

Reflections from Damascus Project Participants

December 1, 2020

The Damascus Project launched its 2020-21 program year with three fall courses—Leadership Skills, Faith Foundations, and Being a Faith Change Agent. All three drew people from a range of professions, church settings, and even locations around the country. Here are a few of their stories:

Learning to be a better leader — inside and outside of church

Jean Ostrom of New Journey UCC in Hutchinson, Minn., has served in many leadership roles — in her church and community and at work —but a desire to develop more faith-based leadership skills led her to The Damascus Project. “I would definitely encourage others to take the Leadership Skills course, as well as others through The Damascus Project,” she says. “The skills learned in this course will help anyone who takes it to become not just a better church leader but also a leader in their life outside the church.” In particular Ostrom says she enjoyed learning about different personality types as well as different leadership types. “We have all different God-given gifts. Learning to balance our strengths and weaknesses with others with whom we serve will make us better leaders.”

Providing valuable structure to learning

Kris Felbeck, of Northfield, Minn., decided to take the Faith Foundations class because she was looking for a community where she could discuss issues of faith in a structured way. “I am between churches right now and was feeling somewhat isolated due to Covid,” she says. “I have been impressed with the geographic breadth of the group. While many of us are from Minnesota and Wisconsin, there are also people from Illinois and Maryland. I have also been impressed with how seriously many of us are coming to this study. People are not casual!” Felbeck says she would recommend the course to anybody looking to gain biblical literacy and to engage in deep and reflective conversations about theological issues.

Finding a place to study outside of seminary

Kathleen Rogers, Children’s Church and Youth Minister at Christ Reformed United Church of Christ in Middletown, Maryland, says she joined Faith Foundations because she wanted to continue studying but knew seminary was not possible for her. “2 Timothy 2:15 says ‘Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,’ ” she says. “How can I know the truth if I do not study it, not just today or yesterday but daily delving into the Word to be

secure in what I hear from others and what I know from my own learning and God's leading?"

Rogers said she has met wonderful people in her Damascus Project course and found a place where she is free to express her concerns, doubts, and fears without feeling judged. "I would definitely recommend taking this course for anyone who wants to go outside of their boundaries and get exposure to the Word without feeling the overall pressure of a big institution."

Making connections in a new position

Susan Weston first participated in Faith Foundations (formerly part of the Wisconsin Lay Academy) while working at First Congregational UCC in Menomonie, Wis. Shortly after she moved to Minneapolis, she discovered that another former Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy course, Leadership Skills, was being offered virtually through the Damascus Project, a collaboration of the Wisconsin and Minnesota Conferences. Now Director of Faith Formation at Edina Morningside UCC, she says she has appreciated the opportunity to further her learning, connect with others and get to know the Minnesota Conference better by taking the course. "The course has helped me to carve out time 'away' to dedicate to my own learning and reflection," she says. "I also appreciate getting to know the other participants and the meaningful opening and closing worship times."

Weston recommends the course to anyone in a leadership position or thinking about taking on a leadership role within the church or other ministry setting. "The supportive staff, engaged participants, and online format help create an accessible and meaningful learning experience."

Faith Foundations and Leadership Skills will be offered again in 2021-22.

Next up at The Damascus Project:

- [Sermon Camp with Backstory Preaching](#), January 11-February 19. Discover a process that returns the joy to preaching!
- [Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth](#), March 12 & 13. Learn practical ways congregations can support and welcome LGTTQIA+ youth.
- A 40-day Lenten practice on Strengthening Stamina to Counter White Fragility, led by Beth Godbee, PhD. More details coming!