

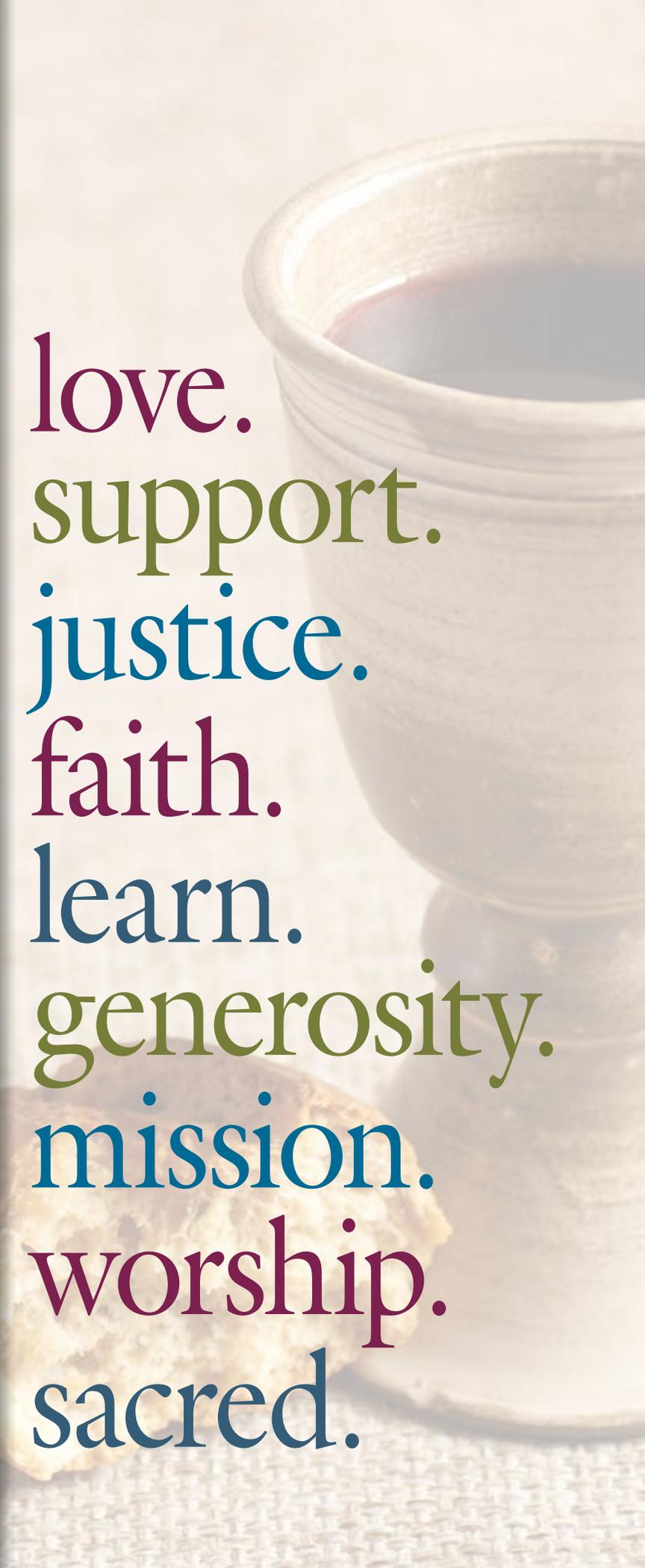


Wisconsin Conference  
United Church of Christ

ANNUAL REPORT 2022

*A new commandment  
I give to you, that you  
love one another: just  
as I have loved you,  
you also are to love  
one another.*

—JOHN 13:34

A photograph of a white ceramic chalice filled with red wine, sitting on a white cloth next to a piece of golden-brown bread. The background is softly blurred.

love.  
support.  
justice.  
faith.  
learn.  
generosity.  
mission.  
worship.  
sacred.

*“Just as I have loved  
you, so too are you to  
love one another.”*

—JOHN 13:34

# love.

## In a Year Unlike Any Other, Love Bound Us Together

### **Dear Friends in Christ,**

2021 was not what we expected. After a summer hiatus from high COVID caseloads, we hoped to enter the fall with resilience. In no time, however, the Omicron variant brought a huge surge in cases, acute levels of illness and hospitalization, and many deaths, resulting in a second year of adaptive survival for the 214 congregations of the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ.

Despite the need to shift to digital platforms and double down on COVID protocols, our congregations demonstrated incredible care to members and friends, discovering creative ways to sustain community life, and continuing essential local ministries and global missions.

Although churches were not immune to the cultural and political tensions surrounding masks, social distancing, and other pandemic restrictions, many faithful leaders pointed to a “third way” amid the dynamics of polarization — the way of Christ. Building up the Beloved Community is challenging in ordinary times, let alone during a relentless pandemic. Yet we emphasized Jesus’ new commandment from John 13:34: “Just as I have loved you, so too are you to love one another.” In focusing on the love of Christ, we found that we could bring divided people together. Unity builds strength, especially during turmoil.



**In focusing on the love of Christ, we found that we could bring divided people together. Unity builds strength, especially during turmoil.**

God's spirit of restoration and renewal provided saving grace.

Facing stress, exhaustion, anxiety and an array of mental health challenges, many in our beloved communities still chose to practice love. Patience, understanding, and kindness were worthy survival virtues, modeling the life of Jesus.

Thank you, pastors and lay leaders, for your courageous and compassionate leadership! Thank you for pointing to the silver linings and moments of grace, and for reminding us that our agonizing pandemic journey also has prompted adaptive changes, leaving the church poised for a new and promising chapter. While the future expression of our Christian faith is still unfolding, we are called to partner with the Holy Spirit to envision the "new thing" that God is doing (Isaiah 43:19).

This Annual Report of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ could very well have been a litany of suffering. We still grieve those relationships that slipped away during COVID. Yet we have so much to celebrate: Newcomers from miles away sharing in virtual worship. Pastoral vacancies filled in creative ways. Care teams reaching out with a message of love and an invitation to re-engage. Ministries providing meals, clothing, shelter, disaster relief

and refugee resettlement, and justice movements providing care for the Earth and working for the equality of all God's people.

Thank you, as always, for your commitment to Our Church's Wider Mission. Through OCWM we participate in the mission and ministry of the national setting of the United Church of Christ and our many ecumenical partnerships. We also provide vital ministry to one another through the support and resources provided by the Conference staff; the Outdoor Ministry opportunities afforded by United Church Camps, Inc.; the faith formation programs made available by initiatives like the Damascus Project, and a wide variety of supportive ministry programs. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

With deep gratitude and great hope,

Franz Rigert  
*Conference Minister*





# support.

## Care for People and Congregations

**T**he 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.

At the heart of that mission statement are a series of promises to the congregations and people of the Wisconsin Conference:

- To strengthen individuals and churches.
- To provide resources for ministers and lay leaders.
- To equip all the saints for the work of the gospel.
- To connect people and institutions in nourishing, productive relationships that model the love of Jesus.

These promises have been sorely tested over the past two years as the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the routines that structure the life of the church, from Sunday-morning worship to our business meetings and Bible studies, from coffee hours to hospital calls. Yet the clergy and lay staff of the Wisconsin Conference, working mostly from their home offices, still provided vital support to congregations across the Badger State using digital tools to stay in touch when in-person meetings were impossible.

Among the most important areas of the Conference's work:

### Transitions

Over the past year, the Conference staff, and particularly the associate conference ministers, worked with nearly 60 congregations as they worked through pastoral transitions, providing guidance and spiritual support. In some instances, congregations have moved toward shared ministry, with one or more pastors leading multiple churches.

### Support for Innovative Ministries

The Catalyst Grant program awarded grants totaling \$55,000 to 15 congregations and church organizations to support ministries that went beyond church walls to share the love of God. 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 an anti-racism audit at Bethel Bethany UCC in Milwaukee and a musical composition by Native American artist Raven Chacon commissioned by Plymouth UCC, also in Milwaukee. A grant to St. John's in Sheboygan enabled the congregation and allies to expand operations of the Sheboygan County Warming Shelter. In Merrill, St. Stephen's used Catalyst funds to revive Dinner @ Five, a weekly community meal. 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](mailto:mgross@wcucc.org).



Clergy and lay staff of the Wisconsin Conference ... provided vital support to congregations across the Badger State using digital tools to stay in touch when in-person meetings were impossible.

### Supportive Ministries

A dedicated group of clergy and lay volunteers complements the work of the Conference staff to nurture congregations and pastors. The group publishes a monthly newsletter, *Tending the Soul of the Beloved Community*, to share wisdom and resources needed to navigate a challenging ministry environment.

Other supportive programs:

**Communities of practice.** Twenty-five of these groups exist across the Wisconsin Conference, including a new one for Members in Discernment who are serving as licensed pastors. On the horizon: A Community of Practice for pastors living in retirement.

**Conflict transformation team.** These teams, consisting of trained clergy and lay volunteers, mediate conflicts and help congregations develop guidelines for healthy relationships and strong communications.

**Coaching partners.** These trained peer coaches work with pastors to navigate the peaks and valleys of ministry

As for those promises that underpin the Conference mission statement? We should probably add one more:

The Wisconsin Conference will persevere.

*The Catalyst program funded an anti-racism audit at Bethel Bethany UCC in Milwaukee.*





# justice.

## Justice Ministries

**O**ur Conference justice ministries proved especially resilient during the pandemic, providing leadership and resources across a range of issues.

### Afghan Refugee Resettlement

The United States evacuated at least 75,000 people from Afghanistan after U.S. military forces withdrew in August. More than 13,000 of the Afghans were housed temporarily at Fort McCoy, one of eight military bases around the country

to receive them. The last group left Fort McCoy for permanent homes in February.

With support from Mary Kuenning Gross, the Wisconsin Conference Welcoming Our Afghan Allies partner-in-service volunteer, congregations and individuals across the state responded generously to the refugees' arrival, contributing cash and household supplies to the effort and simple kindness to the Afghans. Contributions to the Conference Afghan Refugee Resettlement Fund totaled more than

\$12,000. In all, Wisconsin communities took in 823 Afghans.

Among the UCC congregations that directly assisted Afghans:

**Congregational United Church of Christ, Neenah/Menasha**, which co-sponsored a family of eight.

**Congregations and individuals across the state responded generously to the refugees' arrival, contributing cash and household supplies to the effort and simple kindness to the Afghans.**



*Volunteers in Janesville load a mattress into a van bound for a Milwaukee duplex, the new home for a family of six Afghan refugees.*

### **First Congregational UCC of Janesville,**

which in December set up an apartment in Milwaukee for an Afghan family of six in partnership with Delavan UCC, the Dawa Muslim Circle and two Lutheran churches. The Janesville congregation also provided financial support for resettlement efforts in Platteville.

**Plymouth UCC in Milwaukee,** which set up an apartment for an Afghan family before the family's arrival in Milwaukee.

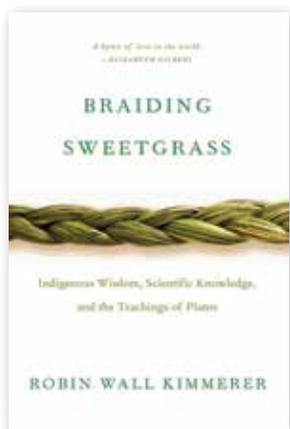
**In Eau Claire,** UCC member Ginny Close was at the center of an ecumenical effort to welcome eight men who arrived in the Chippewa Valley in February.

With about 280 additional Afghan refugees expected to arrive in Wisconsin from safe havens abroad, local groups already are forming to aid in future resettlement efforts. In southeast Wisconsin, for example, the Western Waukesha County Refugee Resettlement Committee, a UCC group led by St. John's in Merton, has formed to discern its future role.



## Creation Care

The highlight of the Creation Care Team’s work in the past year was the Conference-wide Big Read of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “Braiding



Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.” The Big Read culminated in October, when nearly 200 people from across the Conference gathered by Zoom to hear Kimmerer discuss our reciprocal relationship with Earth.

Beyond the Big Read, the Creation Care Team continues to expand support for congregations responding to the Kairos Call to Action issued by the UCC Council for Climate Justice.

The core team of about a dozen dedicated volunteers, led by the Revs. Bob Ullman and John Helt and staff liaison Lisa Hart, spreads the word through the every-other-month *Kairos* newsletter and other platforms, provides grant support for projects at congregations, and uses multiple platforms to encourage congregations and individuals to advocate for the health of God’s beautiful, but fragile, creation. In addition, the team has collaborated with climate-justice groups in neighboring conferences to form the Great Lakes Creation Collaborative, a group focused on education and advocacy around environmental issues affecting the Great Lakes.

Many Wisconsin UCC congregations have emerged as leaders in their communities as a result of their creation care work, and the Wisconsin Conference is recognized nationally within the UCC as a leader in creation care ministry.

## Conference-wide Working Groups

The Racial Justice Task force has led a series of virtual conversations called “White Christians Doing Our Work,” designed to examine the role of white people of faith in addressing racism. The Immigration Working Group has hosted a series of well-attended webinars to educate people about a variety of immigration issues. And a small WISE Team has formed to encourage and support congregations moving to become WISE — Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged — Congregations for Mental Health, a designation of the UCC Mental Health Network.





# faith.

## Faith Formation

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential challenge to faith formation programs. Overnight, Christian education leaders in congregations pivoted to online instruction, sometimes mastering unfamiliar technologies and learning new skills on the fly.

The pandemic also forced changes to Conference-wide youth formation programs.

At First Congregational UCC in River Falls, there were two overarching goals for education during the pandemic.

“We needed to stay connected to all our people,” said the Rev. Stacy Johnson Myers, the congregation’s minister of education. “We also knew that when they couldn’t come through our doors, we needed to provide resources for them to grow in faith at home.”

In the early days of lockdown, that meant moving immediately to Zoom, where Stacy would read a story to kids online. Over that first pandemic summer, she led the development of a robust plan for Sunday School, creating an at-home format with new materials and take-home bags filled with age-appropriate activities and projects. Stacy recorded a brief lesson each week. A “passport” system for children and families provided the structure for at-home faith formation.



*Passport books in two age levels were sent home to families with simple faith formation activities and projects that families could do together. Kids got a sticker for each page completed.*

“We tried to find the balance between things that were meaningful but not overwhelming,” Stacy says. All told, she says, they reached 52 families.

“We tried to feed the children not only in terms of faith development but as people, so they had something to sustain them during this time at home,” Stacy says. “Families want to nurture their children in faith. They just don’t always have the resources.”

After a year without being able to offer in-person retreats, the Conference was finally able to offer scaled-down youth faith formation retreats at Daycholah Center in November. In March, capacity was increased to accommodate three retreat groups. Lisa Hart, the associate conference minister who leads faith formation efforts, says she hopes retreats can return to full capacity in the coming year and that programs like the Knock Knock retreat for middle schoolers and Jesus Core will return.



**“We tried to feed the children not only in terms of faith development but as people, so they had something to sustain them during this time at home. Families want to nurture their children in faith. They just don’t always have the resources.”**

Support for faith formation and youth ministry leaders in our congregations has continued to be a Conference priority, Lisa says, with twice monthly Zoom meetings for faith formation and youth ministry leaders. These Zoom gatherings draw clergy, paid staff and volunteers from across the Conference, the denomination and beyond. Over the past year, a cohort has emerged in the Damascus Project Network to provide a place for connection between online gatherings and a forum for sharing resources.

Amid the pain inflicted by COVID, it’s nearly impossible to find anything good. Yet for Christian education leaders, the pandemic provided a valuable opportunity to think about news ways of doing things.

In River Falls, faith formation may include paying more attention to children’s personal development, Stacy says.

“My congregation is fortunate because we have had a vibrant faith formation program all along, but we have shifted over the years,” she says. “Kids have different needs. We are focusing more on social and emotional needs.”



*First Congregational, River Falls, sent home a Christmas activity and coloring book, along with colored pencils, a die and some doilies so kids could complete projects, color the pictures, play a game and make an origami Christmas ornament from a doily.*



# learn.

## Damascus Project

The focus for the Damascus Project in 2021 was on solidifying our core course offerings for lay people and Members in Discernment by adapting the former Lay Academy curriculum for online delivery. We now have two key learning areas for lay leaders and Members in Discernment: Faith Foundations and Leadership Skills.

**Faith Foundations'** emphasis is on reading and interpreting scripture, learning to speak with confidence about our experiences of God and diving into Christian history. The focus of **Leadership Skills** is on equipping lay leaders and Members in Discernment with additional tools for their leadership toolboxes. In 2022, we are adding a third learning area called **Ministry Studies**. This learning area will focus on preaching, pastoral care, worship and faith formation for all ages. Each of these is a yearlong course of study with multiple enrollment options. Learners are free to choose to enroll for the full year or for a portion of each year depending on their interests and time constraints.

Thirty-two people from five different conferences within the United Church of Christ are currently participating in Faith Foundations or Leadership Skills. In addition, six people discerning a call to authorized ministry are participating in Faith Foundations, Leadership Skills, or both.

We are also developing an online community of seekers, lifelong learners, pastors and lay people that is free to all.

But the Damascus Project is so much more than simply a place to take courses. We are also developing an online community of seekers, lifelong learners, pastors and lay people that is free to all. Since its inception in 2020 the Damascus Project Network, the online home of the Damascus Project and our learning platform, has grown into an engaging online community with more than 900 members from Minnesota, Wisconsin and beyond. We would love to have you join this community of learners who are honing their skills, diving into scripture and theology, sharing thoughts, resources and ideas, and growing together in faith. Join today by creating a free account at <https://learning.the-damascus-project.org/> or join our mailing list by visiting [www.the-damascus-project.org](http://www.the-damascus-project.org).



*The Damascus Project provides a virtual community where people can deepen their faith through study of scripture and church history and sharpen the skills required of congregational leaders.*

The Damascus Project has given me some additional tools. Before coming here I had some tools but now more and more tools are being added and I'm also learning new ways to use the tools I already had. This experience and the tools I've gained really shape how I engage with the youth in my congregation.

—Devon

Prior to coming to the Damascus Project I was worried that I wouldn't be knowledgeable enough. But what I have found is that everyone is supportive of one another and appreciative of what we have to offer. What I am seeking is a sense of confidence that the message I'm sharing with the children I work with in my congregation is one that provides them with a better foundation than the one I feel I had in my life.

—Dar



# generosity.

## Because of Your Generosity...

**G**enerosity from congregations and individuals makes the ministry of the Conference possible. Gifts from congregations to OCWM Basic Support provides most of the funding for the Conference. Basic Support giving increased slightly from 2020, and individual giving to the Conference operating budget and to the Strengthen the Church Offering remained strong. The rising stock market buoyed investment income. Revenue from programs rebounded after the 2020 downturn. Common services revenue from the Wisconsin Foundation offset declines in the common services revenue from our associations.

## ...the Conference Strengthens Churches and Leaders.

The Conference supports, connects, and resources congregations and leaders through five core programmatic areas. Leadership Initiatives like the Damascus Project and Communities of Practice support lay and clergy leaders. Congregational Vitality programs like Catalyst Grants and consultations help churches adapt and experiment. Search and Call work, including the crucial work of our Committees on the Ministry and Conflict Transformation Teams, supports pastors and congregations at every stage of ministry. Community and Justice Initiatives give witness to

our faith and values. Our Wider Church Partners' commitments of financial and staff support extend and expand the ministry of our Conference. These programmatic areas rely on Administrative and Fundraising support to be effective.

## Allocation of OCWM Basic Support

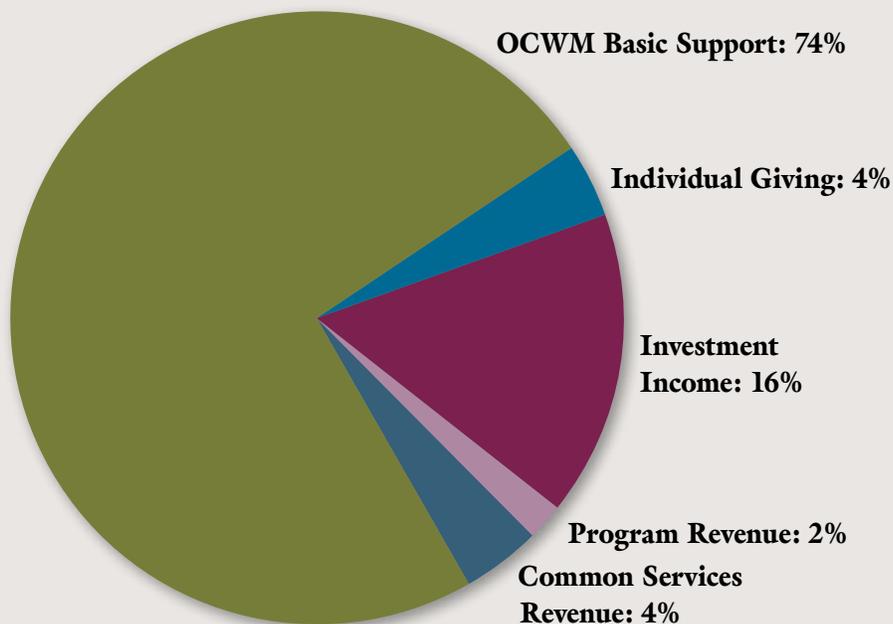
Fifty-seven percent of gifts to OCWM Basic Support funded Conference ministries to directly support our congregations and clergy; 43 percent of expenses support wider church missional ministries. Wider church support includes our commitments to United Church Camps, Inc., Wisconsin Council of Health and Human Services agencies, educational ministries connected to the UCC, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the national setting of the UCC.

## Congregational Gifts to OCWM Basic Support

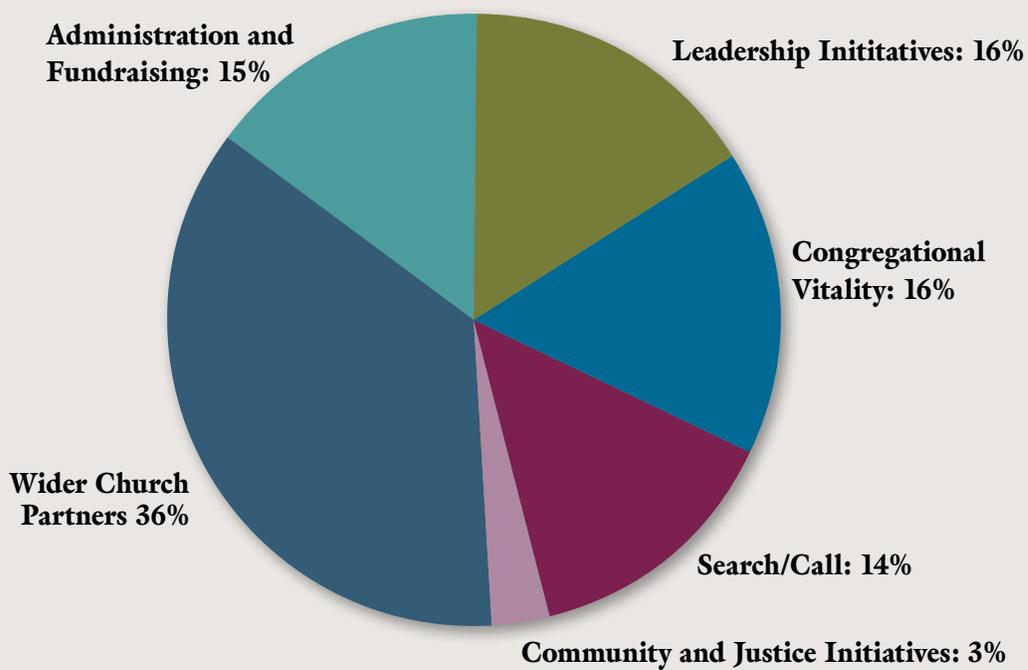
On average, UCC congregations gave an average of 4.2% of their pledges and offerings to OCWM Basic Support.



## Sources of Support



## Uses of Funds





# mission.

## Wisconsin Foundation UCC

The Wisconsin Foundation UCC supports congregations and the Conference. The foundation's investment fund provides a socially responsible investment option. The Rev. Andrew Warner helps congregations raise funds for their mission and ministry — a philanthropic return.

### Investment Pool

Congregations that invest through the Wisconsin Foundation join an investment pool that allows us all to get better investment management at a lower fee than we could on our own. Our cooperative investment pool generally holds 65 percent equity and 35 percent fixed income investments (but our manager can vary that based on market conditions). In 2021, we generated a net 10.30 percent return.

## Socially Responsible Investing

The foundation takes a socially responsible investing, or SRI, approach. This means screening out some companies and industries because they do not align with our faith and values. We do not invest in oil production from tar sands, for example, because of the environmental damage. More than avoiding some companies, we also actively engage in shareholder activism. Together with other faith-based investors, we advocate for positive social change. This has included encouraging vaccine manufacturers in which we had an ownership interest to improve access to vaccines in the developing world. Our SRI approach ensures our endowments do good while earning a prudent return.

## Growing Funds

Andrew works directly with congregations invested in the foundation to help them generate new donations. Throughout 2021, he helped St. John's of Madeline Island raise more than \$500,000 for its endowment. "Andrew brought extensive knowledge and expertise about best practices for congregational philanthropy as well as concrete tools for us to implement immediately in our context," Pastor Rachel Bauman said. Unlike traditional investment options, the foundation helps congregations raise their next endowment dollar.



## The foundation's investment fund provides a socially responsible investment option.

### Legacy Congregations

Andrew supports congregations facing the conclusion of their active ministry. In 2021, the congregation at St. John's in Hartford realized they would need to close. Working with church leaders and Legacy Pastor Christine Wilke, Andrew helped the congregation form a legacy plan for their assets and walked with them through the sale of their building. The unique plan included the creation of three funds at the foundation: a Washington County Impact Fund to support social service agencies in the congregation's community, a UCC Impact Fund for the wider work of the UCC, and a St. John's Impact Fund to provide ongoing pastoral care to former members of the congregation.

### Planned Giving

Independent of their investment choices, congregations can work with Andrew to promote planned giving. Over the course of 2021, congregations working with Andrew and the conference secured planned gift commitments worth between \$2 and \$3 million. These future gifts will significantly support ministry in Wisconsin.

### Consider Partnering

Congregations can partner with the Wisconsin Foundation UCC to manage their invested funds and to promote planned giving. Contact the Rev. Andrew Warner at [awarner@wcucc.org](mailto:awarner@wcucc.org) or call 414-758-6233 to learn how the foundation can be a catalyst for generosity in your congregation.



*As St. John's in Hartford prepared to close, the Wisconsin Foundation UCC helped the congregation develop a legacy plan for its assets.*

**In 2021, the Wisconsin Foundation UCC generated a net 10.3 percent return.**



# worship.

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Of all the changes forced on churches by the COVID-19 pandemic, by far the most visible occurred in worship, as congregations suspended in-person services, shifted to virtual liturgies and turned to technology to hold parishioners together.

For some, the switch to online produced an unexpected increase in worship attendance, while raising questions about how best to serve people who may never have been inside the doors of the church.

The experience of Our Saviour's UCC in Ripon may be unique.

"We never missed a service," said the church's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Kevin Mundell. Our Saviour's services have been broadcast on the radio since 1958, so the congregation had some experience with the demands of

a remote audience. The radio service, for instance, has to be exactly one hour. "Not a minute more, not a minute less," Kevin says.

A first step was to embed the radio broadcast on the church website. Livestreaming followed. Along the way, Our Saviour's invested in additional cameras and installed a lighting system more conducive to high-quality livestreaming. The church also added a Thursday evening service that mimics the Sunday service.

The congregation went just three months without worshipping in person.

"We encouraged people to make the best, safest choice for themselves," Kevin says of the various worship options. The church is large enough that "I could seat 150 people with 10-foot gaps."

*Outdoor worship at Trinity, LaCrosse, summer 2021*





## Remarkably, the worshipping congregation grew amid the pandemic, thanks to the Thursday and Sunday in-person and streaming options and the radio broadcast.

He urges congregations not to be scared off by technology.

“Some of this is simpler than people think,” Kevin says. “You can do it with a smartphone.”

Remarkably, the worshipping congregation grew amid the pandemic, thanks to the Thursday and Sunday in-person and streaming options and the radio broadcast.

“We were worshipping about 110 before COVID,” he says. “By the time we were fully livestreaming, we saw our in-person and livestream attendance double what we had before.”

Our Saviour’s virtual congregation is geographically dispersed, with pockets of viewers in Texas, California, Ohio and northern Illinois, and others tuning in from abroad. One woman living in an assisted living facility in Tennessee watches every Sunday with her son.

“We’re not getting people coming back in droves because they have five ways of accessing us,” Kevin says. “We’re wondering whether we have five communities. How do we more meaningfully connect with all of them?”

After two years of the pandemic, he’s not complaining.

## Pandemic Worship

Throughout the past 12 months, we worshiped outdoors and online, held virtual Bible studies and coffee hours, and took precautions to avoid contracting or spreading the coronavirus that has gripped the nation for more than two years. Most of all, we awaited the end of the pandemic in prayer and hope.

*Outdoor Christmas Eve 2020 at First Congregational, River Falls*





# sacred.

16

## With Daycholah, a New Era Dawns for UCCI

**“Naming is the beginning of justice.”**

**—Robin Wall Kimmerer**

United Church Camps, Inc. made history in fall 2021, rededicating its Pilgrim Center Outdoor Ministry site in Green Lake as the Daycholah Center. “Daycholah” is the original Ho-Chunk name for Green Lake. The formal renaming took place on Oct. 11, Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

The new name recognizes that the land on which the camp sits was and remains a sacred place 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 name change occurred after a three-year process of discussion and reflection that led to a better understanding of how a name like “Pilgrim” could be offensive.



“In my experience and education growing up in southeast Wisconsin, the history of the Pilgrims, Puritans, idealized Thanksgivings, westward expansion, and the settling of this new country were all spoken of positively from a European colonist perspective,” said the Rev. James Schleif, UCCI’s interim executive director. “As my life experience and education broadened, I learned that there is a quite different perspective from a Native American experience. In some ways, the landing of the Pilgrims and Puritans began the end of their way of life.”

UCCI’s commitment to the sacred place that is Daycholah Center, and the community created when people gather there, is unchanged.” Renaming is an appropriate and necessary first step on our journey toward a future where all are welcome and included and have a voice,” said Judnard Henry, managing director of Daycholah Center. “We will continue to grow as a sacred place of love, a sanctuary, a community of inclusion and belonging, a place to learn, and to connect more deeply to God and all others.”



The new name recognizes that the land on which the camp sits was and remains a sacred place for Indigenous people, and underscores UCCI's unique opportunity to restore the voice of Native Americans and acknowledge their stewardship of the sacred place.

*UCCI's outdoor ministry at Green Lake was renamed Daycholah Center after a three-year process that included consultation with the Ho-Chunk, the original settlers of the site. "Daycholah" is the original Ho-Chunk name for Green Lake.*

# 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.

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](http://wcucc.org) or email [resourcecenter@wcucc.org](mailto:resourcecenter@wcucc.org).



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United Church of Christ**

[www.wcucc.org](http://www.wcucc.org)