



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

The Lay Academy: Transforming and Equipping

by Rev. Tisha Brown

Throughout this year, I have been engaged in a Doctor of Ministry study on our Lay Academy program. My purpose for engaging this study was to understand more about the observable impact of this program on the life of its participants. My research question is: *How has the WCUCC Lay Academy transformed its participants and equipped them to live out the call of their baptism and what are the implications for theological education in our region?*



To answer this question, I interviewed sixteen former and current Lay Academy participants to hear their stories of how they have been transformed and equipped. I am very excited to be at the point of sharing with you the brief outlines of what I have discovered through these interviews as I embark on a two-month sabbatical so that I can write up my findings to complete this degree.

How does the Lay Academy transform its participants?

My first key discovery is that as Lay Academy participants move through the program, their faith is enriched and transformed. This transformation takes place as participants deepen their engagement with the ancient wisdom and rich history and traditions of the Christian faith through a structured, ordered course of study in a safe and productive learning environment with mentors and peers who model, guide, encourage and instruct them.

This transformation takes three primary forms:

1. Transformation of identity as a child of God
2. Transformation of belonging to and within the Body of Christ
3. Transformation of the meaning, worth and value of one's life and what one has to offer

Transformed Identity: I am a child of God:

Throughout Lay Academy participants explore who they are in relation to God. This leads to a transformation in the identity "child of God." Transformation of identity is apparent in this quote from a church musician and worship leader describing her experience of singing a favorite hymn.

- *"I didn't have to play it. I didn't have to facilitate it. I just got to be a part of it and it was probably the first time that I really heard that song for me. ... it was the first time I heard the words of that song sung for me and that was really cool."*

Transformed Belonging: I belong to the Body of Christ

As Lay Academy participants grow through the program, they also experience transformation in a sense of belonging and finding one's place and one's voice within the wider body of Christ. This quote from a participant whose grief experience was validated by an instructor reveals this transformed sense of belonging.

- *"I realized other people have had similar types of experiences. ... this grief is in some ways a gift, rather than this horrible, miserable, uninterpretable experience of my life." "My struggles belong."*

Transformed Meaning: I matter, my life has meaning and value

When we know who we are (children of God) and to whom we belong (the body of Christ) we can trust and know that our lives have meaning and value – we matter and we have the privilege and the responsibility to act out that mattering for the good of our world and for the good of the entire body of Christ. This quote points to a transformed sense of life's meaning.

- *"Is THIS it?... Is THIS what I'm going to do for the rest of my life?" "I don't want to be the person that has their work and then their call... I want to be my whole self everywhere. My expectations are higher now."*

How does Lay Academy equip its participants?

The second key discovery has to do with how the Lay Academy equips its participants to live out the call of their baptism. A basic assumption behind the Lay Academy is that ministry is the call and responsibility of all of God's people. Equipping the saints for the work of ministry that builds the body of Christ is the core purpose and goal of the Lay Academy.

There are five key ways in which the Lay Academy equips its participants to live out the call of their baptism:

1. By engaging participants in personal and spiritual growth and development
 - A woman reflecting on how learning about scripture interpretation has equipped her said: *"now when I hear a Psalm I wonder what's the rest of it? and I'll pull it up because I know there's more to it than that. ...What did they leave out and why? It's things like that that are really silly but it helps me know, hey, I learned something. I know something rather than just saying o.k. and nodding along." ..."it's like opening a door and giving me the words and the vocabulary—those pieces to put that part of the puzzle together."*
2. By providing opportunities for people to reflect and build upon their experiences
 - Someone who served as the secretary of a search committee in local church said: *"I found that if I just shut up and listened to what I learned in LA that I can be more of a leader than I think I am."*
3. By providing a well-grounded curriculum that equips participants with theoretical and practical knowledge about being a Christian and a leader that grounds them in the tradition and provides confidence in articulating ones faith stance
 - Someone speaking of what it was like to learn how to interpret scripture said: *"I can develop my own opinions."* Then she described an "aha moment" *"... we can all interpret*

this differently. It can mean different things to different people. ...It's o.k. that I disagree."
(with those in authority i.e. pastors, LA Director etc.)

4. By providing a safe environment conducive for learning. Lay Academy is a place to:
 - *"try out ideas with relative strangers"*
 - *"to encounter God"*
 - *"to stretch beyond my comfort zone in supportive community"*

5. By offering encouragement and support for sharing what is learned with others through opportunities to engage in action and reflection
 - Someone describing how they are sharing what they learned: *"I became more open and more willing to not only talk about my own experience but I also started doing spiritual classes in my local church. I wanted to make this happen for other people. I knew I could do it and that there were other people who would benefit from me doing it."*

I am deeply grateful to the Wisconsin Conference for supporting this work and also for placing the Lay Academy in such high priority. We have a treasure in this program that is crucial not only for the health and vitality of our congregations today but also for the strength and impact of our faith for tomorrow.

The Lay Academy will be accepting registrations for the 2020-2021 cohort starting in April. Perhaps what you have read here is calling to you or brings to mind someone whom you think would benefit from this type of experience. Watch this newsletter for information about when and where to register for the transforming and equipping experience.

Faithfully,
Tisha Brown