

Annual Report of the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ

"The lessons of history remind us that the Church at large survives largely because churches endlessly reinvent themselves as they resist pressures that would see them vanish with the morning mist."

This quote from Professors Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis of York St. John University, sums up the Epiphany hope we cling to for the future of the Church in such uncertain times. We enter 2021 with determined endurance, recognizing the toll COVID-19 will continue to take until vaccinations are widely available. Yet, we can see the light at the end of this tragic tunnel, and this prompts a spirit of resilience!

The mission of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ – **to connect, support, and resource local congregations and leaders** – was vital and essential in 2020. Conference staff dedicated considerable time and energy addressing the pandemic. With collaborative support from the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we provided guidelines and protocols as the spread of COVID-19 forced rapid changes in congregational life. Pastors and lay leaders adapted to virtual technology instantaneously, developing creative ways of providing socially distanced worship and pastoral care. While many of us suffer Zoom fatigue, we nevertheless give thanks for the church-saving grace of digital connections.

Through the generosity of many to the COVID Emergency Response Fund, the Wisconsin Conference was able to offer technology, relief and continuing education grants to over 20% of our congregations. We also curated and created various worship resources in order to support weary pastors in need of a Sunday respite. **At the turn of the New Year, three things seem evident:**

- 1) Many congregations have managed to remain steady with a faithful and fruitful witness to the Gospel despite the necessary changes and the social isolation, though congregations that entered 2020 in fragile states continue to struggle,
- 2) there remains deep anxiety and concern as to the recovery and renewal of church life, particularly the unknowns of future in-person worship attendance and ongoing strength of stewardship, and
- 3) nearly all congregations are exploring ways to capture the technology learnings and incorporate hybrid models of worship in a post-COVID era.

Perhaps the hardest hit ministry among us was **United Church Camps Incorporated (UCCI)**. This beloved bedrock ministry of our Conference launched a remarkably successful Matching Gift Campaign called *Keep the Fires Burning* in order to stay funded through the end of the pandemic. The partnership between UCCI and the Wisconsin Conference is strong, and we have every intention of returning to a thriving outdoor camping and retreat ministry. Thanks to all who have so generously responded!

Annual Meeting 2020 took the form of a very abbreviated Zoom Meeting, the highlight of which was endorsing and committing to a 10-year effort to address climate change. **The Kairos Call to Action** is a 10-step earth-saving program designed for church communities and family households. The Conference Creation Care Team has done extraordinary work in launching this initiative, and has set a high goal of engaging half our congregations in this commitment.

In addition to Creation Care, our Wider Church justice initiatives continue as a collective resource to all congregations, empowered by passionate volunteers who help push along these ongoing and important working groups: Racial Justice, Immigration/Refugees Advocacy, LGBTQIA Plus, Break the Silence, Bethlehem Stars, Interfaith Peace, Human Trafficking, and Jail/Prison ministries.

I want to highlight three exciting and evolving Conference ministries:

- **The Supportive Ministries Team** provides resources and tools, wisdom and insight, for these challenging times. Their periodic publication *Tending the Soul of the Beloved Community* is excellent! This team of retired pastors and lay people seek to highlight the important ministries that provide such rich support: Communities of Practice, Coaching/Strategic Conversations, Conflict Transformation, Church Vitality resources, Appreciative Inquiry facilitation, etc.
- **The Damascus Project** now encompasses Faith Foundations (Lay Academy) and courses for the purpose of clergy continuing education, lay person biblical and theological development and offerings that will train those seeking an alternative path to authorized ministry. This joint project with the Minnesota Conference is gaining traction and attracting wide participation!
- **The Development and Stewardship** initiatives, led by the Rev. Andrew Warner, provide valuable education for annual stewardship, capital campaigns, legacy giving, and investment financial management through the Wisconsin Foundation of the UCC (provided by the Pension Boards' Generation Company).

Finally, we experienced some changes in our Conference Staff during 2020. Vicki Graff, longtime Director of Finance, retired this past summer. Tracy Hauge now serves as our only in-house Finance staff person, managing all deposits and expenses and communicating daily with our accounting firm, a non-profit in Escanaba, Michigan, called Community Foundation of the Upper Peninsula. This outsourcing of our accounting brings significant cost savings yet continues to allow us to provide personal service to our congregations. Additionally, in anticipation of the retirement of Deb Simon this coming summer, we have hired a very gifted part-time Annual Meeting Event Planner, Katie Komassa. I must say, we are so very blessed with an excellent, dedicated and gladhearted staff!

Siblings in Christ, keep the faith, and remember the words of Paul:

“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Romans 5:3-5

Submitted with steadfast hope,

Rev. Franz Rigert
Conference Minister