



Wisconsin Gospellers Nov 2019 Newsletter

UCC forgives millions in debt in Chicago, announces national effort

Written by Hans Holznagel on October 21, 2019

Almost 6,000 families on the South Side of Chicago have had their medical debt forgiven through a collaborative effort of local, Conference and national bodies of the United Church of Christ and other partners. UCC leaders announced Oct. 20 that church donations have wiped out \$5.3 million in medical debt for 5,888 Chicago families. They invited participation in a similar national effort being planned for Giving Tuesday, Dec. 3.

Thanks to a campaign led by UCC Justice and Local Church Ministries and Chicago's Trinity UCC, qualifying residents in three Chicago neighborhoods are now receiving letters telling them that their medical debt, averaging \$907, has been forgiven. The Rev. Traci Blackmon, UCC associate general minister for JLCM, and The Rev. Otis Moss III, Trinity's senior pastor, teamed up to initiate the project earlier this year and enlist other contributors inside and beyond the UCC.



In a Sunday-afternoon news conference and celebration at Trinity, church leaders said the debt was purchased in September in three communities identified by ZIP codes: 60621, 60628 and 60636. The church bodies raised \$38,000 over the summer and then worked with the New York-based nonprofit RIP Medical Debt to buy the debt at pennies on the dollar. In addition to lead gifts from Trinity and JLCM, generous contributions came from the UCC Illinois Conference, St. Pauls UCC in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, Covenant UCC of South Holland, Ill., and The Leaders Network, a consortium of Baptist churches serving Chicago's west side neighborhoods.

"Today we thank all the supporters of this beautiful vision," Moss said. "Because of your generosity, thousands of families in Chicago will now be free to pursue dreams and celebrate this holiday season without the weight of medical debt."

The urban neighborhoods were chosen because of their demographics, said the Rev. Traci Blackmon, the UCC's national associate general minister for Justice and Local Church Ministries. Qualifying debtors were those earning less than two times the federal poverty level; in financial hardship, with out-of-pocket expenses that are 5% or more of their annual income; or facing insolvency, with debts greater than assets.

"When medical debt piles up, families have to make difficult financial decisions, sometimes cutting back on food, clothing or other basic household items," said the Rev. Justo González II, interim leader of the UCC Illinois Conference. (continues on next page)



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Moss invited to the podium a physician who belongs to Trinity, Chief Operating Officer Terry Mason of the Cook County (Ill.) Department of Public Health, which serves Chicago. He cited findings from a 2008 Commonwealth Fund survey, "Seeing Red: The Growing Burden of Medical Bills and Debt Faced by U.S. Families." Among millions of adults in the study, ages 19 to 64, 39 percent reported using up all their savings because of medical bills. "It is a shame that we live in a country where we are forced to decide between our physical health and our financial health," Mason said.

Cook County Assessor Frederick (Fritz) Kaegi also spoke of the impact of medical bills in the neighborhoods where people will soon be learning their medical debt has been abolished. "More than one-third of the homes in these communities are under water," Kaegi said. "Unexpected medical debt is one of the largest causes of bankruptcy in the United States. Because of this project, thousands of souls may get to stay in their homes."

"The talent, time and treasure of the church have touched a core need of people without means, or a way out of no way," said the Rev. Dr. Ozzie Smith Jr., senior pastor of Covenant UCC. "God be praised for faithful collaborative efforts!"

"Sometimes it seems there is very little grace in the world," said the Rev. Matt Fitzgerald, senior pastor of St. Pauls. "Or at least, we don't give each other much grace. What joy to open a letter saying, 'Your debt has been forgiven,' instead of a letter saying, 'We're coming after you. Pay up.' Saint Pauls is so happy to be part of this effort. I hope what is happening here inspires other churches to buy up medical debt. It's like Jesus feeding thousands of people from a few loaves of bread and two fish. We just watched \$38,000 become more than \$5 million."

"Our efforts in the Chicago area serve as a launching pad, in collaboration with the UCC's 38 conferences and almost 5,000 congregations, to medical debt relief efforts for those living at or below poverty in the 44 states we currently serve," Blackmon said. "We view this ministry as one that also embodies what it means to love God, love our neighbors, and proclaim Good News to the poor, whether they worship in our churches or not."





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Gosseller Relationships

Malena

We leave our host families after two or three days, so we have less opportunity for conflict. Being in close quarters on a bus, in rehearsals and on tours with the same 24 people for 18 days creates plenty of opportunity for relationship building and conflict resolution.

Although it is very difficult to be in such close quarters to so many people for such an extended time, it is extremely valuable. You know you must establish relationships with all of these people in order to survive. It is so wonderful that most of the people in the group reach out to each other at some point during the trip and have a heartfelt conversation. We bond more closely to some than with others, but we create a certain bond with everyone. A bond that says I know you are important to this group, so how am I going to best relate to you? When and how can I take a break from you when our differences start to be overwhelming? How can I repair that break and look again for commonality between us?

The unique thing about that trip is that you have a desire to make this connection, even if it is a tenuous connection, with everyone. It is simple survival to be connected in some way even with people who are difficult for you to be with. In our communities and work situations, it is easy to exclude others or stay clear of individuals we don't agree with. It is very difficult to do this on a bus. As a choir, we need each other and we more easily see the value that the other brings.

This relates directly to Ruby's question about social injustice. I think we do experience this in the group as well as from outside the group. On our last night before we flew home, we had some opportunities to talk one on one with individuals and the idea of conflict came up in almost every conversation. We are trying so hard to be polite and get along, that rather than raise the conflicting concerns, we avoid them. I'm currently reading *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo. I see many of the same issues in our group that are raised in the book. We may not see the conflict we cause with another and may be overly sensitive when confronted with it because we believe we are not blind to the concerns of others. What this book has taught me most is that as a society, we don't often practice receiving constructive criticism with thoughtful humility.

“Bodies of Joy: German Gospel Choirs and the Church”

Have you seen Fritz's contribution to *A Ministry of Reconciliation: Essays in honor of Gregg Mast* (Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2017)? Fritz's essay puts our Wisconsin Gossellers' vision into a broader historical & cultural context. Here's a teaser:

“...The explosion of gospel choirs in Germany calls for an explanation. One aspect is common to all gospel singers rooted in Western culture: gospel music provides a socially acceptable form of *ecstasis*; it allows persons to break through the *stasis* of decorum and constraint generally found in Western culture in order to express one's feelings freely. As joy follows, there is a catharsis of release and rejoicing....”





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Who gets the emails that I send to
WisconsinGossellers@gmail.com ?

There has been some confusion lately about how to send an email to the whole Wisconsin Gossellers choir. I've written the following to hopefully help clarify for everyone. Let me know if you have any further questions.

If you send an email to WisconsinGossellers@gmail.com, it gets sent to the Wisconsin Gossellers email account which is read & operated by the Leadership Team. If you request that it be sent to the whole choir, just mention that in the email, and we will send it to everyone in the Wisconsin Gossellers choir for you.

Or another option to send emails to the whole choir would be to copy & paste everyone's individual email addresses from a recently sent group email. Hopefully that should have everyone's up to date email address.

~Alicia Gardner

P.S. as a side note, if you haven't been getting emails, and think you should be getting them, please let me know so we can update your contact information.



Jenn Bostic

8 hrs · 🌐

Today I was truly moved by a woman dancing to some music in a hotel lobby. She didn't care who was watching, she wasn't making a scene, or trying to impress the friends she was with. She was just dancing, because she wanted to. It can be so easy to hold back in life, hoping we might "fit into" the socially acceptable norm, but why? What keeps us from the freedom of dancing, or whatever that beautiful creative freedom is that lives inside of the wonderful and unique person that you are?

Jenn Bostic is one of Alicia's favorite singers. Alicia owns all her CDs. She saw the facebook post and wanted to share in the Wisconsin Gossellers newsletter.

Facebook finds:



SOMETIMES, MUSIC IS
THE ONLY MEDICINE THE
HEART AND SOUL NEED.



You relax on a plane, even though you don't know the pilot. You relax in a ship, even though you don't know the captain. You relax on a bus, even though you don't know the driver. Why don't you relax in life knowing that God is in control?

The heart is gravous





Mission Statement: To bridge cultural divides and touch souls through the transformative power of gospel music

Vision Statement: A world where God's love triumphs over that which divides us.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Lunch by</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Sat Dec 14th 2019	10am-230pm rehearsal 3pm concert at Attic Angel Place	Community of Hope UCC 7118 old Sauk Road, Madison, WI	men	Rehearsal & concert
Sat Jan 11th 2020	10am-3pm 3pm concert	Cedar Ridge 113 Cedar Ridge Dr West Bend WI 53095	Cedar Ridge	Rehearsal/ workshop & Concert
Sat Feb 8th 2020	10am-3pm	First Congregational UCC 311 2nd St S, Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494	sopranos	Rehearsal
Sat Mar 14th 2020	10am-3pm	To be determined	altos	Rehearsal
Tentatively Jun 29-Jul 10 2020	Gospel & More Choir from Germany visits	Various churches throughout wisconsin	n/a	Rehearsal & concerts & touring

? = still tentative and could change. Stay tuned! Will be updated at a later date or via email.

***Over night stay available = Let the Leadership team know if you need a place to stay**

Music-based assignment for the month

Become more familiar with the Sleep song. Review the music & listen to a video or audio-clip from the internet.

Mission-based assignment for the month

Write a hand-written letter & mail it out to someone. Some good suggestions are:

- Mail a thank you letter to host family
- Mail a "thinking of you" letter to a friend
- Mail a get well soon to someone who would appreciate a letter