Generosity Forward

Growing ministry through financial sustainability

A Generous Legacy

By Gail Holmes

My mother instilled the importance of generosity in me when I was in preschool. Our home was just a block away from a train stop, and the rail-riding hobos knew through the grapevine that a meal could be found there. A sandwich made from fresh-baked bread, a glass of cold milk, and a warm piece of pie or cake would be devoured on the back porch steps. To this day, I volunteer at the Second Harvest of Southern Wisconsin to assist those who are food insecure.

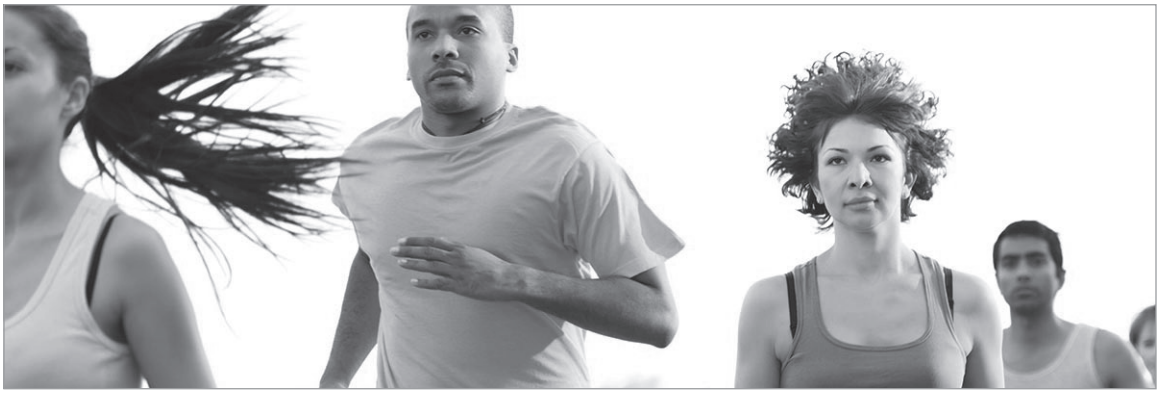
Newly married, my parents moved from Oshkosh to Madison, where they joined Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, where I was baptized, attended Sunday School, was confirmed, and was married. This is my spiritual home—and I'm still a member. Our church family embodies justice and compassion for "our neighbors, all our neighbors" in our prayers every Sunday. Our acts of caring extend to our community, state, nation, and world. Our generosity has led us to be designated a UCC 5 for 5 congregation.

When I was in the seventh or eighth grade, the minister's son and I attended camp at Pilgrim Center, now known as Daycholah Camp. As a young adult, a different minister at church recommended my election to the board of United Church Camps Inc., where I served for a total of 12 years. My family began attending one of Moon Beach's family camps, my children, grandchildren, extended family and friends have been introduced to the faith found in participating and worshiping in God's gift of the outdoors.

My introduction to Freewill through the United Church of Christ led me to write the wishes for my estate into a revocable trust. Of course, my family is included, but I was also able to designate a gift for my beloved church and for life-changing programming at our camps. My life has been blessed in so many ways, and now I can perpetuate those blessings and the joy they bring across generations of God's people. I encourage you to do the same.

You can use the conference's free estate planning tool to create your own legacy plan. Learn more at www.freewill.com/wisconsinucc.

Creation Care 5K
Virtual Run, Walk, Roll



Now is the time for Creation Care. Whether you run, walk, or roll, you can join a virtual 5k race to support Creation Care. Everyone who participates gets a Kairos Call to Action T-shirt. The run takes place between Sept. 1 and Sept. 30. Make the event even better by recruiting friends to run it with you (i.e., set up an in-person run/walk/roll with your friends).

All proceeds support seed grants to congregations for creation care demonstration projects such as solar panel installations, energy efficiency improvements, and pollinator gardens. From 2020 to 2025, the Kairos Call to Action Team awarded $44,545 in 49 grants to 37 congregations in 29 communities across Wisconsin.

Register by Sept. 17 at https://bit.ly/4fcGHPJ or using the QR Code.

Legacy Church Awards Scholarship

Madelin Burow presented Jamison Oldenburg with the Ryan Burow Memorial Scholarship for Outstanding Business Student from the Immanuel Neenah Fund at Wisconsin Foundation UCC.

Catalyst provides a boost as River Falls tackles housing crisis

What's the best way to attack the housing crisis? In River Falls, it's one tiny house at a time in an initiative called Wellspring Village.

The project was hatched by an ecumenical collaborative of six congregations, including First Congregational UCC of River Falls, which received a $5,000 Catalyst Grant from the Wisconsin Conference that will go toward construction of one tiny house. The congregation will raise an additional $15,000 to $20,000.

River Falls, a growing community of roughly 18,000 residents, is a 45-minute drive from the Twin Cities, and housing prices are out of reach for many. "Builders are building more high-income and middle-income homes," said the Rev Chris Myers, pastor of First Congregational UCC. "Anything less than $350,000 is gone." The Neighbor's Place, a nonprofit that connects individuals in crisis with housing and other essential services, doesn't have enough housing resources to meet the demand.

Guests in the tiny houses will be on week-to-week leases. Guests can renew their leases so long as they abide by a set of rules that forbid illegal activity and require that the houses be kept tidy. Guests also must meet personal goals like receiving treatment for substance abuse and pursuing employment. Trained volunteers will check in with them daily, and a licensed social worker will check in once a week. The goal is to provide a bridge to sustainable housing.

Project leaders won over skeptics by correcting misunderstandings of the area's homeless challenge, which differs from what residents see in the Twin Cities, with its homeless encampments.

"The big thing is talking about the face of homelessness," Chris said. "Our clientele is likely to be No. 1, retired women. After that, families. Then, single people. Fourth is high school students. It's a very different face of homelessness."

Organizers anticipate that the first tiny house will be built this summer by high school students and placed in the parking lot at one of the partner churches, though it won't be First Congregational, which doesn't have a parking lot. A second house will follow in the fall. The location on church property is the result of the city's unique interpretation of zoning ordinances, Chris said.

"They decided churches have a natural right to housing—parsonages."

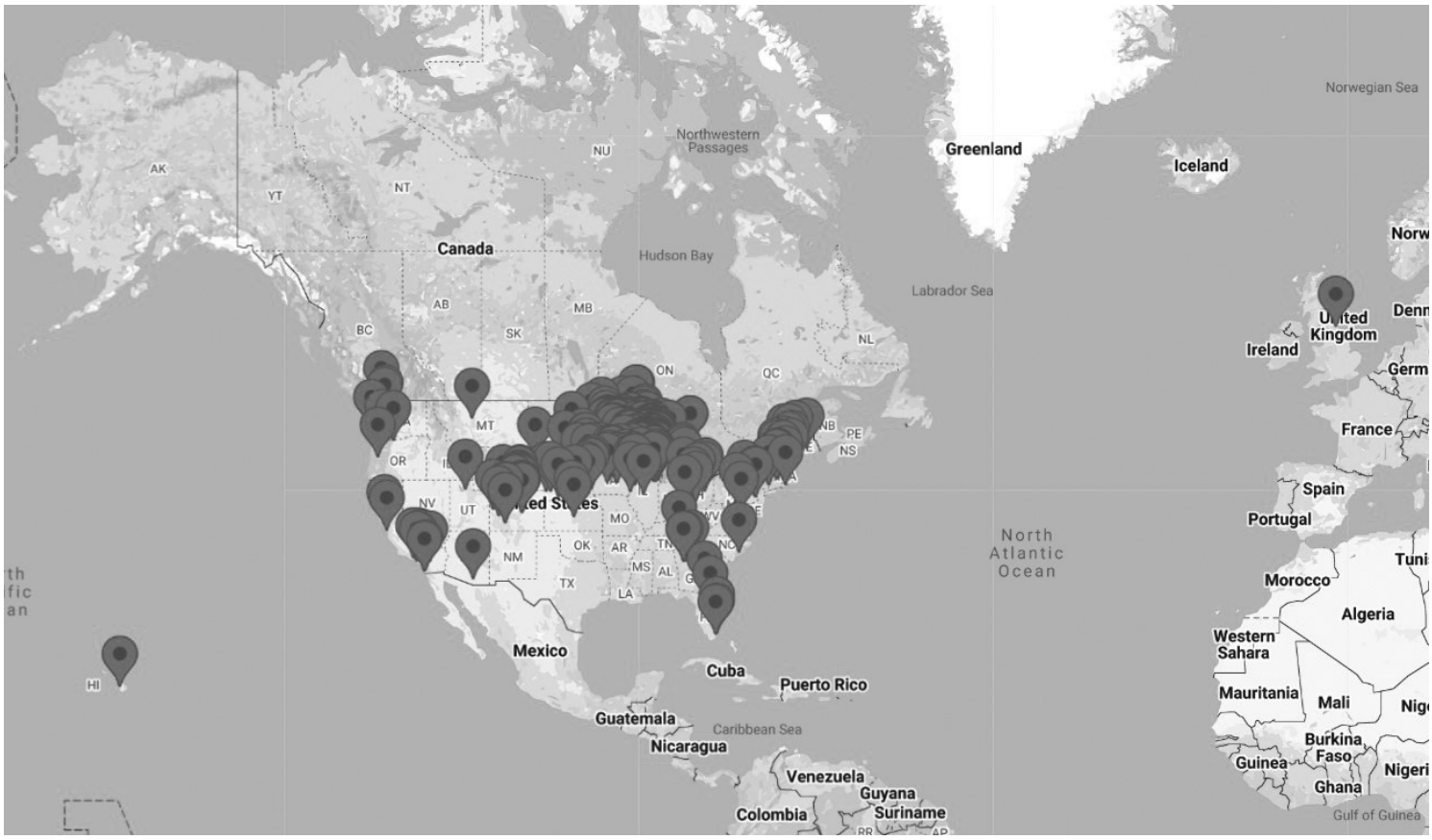
Damascus Project grows to serve an entire denomination

When the creators of the Damascus Project envisioned the regional theological education ministry they were creating for the Minnesota and Wisconsin conferences of the United Church of Christ, the audience they had in mind was primarily lay learners, lay leaders, and those who might be pursuing licensing, lay ministerial standing, or authorized ministry. They imagined these learners would hail mostly from the small and rural churches in the two conferences.

Fast-forward to today, and the Damascus Project indeed serves many of those lay learners and lay leaders from Minnesota and Wisconsin, those pursuing licensing in Wisconsin, and a small group pursuing authorized ministry in the two conferences.

What the creators may not have imagined was how appealing the Damascus Project would be across the wider United Church of Christ. But online learning transcends geographical boundaries, and the Damascus Project is bringing together more and more learners from across the UCC and the Disciples of Christ.

In 2025-2026 program year, the Damascus Project reached learners from 28 of the 33 conferences in the United States—a remarkable increase even from the previous year. Time zones notwithstanding, the Damascus Project engaged learners from the Hawaii Conference to the Maine Conference, from the Florida Conference to the Central Pacific, and many places in between. Over the past year, we have gained some insight into the program's growth.



First, we have taken some steps to raise our profile across the UCC through our email list, social media, and communication with other conferences. Second, we are offering a range of training opportunities that speak to the needs of congregations. And third, we know that we are reaching conferences that do not have their own theological education ministry—nor do they need to if we can work together across the UCC.

The energy behind the Damascus Project will always emanate from Minnesota and Wisconsin, and our focus will remain on the needs of our churches, particularly small, rural ones. But it turns out that many UCC congregations have similar needs, face similar challenges, and ask similar questions. Some of our sibling conferences lack the resources available in Minnesota and Wisconsin that make the Damascus Project possible. We are thankful to be able to live out our covenantal UCC relationships by becoming a learning resource across the UCC.

Our program objectives and our mission of promoting the vitality of congregations and their leaders remain unchanged.

Upcoming Stewardship Webinars

Gen Z and Generosity
September 23, 2026
Register here: http://bit.ly/4ffYoxG or use the QR code.

Most churches can have up to five generations of people present in them. Studies show that there is a diversity in the way generations approach generosity. A "one size fits all" approach to engaging givers will fall short if it does not account for those differences. Join the **Rev. Bonnie Bates** in a conversation about generational variety in giving patterns with a particular focus on reaching members of Gen Z.

Thanking People
October 28, 2026
Register here: https://bit.ly/4wHNXdv or use the QR code.

Gratitude is one of the most powerful stewardship practices. Thoughtful and sincere thank-yous deepen donor relationships and express appreciation that builds trust, loyalty, and long-term support. Join the **Rev. Ruth Edens** in a discussion about strategies to show every donor that they are valued and inspired to give again.

New ACM's calling: 'Helping people through difficult moments'

The Rev. Shannon Joshi, the new associate conference minister for the Northern Region, seems to have been born for the role. She's an Eau Claire native and holds a degree in elementary education from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She eventually found her way onto the staff of First Congregational UCC in Eau Claire Ordained in 2024, she served as associate pastor at First Congregational joining the Conference staff. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you feel called to judicatory work?

Serving on a fitness review team exposed me to judicatory work. The reviews I participated in were intense and in depth, and they developed my skills for judicatory work. I learned that I enjoyed helping people through difficult moments and helping groups of people think innovatively about change.

Talking about change in the church is challenging.

It excites me to work with congregations that engage in the uncomfortable work that involves change. My role at First Congregational put me in position to think constantly about where we are going, and I learned the importance of beginning to think now about where we're going to be in 20 years.

Describe your leadership style.

My style is to walk alongside people through the hard times and joyous times, to be a resource without being heavy-handed, and to be a good listener Then you can help them organize themselves around how they want to proceed forward. I can't do the job for them, but I can help get the bumps in the road out of the way.

Who in particular has shaped your approach to leadership?

Our senior pastor at First Congregational, Mark Pirazinni, for sure. He also encouraged and gave me the freedom to try many ways of living into being a leader – and showed me that how I show up as a leader may need to change based on the situation.

What advice would you give your younger self before pursuing ministry?

The advice would be to give myself grace, lean into mistakes and learn from them, then move forward. And to remember that my style of ministry is the right style as it is.

Early Life Experience Shapes Bequest

By the Rev. Elizabeth Hazel

My experience as a young woman eventually pointed me toward Church World Service when it was time to create a will.

Good jobs aside from teaching were hard for women to get when I was young. I lived very simply, so I could work as a department store salesperson and still have time to write newspaper articles about art. My husband died young, and I had no children and no siblings.

I did housekeeping for a retired, high-profile Harvard professor of Christian Ethics, Dr. James Luther Adams. Once we began to exchange ideas, he asked me to be his research assistant, even though I had neither attended Harvard nor previously taken any course in religion. But Dr. Adams could look straight through the usual indicators like status and track record to see what a person had to give underneath—a quality that requires a very creative way of thinking. That experience led me to think I would like to become a minister and help give people opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise.

In my ministry, I met and heard about people caught in much more desperate circumstances than I had experienced—from real homelessness and renter's nightmares, to gangs at the door and bombings down the street—and I started looking for organizations that help people in the worst kind of trouble to put in my will.

I chose CWS because CWS doesn't get stopped by circumstances others deem hopeless but is constantly looking for out-of-the-box or unthought-of ways to give people and their families a chance to rebuild their lives and become all that God meant them to be. CWS's motto is on my refrigerator: "I believe everyone deserves food, a voice, a safe place to call home."

You can use the conference's free estate planning tool to create your own legacy plan. Learn more at www.freewill.com/wisconsinucc.

What does your love letter look like?

Planning for the future is one of the most selfless gifts you can give. By creating a will, you secure peace of mind for your loved ones and care for them exactly as you intend. Through our partnership with FreeWill, you can write this love letter that lasts for generations in just 20 minutes at no cost to you.

Visit **FreeWill.com/Wisconsinucc** to begin your legacy today!

Questions? Reach out to Rev. Andrew Warner at awarner@wcucc.org.

Already included your local church or the Wisconsin Conference UCC in your plans? Please let us know at partner.FreeWill.com/Record/Wisconsinucc so we can thank you for your generosity.

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

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

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