

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2013

Vernis Brown recalls how her husband, the Rev. Roy Brown, “always said he would never marry a redhead. Guess what he did?” Roy and redheaded Vernis were married on June 3, 1951. “He preached in the morning and we were married in the afternoon on Sunday.”

The Browns served churches in Minnesota and Wisconsin for 15 years before moving to South Dakota, when Roy was called as pastor of Edgemont United Church, a congregation dually affiliated with the United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church. “Roy said that God called him when he was seven years old. He promised God that he would go to small churches. He kept that promise.”

In the meantime, Vernis was busy as a homemaker raising the family’s 10 children, and active in the churches her husband served. She taught Sunday school, ran a Vacation Bible School, and worked with women’s and youth groups, often hosting meetings in her home. “All this means that you do a lot of cooking and fixing!” she says. The small churches Roy served had no staff other than the pastor. Vernis tells of the family “cleaning the church and getting it ready for anything that was going to happen. We did it all ourselves.”

Roy retired from the Edgemont church in 1990, but it wouldn’t be long before he “got restless.” From 1993 to 1997, he served the United Church of Christ in Dupree and First United Church of Christ in Eagle Butte, until he suffered a stroke. He passed away in 2002, at the age of 77.

Honoring his childhood promise to God had meant that the Browns “lived on very little. The churches couldn’t afford to pay much.” Throughout his ministry, Roy had to hold down other jobs. He drove a school bus, and was a farmer, trapper, hunter, and fisherman as well. The ministerial assistance Vernis continues to receive in the form of a Christmas “Thank You” Gift Check “has really been a blessing and helped us in so many ways.”

Looking back now, Vernis reflects: “Being in the ministry is wonderful. I wouldn’t want to be anything other than a pastor’s wife.” At Edgemont United Church, she remains active teaching adult Sunday school class, quilting, and running the women’s group as its president. “It’s fun and I enjoy the work – God’s work.” And she is a strong supporter of the Christmas Fund, encouraging others to give. “I’m the first one to stand up and say, ‘I’m a recipient. Give generously to help other people!’” And she leads by example, tithing her Christmas check to the Christmas Fund, “because that can help someone else. You cannot out-give God,” she says. “He won’t let you.”

HOW THE FUNDS ARE USED

The generous gifts of UCC congregations and individuals to the Christmas Fund enabled the Pension Boards’ Ministerial Assistance program to provide some form of assistance to impact the lives of approximately 900 persons during the past year.

- **CHRISTMAS THANK YOU CHECKS** to 500 retired UCC clergy/lay church employees.

This special gift at Christmas time reminds these Veterans of the Cross that they have not been forgotten and that the Church is grateful for their service. Gifts totaled \$200,000 in 2012.

- **MONTHLY PENSION SUPPLEMENTATION** for 395 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

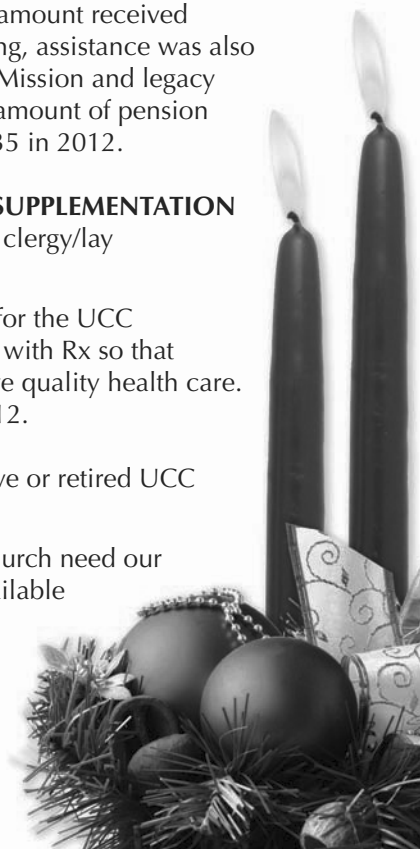
Our retired clergy/lay employees relied on this income supplementation for basic needs such as food, utilities, living and/or medical expenses. Since needs exceed the amount received through the Christmas Fund Offering, assistance was also supported by Our Church’s Wider Mission and legacy gifts to Ministerial Assistance. The amount of pension supplementation totaled \$1,344,635 in 2012.

- **QUARTERLY HEALTH PREMIUM SUPPLEMENTATION** for 228 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

These funds subsidized premiums for the UCC Medicare Supplement Health Plan with Rx so that individuals could afford and receive quality health care. Assistance totaled \$554,208 in 2012.

- **EMERGENCY GRANTS** for 45 active or retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

Sometimes those who serve the Church need our help, and emergency funds are available to assist in covering costs that arise unexpectedly – for example, large medical expenses, or home damage resulting from natural disasters. Emergency assistance totaled \$82,718 in 2012.



The Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2013

When the Rev. David Huels felt God calling him to ministry, his initial response was "Who am I to be a minister?" It was UCC missionary Ray Whitehead who told him, "You are trusting in yourself too much. You're not trusting in God."

David has witnessed first-hand the power of trust. After his conversation with Ray Whitehead, the Buffalo, New York native was accepted to UCC-related Elmhurst College. He drove a dairy truck to put himself through night school, but housing costs were too high, and he ended up returning to Buffalo. He was working at another dairy when he injured his back and had to go on disability. He was out of work for about a year, and visited the unemployment office several times a week looking for work. "Then one day, they asked me if I'd like to go to school, and said, 'we'll help you with money toward tuition for whatever school you go to for whatever rehabilitation program.' I'd been trying to go to school for years!" David went home and said to his wife, Ellen, "Start packing – we're going to Bangor!"

David and Ellen and their three young children "loaded up the old station wagon and got the biggest U-Haul we could find and packed all our worldly goods in it. The bumper was almost touching the ground!"

As a student at UCC-related Bangor Theological Seminary, David served as a supply preacher, then was called to two small, rural UCC churches. One paid him \$25 and the other, \$15. "The farmers would put vegetables in my car," he says.

The Bangor community formed a circle of care when David and Ellen's daughter Nan was born with a birth defect that required cranial surgery. They had no insurance and very little money. The physicians waived their fees, but there were still hospital costs totaling \$7,000. In chapel, a collection was taken to help the family with expenses. Today, Nan is a musician and choir director, "a miracle child," says David.

The Huels family returned to New York State in 1969, and David went on to serve St. Paul's UCC in Wendelville, Eggertsville UCC in Amherst, and Cambria UCC in Lockport. In 1993, he had to have a cancerous kidney removed. "Walking through the hospital after the surgery, feeling sorry for myself, I asked 'Lord, why is this happening to me?' There was a young boy with a bald head from chemo. God said, 'Go into him and tell him that the Lord loves him.' That's what I did."

Twenty years later, David is cancer-free. After 10 years as snowbirds in Florida, the Huelses now live in Tonawanda, New York.

The ministerial assistance they receive is "not just handy, it's a necessity," says David. "The Lord has given me 50 years of being a parish minister – rich, rich years. The Pension Boards and the Christmas Fund have not just been helpful, but have been keeping us alive. God has been super rich to us."

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