



The Damascus Project – a Leadership Development Collaboration

by Rev. Tisha Brown



I do not have to tell you that we are living in times of radical and fast-paced change in our understanding of what it means to do and be church. In our conference, increasing numbers of congregations are turning to part-time and bi-vocational pastors and relying more and more heavily on the ministry of the laity to faithfully be the church in today's context. The farther I go in my DMin studies in Creative Leadership the more convinced I am that nurturing vibrant, spiritually-alive and theologically-grounded leadership is one of the most important and necessary functions for the current and future well-being of the church.

Leadership development and how best to approach this in a deeper and more comprehensive way in our conference has been a frequent topic of conversation among the conference staff and board of directors over the last few years. Therefore, it seemed like an answer to our prayers when Shari Prestemon, Conference Minister in the Minnesota Conference, reached out in the fall of 2016 to inquire about our willingness to work with them to build a leadership development program. As the conversation unfolded, Franz, Shari, the Boards of Directors in both conferences, and I decided to take a chance and work collaboratively on the development of a program that would be based on the best elements of what our Lay Academy offers but that would also have the capacity and the possibility to serve both conferences now and into the future.

In the Spring of 2017, the Minnesota conference hired Rev. Vicki Wunsch to guide their efforts and together Vicki and I developed a team whose charge is to guide and nurture this idea into being. We do not yet have a name for the program but the team that is responsible for shepherding it is calling itself The Damascus Project. The team chose this name after studying the story of Paul's transformational experience on the road to Damascus. As we pondered Paul's transformation, his blindness and return to sight we became convinced that God

is calling us to see with fresh eyes when it comes to equipping leaders for service in God's church and our world.

As it stands now, **the primary focus of The Damascus project will be to provide innovative challenge and response learning opportunities rooted in the UCC's Marks for Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministry.** The long-term vision is to provide lay people as well as licensed and ordained clergy in both conferences with courses that will bring the theological, spiritual and scriptural, and historical richness of the Christian tradition into conversation with the real-life ministry situations and contemporary concerns of our culture and times. In this way we plan to equip leaders to transform lives and communities through the power of God's love and the wisdom of the gospel for our world. We look forward to sharing more information about this exciting project as it unfolds and hope that you will support this effort with your prayers.

The Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy will continue to function as it has faithfully and well for the last 24 years while we develop this new program and see where it leads us. One thing I promise is that we will not take away an effective and beloved program until or unless we are able to offer something even better that will serve the needs of our conference for spiritually alive, theologically astute and biblically-grounded leaders.

I welcome any and all questions about this emerging possibility and look forward to sharing the exciting course offerings of The Damascus Project later this spring. Stay tuned!!

Tisha