One fall, I had had enough. Even though each month we could pay our bills and make at least the minimum payments, we fell further behind. Our goals—retirement, travel, debt reduction, more generous lives—were nowhere in sight. This frustration, along with the stress of dealing with our disordered finances, had built up until I knew that something needed to change.

This disorder was evident in a number of ways. We did not have a budget. We made purchases without knowing how they would impact our financial future. Debts continued to pile up. And our giving to charity was sporadic and undisciplined—just like the rest of our finances. Paradoxically, I had devoted a lot of time to learning about stewardship as a part of my Christian leadership and discipleship.

Change in our family relationship with money began that difficult fall. Through conversations with my spouse, reflection on our priorities, and much trial and error, I came to live a more generous life.

Drawing on my experience and the insights of many financial thinkers, I created a personal financial curriculum that provides an opportunity for you to be on a journey toward a more ordered and faithful financial life. Our Christian faith frames the practical processes and suggestions for becoming more responsible stewards of the wealth that has been entrusted to us.

You can take part in this study as a household or as a group within your congregation. “Living the Generous Life: A Personal Financial Management Curriculum” will be available for free through the Damascus Project Network in January 2022. Make a New Year’s resolution to live a more ordered financial life that reflects the image of God within us by being more generous in all parts of our lives.
Magnanimous Spirits Yield Generous Lives

There’s no getting around the need for money to support either the Wisconsin Conference or the nonprofit organizations that deliver essential human services to communities.

Yet money isn’t all there is to generosity. In fact, we’re in the midst of an extraordinary display of generosity that relies as much on our attitude toward the world as it does on dollars and cents.

That’s the case with the outpouring of support for the Afghan refugees who have arrived recently in the United States. Wisconsin Conference congregations have been swift to ask how they can help, and the result has been the donation of countless sets of cold-weather clothes and pairs of shoes, blankets, yoga mats (for prayer) and soccer balls (for fun). Many people made financial contributions, too.

We shouldn’t be surprised. The reminder to care for refugees is woven throughout the stories of our faith, nowhere more so than in Matthew 25, where we are reminded that we are called to provide food and drink for those who are hungry and thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. Providing support for refugees is one of the most direct ways we can imitate Jesus’ own generosity.

Nurturing a generous spirit is like building muscle memory. Magnanimous behavior and attitudes grow stronger each time they are put to use. Here’s how Pastor Julie Goranson of Grace UCC in Wausau put it: “Because we’ve resettled so many Hmong refugees over the years, (the resettlement agency) thought Wausau was empowered to help Afghan refugees, too.”

Julie’s congregation demonstrates in clear terms what a generous spirit looks like. “What was particularly heartwarming as a pastor was not if but how we were going to help,” she said of the thinking inside her church. “The if was never the question. That was God calling to us.”
Supporting Pastors with Renewal Grants

Wisconsin Conference leaders witnessed the unexpected additional stress the Covid-19 pandemic caused pastors. The Conference offered one-time Clergy Renewal Grants to spur congregations to encourage their pastors to take some time away.

Twenty congregations received grants from the program, including First Congregational UCC of Oshkosh. Sarah Jaschob, moderator, explained, “It was clear the grant gave our pastor the space to breathe, relax, and refocus.” The generosity of individuals to the Emergency Response Fund and support from the Ministerial Assistance Fund made the grant program possible.

Catalyst Grants Fund Innovation and Outreach

The Catalyst Team awarded grants totaling $29,500 to several Wisconsin Conference congregations. Funded by OCWM Basic Support and endowed funds, the grants support innovative projects that help congregations engage the local community. The grants:

- Lake Edge UCC, Madison: support for community building within two racially distinct congregations.
- Christ Church UCC, Milwaukee: a grant for the Arts and Science Literacy Camp, an innovative summer camp integrating arts, literacy and science experiences for children.
- St. Stephen’s UCC, Merrill: help to restart the Dinner at 5 program that feeds the underserved and creates a place of extravagant welcome for diverse community members.
- Plymouth UCC, Milwaukee: received two grants to hold retreats for youth within the Southeast Association and to commission a unique composition by a Native American composer.
- St. John’s UCC, Sheboygan: support for the Sheboygan County Warming Center, which provides homeless people a warm place to sleep during the cold winter months.
- Zwingli UCC, Monticello: a grant to purchase and install livestreaming equipment in the sanctuary for use by the congregation and the wider community.

In addition, the Creation Care Team received funds that will be disbursed to congregations to support Creation Care projects.
Generosity Forward: Growing ministry through financial sustainability

Saints Fund Kitchen and More

The planned gifts of three longtime members helped to transform St. Paul’s UCC in Sheboygan.

In recent years, the congregation felt financially constrained. The Consistory stretched its financial resources to fulfill its mission in the community. In part, the congregation learned to delay necessary building upkeep. It struggled every year to cover a budget deficit. St. Paul’s did meaningful ministry, but leaders wondered, “Is this sustainable?”

A series of estate gifts came to the church in 2019 from the Mueller and Schweikert families. Glen and Karen Mueller were married at St. Paul’s in 1967. Originally from Sheboygan, Glen and Karen split their time between St. Paul’s and the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. Glen worked with Wisconsin Public Service as a meter reader, and Karen taught at Pigeon River School. They remained active as volunteers in the community in retirement. Margaret Schweikert, who, like Karen, grew up at St. Paul’s, cherished her congregation. Friends remember her unique combination of a strong will and kind spirit.

Together, these two families gave over $750,000 in unrestricted gifts to St. Paul’s. The congregation invested the funds with the Wisconsin Foundation UCC. Soon the congregation started taking a monthly draw on their endowment to support the ministry of the congregation. Later, the gifts helped to support a major renovation of the church kitchen and fellowship hall.

During the renovation, the church discovered asbestos issues and incurred other unanticipated costs. Expenses ran way over budget.

Violet - “Vi” - Kuitert long outlived her husband, Jacob. Both were active in St. Paul’s. Vi loved the ministry of the congregation. She died in 2020 and left an estate gift to St. Paul’s. The gift from Vi allowed the congregation to complete the renovation project fully.

The planned gifts from these three families helped renew St. Paul’s while also providing long-term financial support to the congregation. The estate gifts allow the congregation to more fully be the church God calls them to be in Sheboygan.

St. Paul’s new kitchen in action.
“Blest be the Tie that Binds,” a classic hymn of American Christianity, speaks to the beauty of gathering as church and the sadness at parting. It includes the verse:

When we are called to part  
It gives us inward pain;  
But we shall still be joined in heart  
And hope to meet again.

The members and friends of Brown Deer UCC, located just north of Milwaukee, felt the truth of this verse when they gathered on Pentecost in 2018 for their final service as a congregation. The service celebrated all the gifts of the Spirit in Brown Deer over its history.

Members of Plymouth Church UCC and North Shore Congregational Church came together to found the church. The congregations provided new members to help start Brown Deer UCC. With this act of generosity, the congregation began with 45 members in January 1961.

Over its years of ministry, Brown Deer UCC was a strong progressive Christian voice in its community.

The congregation dwindled in size until the remaining members faced the necessary idea of closing. Just as Brown Deer UCC began in an act of generosity, the members made their congregation a gift to others. First, the congregation sold their building to New Life Community Church. The new congregation was the first predominantly African-American congregation in Brown Deer. Second, the congregation gave the proceeds of the sale to the Wisconsin Conference. Through this gift the conference can work to strengthen, equip and renew congregations.

Calvary Memorial UCC faced a similar challenge. The congregation, formed in the 1950s, closed in 2019. Members of the congregation had long supported agencies serving people experiencing homelessness and hunger. The congregation even started a food pantry. In closing, the congregation sold the building to Epikos Church and gave the proceeds to the Wisconsin Foundation UCC. The foundation, following the directions of the congregation, disburses the funds to St. Ben’s Meal Program, the food pantry started by Calvary, United Church Camps Inc. and the Wisconsin Conference. Though the congregation closed, its commitment to its neighbors didn’t end.

We feel sad when a congregation closes, but through an act of generosity the legacy and mission of the congregation can continue.
Accepting the Gift

By Glenn Svetnicka, executive director of United Church Camps Inc.

United Church Camps Inc. earlier this year renamed our Outdoor Ministry site in Green Lake. It’s now Daycholah Center, incorporating the Ho-Chunk name for Green Lake, chosen to honor the Ho-Chunk people who were the original keepers of this land. Generosity was at the heart of the entire process: a generosity of spirit, an extended hand and an open heart.

The process began at the 2019 annual meeting of the Wisconsin Conference UCC with the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery. Further conversation led to the understanding that a camp and retreat center with “Pilgrim” in it could be offensive, hurtful—and a barrier to living out our mission.

We formed a team to explore all angles for overcoming this barrier. Members were generous with their time and prayers and in doing deep spiritual work together. Led by the Alliance for Justice and facilitated by members of Hocak UCC, the team offered UCCI the gift of a name: Daycholah Center.

We rededicated the center on Indigenous Peoples’ Day, Oct. 11. There were speakers, a fire circle and a shared meal. Karena Thundercloud, vice president of the Ho-Chunk Nation, captured the essence of the day and of Outdoor Ministry when she asked us to “think about the life of this lake, (how it) brought us together, and will continue to connect us in our greatest identity as a community.”

The compassionate and generous spirit of the Ho-Chunk people filled the air. They gave us gifts of blankets and star quilts, leather pouches containing passages of Scripture on small scrolls, fragrant cedar pouches and a hand-carved walking stick. They performed traditional smudging and presented UCCI with a Ho-Chunk Nation flag that will fly over Daycholah’s welcome center. Here we were, doing our best to give thanks, and recognize everything the Ho-Chunk community has so freely given to us—and yet again, they became the givers.

Larry Littlegeorge speaks at the Daychola Center rededication celebration.
A Generous Place to Learn

By the Rev. Dr. Tisha Brown

The Damascus Project, funded in part by Our Church’s Wider Mission, engages lay people, seekers and pastors in high-quality educational programs. The name of this innovative project was inspired by Paul’s transformation on the road to Damascus.

The story began with Paul heading to Damascus to continue his persecution of the first Christians. A flash of light forced Paul to the ground and he heard Jesus speak to him. Blinded, Paul stumbled on to Damascus. A Christian named Ananias nursed him to health and taught him about Christianity. Ananias offered Paul a generous place to learn.

People often remember the fall to the ground but forget Ananias’ role in Paul’s transformation. Yet, for most of us, true change in our lives comes from friendships and communities that encourage us to reflect, imagine and learn.

The Damascus Project takes seriously the need for companions on our faith exploration and learning journeys. This is why we created not just a set of online videos but an engaging social community, a network of people exploring faith and leadership. Two foundational programs for lay people and Members in Discernment begin in January: Faith Foundations and Leadership Skills.

You might be interested in Faith Foundations if you want to:

- Wonder about God, Jesus, and Scripture in a non-judgmental space.
- Discover new tools for interpreting the Bible.
- Develop language for speaking with confidence about your faith and finding your voice.
- Explore gifts for serving God in ministries of all kinds.

Leadership Skills might be the place for you if you would like to:

- Learn about different leadership styles and identify your own.
- Develop methods for strengthening relationships, building community and navigating conflict.
- Equip yourself with new skills for serving your community.
- Deepen your knowledge about the United Church of Christ.

If you are intrigued, explore the many registration options available by visiting the Damascus Project website: https://the-damascus-project.org/faith-leadership. New registrations are welcome through the end of December. Members of the Minnesota and Wisconsin Conferences get a 15% discount using the code MNWI. Email info@the-damascus-project.org or 507-222-0914 for more information.
Gifts in Wills as Easy as 1, 2, 3

Follow these steps to include in your will a gift to the Wisconsin Conference, your congregation or United Church Camps Inc.

1. First: Identify the beneficiary: You will need the legal name, address, and Federal Employer Identification Number of the charity you want to support.

2. Second: Designate the gift: Decide whether you want to make an unrestricted gift or if you want the charity to use it for a specific purpose.

3. Third: Share your story: We learn generosity from one another. Your story can inspire other people to include a gift in their will, too.

You can learn more about making a gift in your will by contacting the Rev. Andrew Warner at 414-758-6233.