

Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2011
Isaiah 40:1-11

PROTECTING LITTLE CHILDREN

The children's choir stands on the altar steps, a little awed by the congregation of smiling adults, until given the signal to sing. Then, like the little angels we imagine them to be, their voices rise and out come the familiar words: "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Yes, Jesus loves the little children, "all the children of the world," as another beloved hymn puts it. "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs," said Jesus, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In our congregations, we reaffirm our commitment to love, nurture, and protect children at every infant's baptism. The United Church of Christ takes that responsibility seriously, all the way to its public advocacy in behalf of quality children's television. When Univision, a network of 24 Spanish-language television stations, claimed that its children's programs met the FCC's educational guidelines, our Office of Communication objected. Spanish-speaking UCC members in Cleveland, Ohio, pointed out that Univision's broadcasts were little more than soap operas featuring children. The FCC agreed, and slapped Univision with a multi-million-dollar fine.

That 2007 victory for children's educational television was nothing new for the United Church of Christ, as Peggy Charren can testify. She's the founder of Action for Children's Television, which has been advocating for reform in programming since the 1960s. Confronting the giant networks was quite a challenge for a mother of two children, armed only with indignation about the quality of children's television. So, she turned to our Office of Communication because, as she said, "the United Church of Christ is famous in broadcast circles."

Since children's educational programming is not a money-maker for networks and stations, they have little incentive to abide by the federal guidelines. So it is up to organizations like Action for Children's Television and the UCC's communication ministry to advocate in behalf of quality children's programming.

You can support the UCC's communication ministry by giving to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2011
Psalm 126

The Christmas Fund

“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” (John 1:7-8, NRSV)

John – descendant of priests, prophet, ascetic, kin to Jesus, baptizer – came into the world with a mission. Even before his conception, a heavenly messenger had announced to his incredulous father, Zechariah, the role his child would play in the fulfillment of God’s plan for humankind. Imbued with the spirit of Elijah and echoing the prophesy of Isaiah, John prepared the way, calling to repentance both individuals and the powers and principalities of his day, bearing witness to the coming of the Incarnate Word, the Light of the World.

Like John, our church historically has embodied a prophetic spirit, proclaiming Good News, calling our world to repentance and righteousness as we strive to live as faithful disciples of the One who came to bring light and life to all people. One of the ways in which we have lived out our prophetic witness is by ministering to those in whom we see reflected God’s face – the economically disadvantaged, the marginalized, the sick, the needy.

For more than a century, the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund has been a tangible expression of love and compassion to thousands of individuals and families who have devoted their lives to the service of our church, many at great personal sacrifice. This annual offering, administered by the Pension Boards on behalf of the United Church of Christ, is one of four Special Mission Offerings received each year in the UCC, and supports ministries to low-income retired clergy and lay employees as well as to active clergy facing unforeseen financial crises.

Your contribution to the Christmas Fund Offering touches the lives of the retired clergy couple whose thank-you gift check at Christmas helps them meet an unexpected end-of-year expense; the young minister whose emergency grant will help pay for the mounting bills brought on by her spouse’s illness and inability to work; the widow who served alongside her husband for decades with no compensation for herself, who now receives pension and health premium supplementation; the many individuals – lay and ordained – who receive some type of ongoing ministerial assistance.

We invite you to join us in this ministry so that we may continue to share the light and love of Bethlehem’s Child with those who have served, and continue to serve, the United Church of Christ.

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2011
Luke 1:26-38

The Christmas Fund

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant...the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name.” (Luke 1:46b, 48a-49)

Mary’s jubilant song proclaims a prophetic vision. The Holy One will enter into human history not amid privilege and means, but as the child of a seemingly insignificant young woman whom God has anointed to play a pivotal role in the story of salvation. God’s ways confound the conventional wisdom and defy the accepted order: the powerful are humbled and the lowly, exalted. The child growing in Mary’s womb will be the embodiment of God’s everlasting covenant. The birth of Mary’s child – God’s son – fulfills the ancient promise: “...to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” (Genesis 17:8) Immanu’el – God is with us!

The spirit of Mary’s song is embodied in our church, a community of faithful sojourners seeking to live in faithfulness to the radical, transforming call of Jesus Christ in our lives. The United Church of Christ has a long history of ministering in holy and compassionate love to all God’s people. Some of those in the greatest need today are women and men who dedicated their lives to the Gospel, often in ministry settings that could not afford to provide them with adequate compensation and benefits that would provide for their economic security.

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund, administered by the Pension Boards on behalf of the United Church of Christ, is one of the four special mission offerings received by our church each year. It helps support ministries to low-income retired clergy and lay employees as well as to active clergy facing unforeseen financial crises.

Your contribution to the Christmas Fund Offering touches the lives of a retired clergy couple whose thank-you gift check at Christmas helps them meet an unanticipated medical expense. It provides an emergency grant to a young pastor and his family who have lost their home in a fire. It offers pension and health premium supplementation to a pastor’s widower who served alongside his wife for decades without pay. It is a tangible blessing to the many individuals – lay and ordained – who receive some type of ongoing ministerial assistance.

We invite you to join us, in the name and spirit of Immanu’el, so that we may continue to reach out in love and gratitude to those who have served, and continue to serve, our beloved church.

Christmas Day
December 25, 2011
Psalm 98

TO HEARTS OPEN WITH EXPECTATION

Glittering lights, gifts, boisterous laughter, and seasonal songs echo through the great vending chambers of cities and suburbs--and not just in America. From Korea to Vietnam, India to South Africa, Iceland to Peru preparations for the visit of Santa have preceded this day...for weeks.

In the midst of the holiday rush with harried shoppers swirling about, the Word of the Lord came to her: "What are you doing here, dear one?"

"I'm hoping to find the Christmas spirit. I thought it might be out here somewhere, but I've only found Santa. I feel like I'm the only one left trying to celebrate the real reason for this season."

The Word of the Lord continued, "Go outside and stand on the curb for the Lord is about to pass by."

She stepped through the doors to the sidewalk. In the chilly night air, one storefront glowed with multiple televisions broadcasting images of weapon-draped soldiers half a world away. The Lord was not in the broadcast images or the gaudy display.

A Brinks truck drove up to the curb. Armed security guards moved past her with large quantities of currency from the seasonal take. The Lord was not in the cash harvest.

Next, a stretch limo pulled up. Beautiful, though immodestly dressed women with tuxedoed escorts emerged stumbling slightly...too much holiday cheer before the gala event. Noisy, showy, oblivious to their surroundings, they jostled her as they moved *en masse* to the doors behind her. The Lord was not in their revelry.

Unexpectedly, she was alone. At that very moment the silence of the night was burst by the cry of a newborn. Turning around she saw the young mother comforting her child. The soft, snuggling sounds of a suckling infant...the gentle whisper...filled the air. "How quietly the wondrous gift is given..." she thought. Then she recalled, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.* (John 1:10-12)

"So that's it," she mused. "God doesn't come into hearts because they're filled with inexhaustible expectations. No, the Holy One slips quietly into hearts because they're expectantly open to Christ's coming inviting all the world to change."

Rev. Renee U. Garrett
All Souls Congregational Church
Bangor, Maine

First Sunday after Christmas/New Year's Day
January 1, 2012
Luke 2:22-40

A UCC PRAYER FOR THE NEW YEAR

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh upon your church today. By the power of your Holy Spirit, O God, make the United Church of Christ a people who *remember*, who *give thanks*, who *bless* and are *blessed*, and who *dare to dream* the beautiful dream of justice, healing, and peace that Jesus taught our hearts to long for.

We *remember* our mothers and fathers in faith who listened to your call and worked to build a church with a heart as wide and loving as Jesus' own heart. We remember those whose generosity built our churches, whose vision saw beyond their own horizons, whose hearts and hands toiled in the vineyard of good works, works of justice and peace.

Make new, we pray, our practice each day of compassion and justice close to home and around the world; renew our hunger for peace in a world marked by violence and grief; strengthen the commitment of our leaders to speak truth to power and to work with those who shape our public life so that together we will build a more just society for all of your children.

We give thanks for the gifts *of* ministry and *for* ministry in the United Church of Christ: lift up and inspire the shepherds who care for your flock and the leaders of our churches who serve faithfully, quietly, joyfully, day in and day out.

Give us the energy and foresight of the gentle but persistent gardener who sees the rich harvest in the smallest of seeds: may our churches flourish, large and small, old and new.

Prosper the work of our hands, O God of Grace, so that, moment by moment and day by day, in every generation and every age, we in the United Church of Christ will be salt, we will be light, we will be leaven in this world you love so well. Amen.

The Baptism of Christ (First Sunday after Epiphany)
January 8, 2012
Mark 1:4-11

CRITICAL PRESENCE

Our United Church of Christ Global Ministries define their top priority with two words: "Critical Presence": meeting God's children at the point of their deepest need in a timely and appropriate way. "Deepest need" includes not only material wants, such as food, medicine, and protection from harm, but emotional and spiritual needs, too. Providing "Critical Presence" (or *acompanamiento*, as our Hispanic brothers and sisters call it) sounds like what Jesus did in his ministry, and it defines our mission as his disciples.

There may be practical reasons why we separate our local, Conference, national, and global ministries. But in God's mission there are no such boundaries--it is one, united. That's why we can say that "Critical Presence" is really the top mission priority for the whole United Church of Christ.

Consider our local churches, which meet God's children at the point of their deepest need. Besides providing comfort for the bereaved and hope for the sick, UCC churches are present in their community food banks and homeless shelters, daycare and after-school programs, and accompanying new immigrants and refugees in their resettlement.

And our UCC Conferences provide "Critical Presence" for their constituent churches as together they go through crises and leadership transitions, plan and finance building and rebuilding programs, and in their efforts to be open, affirming, and accessible to all.

Through our national ministries, guided by the decisions of General Synod, our church's witness for peace and justice meets members of our society at some of their points of deepest need. We accompany farm workers in the tomato fields of Florida, residents of communities exposed to toxic waste, and other marginalized people as they struggle to improve their lives.

Yes, "Critical Presence" is a mission priority for the *whole* United Church of Christ.

Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 15, 2012

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

CALLED TO UNITY

It is appropriate that the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday comes just two days before the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. For no one in recent American history did more for the ecumenical movement than the man whose memory we honor tomorrow.

Dr. King did not bring together Christians in order to listen to well-intentioned appeals for church unity. No, he brought them together to confront injustice, and to redeem the promises contained in the Gospels, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights.

The Christian unity that matters, and that we will pray for this week, takes place in courageous action, not eloquent expressions. Again and again in his career as a civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., brought together Christians from a variety of denominations to organize, march, and protest in the non-violent struggle against racial discrimination and segregation. And, in doing so, he brought all of us closer to the realization of his dream, the "beloved community."

This wasn't Christian unity for the sake of unity, noble as that vision may be. Nor did it depend upon Dr. King's physical presence. When he was jailed in Selma, Alabama, the interfaith march he had planned to lead was not called off. Instead, the demonstrators' ranks swelled in his absence. Memories of the pitiless police beatings on the Edmund Pettis Bridge are still painful today. But the outrage they provoked in much of the rest of the country was felt in the halls of Congress, where action on the landmark Voting Rights bill accelerated.

While we honor Martin Luther King, Jr., the man of action, on this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let us also remember, finally, that he was a man of prayer:

Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace;
help us to walk together, pray together, sing together,
and live together until that day when all God's children,
Black, White, Red, and Yellow will rejoice
in one common bond of humanity in the kingdom
of our Lord and of our God.... Amen.

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2012
Mark 1:14-20

INTERFAITH LIFE IN SEMINARY

For centuries if not millennia, religious groups have erected walls around themselves, fearful of being contaminated by another faith. But our Andover Newton Theological Seminary and Hebrew College have not only audaciously torn down those walls, but even actively sought an interfaith relationship. Faculty and students believe that interaction with each other makes them better Christians or Jews, as the case may be.

Like so many prophetic relationships, this innovative program originated at the grass roots, when one student from each school first met. Out of their conversation came the question, "How can we learn more intentionally together?" The idea has since evolved to the point where students at the two schools must have some exposure to interfaith during their studies, both in the classroom and through an annual joint community day. Joint faculty meetings and shared dining facilities also promote fellowship, and other informal contacts among students help build friendships that will last beyond the seminary years.

Student fieldwork is still another area of cooperation between the two schools. A grant from the Henry Luce Foundation funds a fellowship program that enables students from the two institutions to work together on a common project. An interfaith prison ministry project, for example, involved tutoring inmates, but also led to deepening discussions of justice issues from different faith perspectives.

Students from the two faith traditions do not always have the same questions and needs. As members of a religious minority, Jews typically know more about Christianity than Christians know about Judaism. For Jewish students, therefore, immersion in their own faith and its traditions is an important part of their education. Nothing in Hebrew College's cooperation with Andover Newton infringes upon that goal, however. And, of course, their presence on the same campus with Christian students only enhances the latter's appreciation of Judaism. So, even out of differences comes unity.

On this Seminary Sunday, we pray God's blessing upon this experiment in interfaith learning and living.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2012
Mark 1:21-28

EMMAUS HOMES

As we live longer and longer, society faces new challenges to care for our aging population. At the UCC's Emmaus Homes in St. Louis, Missouri, which serves adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities, most residents are now over fifty. Accordingly, Emmaus' vision today is to provide what they call a "care continuum" for their residents, providing housing and services appropriate for older as well as younger adults.

Founded by our German Evangelical ancestors in rural Marthasville, Missouri, more than a hundred years ago, Emmaus Homes soon added a second campus in St. Charles, Missouri. While over half of its 250 residents still live in those facilities, a growing number now reside in group homes in the surrounding communities.

Since mobility issues are prevalent among older residents, one of Emmaus Homes' greatest challenges is finding accessible homes for its residents. Caring for these individuals throughout their lengthening lives not only involves physical improvements, but also additional help from Emmaus' caring staff of five hundred. Unfortunately, the State of Missouri, which provides more than eighty percent of Emmaus' budget, has had to reduce its support, due to spending cuts. To maintain the same quality of life for its residents--care that has won it the highest accreditation-- Emmaus will now have to depend more and more upon the generous support of the individuals, organizations, businesses, and faith communities, including the United Church of Christ, that have nurtured it for so many years.

Those donors know how much Emmaus residents enjoy the rich variety of activities, from games and crafts and classes to outings and parties, as well as the vocational opportunities in the community, including in sheltered workshops. As a resident named Bridget says, "Emmaus means a place to work, a place to live, a home and friends." UCC congregations especially recognize how much pride Emmaus takes in its faith-based heritage, and how it strives to help residents participate in their church of choice by attending worship and other activities. To provide counseling and spiritual guidance to residents, Emmaus employs two fulltime ordained chaplains.

On this Health and Human Service Sunday, we thank God for the people and ministries of Emmaus Homes--a community that, in its own words, is "inspired by our belief in a higher purpose to help adults with developmental disabilities fulfill their potential and their dreams."

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

UCC WOMEN'S WEEK

“How typical,” we might think after reading today’s scripture. “A woman who is sick in bed drags herself up to serve others.”

But wait. Consider a more faithful account: After witnessing an astonishing healing, the disciples lose no time bringing Jesus to Simon’s sick mother-in-law. Jesus comes. He takes her by the hand. He lifts her up. The Greek literally reads “he raised her.” He renews her strength. The fever leaves her. Touched and healed by Jesus, she offers hospitality to her liberator and honored guest. All this took place on the Sabbath.

In this brief story we discover a second miracle. Though women remained mostly unnamed and invisible in Mark’s world, from the very start of his ministry Jesus demonstrated radical openness toward women and their participation in the in-breaking reign of God. Simon’s mother-in-law is the first example of a person serving Jesus. By the end of his gospel, Mark records in 15:40-41 that many women from Galilee followed Jesus and were there at the end when the men fled.

Though the institutional church has not been as receptive, women have found ways to offer their gifts and service. Our own denominational history includes:

The mission board – begun in 1802 to raise funds for the Massachusetts Missionary Society. In 1839 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions received contributions from 680 “ladies associations.”

The religious order – established in 1889, an order of consecrated deaconesses based in service and communal living

The Ladies Aid society – responding to needs closer to home by raising money through quilt and rag carpet-making, dinners, rummage sales, bazaars, fairs, and lectures

The Altar Guild – taking responsibility for care of the church altar

Prayer or support groups – organized in less formal structures to serve the needs of others and share the gospel

Ordained ministry – beginning with the first clergywoman in U.S. history, Antoinette Brown, ordained in 1853

Today across the United Church of Christ we are celebrating the beginning of Women’s Week. This special Sunday offers churches the opportunity to celebrate the many gifts of leadership and service women offer the church. Take a moment to imagine your church without the ministry of its women. Now offer your thanks for their sustaining ministry.

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2012
Mark 1:40-45

YOU'RE WELCOME HERE

Is the glass half empty or is it half full? It all depends, of course, on how you look at it. The same goes for church growth and decline. Almost half of the American people, we're told, have left the church in which they grew up. Some of us in the United Church of Christ consider that bad news, because we see only the folks who are leaving our churches. We don't appreciate the potential newcomers out there. To be sure, some of those who have left the church where they were baptized will not join another. But many others are searching for a new church home. And the UCC could just be what they're looking for.

Evangelism is what we're talking about, but maybe not in the way we're used to. Many of today's "seekers" won't respond to traditional evangelistic methods. But that doesn't mean they won't respond to a different kind of invitation. Think of evangelism as a holistic process that is essentially relational, grounded in the non-exploitive, non-coercive love of neighbor.

In the past, new church members were often expected to "fit in," in several senses of the word. But times and culture change, and mission has always adapted, learning to speak the languages of the people to be reached, affirming them for who they are, not how well they conform, and doing so with Christian hospitality.

The United Church of Christ: Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2012
Mark 1:40-45

Continuing Testament, Extravagant Welcome, Transformed Lives

The United Church of Christ is committed to God's continuing testament in the world, the extravagant welcome of our churches, and transforming lives—in our congregations, our communities, our nation, and the world.

Because we believe in God's continuing testament in the world, we...

Take stands for justice and peace
Proclaim God is still speaking
Communicate the UCC message
Help local churches to call pastors
Vision and plan the future of UCC mission
Teach best practices for pastors and congregations
Nurture formation of those discerning a call to ministry

Because we believe in extravagant welcome, we...

Preach a welcoming and open understanding of Christian Faith
Respond to disasters and human tragedies
Feed the hungry and send help around the world
Reach out to our newest neighbors
Nurture ecumenical and interfaith relationships
Care for our retired UCC clergy and spouses
Foster healthy and vital congregations

Because we believe in transforming lives, we...

Raise our children in faith
Equip leaders for children's and youth ministries
Foster beauty in worship
Support clergy in their ministries
Help start new churches
Revitalize and make older churches accessible to all

All of this we do together in the United Church of Christ, through your generous giving to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration
February 19, 2012
Mark 9:2-9

ASH WEDNESDAY

In our Ash Wednesday service, when we mark people with ashes, we say, “You have come from dust, and to dust you shall return.” I’m amazed anyone comes to a service to be reminded of their mortality and impending death, but they do.

Now, not everyone comes. Some people tell me it is just too depressing.

But I find that the Ash Wednesday service has the opposite effect on me. Leaving the dark sanctuary, I feel a little lighter. The somber music, the provocative readings like this one, and that smudgy reminder that life is short all encourage me to think about what really matters.

I may arrive at the service stressed out about my moth-eaten treasures on earth, but I always leave thinking about how precious life is. My heart returns to that treasure place.

Still, as a pastor, when I first mark people’s foreheads with ashes, I am struck by the heaviness of telling them they will return to dust. These people already have hard and complex lives. Who am I to give them this news?

I remember dreading the moment when I would mark the forehead of a dear parishioner who I knew was dying, but no one else in the church knew.

But in marking her, I realized that we were all dying. And everyone in the church did know, at least that.

There will be no secrets in heaven, just the treasure of being together, and the memory of our common dust.

Rev. Lillian Daniel, Senior Minister

First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn

Glen Ellyn, Illinois

First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2012
Psalm 25:1-10

HELPING SEMINARIANS BECOME "SMART IN THEIR FAITH"

Answering God's call to pastoral ministry has never been easy. But today it is especially hard. Added to the intellectual demands of theological education, the financial burdens of seminary training are now very heavy.

As costs have risen, scholarships and grants have struggled to keep pace. Thus, United Church of Christ seminary students have to borrow more and more money to pay for their educational and living costs. Total accumulated divinity school debt and interest can now easily surpass the annual salary of a beginning pastor, and paying it down can take years.

At Eden, the UCC-related theological seminary in St. Louis, sixty percent of the fulltime students are studying on borrowed money--a figure that is, if anything, comparatively low. Thanks to a grant from the Missouri Department of Higher Education, Eden has launched a debt management program to help those students cut their expenses, thereby reducing the amounts of their loans.

Since it is all too easy to ignore the consequences of borrowing, Eden begins with spreadsheets that spell out the sobering statistics for each student. Confronting exactly how much they must eventually repay for their education opens them to the need to find ways to augment their income, or to economize.

Encouraging students to look at their discretionary spending is another part of the program. Exercises in money management have already resulted in a 10-20 percent decrease in the average amount of student loans. Making sure students are aware of financial aid opportunities available beyond the seminary is still another part of Eden's initiative.

Despite the burdens of debt, students at Eden are staying true to their call to pastoral ministry. Under the circumstances, this is something Caron Strother, who directs the debt management program, hails as "an act of faith." Her job, she says, is to help them become "smart in their faith."