



**Wisconsin Conference  
United Church of Christ**

## **Faith and Learning and The Damascus Project**

*by Rev. Abby Henderson, Director of Leadership Development, Minnesota Conference, UCC*

*Rev. Abby Henderson is the new Director of Leadership Development in the MN Conference. She began her work on October 7, 2019.*

In Paul's second letter to Timothy, the dying patriarch charges his faithful protégé to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it" (2 Tim 3:14).

I really love that line: for me, it captures something of the essence of church. Church is a place we go to receive deep wisdom, wisdom that has fed generations before us and generations to come, wisdom that can anchor us when nothing else will.

My mother tells a story from her childhood that speaks to this: she was a little girl, five or six, sitting in the pews of her congregational (soon to be UCC) church in Connecticut, watching the minister preach. His voice sounded urgent and intense.

My mother turned to her mother and whispered, "Mama, is he mad?"

"No, he's not angry," her mother answered. "He just cares very much about what he's talking about."

"What is he talking about?" my mother asked.

"God," my grandmother said.

Perhaps it goes without saying that my mother cares deeply about God, and she raised a daughter who does too.

*Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it.*

My challenge is that I don't always share Paul's confidence in the reality of firm belief. Indeed, the longer I'm around and the more I learn, the more I know that I don't know,

Yet here's the paradox: when I'm in a community of faith and learning, when I'm exploring and asking questions and challenging myself and challenging God too, I find myself drawing ever closer to the



Holy. For me, “firm belief” becomes less about a fixed and narrow set of ideas, and more about a solid foundation of values, hopes, and sacred covenants that shape who I am and what I do.

In a world which is fractured and unforgiving and without a common sense of purpose and belonging, perhaps you – like me – have found church to provide a kind of deep knowledge that other places just can’t. I’m speaking not just of book knowledge but of a deeper knowing of the things that help us get through the day: love, endurance, and hope.

There’s a Christmas carol called *In Dulci Jubilo* – in Latin it means “in sweet rejoicing,” and we know it as Good Christian Men Rejoice. In the original language, the last line is sung to Jesus, and it goes: *trahe me post te*. Literally, this means, “Drag me after you!” Think of a tractor pulling something heavy behind it. It’s the same word! Jesus, be like a tractor and drag me where I need to go.

Now, I think this is a great image! And it applies to me: there is something about the faithful church that keeps dragging me, pulling me, surprising me, keeping me humble, and teaching me. Teaching me again and again about the mystery of God, and about life itself.

It was my interest in this connection between faith and learning, among other things, that drew me (dragged me?) to The Damascus Project and the position of Director of Leadership Development at the Minnesota Conference. I’m very excited by the potential of the Damascus Project, which seeks to make resources and learning opportunities for anyone who cares very much about God, the church, or simply wants to find out more, be they clergy, lay person, life-long learner or brand-new seeker.

And more than that, I’m proud that the Minnesota and Wisconsin Conferences are investing in new models of ministry formation, leadership development, and theological education. I believe this work is crucial for the church of the present moment and the church of the future.

Tisha Brown and I are off to a great start working together. I look forward to connecting with folks across the Minnesota and Wisconsin Conferences; it’s my hope we can create more spaces for learning, growth, and spiritual deepening, so that we can all continue in what we have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom we have learned it.

*The Rev. Abigail Henderson was raised in New England and made Minnesota her home in 2008. Before coming to the Minnesota Conference, she served as an associate minister and hospital chaplain in the Twin Cities metro. Abby is a participant in the Next Generation Leadership Initiative, a leadership development program of the Pension Boards of the United Church of Christ. She is also a licensed social worker.*