



UNITED METHODISTS OF UPPER NEW YORK



Dear United Methodists of Upper New York,

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, the source of our faith and hope.

During the Advent season, we have the unique opportunity to reflect and celebrate the gifts of love, hope, peace, and joy we receive from Christ every day. I thank God for the many ways Upper New York congregations, leaders, and disciples are witnessing God's healing love in your communities.

In my first year journeying alongside you, it has been a blessing getting to know you, your ministries, and your hopes and aspirations for the future. You've welcomed my family and me as one of your own and shown us the love of Christ through your hospitality.

Amid the unprecedented challenges we faced this year, I experienced United Methodists in Upper New York as a strong and vibrant network of congregations living the gospel and being God's love with our neighbors in all places throughout the region and around the globe through our United Methodist connection missions.

This year, I had the opportunity to visit many congregations in our cities, suburbs, villages, and rural settings, small, medium-sized, and larger, conservative, centrist, and progressive – and in all of them, it was palpable your deep love for God and one another, and your passion to serve your community and make the love of Christ visible in your neighborhoods.

I witnessed powerful ministries changing lives and positively impacting the people you serve.

- I witnessed new people being introduced to the healing love of Christ and welcomed into the church's fellowship through baptisms and professions of faith.
- Disciples intentionally seeking to grow in the knowledge and outward expressions of the love of Christ through small groups and other faith formation and companionship groups.
- Folks faithfully responding to God's call to serve the church. Ministries that are providing the most pressing needs in our communities – food pantries, feeding tables, clothing closets, after-school programs for children, mentoring initiatives for young people in communities at risk, scholarships to help youth advance in their education, hospitality to immigrants coming to our area.
- New faith communities that are reaching to new and different people.

- Individuals and entire congregations rallying and advocating for justice for the most vulnerable.
- Congregations sacrificially giving to our Shared Ministries fund to extend the work of the church around the world so that others can also experience Christ's love and hope in their lives.

This is who we are. This is who we choose to be as United Methodists here in Upper New York - people who love God and respond to God's grace by loving others as Christ loves us. You are living in the spirit of Advent. In Christ's name – you are love, hope, peace, and joy embodied to our neighbors in all places. For all this, from the deepest place in my heart, receive my gratitude as your episcopal leader.

As followers of Jesus, this Christmas, we can share no better gift than the Good News of Jesus. Advent and Christmas are a few of the celebrations in the Christian calendar that provide a natural and more accessible path to share our faith journey with others.

In a recent article, Greg Stier offered simple ways disciples can share Christ this Advent and Christmas seasons (both laity and clergy are encouraged to do this!).

For example, **invite another family to accompany you to your congregation's Christmas Eve service or Christmas program, and perhaps use it as a gospel conversation starter.** If there's ever a time people are pre-conditioned to go to church, it's on Christmas Eve. The Christmas story becomes an excellent entry point to the Gospel message. Maybe have them over for some eggnog afterward and ask a question like, *"So why do you think the story of Jesus' birth is so important to so many churches?"* or *"What was the most meaningful part of the service to you?"*

You can also write someone a personal letter that explains the Gospel in the context of Christmas. There's nothing more powerful than a hand-written, heartfelt letter. A letter is both personal and permanent (because typically, people don't throw handwritten letters anymore!). The book of John was a hand-written letter primarily written to those who had not believed in Jesus. That's why the Apostle wrote, "These things were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that by believing you may have life through his name" (John 20:31).

You can also host a meal and movie night. Invite family, friends, or neighbors for a meal and movie night. People today are craving for relationships and community. You could start with a funny one (A Christmas Story?) and follow it up with a movie that could spark a Gospel conversation over hot cocoa (The Nativity Story?) There's nothing like a meal together and a few laughs to open the door for a deeper conversation about what matters most.

Or just have the conversation. Not to be too simplistic, but maybe, just maybe, it's time to bring it up. Ask the person God has placed on your heart where they are spiritually, what their view of God is, and what they think about this whole "Jesus thing." After all, it's Christmas. His

Name is central to the celebration. Then, after you listen to them deeply, share with them honestly about why you're a Christian. Be upfront about how much Jesus means to you.

Sharing our faith story with others can be scary...but be assured that as you step out in faith and share what Christ is doing in your life, the Holy Spirit will be with you every step of the way!

I pray that in this Advent & Christmas seasons our faith is rekindled so that we all experience the abundant life we have promised through Christ, and our congregations continue to be beacons of hope and joy in the community and the world as we share the good news of Jesus through words and acts of love, mercy, and justice.

I look forward to our ministry together in the New Year and the new and mighty things God will do in and through us as we live the gospel and embody God's love with our neighbors, and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

May you all have a blessed and joy-filled Christmas and New Year celebrations. Amen