Dear friends in Christ:

With the Damascus Project about to begin its sixth year of providing learning opportunities for lay people, authorized ministers and members in discernment, I thought it important to share with you this testimony. It comes from Michael Whiteley, a Member in Discernment and moderator of First Congregational Church UCC in Genesee. Here is his story:



I started hearing about COVID-19 in December 2019, when part of my work involved managing a factory in China. My job in sales and marketing changed dramatically after that: I went from traveling 150 days a year to sitting at home day after day.

When I realized that wasn't going to change anytime soon, I began thinking about my retirement plans. I had always wanted to explore ways to expand my service to Christ, and had thought that would be my focus in retirement. Now, I saw an opportunity to get a head start.

One day, I received an email from the Wisconsin Conference UCC promoting the Faith Foundations course offered through the Damascus project. When I inquired, the director at the time, the Rev. Tisha Brown, whether I wanted become a candidate for authorized ministry through the Damascus Project. After learning more about it, I realized this was God calling me into a new role in service to Christ.

I began Faith Foundations in August 2020 and finished Year 1 in April 2021. It was an awesome journey, and not what I expected. I had figured we would learn what was in the Bible. I had no idea how much I would learn about interpretation of scriptures and theological reflection. I fell in love with the laments of the Psalms and the messages of social justice in Amos and other prophets. I couldn't get enough of it. The rich history, the covenant with God, the various ways God speaks to us -- it was wonderful.

The best part was the diversity of viewpoints in my class, which opened my eyes to how differently individuals read and interpret the Bible. Slowly, I realized how challenging the

different aspects of Christian Ministry can be: pastor, priest, prophet. There was so much more that I needed to learn – but it was so exciting to realize the wide and deep faith journey in front of me.

After Faith Foundations finished, I began exploring what came next. I asked my pastor, David Schnepf, what I needed to do to pursue my desire to become a Member in Discernment. He took me to the Council on Ministry and helped me with the application process. My application was accepted. The following year, I completed Faith Foundations 2 and an intense New Testament study.

Most recently, I completed my third semester of classes through the Damascus Project: Christian Ministry and Pastoral Care. In September, I will begin my fourth semester with the Sunday by Sunday class on preaching.

The Damascus Project has prepared me for ministry and helped me listen for God to tell me where and how God wants me to serve next. It turns out that the pandemic had a silver lining and allowed me time to start a second career sooner than I had hoped – and with greater joy than I had expected. I pray more people will explore and benefit from the Damascus Project – it's truly a blessing.

To learn more about the courses we're offering in the 2023-2024 learning year, and to register, visit the **Damascus Project Network**, an online classroom and community space designed to provide a welcoming environment for learning and conversation. You can also help us spread the word by sharing the bulletin insert (linked below) with members of your congregation.

Questions? Please email me at stephanie@the-damascus-project.org.

In faith,



The Rev. Stephanie Perdew, Ph.D.
Director
The Damascus Project

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