for the strength with which many congregations are enduring such catastrophic times. For a year now, pastors, musicians and lay leaders have creatively offered virtual worship, celebrating the sacraments and rites of the Church, and fostering a new sense of distanced belonging. Some 74 congregations even ventured through the pastoral search process during 2020!

This Annual Report of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ could very well be a summary of all the worries and anxieties and losses our congregations suffered. But that would not be true to our faith nor honoring of the God who continues to bountifully bless us despite what life brings.

In the coming pages you will see the abundance of ministry we share—ministry made possible only by your generous commitment to our collective mission here in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Your brother in Christ,

Franz Rigert
Conference Minister

Cover photo: Rev. Bob Gross, pastor of Evangelical and Reformed UCC, Waukesha, records a worship service in this photo taken by his wife, Mary K. Gross.



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Support Through the Pandemic



The congregations of the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ pulled through a very tough year by faith, courage and creative change!

The guidance and resourcing of the wider Church provided essential support during a time of high anxiety and stress.

Gathering information from the Center for Disease Control, the Wisconsin Department of Health and exceptional resource support from the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Conference staff provided clergy and congregations regular updates on COVID-19 protocols and recommendations for virtual worship gatherings.

Emergency grant funds in excess of \$40,000 were distributed to 20 percent of our congregations for such things as technology advancements and urgent needs.

Associate Conference Minister Staff offered opportunities for clergy and lay people to gather via Zoom for support, updates, and the sharing of best practices and alternative worship ideas during a time of social distancing.

The Conference Staff and national setting of the UCC provided recorded worship services in order

to give relief to weary pastors, musicians and technology teams.

Conference Staff shifted to remote working, yet remained accessible via phone, email and zoom to carry on the work of pastoral transitions, ecclesiastical matters, faith formation and pastoral care.

Adaptive Changes

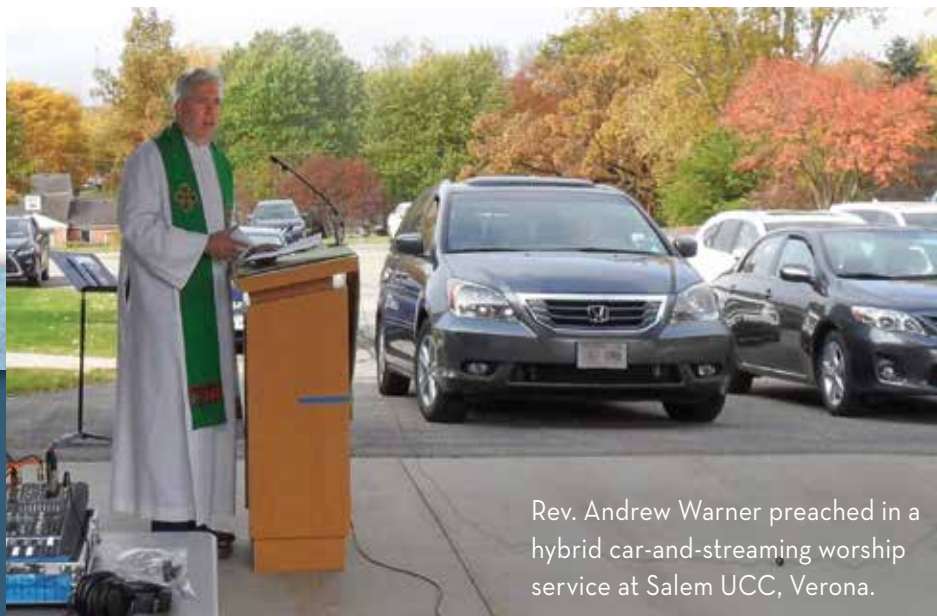
Now that the COVID cases have declined and the vaccination process is well underway, we celebrate increasing signs of daylight, with hopes of returning to in-person gatherings in the next few months!

So many new learnings will shape our future ministry:

- Hybrid worship and online community building
- Future meeting flexibility: Now that we are accustomed to virtual meeting platforms, committees can choose to meet in person or online.
- Opportunity to gain new audiences: Many congregations reported new online attendees and several celebrated a reception of new members virtually!
- Rapid movement to automated and online giving

“Thanks and compliments to the entire crew at Conference who put this [Epiphany worship service] together. I really appreciate your message and will be using the service.”

-GARY WILNER, PASTOR OF ZWINGLI, MT. VERNON UCC



Rev. Andrew Warner preached in a hybrid car-and-streaming worship service at Salem UCC, Verona.

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Congregational and Ministerial Care

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The Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ serves to strengthen, resource and equip local congregations, providing a support system to associations, churches, clergy and laity. Central to this work is the congregational and ministerial care provided by our regional Associate Conference Ministers, or “field staff,” who support congregations in Search and Call, conflict resolution and transformation, care for ministers and guidance to congregations seeking direction.

“I am deeply grateful that you reached out to me when you heard that our pastor was leaving. I was trying to think about what to do and I didn’t really know. We tend to think that our church is just on its own so I was feeling pretty lost. I didn’t realize all that you and the Conference do to help churches during transition times. I am glad for your guidance and help.”

- LOCAL CHURCH LEADER

All of these activities have continued despite the pandemic, necessitating dramatic shifts and adaptations to on-line platforms. A great deal of staff energy and time were dedicated to addressing tensions within congregations around pressures to return to in-person worship and the willingness to embrace recommended protocols. Staff also supported 74 pastoral searches, working with more than a third of our congregations in transition.



Chalk drawings and messages of encouragement filled the parking lot to raise money for NAMI mental health programming, thanks to youth from First Congregational UCC, Sheboygan.

Supportive Ministries

A breadth of Conference programs, many led by trained and dedicated clergy and lay volunteers, complement the work of Conference staff to support and nurture congregations and pastors.

Tending the Soul of the Beloved Community:

In 2020, the Supportive Ministries Task Force was formed to develop resources and tools, wisdom and insights to support clergy and congregations navigating through and beyond the pandemic. The team initiated a monthly communication, *Tending the Soul of the Beloved Community*, to share these resources across the conference.

First Congregational UCC, Madison, held a socially distanced Confirmation ceremony on the church’s front steps.



Conference staff supported 74 pastoral searches, working with more than a third of our congregations in transition.



Communities of Practice: In Communities of Practice (COP), pastors and faith formation members find shared wisdom and support from colleagues gathered into community focused on

“COP is a calming refuge spot amongst the barrage of weekly storms.”

- COP PARTICIPANT

the practice of ministry. In 2020, COPs chose to gather throughout the summer months to sustain the valued support of these communities.

Conflict Transformation Team: A team of trained ministers and lay volunteers is available to help resolve issues of conflict within congregations. In the past year, these teams stepped up to work with an increased number of congregations finding themselves in conflict brought about by the pressures of the pandemic.

Coaching Partners: Trained and experienced peer coaches work with pastors to navigate the ups and downs of ministry. Fees for engaging a coach have been waived through 2021, thanks to support from Catalyst.

Church and Ministry Commission: The conference-level Church and Ministry Commission works in partnership with the association committees to achieve consistency and create resources to support associations. In 2020 these teams learned to perform their critical roles through meeting virtually.

Moving Forward: Resilience and Adaptation

As churches return to in-person worship, congregations will be challenged with how to pivot to a hybrid worship style which allows a full return to in-person gatherings as well as a virtual worshiping community. The Conference is committed to helping resource congregations in this endeavor, and will be looking to partner with churches to gather and share ideas and best practices.

Additionally, in the coming year the Conference will initiate a focus on leadership training for all church leaders (clergy and lay), launching a multi-year emphasis on preparing ministry leaders for navigating not only the post-COVID era of Church, but strategies and ideas for vitality and innovation as we shift our attention to reaching and engaging younger generations.

A continued emphasis on justice initiatives will focus in particular on partnering with progressive, spiritual, broad-minded people beyond the Church, with whom we can make a bigger impact.

Trinity UCC, LaCrosse, began offering outdoor worship in June.





Generosity Initiatives

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Building Financial Strength for Congregations

Like much of Church life, the pandemic challenged and changed the planning for what could be accomplished on these initiatives. And yet, through the pandemic, we all witnessed the tremendous generosity of people in our conference.

Stewardship Skills: The pandemic significantly increased the demand for support on Stewardship. Throughout the year, the Conference offered webinars and programs designed to help pastors and leaders. The “Cultivating Generous Congregations Seminar” engaged participants from 14 congregations who learned how to implement fundraising best practices in their congregations. This seminar will be offered several times in 2021.

“Our Stewardship Team came away from the [Cultivating Generous Congregations] seminar excited and ready to use the skills they learned in our fall campaign. The whole program is a helpful combination of solid information, reflection on current practices and a challenge to each of us to grow in our generosity.”

—REV. CHRIS MYERS, FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, RIVER FALLS

Planned Giving: Several congregations initiated planned giving covenants with the Conference, but work on this initiative largely stalled as leaders focused on the immediate concerns of the pandemic. Looking ahead at 2021, work will resume with congregations and individuals interested in setting up legacy plans.

Encouraging Contributions: OCWM Basic Support funds most of the work of the Conference. Over 2020, we built on that generosity with an expansion of direct appeals, raising \$48,234 for the Emergency Response Fund of the Conference. This fund provided grants to over 20 percent of the congregations in the conference, ranging from small technology grants to larger grants to fund necessary adaptations in how congregations operated.

Wisconsin Foundation UCC: The foundation grew substantially over the course of 2020. The four associations, United Church Camps, Inc., the Damascus Project, and seven congregations joined the foundation. Andrew Warner, Conference Director of Development, helped raise \$56,603 for congregations and organizations that partnered with the foundation. The investment pool of the foundation saw nearly 13.5 percent in annualized returns. Late in 2020, the foundation made a significant loan to United Church Camps, Inc., as part of its fixed income investments.

2021 will likely bring an expansion of planned giving, encouraging contributions, and growth in the foundation, as well as classes on fundraising.



The Emergency Response Fund provided grants to over 20 percent of Conference congregations, ranging from \$50 technology grants to larger grants funding operational adaptations.

Grace Congregational UCC, Two Rivers, a Creation Care Grant recipient, installed energy-saving LED lighting in the church.

Justice Ministries

A Kairos Call to Action

In 2020, the UCC Council for Climate Justice issued an urgent plea to help rescue our planet from peril. The Kairos Call to Action is a ten-year plan to inspire and guide faithful action in response to global climate change. In June, the Wisconsin Conference became the first UCC conference to formally adopt this Call to Action, covenanting with one another to commit—as a conference, as congregations, as households and as individuals—to join in the healing of our sacred earthly home.

The Conference encourages every congregation to dedicate the next ten years to acting on this call. Start wherever you are and go as far as you can. The Conference Creation Care Team supports you in this work by:

- providing resources for study and action
- encouraging advocacy
- helping congregations connect with partners who share this concern

In 2020, the Creation Care Team launched a bi-monthly publication, *Kairos Call to Action Newsletter*, to bring resources to local congregations and inspire their creation care practices. The team also sponsors webinars and shares stories about creation care initiatives happening around the state.

Thanks to funding from Catalyst, the Creation Care Team was able to award nearly \$10,000 in Creation Care Grants to 10 congregations and United Church Camps, Inc. for creation care projects in their congregations and communities. The team plans to offer Catalyst funded Creation Care grants again in 2021.

Funding from Catalyst enabled the Creation Care Team to award nearly \$10,000 in grants to 10 congregations and United Church Camps, Inc. for creation care projects.



First Congregational, River Falls' solar array generates an impressive amount of energy, reducing energy charges and the church's environmental footprint.

Conference-wide Justice Working Groups

A core value in the United Church of Christ is advocating toward a more just and generous world. Conference-wide Justice Working Groups focus on a wide range of issues, including racism, immigration, sexual assault, climate, human trafficking and others. These groups gather and share resources, create connections and take action toward a more just world for all.

While each group is focused on a particular issue, there is a recognition that the various justice issues are interconnected and, by working together, we can better address these issues. This year, the Creation Care Team and the Immigration Working Group jointly sponsored the Immigration Justice Reset workshop on faith-based advocacy. The Immigration Working Group continues to offer online workshops to educate and raise awareness of current immigration justice issues.

“Our Green Team is very thankful for the Creation Care grant to help make this happen. We’re anxiously awaiting warmer weather to see what’s going to start growing!”

**—JUDY TABER, MCFARLAND
UCC, ON NATIVE PLANT
RESTORATION PROJECT**



Vital, Innovative Ministries

Damascus Project: Cultivating Congregational Leadership

The Damascus Project is one initiative of the conference that has thrived throughout the Coronavirus Pandemic. The necessity for social distancing and the ban on in-person gatherings required the co-directors to pivot their vision for what the Damascus Project could be. What has emerged is a robust online community and digital learning space, the **Damascus Project Network**, that is serving the needs of individuals and congregations throughout the Wisconsin and Minnesota conferences and beyond.

The Damascus Project develops and offers content for three primary audiences—lay people, Members in Discernment and clergy. It is an inclusive space where all are welcome to engage in learning that nurtures and grows our faith, develops and hones our leadership abilities and inspires our practice of ministry where ever we may be.

“The Damascus Project enhances the value I bring to my church leadership role. I am growing my skillset by exploring my strengths and weaknesses as a leader and learning about new tools to increase my effectiveness. My newly acquired knowledge benefits the quality of work I provide in my ministry.” -DAMASCUS PROJECT PARTICIPANT

In 2020, as a result of the pandemic, the **Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy** moved under the umbrella of the Damascus Project. What we in Wisconsin have known and loved as the Lay Academy will now be three distinct learning tracks for lay leaders and Members in Discernment within the Damascus Project Network. The original Lay Academy curriculum will be adapted for digital teaching and learning in 2021 and will become available



The Faith Foundations and Leadership Skills groups met on Zoom in Fall 2020.

to anyone, anywhere, in these learning tracks: Faith Foundations, Leadership Skills, and Ministry Skills. An added benefit of the Damascus Project Network is that the learning, resource sharing, and community connections that were a hallmark of the Lay Academy weekends never have to end!

From time to time, the **Damascus Project** will create content specifically for use within local congregations. One example is the 40-Day Practice to Strengthen Emotional Stamina to Counter White Fragility offered during Lent, 2021, which drew groups of members from eighteen congregations. The Damascus Project’s course catalogue will be constantly changing, and the Damascus Project Network is open and available to anyone who desires to access it. All are welcome to join this free community and learning space at any time.

During 2020–2021, the Damascus Project offered 13 distinct courses engaging 647 learners overall, including 200 from Wisconsin, and offered 2 free learning opportunities.



Catalyst

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. - ISAIAH 58:12

Inspired by these words and believing ourselves called to join with God in repairing breaches and restoring streets to live in, the Catalyst Team of the Wisconsin Conference:

- Resources vital and innovative ministries that creatively and vibrantly live out the values of Jesus in this time and place
- Encourages congregations and individuals to broaden the focus of their mission toward building partnerships in their community to serve the common good
- Supports congregations and individuals in their efforts to make a greater impact on their members and their wider communities
- Connects congregations and individuals engaged in vibrant ministries with one another for idea sharing and inspiration.

Early in 2020 the Catalyst Team pivoted to meeting remotely. We were amazed to witness how many of our projects pivoted to address emerging needs, and grateful to see how congregations pulled together to support crucial needs in their communities. This pivoting and pulling together is evident in the \$16,000 increase in grants awarded in 2020 as compared to 2019.

Catalyst awarded 9 grants totalling over \$47,000, directly impacting 20 congregations and over 30 community and ecumenical partners.

This year, the Wisconsin Conference’s justice commitments featured prominently in Catalyst grant awards. Eleven projects funded in 2020 were for congregations taking a variety of steps to address their environmental impact. An additional three projects address racial justice through art, study and community building. One such project coordinated by St. John’s UCC in Monroe was a collaborative effort between the congregation, the Green County Multicultural Outreach Program and the Monroe Center for the Arts. This project involved a book study within the congregation and a community-based mural painting project.

Looking forward, the Catalyst Team will continue expanding its work through grants to congregations for projects and ideas that repair breaches and restore streets to live in. In 2021 we will begin identifying key leaders in congregations and communities whose ideas and congregations we can nurture. If you know someone we should be talking to, let us know!

“We were amazed to witness how many of our [grant] projects pivoted to address emerging needs, and grateful to see how congregations pulled together to support crucial needs in their communities.”

- CATALYST TEAM MEMBER

Congregations adapted to support crucial needs in their communities.



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Nourishing Spirits

Faith Formation Support Community

In response to the pandemic, the Wisconsin Conference UCC began offering a weekly support and resource Zoom for faith formation and youth ministry leaders. This quickly expanded to include clergy and laity from across the denomination, as well as three other denominations. This drop-in group continues to meet to share resources and ideas, and to provide encouragement and emotional support

“Today was yet again an amazing example of the on-line community and support system this weekly Zoom has built. What a beautifully open and honest and authentic space for love, support and care!” - THURSDAY ZOOM

SUPPORT PARTICIPANT

Youth at Evangelical and Reformed UCC, Waukesha, packed 60 blessing bags for Family Promise, which serves homeless families, and packed 16 care packages for college students.



to each other. Resources and ideas shared in this community are compiled to be shared widely. This community has also led to the formation of two subgroups: a Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Leaders online community, and a “Respond to Call” discussion and support group.



First Congregational UCC, Sheboygan, provided a safe way for youth to stay engaged.

United Church Camps, Inc.

Given the challenges of this past year, United Church Camps, Inc. (UCCI), doing business as Camp AweSum, Cedar Valley, Moon Beach, and Pilgrim Center, is tremendously grateful for the Wisconsin Conference. The Conference, its four Associations, partnering churches, and members throughout the state, have been nothing short of amazing! Besides your annual OCWM support and periodic capital campaigns, the Conference stepped up in a very overt and necessary way, with a low-percentage interest-only loan of \$500,000. Coupled with our cost cutting measures and tough decisions around furloughs, that loan helped UCCI stay financially solvent and operating in these unprecedented times.

Our Outdoor Ministry mission and ministry will continue to strongly complement the indoor ministry of our UCC churches and ecumenical partners for years to come! Furthermore, together with the four Associations we have built up the UCCI Scholarship Fund so that anyone who needs support can have it at a UCCI Site! We invite you to reconnect with Creator and creation at one of our sites.

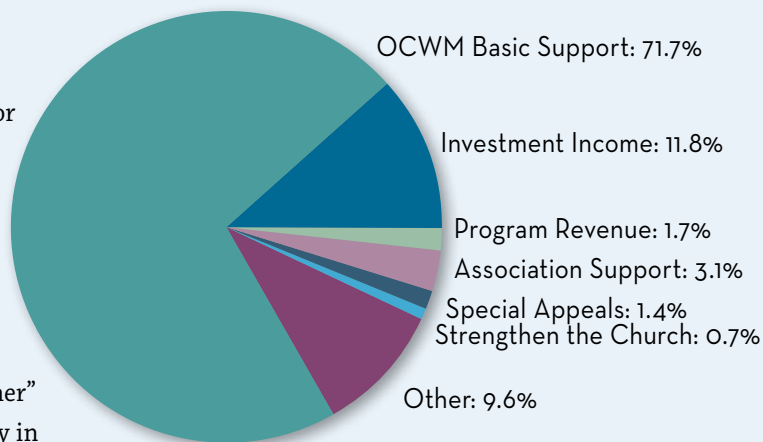
Despite the uncertainty of 2020, we ended the year within 2.5% of our income goals.

Financial Support

Where Our Support Comes From

The Coronavirus Pandemic presented several challenges for the finances of the Conference. OCWM Basic Support, the voluntary contributions of churches to the ministry of the Conference, declined 5 percent over the course of the year as congregations themselves dealt with fundraising shortfalls. Programs and the Strengthen the Church Offering generated far less revenue. Individual gifts from donors and a forgiven Payroll Protection Plan Loan (reported as “Other” on the chart) provided crucial support and ensured continuity in the Conference. Despite the uncertainty of the year, we ended the year within 2.5 percent of our income goals.

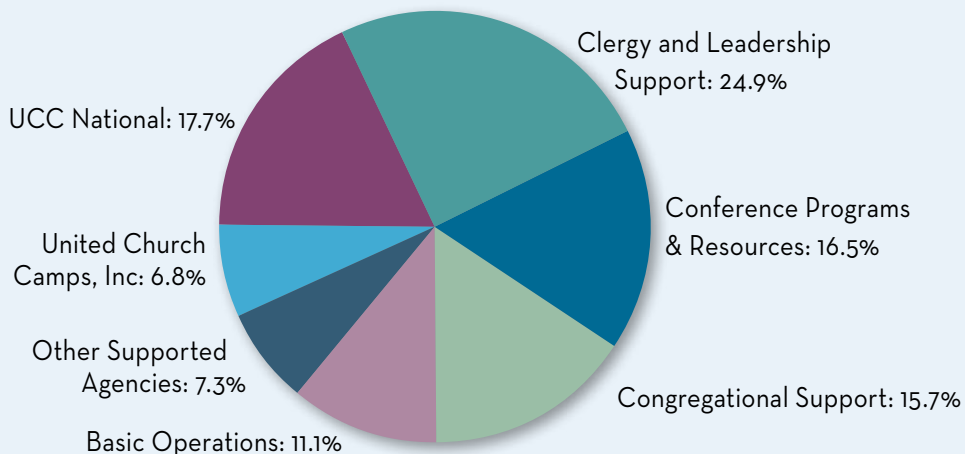
Sources of Support



What Your Gifts Support

During 2020, we saw first-hand the importance of leadership in adjusting to the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic. While in-person programs shifted to virtual formats, the Conference staff continued to connect, support, and resource congregations every day. The Conference finances reflect our strong investment in people to carry out our mission, whether that means our direct staff, grants and educational events for congregational leaders, or support of the national setting or statewide agencies such as the Wisconsin Council of Churches and United Church Camps, Inc. The pandemic affected how we resourced congregations but did not change our commitment to strengthening local churches.

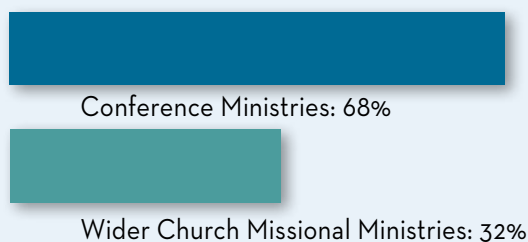
Uses of Funds



Allocation of Support

68 percent of Conference expenses were used in Conference ministries that directly support our congregations and clergy. 32 percent of expenses support the wider church missional ministries. Proportionally, our support of the wider church grew because of some declines in Conference expenses (mostly related to decreased in-person events and travel). Wider church support includes our commitments to United Church Camps, Inc., Wisconsin Council of Health and Human Services agencies, educational ministries connected to the UCC, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the national setting of the UCC. As a conference, we maintained our commitments to our strategic partners despite the economic uncertainty of 2020.

Allocation of Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support



Youth Live Out Our Mission



First Congregational UCC, Sheboygan, youth work group cleaned up the garage and backyard of a church neighbor.

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.



Evangelical and Reformed UCC, Waukesha, youth harvested tomatoes at the Green Power Garden for the Hope Center, which provides meals and clothing.



Youth of First Congregational UCC, Madison, carved and sold Jack-O-Lanterns to raise funds for Second Harvest Food Bank.



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**
www.wcucc.org

To learn more about the programs and services in this report, and how you can get involved and help strengthen your congregation and the wider conference, go to wcucc.org or contact resourcecenter@wcucc.org.