

## **Reflecting on Lay Academy and Damascus Project**

*By Bill Whitford*

I have enjoyed my learning experiences in Lay Academy, and the fellowship with the participants. The books we have read and the classroom experiences are meaningful and have strengthened our bonds to each other and to Jesus Christ. But my own goal has been either ordained or licensed ministry, and I understood that Lay Academy wasn't going to get me any closer to those objectives. I am slowly working through my bachelor degree from UW-Whitewater as a part-time returning student, and if all goes well I will try to attend seminary 2-3 years from now. I am a Member in Discernment, with support from my home church and the Wisconsin Conference and the Southwest Association. When the advance news of the Damascus Project and its focus on curriculum useful on the path leading to licensed ministry, I knew that I wanted to enroll. As Tisha and Vicki will testify, I was the first online registrant, a real eager beaver!

The first course was great, really great. I felt like I was in the kind of class one might have in seminary. It was challenging and required some real soul-searching about discernment and being called. The students and instructor were fantastic. Our assigned book (and there were several other books, too) was Clyde Steckel's little book "Finding the Church | A Personal Memoir". As we got to know him better by reading his story, we were challenged to write a draft of our own faith memoirs, showing how we got where we are now. Thinking about where we are now, and our journey through life to this moment, that is a challenge. We each see the past more clearly than we see the future, and yet that is exactly where God is leading us -- the future.

I am excited and hopeful for the growing list of classes offered by the Damascus Project. I appreciate deeply the planning and design of these classes. They are intentionally focused on helping participants develop themselves in areas which match up well with "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers". These Marks represent opportunities for us as ministers in the United Church of Christ to look at our own skills and strengths and weaknesses, and find areas we can grow and improve. The Marks are a big part of how Members in Discernment and licensed ministers are evaluated. The strength of what the Minnesota and Wisconsin conferences are offering in the umbrella of the Damascus Project is a measurable way for us to learn and grow and demonstrate improvement in precisely these areas. We are all ministers, and classes that help us be better ministers are useful, no matter where your journey is taking you. My walk continues with prayer and laughter and gratitude (and always more homework!).

*Bill Whitford is currently enrolled in Lay Leadership Skills (year 3 of Lay Academy). He has also participated in both Damascus Project Courses.*