

A Light Is Drawing Near



Advent Starry Night, 2
by Virginia Wieringa

★ 2014 THE CHRISTMAS FUND for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund

Offering Guide

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“So, open up our eyes to see your light...”

– from the song “Drawing Nearer,” by Christopher Grundy

Grace to you and peace in the name of the One who brings light and life!

In this holy and joyous time of year, our thoughts turn to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

The theme for the 2014 Christmas Fund Offering is **A Light Is Drawing Near**. For 112 years, the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund – one of four Special Mission Offerings of the United Church of Christ – has been a way in which we, as members of the United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations, reflect the light of Jesus Christ in the lives of the many women and men who have so faithfully and selflessly served, and who now find themselves facing unforeseen financial crises.

We are grateful for the generosity of UCC churches and individuals who contributed a total of \$1,545,076 to the 2013 Offering. This enabled the Pension Boards’ Ministerial Assistance program to provide, on behalf of the whole Church,

Pension Supplementation, Health Premium Supplementation, Emergency Grants, and Christmas “Thank You” Gift Checks to individuals and families in need. We ask that you prayerfully consider supporting this year’s appeal to the best of your ability.

We are pleased to provide you with the resources in this **Offering Guide** to assist you in promoting the Christmas Fund in your congregation. Additional resources are also available online at **www.christmasfund.org**.

On behalf of the hundreds of clergy and lay employees and families whose lives were touched by your giving to the last Christmas Fund Offering, permit me to express profound gratitude for your generosity and compassion.

May you experience the life-giving light of Christ drawing ever nearer in your life.

Faithfully,



Michael A. Downs
President/Chief Executive Officer
The Pension Boards–United Church of Christ, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund is a Special Mission Offering of the United Church of Christ that grants us an opportunity to recognize and honor those who have served and continue to serve in lay and authorized ministries of the United Church of Christ.

One of the unique aspects of the Christmas Fund is that the funds provide direct financial assistance to individual UCC clergy and lay church employees – the funds do not support programs or institutions, but people.

During 2013, you provided gifts totaling \$1,545,076 – an increase of about \$80,000 over the 2012 Offering. Thank You!

Our goal for the 2014 Offering is to raise \$1,700,000 for the vital ministries of Pension Supplementation, Health Premium Supplementation, Emergency Grants, and Christmas “Thank You” Gift Checks.

The theme of the 2014 Offering is **A Light Is Drawing Near**. This **Offering Guide** contains many resources to help promote the Offering in your congregation. All of these resources are also available in electronic format at www.christmasfund.org.

We suggest you begin promotion of the Christmas Fund Offering on the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, and receive the Offering on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21. However, there is no one way to receive the Offering, so use whatever dates work best for your congregation. Some congregations, for example, choose to have a “Christmas in July” Offering.

We welcome your willingness to tell the story, share the good news, and ask your friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and congregants to join you in providing support for both the annual Christmas Fund appeal and legacy gifts.

Thank you for the ways you have invited others to give to this vital mission in the past, and for the ways you will do so again this year. Should you have questions, or need more information, please do not hesitate to contact the Rev. Krista L. Betz, Director, Ministerial Assistance, toll-free at **1.800.642.6543, ext. 2716 (212.729.2716)**, or by e-mail at kbetz@pbucc.org.



www.christmasfund.org



<http://bit.ly/PB-UCC>



[@pensionboards](https://twitter.com/pensionboards)



http://bit.ly/PB_2010

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.

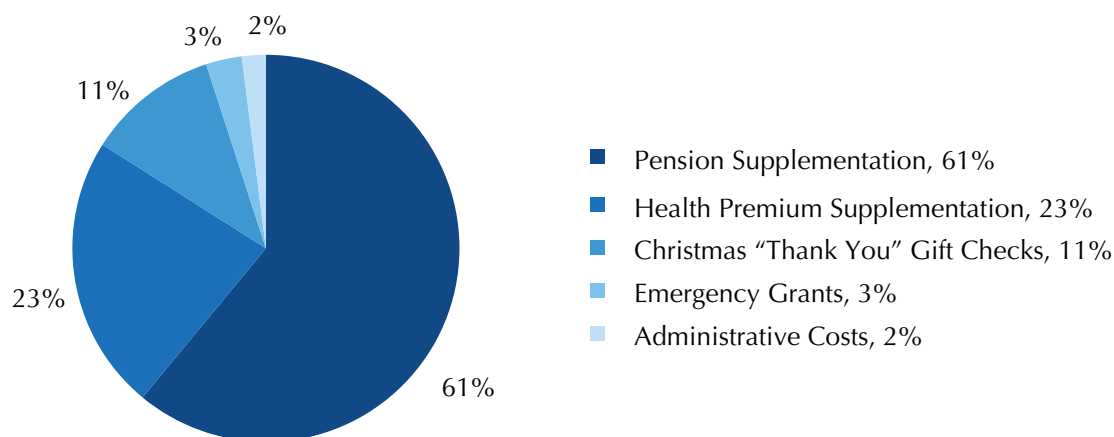
These funds subsidized premiums for the UCC Medicare Supplement Plan with Rx so that individuals could afford and receive quality health care. Assistance totaled \$508,000 in 2013.

- **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.



TOP GIVING CHURCHES TO THE 2013 CHRISTMAS FUND OFFERING

Total Dollars

Naples United Church of Christ
Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ
Evangelical Reformed United Church of Christ
The United Church of Christ in Medfield
St. Peter's United Church of Christ
Emerson Congregational Church
Pleasant Hill Community Church (UCC)
First Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Bellingham
Evangelical United Church of Christ
Plymouth Church, United Church of Christ

Naples, Florida
Arlington, Virginia
Frederick, Maryland
Medfield, Massachusetts
Skokie, Illinois
Richfield, Minnesota
Pleasant Hill, Tennessee
Greeley, Colorado
Bellingham, Washington
Godfrey, Illinois
Seattle, Washington

Naples United Church of Christ in Naples, Florida has led the way as one of the top total dollar giving congregations since 2006. In 2013, it gave over \$23,000 to the Christmas Fund! Thank you to all the givers!

Per Capita Giving

First Congregational Church
Union Congregational Church
First Congregational Church UCC, Haverhill
Rolling Hills Congregational United Church of Christ
Emerson Congregational Church
Apples United Church of Christ
St. Peter's United Church of Christ
Lahuiokalani Ka'anapali Congregational Church
Wai'oli Hui'ia Church
United Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Rockport
United Church of Christ
New Joy Community Church

West Chicago, Illinois
Medora, North Dakota
Bradford, Massachusetts
Salina, Kansas
Richfield, Minnesota
Thurmont, Maryland
Skokie, Illinois
Lahaina, Hawai'i
Hanalei, Hawai'i
Lubbock, Texas

Rockport, Massachusetts
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

These top giving per capita churches gave between \$29 and \$100 per member. How much would your congregation have to give to make this list?

Data Provided By: Yearbook Office, UCC Office of General Ministries.

TIMELINE FOR PROMOTING THE 2014 CHRISTMAS FUND OFFERING

Beginning **November 3, 2014**

- Check your supply of Offering materials – order extras from UCC Resources, **1.800.537.3394** or **www.uccresources.org**.
- Recruit your church's Missions Committee or other group(s) to assist in promoting the Christmas Fund Offering. Plan how to get the word out: newsletters, bulletins, Mission Moments, social media, and worship announcements are just a few possibilities. Resources are available at **www.christmasfund.org**.
- Work with your Missions Committee or Church Council to establish a goal for giving to the Offering in 2014. Look at last year's total and see if you can match and exceed it by 10%, 25%, or more!
- Ask your Pastor and/or church's Worship Team/Committee to promote the Offering by including Christmas Fund worship resources in your worship services. Mission Moments, bulletin inserts, liturgy and ready-to-use PowerPoint slides are available in this **Guide** and/or at **www.christmasfund.org**.
- Consider if there are any small groups in the church – Sunday School classes, youth groups, men's or women's groups – that you can approach and ask for their personal support and/or ask to organize a group fundraiser for the Christmas Fund.

Week of **November 23**

- Begin your 2014 Christmas Fund promotion.
- Display Christmas Fund posters prominently throughout the church building.
- Promote the theme and images of **A Light Is Drawing Near** in your church's communications: newsletters, bulletins, social media, and worship announcements. Resources are available at **www.christmasfund.org**.
- Send a letter and offering envelope to every household on your church mailing list, announcing the Offering date and goal amount.

Advent Sundays (**November 30, December 7, 14, 21**)

- Place additional Offering envelopes at each seat or pew.
- Distribute copies of the bulletin inserts with your weekly worship bulletins.
- Share information about the Offering in worship.
- Invite your Missions chairperson, church moderator, or a retired minister, missionary or lay employee (or their widowed spouses/partners) to share a Mission Moment about the Christmas Fund during worship. Ask them to reflect on what it means to be remembered and cared for as a "Veteran of the Cross" (retired church pastor or lay employee).
- Use the Advent Candle Lighting Resources provided in this **Guide** or at **www.christmasfund.org**. Ready-to-use PowerPoint slides are also available.

Sunday, **December 21**

- This is the day designated to receive the Christmas Fund Offering. Some congregations may elect to receive the Offering on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.
- Make your personal gift to the Christmas Fund and, if possible, give your personal testimony in worship as to why you are supporting this Special Mission Offering.
- Use the Calls to the Offering and/or Prayers of Dedication (available in this **Guide** and/or at **www.christmasfund.org**) when the Offering is received.

January 2015

- Have the Treasurer of the congregation forward the contributions received to:
 1. Your Conference office
 - or-
 2. Directly to:
 - The Pension Boards–United Church of Christ, Inc.
 - Christmas Fund
 - 75 Remittance Drive
 - Suite 1637
 - Chicago, IL 60675
 - or-
 3. The secure online donation site: **www.christmasfund.org**.
- Announce the total gifts received, and publicly thank all who helped make the appeal successful.
- Invite those who have not yet provided their gifts to the Christmas Fund to do so.
- Prepare an article for your church newsletter or website thanking church members and friends of the congregation for their generous response.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCREASING THE OFFERING

Yes, it may be this simple!

Someone (perhaps YOU!) emerges as a leader for the effort. That leader:

- SETS A GOAL with the congregation.
- SHARES information about the ministry that the Offering supports.
- ASKS the congregation to be generous.
- LEADS with his/her personal contribution.
- CELEBRATES the results with the congregation.

ENDOWING A CHRISTMAS FUND GIFT

An increasing number of members who faithfully remember the annual Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund Offering are endowing their gifts. This is a way to make a lasting gift that ensures that those Veterans of the Cross who have faithfully served the United Church of Christ are not forgotten.

It's easy to do. For example, if your annual Christmas Fund gift is \$250, a one-time \$5,000 gift will generate \$250 annually based on a 5% return. If your annual gift is \$100, a one-time gift of \$2,000 will generate \$100 annually based on a 5% return.

There are a number of ways to make a one-time gift:

- Giving cash or stock
- Listing the Fund for Ministerial Assistance – Christmas Fund as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy you no longer need
- Listing the Fund for Ministerial Assistance – Christmas Fund as the beneficiary of an IRA
- Designating a bequest in your will

The standard legal wording for a bequest should read: "To perpetuate my annual Christmas Fund Gift, I give and bequeath to the Christmas Fund of The United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, Inc., incorporated in 1885 under the laws of the State of Connecticut and having an office at 475 Riverside Drive, 10th Floor, New York, New York 10115, the sum of _____ dollars (\$_____) for its uses and purposes."

ONLINE PROMOTIONAL RESOURCES

High-quality materials are provided to help you tell the story of the Christmas Fund and encourage giving. In addition to the resources in this **Offering Guide**, an extensive array of electronic and downloadable resources is available at www.christmasfund.org.

Among the resources you will find on the website are:

- Up-to-date statistics on the use of the Offering proceeds
- Ready-to-use PowerPoint Christmas Fund slides for worship services
- Articles and stories from those who have benefited from the Christmas Fund that can be cut and pasted into newsletters, bulletins, Facebook or Twitter posts, or used for Mission Moments in worship
- Archives of previous years' Christmas Fund worship resources
- A link for secure online giving through PayPal

WORSHIP RESOURCES

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund is a Special Mission Offering of the United Church of Christ that grants us an opportunity to honor those who have served and continue to serve in lay and authorized ministries of the United Church of Christ. The Offering has been received for 112 years. Thanks to the generosity of UCC congregations and individuals, the Pension Boards' Ministerial Assistance program was able to provide assistance and directly impact the lives of hundreds of persons during 2013.

The theme for the 2014 Christmas Fund Offering is **A Light Is Drawing Near**. These worship resources have been developed around that theme in partnership with the Revised Common Lectionary readings for the Advent/Christmas season. Ready-to-use PowerPoint presentations, bulletin inserts, information on how the funds are used, and an archive of previous years' worship resources are available at www.christmasfund.org.

We thank you for your willingness to use these worship resources and promote the important ministry that happens through the Christmas Fund. We appreciate your partnership and generosity, and ask that you prayerfully consider supporting this year's appeal to the best of your ability.

ADVENT I – HOPE Psalm 80; Mark 13:24-37

Lighting the Advent Candle

A lay person or persons may be invited forward to lead the congregation. A leader may say, "Before we light the first Advent candle, please join me as we read together a litany of preparation."

One: When it seems that, no matter where we look, the world is sunk in shadow,
when the sun is darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

Many: Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us.

One: When lighting one small candle and calling it "hope" feels like an act of futility,

Many: Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us.

One: When we need to be reminded that even one small light can begin to warm the shadows around it,

Many: Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us.

One: Because even one small light can assure us that you have not abandoned us,
that even now your light is drawing near,

Many: Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us.

One: As we light this one small candle, O God, we remember that our sisters and brothers all over this world are lighting candles of their own, and that all of us together, with your help, can carry a light of hope into the deepest, most foreboding corners, where you, amazingly, are already at work.

Many: Restore us, O God; may our faces shine with your light.

As the first candle is lit, the congregation may sing "Drawing Nearer" (p. 9). It will be important to teach this before the first time you sing it as a group, or have the choir or a song leader learn it and lead the congregation. Note: An accompaniment edition of the song "Drawing Nearer" is available online at www.christmasfund.org.

Drawing Nearer

Christopher Grundy

E-ven in the midst of all of this, trou-ble on the
eyes to see your light, op - en up our
news, no peace with - in, still there is a light in the
arms, they're clenched so tight - ly, come in like a thief and steal
- dis - tance draw-ing near-er, draw-ing
- our hearts like a ba - by, like a ba
near - er. So, op - en up our E - ven in the
- by.
midst of all of this...

"Drawing Nearer," music and lyrics by Christopher Grundy. © 2014 Hand and Soil Music.
Used with permission. Website: www.christophergrundy.com.

After the candle has been lit and the song has ended, a lay leader may lead this prayer:

One: Let us pray.

Many: **Gracious God, remind us in the events of each day that no matter what the world around us brings, you are our light, drawing ever nearer. With this one small candle, strengthen us to join our own light with yours, and to be ever watchful for your in-breaking realm in our midst. Let this one small candle kindle hope: in our hearts, in our community, and in our world. Amen.**

Call to Offering (for churches receiving the Christmas Fund Offering today)

Every act of faith, every deed of kindness shines a light into the world. During the Advent and Christmas season, in addition to our regular offering, we receive a Special Mission Offering for the United Church of Christ Christmas Fund. We do this to honor those who have let their light shine as clergy and as lay leaders. These women and men have given their time, treasure, and talents for the work of the church, sometimes at great personal cost. In the words of the Rev. Krista L. Betz, the Director of Ministerial Assistance who oversees the Christmas Fund, "Every dollar we give to the Christmas Fund has a person behind it." This Offering helps

active and retired clergy and lay employees who are in need receive quality health care, adequate retirement income, and emergency assistance in times of financial crises. The Christmas Fund Offering is our chance to hold up a light for those who have given much to serve the Church of Jesus Christ, restoring hope that the realm of God continues to draw near. Let us receive this morning's offering.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Please join me in the prayer of dedication.

Many: Glorious God, take these gifts and kindle them with your light. May they bring hope to those who sit in shadow, may they light the way to your intention for all people, and may they be a reminder that you are drawing ever nearer. Amen.

ADVENT II – PEACE Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Lighting the Advent Candles

A lay person or persons may be invited forward to lead the congregation. A leader may say, "Before we light the Advent candles, please join me as we read together a litany of preparation."

One: Voices cry out from the wilderness:

Many: Prepare the way of the Holy One! Prepare for the glory of God to be revealed, and God's peace to rise like the dawn among us.

One: This peace may not be easy, if it means that mountains will come crashing down, and rough places will be ground to dust, to make a way.

Many: Yet God once restored Jerusalem,

One: Gathering exiles in his arms, carrying them home in her bosom.

Many: Peace has happened before.

One: Today, on this second Sunday of Advent, we light a candle of peace, as a sign of the approaching sunrise, a reminder that we are called to prepare the way for peace:

Many: Making a highway through the desert of the world's violence, comforting God's people, speaking tenderly to those who are wounded.

One: And though the way to peace may be hard, peace itself is coming toward us. God comes with might, with an outstretched arm, reaching up, helplessly, from a manger.

As the first two candles are lit, the congregation may sing "Drawing Nearer" (p. 9).

After the candles have been lit and the song has ended, a lay leader may lead this prayer:

One: Let us pray together.

Many: Loving God, you provide a mighty peace, even in the midst of trouble. As we light these candles, place your deep peace in us, that we may help to make a way, risking peace each day, for your sake, and the sake of your realm of *shalom*. We pray this in the name of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who guides us. Amen.

Call to Offering (for churches receiving the Christmas Fund Offering today)

The Hebrew word *shalom* is rich in meaning. It can include peace of mind, world peace, making peace with someone, physical well-being, and even systems of financial justice and compassion. The Christmas Fund, a Special Mission Offering of the United Church of Christ, offers us a way to restore *shalom*. It provides support for retired clergy and lay employees through health premium and pension supplementation, and supports those church workers that have emergency expenses such as after a natural disaster or a large medical expense. This season we are receiving this special offering, in addition to our regular offering. As we consider

our own sense of peace this morning, we are invited to listen to hear if God is calling us to support the peace of those who find themselves in need, having served the church long and well. Let us present our tithes and offerings.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Please join me in the prayer of dedication.

Many: O gracious Giver, accept these our gifts. We have heard your voice speaking peace to us, and now respond, however little or great our resources may be. Bless these gifts, send them forward, that they may help to feed your flock and restore *shalom*. We seek to be your voice, your hands, your feet. May these gifts be acceptable in your sight, as you are the light of peace for us. Amen.

ADVENT III – JOY

Psalm 126; John 1:6-8,19-28

Lighting the Advent Candles

A layperson or persons may be invited forward to lead the congregation. A leader may say, "Before we light the Advent candles, please join me as we read together a litany of preparation."

One: As we look to the great things that God has done for us, we remember:

Many: The Spirit of the Divine Creator is in our very midst, restoring the fortunes of Zion, reclaiming our hearts and this season of Advent, that all may know joy.

One: As we cry out in a wilderness of blaring ads, frantic sales, and celebration that can feel hollow once we get home, we remember:

Many: There is a deeper joy that has no price tag, and a baby boy who seeks to heal the deeper hurt, the real brokenness within and among us.

One: As we draw closer to the light of everlasting joy in this season, we remember and claim for our own lives:

Many: The courage and spirit of John the Baptizer to testify to the light that is coming into the world, a beacon of joy for all those who are searching.

One: We light these candles as reminders of the joy of the Advent story, as well as the delight of retelling that story to others, that joy may abound all the more.

As the first three candles are lit, the congregation may sing "Drawing Nearer" (p. 9).

After the candles have been lit and the song has ended, a lay leader may lead this prayer:

One: Let us pray, reading together.

Many: Source of all light and love, as we anticipate the Light of the World, draw us more deeply to this Season of Advent. Draw our eyes toward the pleasant glow of a life that has depth and meaning. Draw our hearts out into the larger love that is your way in the world. When we are discouraged by the brokenness around us, help us to claim joy daily, as those who are welcoming the Christ child. We pray in the name of the one who is, himself, good news of great joy for all the people. Amen.

Call to Offering (for churches receiving the Christmas Fund Offering today)

Just as John the Baptist made a way for the coming of the Christ, so can we make a way for Christ's ministry to continue. We do this through our daily living, our witness to Jesus' ways of compassion and justice, and through our sharing to support the ministry of others.

In addition to our regular offering this season, our congregation will be sending support to the Christmas Fund. One of the uses of the Fund is at Christmas time, when a small check is sent to retired clergy or their surviving

spouses or partners to supplement income that may not be keeping up with the cost of living. Your gift during this season can bring welcome relief to those who might need a reminder that the church has not forgotten them, and all their years of service.

The Christmas Fund helps others as well, providing assistance to active clergy and lay employees in crisis. By strengthening and restoring them, we help to keep making a way for Christ, for inroads of grace in the world. As we share what we can, let it be in joy.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Please join me in the prayer of dedication.

Many: Radiant light and our eternal joy, because of the gifts you have brought daily into our lives, we dedicate ourselves to giving as constantly as we receive. Bless these humble gifts, along with us, and all those who have served in ministries of peace and compassion. Grant that we may each be bearers of your joy in this season, knowing the Emmanuel promise, that you are always drawing near. We pray in the name of Jesus, coming soon. Amen.

ADVENT IV – LOVE

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Luke 1:26-38

Lighting the Advent Candles

A lay person or persons may be invited forward to lead the congregation. A leader may say, "Before we light the Advent candles, please join me as we read together a litany of preparation."

One: There is a light drawing near – a light that will soon enter this world in the most unlikely of places, by the most unlikely of mothers.

Many: It is a light that promises hope.

One: It is only a faint glow in the distance, like a new star blooming in the night, but it cannot be contained. It will topple empires, heal the sick, and touch the weary heart.

Many: It is a light that brings peace.

One: The light is a promise, the same promise that the angel Gabriel whispered to Mary so long ago: "Emmanuel," as if to say, "The Eternal is right here with us."

Many: It is a light that promises joy.

One: The light is coming, as surely as God's love is steadfast. Its radiant reach is limitless, enveloping each one of us with a love that knows no bounds.

Many: It is a light that brings us love.

One: Today we light four candles, four small beacons in a sea of shadow. May they be signs for us, shining into our everyday lives with a spark of hope for Monday's worries, a warm glow of peace for Tuesday's spats and squabbles, a glimmer of joy for Wednesday's holiday melancholy, and a love that welcomes, like a brightly-lit doorway, at the weary week's end.

As the four outer candles are lit, the congregation may sing "Drawing Nearer" (p. 9).

After the candles have been lit and the song has ended, a lay leader may lead this prayer:

One: Let us pray.

Many: Gracious God, we give thanks for the light that is dawning, even as the days grow so short. Open us to your nearness, to Gabriel's good news. Help us to trust, like Mary, that you are actually and truly with us. Help us to say, "Here we are. Let it be with us according to your word." Breathe upon the spark of your love that is in each of us, until the light and warmth of it can be felt by all those we meet. We pray in the shining name of Jesus. Amen.

Call to Offering (for churches receiving the Christmas Fund Offering today)

We have become who we are today at least in part because of those who have formed us in faith. This includes those clergy and lay employees who carried the light for us, through our childhood, our times of doubt, even through our catastrophes. They paved the way for us and this season, with our Christmas Fund Offering, we are able to show our thanks and support for them, and their tireless years of service. For 112 years now, the Christmas Fund has provided assistance for retired leaders of the church who are in need, as well as active clergy and lay employees who experience a financial crisis. As we receive our regular offering, please consider contributing to the Christmas Fund as well, to help those who gave their careers and their lives to do the work of Christ.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Please join me in the prayer of dedication.

Many: God of gracious love, we bring before you our gifts and offerings, bringing also our thanks for those leaders of the church who have come before us. Bless these gifts, that through them Jesus' ministry may go forward, and church leaders in need may know that they continue to be held in your love and care. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14

Lighting the Advent Candles

A lay person or persons may be invited forward to lead the congregation. A leader may say, "Before we light the Advent candles, please join me as we read together a litany of preparation."

One: Though the holiday lights are bright, shadows remain in the world around us.

Many: Some of us have walked in those shadows. Some walk there even now.

One: Though the warm glow of holiday cheer pushes back the long, looming nights,

Many: Some among us in this world have lived in a land of darkness, and will live there still when the season has passed – a land of violence, tragedy, and grief.

One: Tonight we light our few small candles – a paltry glimmer when we think of the world outside. We light them not to banish the shadows, to somehow vanquish the night, but to change the heart of darkness. For God dwells even there, in the darkness of a barn, deep in the shadows of a stall, down in the pitch black of a feeding trough, with only a faint glimmer of starlight outside.

Many: In that holy darkness, God comes to us and shares our common lot.

One: One fragile, incandescent life, to begin the world anew. "A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Instead, the darkness itself is found to have a holiness all its own.

As the four outer candles and finally the center candle are lit, the congregation may sing "Drawing Nearer" (p. 9).

Encourage those who already know it to lead others for whom it will be new.

After the candles have been lit and the song has ended, a lay leader may lead this prayer:

One: Please join me as we pray together.

Many: God of the shadows, God of the night, God of the dark alley, the deep mine, the basement cell, even the darkness is as light to you. With these candles shining, as signs of your amazing love, we give thanks that in Jesus Christ you have made it plain that you are always drawing near. On this night, and for many nights to come, help us to face the shadows within and around us, and to risk being a light, however small, for the sake of the difference it can make, for the sake of your kingdom coming near, for the sake of the Christ child, a tiny light born among us, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Call to Offering

It might seem unfitting, even crass, to receive an offering on Christmas Eve. Tonight, however, none of our offerings will remain here. Tonight's offering will be sent to the Christmas Fund of the United Church of Christ. For 112 years, the Christmas Fund has supported pastors, chaplains, and lay employees who have served the church, and who find themselves in need, either in their retirement or their active years of ministry.

In this season of gift giving, of light and new beginnings, consider also those who have dedicated their lives to carrying a light into the shadows, calling and helping us to do the same. Let us share tonight, what we can.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Please join me in the prayer of dedication.

Many: Gracious One, Source of all the sacred mysteries that surround us – like the birth of a child, like starlight crossing millions of miles, like the hushed, unlikely togetherness of strangers in a barn – tonight we can see more clearly that everything is a gift. Thank you. Bless whatever small portion of your abundance we return here. Bless us also, that our words, our choices, the way we treat our co-workers, our family, even strangers, may be a gift you are giving to the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, light of the world. Amen.

RESOURCES FOR ANY TIME OF YEAR

Call to Offering

Some pastors retire with a degree of financial security. Many, however, do not – either because they have been willing to serve smaller, struggling congregations, or because of all the times they have given from their own pockets to provide a meal, a hotel room, or supplies for vacation Bible school. The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund supplements the small pensions of some UCC clergy and lay employees and their families, helps some retired clergy pay for health insurance, and sometimes keeps the heat on. The Christmas Fund also supports active clergy and lay employees who have medical emergencies or unexpected misfortunes that require more money than they have in their bank accounts. All told, this Offering contributes more than \$2 million a year in assistance to clergy and lay employees.

We may not be in the Christmas season this morning, but we can still participate in the spirit of this Offering. In addition to our regular offering today, I hope you'll consider giving, to help preserve the dignity of those who have given, faithfully, to the church and its mission.

Prayer of Dedication

One: Will you join me in prayer? Let's pray together.

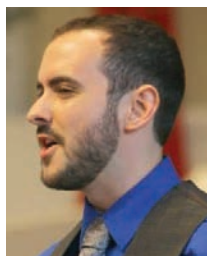
Many: God of the ages, God of the saints, we give thanks for all those who have labored together with you for the sake of your realm coming near – and today, especially, those who lead us in your church. We give thanks also, that we have anything at all to give. Bless what we return to you now. Bless all those who lead your Church as well. Grant them, at the end of their active service, the joy of lives that have meant something, the dignity of a simple life, and a voice that follows them, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen.

AUTHORS OF WORSHIP RESOURCES

Our special thanks to the following students and professor at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri for writing the 2014 liturgical resources. Eden is one of the seminaries of the United Church of Christ and has been preparing men and women for ordained Christian ministry since 1850. To learn more, visit www.eden.edu.



Larissa Forsythe (Advent I) graduated from Eden Theological Seminary in May 2014 and is currently serving at St. Philip's United Church of Christ in St. Louis, Missouri.



Arik Borstad (Advent IV) is a lifelong member of the United Church of Christ, a graduate of Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary, and is pursuing a call to ordained congregational ministry.



Josh Privitt (Advent II) is a 2014 graduate of Eden Theological Seminary, pursuing Associate Ministry with a particular emphasis in Youth and Young Adult Ministry.



Christopher Grundy (Christmas Eve, song, project editor) is an ordained minister, composer, and author, currently serving as Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship and Associate Dean for the Chapel at Eden Theological Seminary. The music and lyrics of "Drawing Nearer" were written by

Christopher and used with permission as copyrighted by Hand and Soil Music.

For more information on Christopher's music, visit www.christophergrundy.com.



Sonya Vann (Advent III) is finishing her Master of Divinity degree at Eden Theological Seminary and is currently a Member in Discernment, preparing for ordination in the United Church of Christ.

ARTIST OF "ADVENT STARRY NIGHT, 2"



Virginia Wieringa is the artist who created "Advent Starry Night, 2," our 2014 Christmas Fund image. In describing the painting, she writes, "The idea of what the sky looked like on the night Christ was born has captured my imagination and blended with the influence of Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night" paintings (yes, there are two). It is a delight to play with the shapes and colors and revisit this theme and look at the topic in a new way each time." Ms. Wieringa was an elementary (pre-Kindergarten through Junior High) art consultant/teacher for over 20 years in the Grand Rapids, Michigan public schools, an art instructor at Grand Rapids Community College for 18 years, and is now a self-employed artist.

To learn more about her or view other pieces of her work, please visit www.virginiawieringa.com.

Rev. Ruth McCarty

Rev. Ruth McCarty's church experience began when she was a child attending a conservative, mission-minded Baptist church in Flint, Michigan. While in college, as a group Bible study leader with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, she accepted a call to missionary service that took her to Cuba and Haiti. She came back from the experience changed. "Although I continued to work in the teaching profession, I continued to be moved by the spiritual experience, realizing that in the words of Peggy Lee, 'There was more to life than this,'" she says. In 1963, she was commissioned as a missionary to Singapore and Indonesia. "I was sponsored by the East Java Synod of the Indonesian Christian Church to design and provide leadership training workshops for teachers of Christian education. I credit this experience with broadening my faith perspective," she says.

Rev. McCarty received her Master of Divinity degree at Western Theological Seminary and was ordained in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in 1982. "I was called by the Douglas Congregational United Church of Christ in Douglas, Michigan as their pastor, holding dual standing in the RCA and UCC," she says. "When I was called by the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ to be the Director of the Conference's Spiritual Renewal Center in Bristol, I dropped my standing in the RCA."

When the Conference closed the Center in 1996, Rev. McCarty took an early retirement and returned to Michigan, where she served as a hospital chaplain, developed the Department of Pastoral Care and was Chaplain at the UCC-related Pilgrim Manor Retirement Community, served as part-time Minister of Pastoral Care at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Grand Rapids, and served as Interim Minister at Newwaygo Congregational United Church of Christ.

The ministerial assistance Rev. McCarty receives in the form of health premium supplementation "enabled me to pay my health insurance premium [and] reinforces the strong sense that the UCC is concerned for my best welfare. I am abundantly blessed by the ways that God has led me," she says, adding, "There are no limits to the grace of God, who will make sure you will always have enough of everything and even a surplus for good works." (2 Corinthians 9:8, The Inclusive Bible)

HOW THE FUNDS ARE USED

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

Rev. Marjorie Peters

Rev. Marjorie Peters* was 55 years old when she entered seminary. Her original goal had been to go to medical school. "In those days there weren't grants and loans like today. I spent 29 years working in four hospitals doing medical research," she says. "When I lost my job, I was under a great deal of stress. My husband was terminally ill. I didn't know what I was going to do." Her pastor suggested that she attend a job-training workshop. "At one point, we were asked what we wanted to do. I don't know where it came from but when it was my turn I said, 'I want to go to seminary for Christian ministry,'" she says. "The more I said, 'No,' the more God said, 'Yes.'" It wasn't until Rev. Peters began collecting her Social Security that she was able to pay off her educational debt.

She was ordained in 1990 at the age of 58. While she was interested in serving only small churches in New England, over the years she also served the Maine Conference on the Commission for Witness Life, and promoted Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM), helping explain its importance and encouraging increased giving. She also served as an elected leader on Association and Conference levels, and on the Church and Ministry Committee. She has been a Sunday School Superintendent, and in retirement, serves as Clerk and Church Secretary in her local congregation.

Rev. Peters was a Congregationalist at the time of the 1957 merger that birthed the United Church of Christ. "I like to tell people that while the UCC was in gestation, I was in gestation as well, since I was pregnant with my second child," she says. "When the merger... was being discussed, my husband was not in favor of it. I ultimately convinced him otherwise."

The pension supplementation Rev. Peters receives "has been an absolute God-send! It made a big difference," she says. "I emphasize to my congregation the importance of the Christmas Fund, that it not only helps retirees but active persons as well. I like giving Mission Moment talks to encourage giving generously to the Offering." The grandmother of four and great-grandmother of six retired in 2003, and continues to provide supply preaching.

A recent lunch with her Annuitant Visitor turned out to be a twofold blessing. "I mentioned an expensive dental problem I was having. Just like that I was referred to [Ministerial Assistance Director] Krista Betz and received a grant to help with my dental work. The Pension Boards is a God-send!"

* Pseudonym

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ADVENT II – PEACE



Rev. Angela Wright

Rev. Angela (“Angie”) Wright and her son were sleeping when a tornado touched down in Birmingham, Alabama last winter, causing a tree to crash through the roof of her house and tearing the roof off Beloved Community Church (UCC), where she is the pastor. Rev. June Boutwell, Southeast Conference Minister, was among the first to call. “Without hesitation, she arranged for me to get an Emergency Grant from the Pension Boards. I didn’t have to apply for help,” Rev. Wright says. The Emergency Grant helped ease the pressure of mounting out-of-pocket expenses, including a \$3,000 septic tank repair.

Rev. Wright is the founding pastor of Beloved Community, a small church started in 2000 with funds from the UCC’s Neighbors in Need Offering. It is a diverse congregation in an inner city that was once the heart of the Civil Rights movement. The church suffered massive water damage, taking three months to repair. Rev. Wright is still living in a rental until her house is renovated. “To be reminded that you are not alone, that you are part of an extended family is a tremendous gift,” she says.

A native of Atlanta, Rev. Wright grew up during the tail end of the Civil Rights movement. Profoundly affected by the racism around her, she felt led to become a community organizer in Alabama after graduating from college. “I did not go to church growing up. But I became active in Greater Birmingham Ministries, an interfaith social service organization, and it opened my eyes to what Christianity was really about,” she says. “Working with people whose work was rooted in faith brought about a transformation within me. After 13 years I decided to go to seminary, although I saw myself being ordained to do social justice ministry.” A large part of Rev. Wright’s social justice ministry is linked to the immigration work she has been doing since 2011.

Rev. Wright, who is bivocational by circumstance, went into ministry late and does not have a pension – a reality that concerns her as more individuals enter ministry later in life, or are called to serve in part-time settings. “I don’t know if people are thinking about what it will mean from a pension standpoint. I have worked for nonprofits my entire life so I do not have a retirement plan.” She is grateful for the Pension Boards and the benefits it provides to those who serve the church. Through financial hardships and the experience of being uprooted from her home, she remains grounded in her faith, quoting God’s words to the prophet Jeremiah, “For surely I know the plans I have for you...” (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV).

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ADVENT III – JOY

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!”

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ADVENT IV – LOVE



IS YOUR CHURCH 5 FOR 5?

MORE THAN 1,200 UCC CHURCHES ARE!

5 for 5 churches are those that fully support Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) – both Basic Support and Special Support, including the four Special Mission Offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need, and The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund. We have been delighted by the response of congregations across the entire Church that have celebrated being 5 for 5, and just as delighted by the many congregations that have asked how they, too, can meet this challenge.

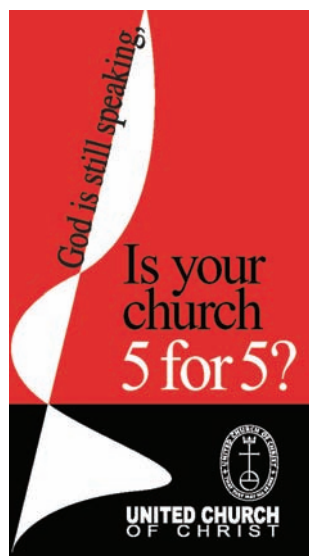
This recognition program says “thank you” to congregations for their faithful and generous giving, and it strengthens their relationship with the wider church. It also helps those congregations teach about mission and the ways their gifts are being used beyond the local church. Finally, the program serves as an incentive and a challenge to other congregations to add one or two offerings – or, in some cases, even to add OCWM Basic Support – to their stewardship and mission efforts.

Order 5 for 5 stickers, posters or promotional materials for any of the specific offerings by calling United Church Resources at **1.800.537.3394** or at **www.uccresources.org**.

5 Ways to Support Our United Church of Christ!

UCC BASIC SUPPORT

Provides funding from congregations for Conferences and the national ministries of the United Church of Christ – Wider Church Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Justice and Witness Ministries, General Ministries, and the Pension Boards.



UCC SPECIAL MISSION OFFERINGS

Part of Our Church's Wider Mission, these four offerings sponsor vital ministries that bring hope to people around the world.

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund

Helps provide pension and health premium supplementation to lower-income retired church workers, emergency assistance to clergy or lay church employees in need, and Christmas “Thank You” gift checks to hundreds of annuitants; administered by the Pension Boards.

December 21, 2014/December 20, 2015

One Great Hour of Sharing

Channels resources for international programs in health, education and agricultural development, emergency relief, refugee ministries, and both international and domestic disaster response; administered by Wider Church Ministries, Global Sharing of Resources.

March 15, 2015

Strengthen the Church

Grows the UCC's future by funding The Stillspeaking Ministry, new and renewing churches, youth and young adult ministries, and lay and pastoral leadership formation – especially among women and people of color; administered by your Conference, Local Church Ministries, and The Stillspeaking Ministry.

May 24, 2015

Neighbors in Need

Supports ministries of justice and compassion throughout the United States, including the Council for American Indian Ministries (CAIM), justice and advocacy, and direct service projects supported by Justice and Witness Ministries.

October 4, 2015

WHERE TO DONATE

Thank you for your gifts to the Christmas Fund. Kindly remit your offerings to:

1. Your Conference office

-or-

2. Directly to:

The Pension Boards-United Church of Christ
Christmas Fund
75 Remittance Drive
Suite 1637
Chicago, IL 60675

-or-

3. The secure online donation site: **www.christmasfund.org**



Promotional resources available at **www.christmasfund.org**.

EXTRA SUPPLIES

Order extra offering envelopes or posters from UCC Resources,
1.800.537.3394 or **www.uccresources.org**.



www.christmasfund.org



<http://bit.ly/PB-UCC>



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http://bit.ly/PB_2010



THE CHRISTMAS FUND

2014 Offering Guide