

Lay Academy is Shifting, Too

by Tisha Brown

SH/FT is in the air, and not only in local congregations but at every level of our conference life. As part of my personal commitment to engaging SH/FT and also because I believe we can always be doing what we're doing more effectively, I have identified a few ways the Wisconsin Conference's Lay Academy program can build on its strengths to become even better.



The greatest strength of our Lay Academy is its emphasis on making high-quality theological education available to anyone with an interest in diving deeper, asking questions, and exploring spirituality. As I experienced this particular strength of our Lay Academy ministry in my first year as its Director, I began to wonder what I could do slightly differently so that we would not lose the core of what makes Lay Academy special but could build on its greatest strength. In response to these musings and in conversation with the wise and wonderful Lay Academy Advisory team we are making the following shifts:

1. Years 1 and 2 of Lay Academy are called Faith Foundations. To strengthen our focus on building a firm foundation for faith to grow these two years will now feature two sessions on the Old Testament and two sessions on the New Testament alongside the same two courses on theology, a course on ethics, a course on Christian History, a course exploring Christian spiritual practices and one introducing participants to World Religions.
2. Year 3 of Lay Academy is called Lay Leadership Skills. The shift we're making here is to emphasize the broad development of useful skills for being a leader in many contexts, including in the church. Starting this fall we will be offering five different courses to explore our personality type and how that impacts leadership, family systems theory and its usefulness in congregations, the importance and practice of developing our spiritual gifts, techniques and tools to use in building community, and effective approaches to governance and administration in our local congregations. In future years, this year of Lay Academy will also feature a course on UCC Polity and History.
3. Lay Leadership Skills will also now be open on a limited and trial basis to anyone with a leadership position in their local church without the pre-requisite of attending

years 1 & 2. Lay leaders who have not participated in years 1 and 2 can choose whether to attend just one, two or all five classes. We are still working out the details of how we will do this so if you or someone in your congregation is interested, please contact me for more information ([email Tisha Brown](mailto:Tisha.Brown)).

4. Year 4 of Lay Academy is called Lay Ministry Skills. The shift in this year of lay academy will be to move toward encouraging, facilitating and supporting more practical experience in the skills and art of congregation-based ministry including practice in pastoral care, worship design and leadership, preaching/giving testimony, stewardship, evangelism, mission and Faith Formation. This year is still evolving but in my dreams it will be a hybrid between in-class work and practical experiences related to the class sessions under the guidance of a mentor-pastor.
5. In all four years we will be expanding the options for reflecting on and demonstrating what is being learned through Lay Academy. Starting this fall we will begin to offer Lay Academy participants the opportunity to develop personal learning goals and to demonstrate that learning in ways that will be most useful to them, which might mean writing reflection papers but might also mean teaching classes in their home church, developing resources for congregational use, sharing a testimonial in worship or undergoing a project of some kind related to what they are learning and how they are growing.
6. Folks who have completed at least one year of Lay Academy in the past will also be eligible to sign up for classes on a per-class basis. We will be bringing in some new instructors and offering some different types of courses and we want to make these classes available to all former participants of Lay Academy at a special rate. The details are still being worked out on this option so if you're interested, please contact me for more information ([email Tisha Brown](mailto:Tisha.Brown)).

Our hope is that these small but significant shifts in Lay Academy will further strengthen this already valuable ministry of our conference and that as we live into these changes we will continue to identify ways to shift with emerging needs in our congregations and the world.

A commitment I am making to myself and to the conference is to stay up-to-date on the seismic shifts taking place in the world of seminary-based theological education and to bring the best ideas and models into conversation with our Lay Academy so that we will continue to have one of the strongest and most popular regional theological education programs in the United Church of Christ.

If this sounds wonderfully exciting to you, registration materials for the next Lay Academy sessions are available at wcucc.org/layacademy.



Tisha