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Sacred Conversations Answers the Call for Education on Race

Anti-racism training that includes honest discussions of America's fraught racial history is taking place in the Wisconsin Conference and beyond thanks to some UCC clergy and allies determined to reckon with Christianity's role in creating and reinforcing institutions and attitudes that contribute to white supremacy and damage to African-descended people.

"We talk about racism being a deep spiritual malformation that robs us all of our humanity, even those of us who benefit from systems of power and privilege."

One strategy for facilitating healthy discussions around race is Sacred Conversations to End Racism, a UCC initiative that uses a variety of resources – books, documentaries, art and music among them – to explore the stories of African cultures, many of which are unfamiliar to Americans of European descent.

"Because Sacred Conversations is faith-based, we talk about racism being a deep spiritual malformation that robs us all of our humanity, even those of us who benefit from systems of power and privilege," said the Rev. Laura McLeod, pastor of Brookfield Congregational Church and a UCC-certified Sacred Conversations facilitator who last year spearheaded Anti-Racism for Youth, an initiative aimed at empowering the next generation of racial justice advocates. The program received a \$3,000 Catalyst Grant from the Wisconsin Conference.

Laura facilitated the launch earlier this year of a Sacred Conversations series at First Congregational UCC in Eau Claire. About 20 people, all white, are attending the conversations, whose content challenges participants' worldview.

A typical reaction to the material is "I had no idea. Why didn't we learn this in school?" said Shannon Joshi, First Congregational's director of faith formation. Church is the perfect place for such learning to occur, she said, "especially because in so many places in the public sphere there is pushback against the teaching of racism." There's one more quality that makes church the right spot to talk about it.

"At its best, the church is a space where people with varying viewpoints can come together," Shannon said. "The know and love one another. That opens an opportunity: When they disagree, they realize there's love coming from the other end. That doesn't happen in the community or the world anymore."

Trish Zimmerman Teaching EcoSpirituality

By the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Perdeu



DAMASCUS
PROJECT

As Christians, we are taught that the creation is good, endowed by our loving Creator. Creation is entrusted to our care. Yet in our fallen world, exploitation of creation is real. In this time and place we grapple with the realities of climate change and God’s call to creation care in our churches and communities. Many of us need to lay the theological foundations for our work. We seek spiritual sustenance in the midst of climate grief or anxiety. The Damascus Project is fortunate that Dr. Trish Zimmerman, Ph.D, has created a course in EcoSpirituality for our laity and authorized ministers. The course begins in mid-April, in the midst of the Christian season of Easter and coinciding with Earth Day.

Dr. Zimmerman is a member of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Northfield, Minnesota, and a committed instructor in the Damascus Project. She regularly teaches an Introduction to Theology course in the Faith Foundations learning track. Dr. Zimmerman embraces the mission of the Damascus Project and enjoys working with adult learners from across the Minnesota and Wisconsin Conferences UCC. By day, she teaches Religion and Environmental Conversations at Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Dr. Zimmerman says she has been “nourished by decades of studying Christian mystical texts” from which she “draws rescue wisdom from our natural world.” She has written on acute climate grief and models of mystical theology. Her current book is *A Mysticism of Place: Minnesota Biomes as Holy Encounter*, where, she says, she’s especially smitten with the prairie, boreal wilderness and hardwood forests and sites of spiritual wonder.



Participants in Dr. Zimmerman’s EcoSpirituality will encounter wisdom from across the Christian spiritual tradition which will help them encounter—and counter—“The grief of our damage to what the Creator called ‘good’” in Zimmerman’s words.

The Damascus Project benefits from the caliber of instructors we are able to engage, many of whom are firmly rooted from within the Minnesota and Wisconsin UCC. Our instructors allow us to bring high quality learning experiences to our laity and credible continuing education for our clergy, all in the shared context of our Upper Midwestern bioregion. Your gift to the Leadership Forward Campaign allows the Damascus Project to continue to retain gifted instructors such as Dr. Zimmerman.

Learn more about Dr. Zimmerman at stolaf.edu/profile/zimmer20

Thanks to Catalyst, Madeline Island Church Breaks Through Winter Isolation

Two things can be true at once:

Madeline Island is a gorgeous place to live and play during the summer. It can also be a lonely place for year-round residents, especially during the long winters. How do you help them cope with the deep isolation?

If you're the congregation at St. John's UCC in La Pointe, you invite everyone over for Thursday dinner and game nights during the winter months.

It's a familiar role for St. John's, which is the only church on the island that's open year-round. Mass is celebrated by the small Catholic community only in the summer.

Everyone is welcome to eat and play, but the Thursday nights may be especially important to families with children.

"There aren't a lot of things to do here on a regular basis," said St. John's pastor, the Rev. Nathan Holst, who is married and has two children. "We wanted to provide a place to have fun and connect. It's a space they can be that's not just home."

The dinners, which draw 15 or so people each week, are largely underwritten by a \$2,000 Catalyst Grant from the Wisconsin Conference. The grant covers the cost of food and pays the local residents who cook it.

"We are considered the spiritual center of the island," Nathan said. "We support a community garden and have a food shelf that's open all the time. We're known as a center that does outreach and supports the community."

The ebb and flow of life on Madeline Island—not to mention the long, cold winters—makes isolation inevitable. The pastor can testify to that.

"Just personally, it took me a little time to adjust," said Nathan, a Duluth native who arrived at St. John's in August. "The day after Labor Day, the island changes dramatically. For a couple of months, in September and October, there are still some people. Once you get to November and December, it's the year-rounders. It was a period where I felt a little trapped."



Game night at St. John's.

Conversation on Leadership: 'There Are Learning Opportunities, Not Failures'

The Rev. Zayna Thomley, pastor of Middleton Community Church UCC, grew up in "a family of bleeding hearts" that took in 32 foster children over the years. She started preaching as a 14-year-old Confirmation student at Olivet UCC in Columbus. A graduate of Elmhurst University and Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Zayna is married and has a 3-year-old son. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



How do you describe your leadership style?

I'm good at seeing the big picture and taking one step at a time. I work really hard to let people know that not everything needs to be perfect. Churches need to be places where mistakes can be made. There needs to be a sense of experimentation. There are learning opportunities, not failures.

Who are some of the people who have shaped your approach to leadership?

I have been really lucky to be surrounded in every stage of my life to be surrounded by capable people who I call friends. Tapping the wisdom that others bring to the table is where I get my knowledge, wisdom and leadership. It's a messier way to go about work and a slower way, but one I truly believe in.

What's been the most eye-opening aspect of ministry?

Realizing that the most outwardly successful people still have questions about faith and how to move through the world. It works the other way, too: People who society would not go to for wisdom exceed expectations. There's a real value to every human, and part of that value comes with questions and doubts and things we don't know and ways we can grow.

Any advice for those considering ministry today?

Every pastor is going through an existential crisis, and if they aren't they aren't paying attention to the state of the church. I think a lot about what the church offers in the social landscape of America today, and I think it's a remedy to loneliness. Church is intentional connection, and people need that. That's the hope: We have something to offer.

From Gratitude to Planned Gift

By the Rev. Bob Gross, Interim Pastor, First UCC of Green Bay

As my wife and I began conversations about estate planning, I wanted to be sure that I provided for my family. I also thought about my commitment to Christ and wondered whether there was something I could do to support the work of the church.

I considered the five Wisconsin congregations that I have served. Each has been at least as much a blessing to my family and me as I was to them. I have seen firsthand how Faith Formation retreats have enriched the lives of all participants. Through my work with the Southeast Association Church and Ministry Team, I have seen the benefits of the Damascus Project to individuals and congregations. As a member of the Conference Board of Directors, I am aware of the Conference's mission to equip the church for the work of ministry. This happens through the tireless work of the conference minister and associate conference ministers who navigate the alphabet soup of county highways and attend countless video conferences to engage, connect, and support the people and congregations of the Conference.

A gift to each of the congregations, and to the Conference, would help. Yet pooled together with the gifts of others, and invested to sustain the support, it can do so much more. That's why I have decided to list the Wisconsin Foundation UCC as a beneficiary in my will.



The Rev. Bob Gross and Mary Kuenning Gross

Foundation Helps You Create a Will

The Wisconsin Foundation UCC brings resources from FreeWill to help members of our congregations with estate planning.

Using the "Bequests" site, people can create a document to start a conversation with a lawyer or to be notarized as a will. People using the site will be prompted to include a charitable gift in their plans, but one is not required to use the site. The prompts include suggestions to include local congregations, the Conference, United Church Camps Inc., and the national setting of the UCC. Most gifts would be received by the Wisconsin Foundation UCC to support a local congregation or other charitable purpose in the Wisconsin Conference at the direction of the donor.



Learn more about this tool at freewill.com/wisconsinucc.

Rethinking Associations

By the Rev. Franz Rigert



Although I have never sipped wine from a goatskin flask, I've always appreciated Jesus' teaching about not aging new wine in an old wineskin. The old flasks are stretched and stiff and lack the elasticity to withstand the fermentation process.

In the Church, we often assume that great new ideas will flourish in the same old structures—even though new ministries don't easily thrive in old containers. But as Jesus says in Luke 5:39, "When new wine is put into new wineskins, both are preserved."

Last fall, the Wisconsin Conference Board of Directors and Conference staff began to engage questions about the future of one of our wineskins—our regional associations. These questions were prompted by concerns including a lack of volunteer and program capacity and challenges in paying association dues, and larger questions about the need for an association-level governance structure.

In the United Church of Christ, ecclesiastical authority—the credentialing of pastors, for example—is vested in each association. Over the past decade, however, most conferences—including ours—have implemented consistent practices across associations. In the Wisconsin Conference, significant "Church and Ministry" functions now are handled conference-wide, with regional representation.

Since the pandemic, it has become clear that our associations, created nearly seven decades ago for a Church three times our current size, no longer have the volunteer or program capacity to function robustly. The questions we've been wrestling with have produced conversations about letting go of structures that may no longer serve us well and to a prayerful pause for pondering the various ways in which our associational connections are life-giving.

After September's Board and staff retreat, at which we focused on the future of our associations, we assembled a 16-person "think tank" consisting of four representatives from each association. That group met several times, joined by the Conference ministerial staff, to share perspectives and prayerfully discern a way forward. Two processes emerged.

A tactical plan involves engaging association leaders in conversations to explore what we value and want to hold on to, what we can better do through our common Conference life, and—most important—what should we relinquish.

A listening plan invites us listen to God and one another as we imagine new ways of engaging one another in the wider UCC body of Christ.

At this spring's association meetings, time will be dedicated to this type of contemplative dreaming.

This is the question I have been pondering: What if we eliminated antiquated governance structures and all the accompanying perfunctory tasks, and instead invited our amazing volunteers to engage in leadership pursuits that suit their faith passions? In fact, we already have tasted the new wine of such efforts in our justice and supportive ministry working groups.

We need new wineskins for new ways of engaging one another. We are envisioning a nimble organizational structure that could revive the old concept of deacons in a new way – identifying gifted facilitators who would provide leadership to new ministries that arise organically, sharing resources and engaging in rich conversations across the Conference around justice issues or mission initiatives. A web of connections would offer people channels for investing their time and gifts where their passions lead them.

Over the next two months you will have a chance to engage in a conversation about the future of our connectional life. Look for the invitations, and please join in.

Regardless of the decisions we make around associational structures, we are committed to maintaining the staffing configuration currently in place. Pastors and congregations appreciate the work of our associate conference ministers and believe there is significant value and a fostering of trust by maintaining these relationships.

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Wisconsin Conference UCC churches

The core question around any shift we make concerns mission: Will it better position us to effectively and creatively carry out the ministry of the gospel, and will it advance our ability to model the values we share in the United Church of Christ? Although we may gain some efficiencies, there is no economic benefit to these changes. Instead, the fruits would be deeper connections made possible by newly configured ways of connecting throughout the Wisconsin Conference – new wine in new wineskins.

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For more information on the
topics in this newsletter, email
admin@wcucc.org

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