



**Wisconsin Conference  
United Church of Christ**

## **Strengthen the Church: Local Impact**

*by Rev. Elizabeth Hazel*

On May 31, we have a national United Church of Christ offering called “Strengthen the Church.” Typically, people in our congregations raise \$45,000 through that offering, of which 50% stays in our Wisconsin Conference. Since the main purpose of the Wisconsin Conference itself is to strengthen the Church and its pastors, 50% of that \$45,000 supports programs like those providing coaching for pastors, conflict resolution, as well as Catalyst grants funding innovative outreach by churches. But the real test is what an organization like the Wisconsin Conference does to strengthen our churches during a crisis like Covid-19.

Usually we think “Strengthen the Church” only means helping a church increase in size. But perhaps a church’s greatest strength is it how it shines a beam into the darkness like a coastal lighthouse, making God’s love visible to a frightened world. The Wisconsin Conference has always given churches the tools to do that, but specifically—how does the Conference keep that light shining during a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic?

As is usual, Conference staff has been trying to surround us with compassion and comfort and good practical sense by coming at this crisis from many different angles—from early warnings, letting us know how to shut our church buildings safely, showing us how to protect ourselves, be separate yet still show love to our parishioners and community, how to conduct both regular and special services online, even Bible studies, providing us with online resources and webinars, UCC videos/songs we can use in our services, the instruments and advice to help churches keep going financially, access to financial aid, but most of all producing forums where churches are able to let others know of the creative ways they are continuing church despite this crisis.

To top it all off, 2020 Catalyst grant proposals are still being received. Each year the recipients of those grants have shown us that there are many ways to be strong, loving, outgoing churches. Whether small or large, churches still doing what Jesus did by dealing with prejudice in our time as he did in his, like the awardee of a 2019 Catalyst grant—First Congregational in La Crosse. Just like the rocking light-house that Colleen Kwong painted on the chalices used for communion at Milwaukee Synod, the strongest churches shine light in the midst of fear and chaos, roll with the waves, and bounce back.

“Strengthen the church” lets us know we are not alone and provides us with many tools to fight the good fight and bounce back. Praise be to God! Please give what you are able to the “Strengthen the Church” offering on May 31. Thank you!

If your congregation does not participate in the Strengthen the Church offering, then please consider making a gift by selecting “donate” on the [Wisconsin Conference website](#).