Wisconsin Donations Help in Kentucky

Tornadoes struck central and western Kentucky on Dec. 10-11, leaving a wide swath of destruction affecting some of the same communities still recovering from ice storms and flooding that occurred in March. Three weeks later, another strong storm moved over the same area. People were hurting.

The Wisconsin Conference responded. Our congregations and friends donated more than $16,000 to help people affected by the tornadoes.

Greg Denk, chair of the Disaster Preparedness and Response Ministry Team of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, has used our gifts to provide immediate and long-term recovery assistance. “Because of your gifts,” he says, “we can help people manage the unmet needs after the assistance they receive from FEMA and insurance runs out.”

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, help often took the form of gift cards and gas cards. Denk’s team then turned to the “recovery work phase.” Throughout the spring, summer and fall, the Indiana-Kentucky Conference will be organizing volunteer work crews to help with recovery and home restoration projects to get residents safely back into their homes. Volunteers will help with long-term rebuilding over the next one to five years.

The Rev. Dr. Chad Abbot, conference minister for Indiana-Kentucky, reflected on what our gift symbolized. “Our mission statement is ‘to live covenant, connecting and equipping local ministries to love and serve like Jesus.’” he said. “Gifts from Wisconsin, Illinois, even our Germany partners remind us of how far and wide our covenant extends.”

The donations of our congregations and friends to disaster relief in Kentucky provided practical relief to people in need and demonstrated our connections of love in the United Church of Christ.
The Divine Dance of Beloved Community

By the Rev. Dr. Tisha Brown

If I had a time machine, one of the places I would love to go is to a jumping, jiving swing dancing club sometime in the 1940s. The big band on the stage playing the hit tunes of the swing era and a crowded dance floor filled with people jitterbugging, lindy-hopping, West Coast (or East Coast) swinging and just having a grand old time. Can you picture the scene—this beloved community of musicians, dancers, bystanders and servers?

This is one image I have of what it means to be the Body of Christ. It means showing up, playing your part, offering what you have. It means trusting the ebb and flow of energy and movement. It means relationships of give and take weaving together to form a whole that is so much more than the sum of its parts.

This is what we have been developing within the Damascus Project over the past two years. Building on the foundation of the Lay Academy, we are creating a lively expression of the body of Christ in which everyone has a role to play and the saints of God are equipped for ministries of all kinds. We are building an online expression of Christ’s body where lay people, Members in Discernment and clergy come together to learn and grow, and relationships extend beyond the boundaries of time and space. Our experience is teaching us that this is not only possible but is deeply life-giving as each individual part of this beautiful whole contributes as they are able and is caught up in the dance. We hope you might come out onto the dance floor and join the fun.

Check out this upcoming Damascus Project course:
Conflict Transformation: When Agreement isn’t Enough
Instructor: Rev. Elena Larssen
Learn more at the-damascus-project.org/
Catalyst Project Gives to Support Native Artist

By Dr. Sheila Feay-Shaw, a member of Plymouth Church UCC in Milwaukee, chair of music education at UW–Milwaukee

Plymouth Church UCC of Milwaukee worked with Larry Littlegeorge (Hocak UCC and Alliance for Justice) to begin to understand the Doctrine of Discovery and responded with a land acknowledgement in 2020 as a first step in truth and reconciliation work. The church made land acknowledgement part of our regular Sunday liturgy. But we wondered, “What next?”

We regularly partner with nonprofits in our local community, including the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education on the UW-Milwaukee campus and Present Music, a contemporary music ensemble in our city. We learned that these two partners wanted to commission a new piece of music from Navajo composer Raven Chacon. Support from a Catalyst Grant from the Wisconsin Conference, a grant from the Neighbors in Need Offering, and individual fundraising allowed us to pay for the composition.

Chacon wrote “Voiceless Mass,” a piece for organ and ensemble. Supporting the commission felt like the right next step for our congregation. But through this project, we realized even more deeply the work God calls us to do.

During an interview, Chacon challenged us: “You know, for Native artists, it seems like November’s the hot month or we get asked to do everything .... And I like that, but it’s just that becomes the month where everything happens.” We recognized ourselves in his comment. How will we engage Native artists and Native culture year-round?

Chacon pressed our thinking further when he explained the ideas behind his composition. “Voiceless Mass” questions the role of the voiceless in communities of faith. But Chacon’s work points to a challenge: “Instead of giving the voiceless a voice, why not cede the space to those without the voice.” This question remained with us long after the concert: Are we using our resources to amplify the voice of others or are we willing to give up those resources to others so they may speak for themselves?

The Wisconsin Conference intends Catalyst Grants to do more than fund an event. Our Catalyst Grant pushed us to think more deeply about our engagement with Native justice issues, to look beyond land acknowledged, to attend to the beauty of contemporary Native culture, and to reflect on the choices we make with our resources.
Wisconsin Foundation Advocates for Vaccine Access

When your church entrusts your endowment or other long-term assets to the Wisconsin Foundation, you not only earn a market-rate return on your investment, you also help advance the socially responsible values of the United Church of Christ.

The Wisconsin Foundation UCC, as part of its commitment to socially responsible investing, encourages companies in which it has an ownership interest to make vaccines more available in the Developing World.

Vaccines for Covid-19 brought protection and hope to many. But around the world, production and distribution issues severely limited access to effective vaccines. The Omicron variant underscored the importance of addressing vaccine access inequality.

Rev. Franz Rigert, the Wisconsin Conference Minister and Chairperson of the Wisconsin Foundation Board of Directors, recently named this as a justice issue for the Wisconsin Conference. “While we in the United States have wide availability to vaccines, many countries in Africa have a full vaccination rate of less than 5%. As followers of Jesus, it is our moral and spiritual obligation to share our abundance of vaccines with nations who have such limited access.”

Rev. Warner observes, “Shareholder activists learned to push for management incentives. It sends a clear signal of the importance of an issue. Companies do implement these goals. For example, Microsoft ties management performance to its net-zero carbon policy. By making performance evaluations of top employee’s contingent on solving the vaccine access, we hope to motivate a commitment to action by the companies.”

Shareholder activism on coronavirus vaccines is just one example of how the Wisconsin Foundation UCC not only invests prudently but also invests faithfully the resources of the conference and our congregations. Contact Rev. Andrew Warner at awarner@wcucc.org or 414-758-6233 to learn how your congregation can practice socially responsible investing through the Wisconsin Foundation UCC.
Investment Returns as of Dec. 31, 2021

The conference and congregations investing through the Wisconsin Foundation UCC benefit from strong investment management aligned with our social values. The Pension Boards UCC manage the majority of our investments. Our investment pool includes a significant loan to United Church Camps, Inc. We typically maintain a balance of 65% equity and 35% fixed income investments. The returns are net of investment management fees.

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**Philanthropic Returns**

At the Wisconsin Foundation UCC, we not only invest the current dollars of our congregations but work to help raise new gifts for a congregation. The foundation can help congregations raise new funds because of the administrative fee the churches pay to the foundation. Last year, congregations invested in the foundation paid $9,025 in fees and received help to collectively raise $533,161 in new gifts for their mission and ministry. The Wisconsin Foundation UCC provides both prudent investment returns and a “philanthropic return” that grows the resources of our congregations.

John Linzey and Franz Rigert. John serves as the chief financial and operations officer of the Pension Boards–United Church of Christ, Inc. His team manages the investments of the Wisconsin Foundation UCC.
Northwest Association Seeks to Build Resilient Leaders

Dues paid by congregations to their associations make this work possible. The Northwest Association offered a retreat for authorized ministers with Drew Benson of LeaderWise. Here’s an interview with Dr. Benson about the retreat.

Generosity Forward: What happened on the retreat?

Drew Benson: As a psychologist, I spend a lot of time talking with people about resilience. Especially with ministers, it can be a topic that almost invariably turns into a conversation about what someone is not doing. “I’m working too many hours, my relationships are strained, I can’t find time for my hobbies.” The retreat provided an opportunity to pivot in our understanding of resiliency. Rather than thinking about what we are not doing, we considered what we are doing well.

GF: What you are observing about leadership during the pandemic?

DB: I have certainly heard that leaders are exhausted. Sometimes pastors tear up in response to my question, “How have you been doing...honestly?” That being said, I am incredibly inspired by the adaptability, creativity and determination I have observed. Leadership during the pandemic has by no means been easy but many have found ways to survive (and possibly even thrive) in spite of all the challenges they have faced. The leaders that seem to be navigating the pandemic the most adaptively have cultivated strong social support networks and reach out for help and assistance.

GF: Any suggestions of what clergy and leaders can do to improve their resiliency?

DB: I find that people are often drawn into an “all or nothing” approach when they think about resilience. But big dramatic changes are often short-lived. Instead, think small in order to create change. Consider three times of the day: early morning, lunchtime and just before bedtime. Can people carve out some time for an intentional practice? Try five to 10 minutes of spiritual practices in the morning, a 10-minute walk or chair yoga session at lunch, and five minutes of gratitude journaling or meaningful conversation with a partner in the evening. Small changes can become the building blocks for transformation.
Next Generation Leadership Initiative Boosts Pastors

By the Rev. Beth Abbott

I recall driving with my precocious niece, Avery, in the backseat when she required a car seat. She kept asking me where we were going and, more important, if I knew how to get there. Fast forward a decade, and, at least professionally speaking, that “voice from the backseat” is now a cacophony after I recently completed the 10-year Next Generation Leadership Initiative offered by the UCC’s Pension Board.

Among other topics, I’ve dwelled in Family Systems (“befriending” my family of origin’s quirks and graces), explored personality and communication types, and learned to navigate change with adaptive leadership skills. What I’ve learned is now sewn into the tapestry of how I do ministry. My strategies for handling conflict stem from the “voices from the backseat,” or the skills, experiences and lessons I’ve wrestled into being. I prepare to engage leaders at church around difficult subjects trusting that the wisdom of the program’s lectures, questions and readings will helpfully frame the conversation.

Mostly, though, it was the cohort of similarly-aged, newer-to-ministry colleagues that created the biggest impact for me. Early on, it was life-giving to learn my struggles were not unique. As the years progressed, these additional “voices from the backseat” are now deeply trusted friends and colleagues who affirm, support and keep me accountable to excellence in ministry.

Ultimately, in terms of my pastoral leadership, I think back to my precocious niece’s question of whether I knew how to get to where we were going. Now I have the skills and, more so, the confidence to exercise my learnings to carve out the best possible church moving forward. As for her other question around where we’re going, well, I don’t know that part at all. The pandemic has accelerated the trajectory of the church in profound ways, so no, I don’t know where we’re going. But yes, Avery, thanks to this program, I do know how to get there.

The Rev. Beth Abbott is pastor of First Congregational UCC of South Milwaukee.
Create Your Legacy With a Gift From Your Estate

A gift from your estate strengthens the future of your congregation and the wider United Church of Christ. Because of your generosity, the church that shaped your life will continue to transform people long into the future.

Thank you to Esther Olson, who recently made a planned gift commitment to First Church of Belleville, Wisconsin. “A while back, having worked hard all of our adult life, we really wanted to determine how and why the results of that hard work were allocated and used,” Esther says. “We put together an estate plan. It is our hope that our contributions will help ensure that First Church will continue to flourish and remain a source of compassion and caring that has meant so much to our family and the community in general.”

To learn more about how to make a gift in your will, visit wcucc.org/plannedgiving or contact the Rev. Andrew Warner at awarner@wcucc.org.