

Generosity Forward

*Growing ministry
through financial
sustainability*



Healthy Clergy, Healthy Churches: How Communities of Practice Foster Healthy Communities of Faith

By the Rev. Jane Anderson

For years, church health has been equated with membership numbers. Significant time and money have been devoted to church growth, at a time when the church has experienced significant decline across denominational lines. Much of the focus has been on finding the silver bullet—one solution to turn the tide, whether that meant creating contemporary worship, securing a talented young preacher, bringing in the latest technology to connect with a digitally savvy younger congregation, or creating a polished online worship experience.

What we've learned is that such efforts have done little to reverse membership decline. A study by the UCC's Center for Analytics, Research & Development and Data, found that while there is a relationship between congregational vitality and ministerial excellence, there is no relationship between vitality and church growth. Moreover, the study found, some of the common silver bullets and areas of concern for congregations did not have an impact on overall congregational vitality.

More than a decade ago, the Lilly Endowment funded an initiative called Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, part of which involved development of Communities of Practice—facilitated professional peer development support groups for clergy. Since then, the Communities of Practice network morphed into a nationwide program to promote ministerial excellence. By promoting clergy health and vitality, these groups in turn promote healthy leadership and vitality in our congregations.

The Wisconsin Conference continues to invest in our Community of Practice program. This program continues to grow. We have expanded our network to include groups for Members in Discernment, chaplains, interim pastors and retired clergy, as well as creating new groups for clergy serving our local churches. Our hope is that you will support this program with your gift to the Leadership Forward Campaign.



Wisconsin Conference clergy participating in a
Communities of Practice group

Catalyst Grant Helps Launch Classes for Seniors

Here's a sure-fire recipe for expanding a church's outreach to the community:

Take a reputation for hospitality.

Add one community gathering space.

Leverage existing connections.

Add one Catalyst Grant.

What do you get? Learning in Retirement, a new outreach of First Congregational Church of Genesee that offers an array of courses designed to meet the needs of older residents who want to keep learning.



The idea isn't exactly new, says the Rev. Jim Langreder, the pastor. He also leads First Congregational UCC in Hartland, which has been hosting Living in Retirement classes for years under an agreement with Waukesha County Technical College. Now, the Genesee church will partner with WCTC. Classes will meet in the educational building on the church campus and will be taught by members of the community. Among the likely offerings are courses on brain science and China and a how-to for amateur photographers who want to learn to take good smartphone pictures.

A \$4,000 Catalyst Grant from the Wisconsin Conference will pay for the technology needed to get Learning in Retirement off the ground.

"We didn't even have a microphone in the main room (of the educational building) or a TV to show a video curriculum," Jim said.

"This will really help." The audiovisual equipment also will help the congregation launch Faith and Film, a series of movie-and-discussion nights. "The goal would be to engage church members with members of the community and enjoy meaningful conversation around a topic relevant to our everyday lives," he said.

The Genesee congregation built a reputation for hospitality on two big events each year – a pig roast and an antique car show. Location helps. "It's cool that the church is smack-dab in the middle of a neighborhood," Jim said.

Evangelism isn't the point of Learning in Retirement.

"The ultimate goal isn't to have them come on Sunday," Jim said. "There's a need for older people in the community to continue learning. That's what we're doing. We have the building and the time to do it."

To learn more about the Catalyst program, email Mary Kuenning Gross at mgross@wcucc.org.

Conversation on Leadership: ‘I Play Well With Others’

The Rev. Christine Wilke, interim pastor at Evangelical and Reformed UCC in Waukesha, was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and felt called to ministry at an early age. “I was told I misunderstood God,” she says. She left the church in her teens. Eventually, she found her way to Marquette University, where she earned a degree in theology. Along the way she found the UCC. After working in the publishing industry, she went to Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and was ordained in 2019. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



How do you characterize your leadership style?

It’s collaborative—I’m a person who plays well with others. If I’m stuck by myself, unable to talk to and get feedback from others, I kind of wilt. We don’t really have hierarchy, so my style works well with our polity.

What leadership lessons did you learn from your pre-ministry career?

I learned to listen, to be empathetic, to be curious, because people are reacting to things that are happening to them. Being curious helped me find out what that was. Leadership also means looking out for the best interests of everyone, not picking sides. It’s meaning what I say and saying what I mean, and offering other people grace and understanding.

Where or from whom did you learn what makes a good leader?

I had some great bosses in printing and publishing. The leaders that stand out were those who could exist in the midst of anxiety – what we now call a non-anxious presence. I interned with Andrew Warner and later worked with him at the foundation while I was interim at a church that closed. I learned from him to be self-reflective and to adapt. I’ve changed a lot. I’ve learned to sit with people and not try to solve things but to ask questions to draw them out.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Do not be afraid. Be who God calls you to be. And God calls our entire self into ministry.

Amid Pandemic, He Found a Silver Lining

By Michael Whiteley



I started hearing about COVID-19 in December 2019, when part of my work involved managing a factory in China. My job in sales and marketing changed dramatically after that: I went from traveling 150 days a year to sitting at home day after day.

When I realized that wasn't going to change anytime soon, I began thinking about my retirement plans. I had always wanted to explore ways to expand my service to Christ, and had thought that would be my focus in retirement. Now, I saw an opportunity to get a head start.

One day, I received an email from the Wisconsin Conference UCC promoting the Faith Foundations course offered through the Damascus project. When I inquired, the director at the time, the Rev. Tisha Brown, whether I wanted to become a candidate for authorized ministry through the Damascus Project. After learning more about it, I realized this was God calling me into a new role in service to Christ.

I began Faith Foundations in August 2020 and finished Year 1 in April 2021. It was an awesome journey, and not what I expected. I had figured we would learn what was in the Bible. I had no idea how much I would learn about interpretation of scriptures and theological reflection. I fell in love with the laments of the Psalms and the messages of social justice in Amos and other prophets. I couldn't get enough of it. The rich history, the covenant with God, the various ways God speaks to us—it was wonderful.

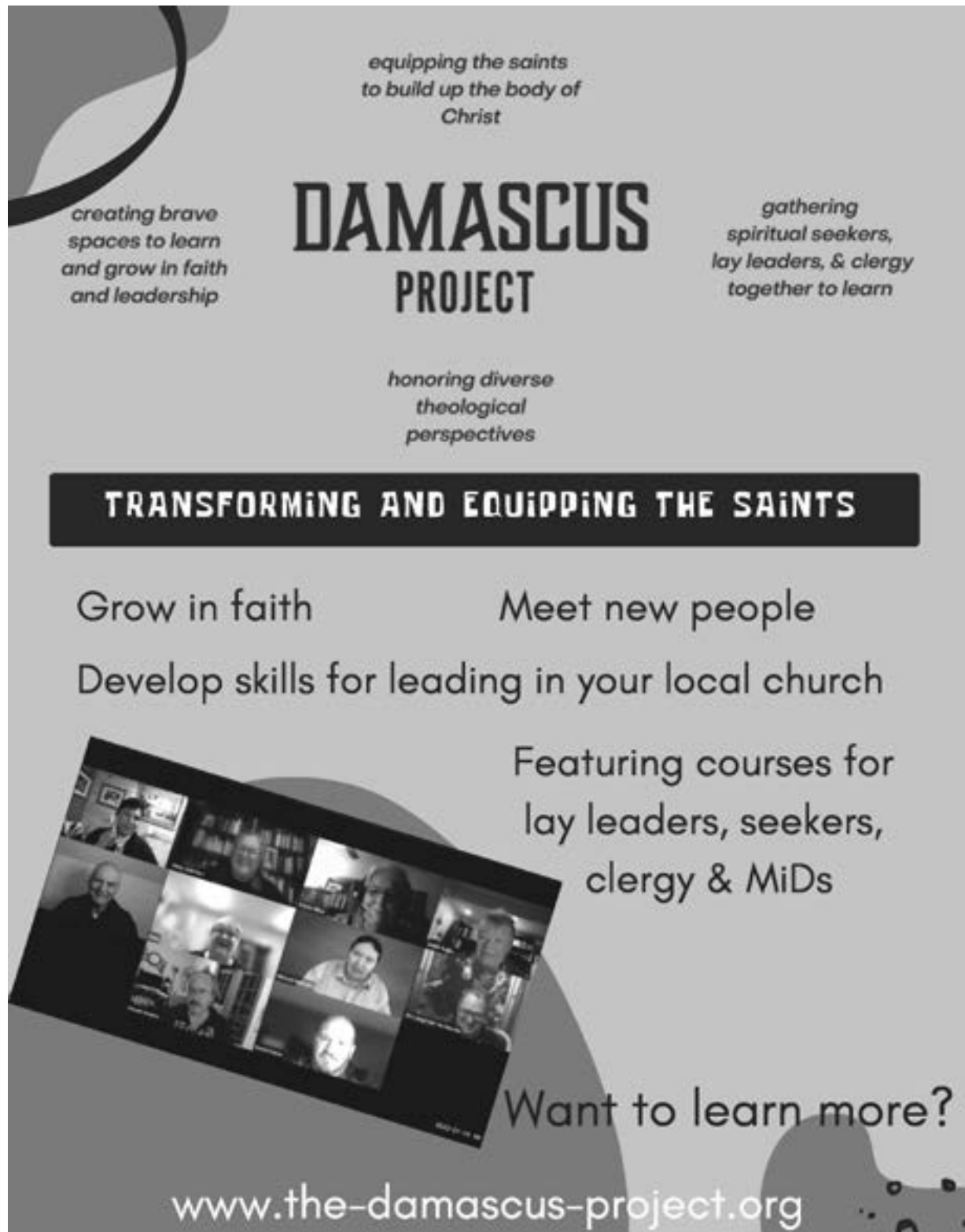
The best part was the diversity of viewpoints in my class, which opened my eyes to how differently individuals read and interpret the Bible. Slowly, I realized how challenging the different aspects of Christian Ministry can be: pastor, priest, prophet. There was so much more that I needed to learn—but it was so exciting to realize the wide and deep faith journey in front of me.

After Faith Foundations finished, I began exploring what came next. I asked my pastor, David Schnepf, what I needed to do to pursue my desire to become a Member in Discernment. He took me to the Council on Ministry and helped me with the application process. My application was accepted. The following year, I completed Faith Foundations 2 and an intense New Testament study.

Most recently, I completed my third semester of classes through the Damascus Project: Christian Ministry and Pastoral Care. In September, I will begin my fourth semester with the Sunday by Sunday class on preaching.

The Damascus Project has prepared me for ministry and helped me listen for God to tell me where and how God wants me to serve next.

The Damascus Project has prepared me for ministry and helped me listen for God to tell me where and how God wants me to serve next. It turns out that the pandemic had a silver lining and allowed me time to start a second career sooner than I had hoped—and with greater joy than I had expected. I pray more people will explore and benefit from the Damascus Project—it's truly a blessing.



The graphic features a central logo for the Damascus Project. The logo consists of the words "DAMASCUS" and "PROJECT" in a bold, sans-serif font. Above the logo is the tagline "equipping the saints to build up the body of Christ". To the left of the logo is the text "creating brave spaces to learn and grow in faith and leadership". To the right is "gathering spiritual seekers, lay leaders, & clergy together to learn". Below the logo is "honoring diverse theological perspectives". A dark horizontal bar contains the text "TRANSFORMING AND EQUIPPING THE SAINTS". Below this bar are four bullet points: "Grow in faith", "Meet new people", "Develop skills for leading in your local church", and "Featuring courses for lay leaders, seekers, clergy & MiDs". A tilted image of a video conference grid with eight participants is positioned on the left. At the bottom right, it says "Want to learn more?" and the website "www.the-damascus-project.org".

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Making a Planned Gift of Insurance

By the Revs. Jim and Julia Hollister



We have served First Congregational Church in Sheboygan since the mid-1990s. Since then, we've enjoyed the fruits of two successful capital campaigns and many stewardship seasons. We have also been blessed as a congregation by forebears who left bequests when they died, as well as by those who are still with us but have made planned gifts to the church. We, too, have been wanting to find an appropriate way to leave a gift for FCC after we are gone because we so value the ministry our church has been doing since its founding in 1845. We've dragged our feet for a long time, though, and have had trouble envisioning how to best do that because we hope that time is a long way off and we have children we'd like to include in any estate planning, among other reasons.

We wanted to let you know of an opportunity to make a planned gift that you might not have thought about. We finally stopped procrastinating and completed a beneficiary form for our UCC Life Insurance and Disability Income

Plan through the UCC Pension Boards. We have made each other a primary beneficiary at 90% and the local church a beneficiary of 10%.

It's also come to our attention that retired UCC clergy who have had their Life Insurance and Disability Income Plan premiums paid for at least five years through age 65 will receive a \$10,000 payout at death. So when we retire, we plan to revise the beneficiary form again so that our local congregation will receive that \$10,000 gift from the Pension Boards. And, since the church has covenanted with the Wisconsin Conference, it will pass along a tithe (10%, or \$1,000.) of that gift. A win-win.

We invite you to consider this option as an easy, pain-free way to share an unexpected bonus with any charity or ministry whose mission is important to you.

Please contact Rev. Andrew Warner at 414-758-6233 to learn more about ways to make a planned gift of insurance and other ways to leave a legacy.

Foundation Helps Ebenezer with Legacy Plan



A view of Ebenezer UCC from the church cemetery.

The leadership of Ebenezer UCC in Stratford faced several challenging trends. The congregation had grown smaller and older over the past decade. Only 50 members remained at the end of 2022. Aging members faced physical challenges affecting their ability to participate and engage in the congregation. “Our current council leaders have long served in their roles and cannot continue indefinitely doing this work,” Moderator Sue Vick said. “While we tried to recruit new people as volunteers, we do not see people stepping forward to volunteer.”

Although some members thought they could contribute more financially, no one wanted to take on the additional volunteer work needed to sustain the congregation. At the same time, it was clear that the congregation wanted to

preserve the cemetery and ensure that 30 acres of riverfront forest remained undeveloped.

The Council worked with Andrew Warner of the Wisconsin Foundation UCC to develop a legacy plan designed to create a new future for the 4-acre cemetery that sits beside the church building. The Council recruited new people to form a cemetery association, and Andrew advised the new board on its incorporation.

Ebenezer will sell the church building and adjacent forest acreage to create funds in the Foundation. The Cemetery Trust will fund the care and maintenance of the cemetery. An Operating Fund will pay for the future construction of a pavilion. A Memorial Fund will provide ongoing support for the United Church of Christ and charities in the Stratford area.

It is always hard for a congregation to close, but the Foundation helped Ebenezer extend its legacy into the future. “Andrew’s advice and financial expertise was invaluable to me and the Council as we worked through the legacy process,” Sue Vick said. “Our congregation really appreciated him being at our meeting to answer questions. It was also very important to us to protect the forest from development and preserve it as a green space.”

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Also find resources on our
website at
wcucc.org/generosity



The Leadership Forward Campaign supports leaders throughout the Wisconsin Conference through funding of the Damascus Project, Catalyst Grants, and Ministerial Assistance. In partnership with the Pension Boards, we're helping to fund programs like the Next Generation Leadership Initiative, which engages pastors under 35 in leadership development. "The NGLI program has been a total game-changer for my ministry. A cohort of peers to support me as I am, continuing education to bring out the best pastor I can be. Each gathering re-reminds me of why I love this work. I have never felt so hopeful—even excited!—about the future of the church."

Leadership Forward Campaign

