

We Thank God by Working for a Just and Loving World

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What Matters to You

*In what ways do you typically express
your thanks to God?*

*Recently, what local or global situation
especially concerns you?*

How might God be calling you to respond

to that concern?

To what other concerns might God be directing you?

What Matters to Us



"To believe is to care. To care is to act." Several years ago, this slogan was printed on bumper stickers to describe the United Church of Christ. Critics found the slogan lacking because it didn't mention God at all. For others close to the heart of the UCC, they knew God is at the heart of, and all wrapped-up in, our caring and acting.

God creates. God loves. God's hope for all that God made is one of a peaceable reign of love and justice. Filled with gratitude for all God's good gifts, God's hope is our hope. Our hope connects with God's hope. We share in both God's vision and work for the entire world.

The Bible describes this vision in a variety of ways that includes paradise (Isaiah 1:6-9) and a peaceable realm (Isaiah 2:2-4), a great banquet (Luke 14:15-24), and a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1-5). We see it in God's delivery of those from slavery and hear it in the justice-loving voices of prophets. We especially see it in Jesus. In him, the realm of God drew near (Luke 17: 20-21). He taught about it, proclaimed it in prophetic stances, and lived it through offering his life for others. We glimpse God's reign even now, and look for the fulfillment of God's love and justice in the future.

Look around and it doesn't take long to discover, however, that the vision isn't fully realized. We see a world where violence, discrimination, and hunger are weapons of greed and fear. We notice those who are ignored are often victims of other's self interest—left in poverty with little hope. We wonder how long the world, our enviro

onmental home, can take the stress and depletion of human want. We scratch our heads in amazement that nations war against nations and religions against religions—destroying the lives of the world's children.

Yet God's vision breaks through in the bold witness of God's people. By God's grace, we extend our hands to others through generous acts of service and compassion. We reach across cultural, racial, and religious divides reconciling ourselves to one another. In solidarity with those who are most vulnerable in our world, we do justice. God comes in moments of healing, peace, and deliverance.

The UCC connects caring and acting, gratitude and giving, peace and justice, service and advocacy in a life of prayer and justice. We don't usually settle for things to just merrily-roll-along when our world is hurting. Instead, we follow Christ's lead and seek to address a [broad range of concerns](#). In 1959, soon after the founding of the UCC, we first outlined the broad arena of global concerns in the "Call to Christian Action in Society" ([LTH](#), Vol 7, article 15, 81-85). Today, we encourage both individuals and congregations to link with both local and [global concerns](#). With thanks to God, we call upon our congregations to [network together](#) and participate in God's reign of love and justice. [Imagine another world is possible](#).

What Matters to UCC Congregations

**Making Connections, God's Justice and a Neighborhood Good News Community Church,
United Church of Christ, Chicago IL**



Good News Community UCC advocates needed jobs through Northside P.O.W.E.R.

How might God speak to you and your congregation through the ministry of Good News Community UCC?

As you hear the story of Good News, what concerns within your own community come to heart and mind?

What is your prayer for Good News UCC and for your own congregation?

Good News Community Church connects vital worship, compassionate service, and political advocacy. Through those connections, God has formed a people faithfully

addressing neighborhood jobs, hunger, violence, and youth empowerment.

According to pastors, Dan Dale and Marilyn Pagán-Banks, Good News began in the 1970's to care for the "North of Howard" neighborhood in northeast Chicago. One of the first acts of the congregation was to found the Good News Community Kitchen. The kitchen continues today, seven days a week, feeding 150 to 220 meals a day, 54,000 meals a year! With the increasing need for meals, however, the directors of the Kitchen discerned that they "weren't solving the problem." Pagán-Banks states we had to "move from charity to justice by addressing systemic issues of jobs, healthcare, and safety."

Northside P.O.W.E.R (People Organized to Work, Educate, and Restore) resulted from this discernment. The group organized the community to watch and act in behalf of the deep needs of the community. They advocated to the local government for job training programs (to be housed at Good News) and for jobs constructing a rail stop in the Howard community.

Good News Community Church also was deeply concerned about the young people of the neighborhood. This came to tragic focus in the shooting of three young people during 2005-2006—two in front of the church. Pagán-Banks describes how the morning after one of the shootings, the congregation gathered for worship outside and declared, "We don't tolerate the death of youth. It doesn't matter who they

are. Their lives are not to be trivialized. It's not OK. They are children of God." Following another shooting, the congregation hosted a press conference with the Chicago Sun Times deploring violence.

In response, the congregation houses the Howard Area Alternative High School where 80 young people, expelled from school, have a safe space and work toward a high school diploma. In spite of the city's delays in developing a youth community center, the congregation continues to push for a needed place of safety and community.

With such acts of compassion and justice, worship at Good News holds the prayers, vision, and hope of the community. "Our worship style," says Dale, "gives people a sense of hope that sustains them in their lives, in the midst of so much. They lift each other up. You know it through our music." They also make sure their children's spirits are lifted each week through an "Affirmation of Faith for God's Kids." At the end of each service, people are called to do something through an "Invitation to do Justice-Action"—which, for example, might include signing a petition or volunteering for service.

The congregation embodies their name, their mission, and **their vision**: Good News! Proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ through transforming ministry to and with our community and our world.

People Matter



Dennis Apuan (left) takes stand for justice and peace.

What's God been doing with Dennis? How would you describe the changes that have happened over Dennis' life?

In what ways does he inspire you and your congregation?

What is your prayer for Dennis? After hearing his story, what might God be saying to you?

"Justice work is hard, you don't know if it's going to work. But it comes back. It works. It brings great joy when I see pain and brokenness healed." This holy healing work of justice is the calling of Dennis Apuan, a UCC member of [First Congregational UCC of Colorado Springs, CO](#) and director of [Pikes Peak Justice and Peace Commission](#).

For Dennis, the seeds of his justice work were first planted in the United Church of Christ of the Philippines. There, as a boy and young adult, he grew to love the church. The seed was nurtured further when he moved to California in his 20's. Because the church had always been a constant gift in his life, he sought out a United Church of Christ in San Diego. There he helped found a new church, was a lay preacher and director of Christian education, and became involved in conference leadership and in Pacific Islander Asian American Ministries (PAAM).

Dennis describes himself in those youthful days as "quiet, soft spoken, absorbing the legacy of justice in the UCC." Inside his heart, however, his calling and his own voice were growing. He loved working with children in the Church School program. Things began to connect for him. Soon he was not only working with the Church School program, but spoke out about children's rights. He called on the San Diego City Council to declare a "Stand for Children Day." Dennis says, "Advocating for children within the church led me to ask questions outside the church. If we really care for our children, how come we don't give funding to school lunch programs? Kids are hungry." By advocating for children, he says, "I began to find a voice." He discovered how a proclamation for Children's Day might lead to legislation, and legislation lead to social change. He was discovering, as he calls it, "a soul-gripping calling on the front lines."

Dennis became involved in other issues of peace and justice. One especially formative experience was when he learned about and advocated the closing of the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. That military training facility had been linked with the training of those responsible for violence in El Salvador, Columbia, and other Latin American countries.

While working for the closing of the School of the Americas, Dennis became increasingly trained in and committed to nonviolent civil disobedience. He went on peace-seeking and fact-finding delegations to the Middle East, India, Latin America, and the Caribbean. "God was calling me to speak out about what I witnessed—being a voice for those whose voices were not being heard."

Dennis seems a bit surprised with the changes in himself since those early soft-spoken, don't upset the waters, days. Rather than avoiding conflicts, Dennis now say

s "When your voice is not popular, then that may be the exact sign that God needs you to speak. We're each to be the best for what God has called us. We're not called to be popular or successful. Don't forsake the work of God's justice."

History Matters



What led the people in these stories to witness to God's justice and love?

How does each story express the joy and the cost of discipleship?

In what ways do the stories challenge and affirm the ministry of your own congregation?

Stop the Chains of Oppression

Senge Pieh

"Give us free! Give us free!" shouted Senge Pieh, a young Mendi African man

before the U.S. District Court in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1839. Senge was one of many Africans imprisoned for a revolt aboard the Spanish ship *Amistad*. Captured as slaves in Sierra Leone, they fought against their captors and were later recaptured off the coast of New London, Connecticut. Their struggle for freedom became a rallying moment for the abolition movement in this country and set the direction for future justice work for our church.

The *Amistad* Committee was founded by abolitionists in Connecticut, including many prominent Congregationalists, to assist in the legal battles for the release of the captured and imprisoned Mendis. Teachers from Yale Divinity School taught English, reading, and basics of the Christian faith to the Mendis while in prison. After two difficult trials and political opposition from President Martin Van Buren, their case was finally heard before the Supreme Court in 1841. The *Amistad* Committee persuaded former president John Quincy Adams to defend their case. Adams argued before the high court that Mendis were never slaves and only defended their freedom. They were acquitted and free!

The committee continued their work by raising funds to charter a ship for the

Mendis to return home to Sierre Leone. The committee's work also continued in the formation of the American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1846 which was a vital center of the abolitionist movement until the Civil War. The AMA made stands in behalf of racial justice establishing more than 500 schools and colleges for African Americans, founding congregations, and advocating for justice in behalf of Asian Americans and American Indians as well.

For more information, see [LTH](#), Vol 5, article 33, 298-305; Clara Merritt DeBoer's on-line article "[Blacks and the American Missionary Association](#)" and Arthur Abraham's "[The Amistad Revolt: An Historical Legacy of Sierra Leone and the United States.](#)"

Two Worlds, One in Christ



Neesima Shimeta took the name Joseph Hardy Neesima.

At twenty-one years old, in 1864, Neesima Shimeta was a samurai, a member of Japan's royal military order. He was also drawn to an understanding of God that he had only read of in Chinese Christian missionary books. He wanted to know more.

That year, he left Japan illegally for the United States. He boarded an American ship to Shanghai, and persuaded the captain to take him to the U.S. Stories of his journey include a port stop in Hong Kong where Neesima sold his samurai sword to raise money to purchase a Chinese New Testament. Upon his arrival in Boston, the owner of the ship, Alpheus Hardy, adopted him. Hardy was a longtime member of American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (a predecessor body to UCC Wider Church Ministries). In gratitude to Hardy, Neesima took the name Joseph Hardy Neesima.

With Hardy's help, Neesima attended Phillips Academy, Amherst College, and Andover Seminary. He was ordained in 1874 and became involved in the Japan mission of the American Board. The new emerging leaders of Japan were from the samurai class, as he had been, and Neesima desired Christianity to reach out to them and others through higher education.

In 1874, Neesima passionately appealed to the American Board for their support of a Western-style Christian school in Japan. He received seed money of \$5,000. Once he returned to Japan and opened Doshisha School in 1875, the Board officially adopted the school as part of their own mission. The school was led by a purely Japanese administration, and soon thirty samurai entered the school and eventually graduated as Christian leaders. Even today, Doshisha University continues as a partner institution with the United Church of Christ.

Throughout his life, Neesima gave thanks to God through lifting up the possibilities of education for transforming God's world. He encouraged Christian higher education beyond that of pastors by advocating the establishment of a medical school and other significant fields of study. His broad understanding of evangelism blended with a love and hope for the social transformation of his homeland, Japan.

For more information, see [LTH](#), Vol 5, article 45, 365-368 and Christian History Institute's "[Issue 48: Neesima Shimeta: A Joseph for Japan.](#)"

They're Not Nuns. They're Deaconesses!



St. Louis Deaconess Sisterhood, 1891. Sister Superior Katherine Haack, seated center.

St. Louis, in the late 1880's, was the new home of German immigrants, many with roots in the German Evangelical Church. Yet there was little medical care for many

of those who were sick, poor, and aging within the city. At a meeting of the St. Louis Evangelical Pastor's Association, an Evangelical pastor asked, "Why can't we train the young women of our church to care for the poor and sick?" Soon in 1889, the Evangelical Deaconess Society and the Evangelical Deaconess Home and Hospital were founded.

Katherine Haack, a trained nurse and widow of an Evangelical pastor, was the first deaconess to be consecrated and named the Sister Superior at the home. At a time when women were often silenced at church, women as Haack were leaders in the administration and guidance of the home and hospital.

The Deaconess movement led to the establishment of over 16 hospitals and institutions for healthcare and nurse training, as well as worldwide work. Through the years at the St. Louis Motherhouse, more than 500 deaconess sisters were trained.

Led by deep faith, the deaconesses demonstrated a life of both compassionate service and profound leadership. They gave distinctive care for those who were sick. Their approach to nursing was loving and spiritual—and professional—similar to the nurture found at home. This contrasted with typical institutional care of that era when hospitals were used as a last resort for the dying. They were also employed in teaching, parish ministry, and city missions. The deaconesses also modeled a bold new contribution by women, a holy calling, which would eventually lead to a more visible and increasing role of women in both church and society.

For more information, see [LTH](#), Vol 5, article 48, 391-403; Ruth W. Rasche's *The Deaconess Heritage* (St Louis: The Deaconess Foundation, 1994) and on-line article "[The Deaconess Sisters: Pioneer Professional Women.](#)"

Bible Matters

What Does God Require of You?

Draw upon prayerful study of the Bible to inspire and guide your congregation's mission for God's love and justice.

Explore Micah 6:6-8. Read the brief passage aloud. You might also sing the passage using the song "[Every Step of the Way.](#)"

Micah 6:1-5 sets the context for verses 6-8 with a brief retelling of God's acts of love and justice for God's people. The well-known snippet of prophetic literature then

takes the form of an early practice in Israel's worship. As laity entered the temple for worship, priests asked a question—a ritual inquiry for preparing for worship. Micah uses this approach to get to the heart of what God desires. Normally, the answer focused on cultic practices as making burnt or sacrificial offerings. Here the answer to what God requires names doing justice and loving mercy. Such a devoted life was the way God's people walk in faith.

Ask questions of your own congregation:

In what ways do Micah's prophetic words demand more from us?

What is God asking of us at this time in our congregation's life?

Examine your congregation's mission statement or the following statement in light of the Micah passage. In April and May 2006, [Good News Community Church UCC](#) in Chicago discerned the following vision statement. How does it express Micah 6:6-8? How do the words of Micah and of Good News Community UCC inspire your personal calling or the calling of your congregation?

At Good News Community Church, we engage in spirit-filled, interactive worship where music plays a central role. Everyone is accepted and welcome to praise God with gratitude and love, while opening ourselves to learn and grown.

Adults as well as youth are encouraged, and prepared, to develop and use their gifts for leadership in this church body, so that we are effective in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to the larger community.

Guided first and foremost by God's word, we strive to enhance our intimate relationship with God through study groups and classes that ensure that our service, praise and prayer are guided by Christ's example.

God is in each and every one of us, and we are called to love one another and live in community. Responding to this call, we create opportunities to deepen our personal relationships with the faith community through fellowship and prayer.

We recognize that as God's children we are empowered and expected to be agents of change, speaking Truth and hope to individuals and families acting to change the powers and systems which create hopelessness, poverty and turmoil in this community.

We work to achieve global peace and justice, living in awareness of our

interconnectedness.

Other ideas for biblical exploration includes becoming familiar with [the biblical foundations for justice advocacy](#) available on-line and the "[Imagine Another World Is Possible](#)" Bible Study.

Prayer Matters

The Examen: Holding the Day before God

Together, both prayer and action draw us deeply to God and to others. Together they form a path toward fulfilling the Jesus' call to "love God" and "love neighbor" (Mark 12:28-34). At the end of your day, when your head's about to hit the pillow, enter a way of praying that recalls God and neighbor. The "examen" is a spiritual practice that holds one's day before God.

Aware of God's presence, enter into a time of prayer, Imagine, recall, or glance at the happenings of your day. Be still and aware of what arises. What makes you grateful? Where was God in the day for you? Who comes to your mind? What situation—including local and global situations—arise? When did you do justice, extend mercy? What feels like a missed opportunity? For whom do you feel called to continue to prayer for? What lingers in your heart that you need to pray for or do something about? Hold all this before God, offer yourself to God's care, and rest.

For more about the examen see *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, as well as Tilden Edward's *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God*.

Worship Matters

Connecting Worship and Justice

The recent "[Worshiping into God's Future](#)" survey looked at worship practices of UCC congregations throughout the denomination. Ten percent of our congregations bring a strong justice orientation to their entire worship experience. These congregations frequently include mentioning of environmental, economic, global, and social justice issues in sermons, prayers, and announcements. They use inclusive language regularly and understand "worship is a powerful place to connect with the world." They also link the sacraments to living justly.

The connection between worship and justice ranked higher in new congregations and highest in African American and mixed ethnic churches. Even with only 10 percent of congregations ranking high in their justice orientation, the majority of our congregations highlighted aspects of justice in worship.

Does worship in your congregation reflect your commitment to and involvement in God's reign of love and justice? What is the content of your prayers, your words, your hymns, and images that are used? What are the connections between worship and justice? How might God enrich each ministry through the other ministry?

God's World Matters

Beyond Coffee Hour

Service matters, and so does taking action. It's nice to serve a cup of coffee to a stranger. When the coffee that is served, however, was produced by workers who receive fair wages for their work, hospitality links hands with justice. Throughout the denomination, UCC congregations are becoming involved in The UCC Coffee Project. The project links our congregations with low-income coffee producing communities in the developing world. The project has helped workers in Nicaragua, India, and the Dominican Republic.

UCC churches have become involved in many ways including serving and selling fair trade coffee, tea, and coffee. Fellowship hour has become even more — a time for participating in God's justice. Link on-line to [The UCC Coffee Project](#) to find out more or to place orders for products.

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