

Christmas Fund Gifts Provided....

The generous gifts of UCC congregations and individuals to the Christmas Fund enabled the Pension Boards' Ministerial Assistance program to provide some form of Ministerial Assistance to approximately 1,600 persons over the past year:

- Christmas "Thank You" Gift Checks were sent to approximately 900 persons in **2010**. Of those who received checks, 20 are over 100 years of age. The oldest person is 107. One person has received Christmas checks continuously since 1976. The 900 gifts total \$270,000.
- Monthly pension supplementation is being provided to 434 persons. These gifts total \$103,401 per month. A significant part of the annual total of \$1,234,344 comes from the Christmas Fund. **(2011 Data)**
- Quarterly health premium supplementation is being provided to 267 families, totaling \$160,608 per quarter. All of the funding for health premium supplementation is derived from the Christmas Fund. **(2011 Data)**
- Emergency Grants totaling \$38,163.35 were provided to 24 individuals and families from January 1 through July 31, 2011.

These statistics reflect annualized projections as of July 31, 2011. The numbers of persons receiving assistance and the totals of assistance payments fluctuate on a monthly basis.

Betty Spooner, originally from Kentucky, was working on a teaching degree when she met Willard Strong. His family had owned farmland for five generations, and he had every expectation of carrying on the family business. He had served with honor in World War II and, with the help of the GI Bill, attended college. They were married in 1948.

Four years later, it became clear that farming could not support their growing family. Reluctantly, Willard sought other means of making a living. He returned to school to complete his undergraduate degree at Youngstown State and went on to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, commonly known as "Methesco." After ordination, he served a number of churches in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Willard's specialty became small, underserved churches; there were times when he served three churches simultaneously.

Both of the Strongs loved music. Betty spent many happy hours directing musicals with youth groups, singing in the choir, and working with women's clubs. In his spare time, Willard created art; his painting of the Last Supper is on display at Hartsgrove Community UCC in Hartsgrove, Ohio, where he was ordained.

After Willard's retirement in 1989, the couple spent nearly 20 years traveling and visiting family. Willard continued to paint, and sometimes still performed ministerial duties. However, in 2009, he succumbed to pancreatic cancer.

Today, Betty lives in Maine in an apartment attached to her daughter's home. She still travels, but not as much as she used to. "The hardest part about being older is not being able to do what I once did at the church, and giving up more and more things." She is grateful for the Ministerial Assistance grant checks she has received over the years. "The grants always help," she says. "With six kids and Willard's career in small churches, the budget was tight. Any money was always immediately put to good use, to pay bills or things the children needed, and tithing."

Betty says she witnesses God at work in most things, "... including the Christmas Fund. If someone sees a retired minister or minister's [spouse] not able to get along, with small parishes and not enough work, who do the work of keeping small churches alive, they [are] deserving."



The First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011