

Rev. Joseph M. Copeland

“The benefits are certainly different and better for black ministers now than when I first became a minister,” says Rev. Joseph M. Copeland. “In fact, very few black clergy were enrolled in the pension fund in the Eastern Virginia Association of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ.” At the age of 92, Rev. Copeland has lived through segregation, the Civil Rights movement, and the coming together of the Southern Synod, the Southern Convention of the Congregational Christian Church, and the Convention of the South – the African American Congregational Christian Churches in the Southeast – in the early 1960s to form the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Rev. Copeland was born in 1922 in Portsmouth, Virginia, where he still resides with his wife of 70 years. He received some of his ministerial training at Franklinton Christian College (now Franklinton Center at Bricks), and was ordained in 1954. He recalls the many notable ministers involved in the development of the center and its programs, among them Dr. J. Taylor Stanley, Rev. Dr. Percel O. Alston, Rev. Dr. Judson King, and Rev. Dr. Yvonne V. Delk.

Rev. Copeland has served as pastor of three churches in Virginia. From 1955-1960, he was pastor of Dr. Delk’s home church, New Macedonia United Church of Christ in Norfolk. He then served two churches simultaneously – Zion Christian Church in Suffolk (1957-1992) and Union United Church of Christ in Norfolk (1960-1992). “I retired from both churches at the same time because I didn’t want it to appear as though I was favoring one over another,” he says. He has also served as President of the Southern Conference and as a Trustee of UCC-related Elon College.

Rev. Copeland served on the UCC’s Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ) during the 1971 trial and conviction of the Civil Rights activists known as the Wilmington Ten, among them CRJ’s Southern Regional Program Director Benjamin Chavis. The sentences were commuted in 1978 and the convictions overturned by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1980, but it wasn’t until the end of 2012 that the activists received a pardon from the governor of North Carolina. “I, like many others, found cause to rejoice for we felt that at last, justice had been done,” says Rev. Copeland.

As Interim Associate Conference Minister of the Southern Conference, Rev. Copeland had the opportunity to help the Pension Boards identify persons needing ministerial assistance. “I was instrumental in finding individuals who were eligible to receive assistance but who were not receiving it, such as widows, which meant a lot to me,” he says. “Like me, they are very grateful to the Pension Boards.” The pension supplementation and Christmas “Thank You” gift check that Rev. Copeland receives “means a lot. I am very grateful for it...indeed the Pension Boards has lengthened my days to be able to pay prescription premiums and things of that nature. Praise God!”

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 hundreds of persons during the past year.

- **MONTHLY PENSION SUPPLEMENTATION** for 408 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

Our retired clergy/lay employees relied on this income supplementation for basic needs such as food, utilities, and living and 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 \$1,342,000 in 2013.

- **QUARTERLY HEALTH PREMIUM SUPPLEMENTATION** for 239 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

These funds subsidized premiums for the UCC Medicare Supplement Plan with Rx so that individuals could afford and receive quality health care. Assistance totaled \$508,000 in 2013.

- **CHRISTMAS “THANK YOU” GIFT CHECKS** given to 543 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 \$235,800 in 2013.

- **EMERGENCY GRANTS** for 65 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 \$57,000 in 2013.

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