

Church bodies forgive millions in medical debt for 5,888 Chicago families

CHICAGO, Oct. 20, 2019 /PRNewswire/ -- Local, regional and national leaders of the [United Church of Christ](#) announced Oct. 20 that church donations have wiped out \$5.3 million in medical debt for 5,888 South Side Chicago families. Families in three ZIP codes are now receiving letters telling them that their debt, averaging \$907, has been forgiven.



In a news conference and celebration at [Trinity UCC](#) that included national and Conference UCC representatives, the church leaders said the project focused on 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 Trinity UCC and two wider UCC agencies -- [Justice and Local Church Ministries](#) and the [Illinois Conference](#) -- generous contributors included [St. Pauls UCC](#) of Chicago, [Covenant UCC](#) of South Holland, Ill., and [The Leaders Network](#), a consortium of Baptist churches serving Chicago's west side neighborhoods.

The urban neighborhoods were chosen because of their demographics, said the Rev. Traci Blackmon, the national UCC associate general minister for Justice and Local Church Ministries.

"Today we thank all the supporters of this beautiful vision," said the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity UCC, the lead congregational contributor. "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."

"When medical debt piles up, families have to make difficult financial decisions, sometimes cutting back on food, clothing or other basics," said the Rev. Justo González II, interim Illinois Conference minister.

"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!"

"Saint Pauls is so happy to be part of this effort," said its senior pastor, the Rev. Matt Fitzgerald. "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."

Blackmon also announced that the UCC is planning a similar campaign throughout the denomination on Giving Tuesday, Dec. 3. Updates on that project can be found at [this page](#) at the UCC website.

"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."

Fact sheets on the impact of medical debt relief are in [this section](#) of the UCC website.

The [United Church of Christ](#), a mainline Protestant denomination, has nearly 900,000 members and 5,000 congregations nationwide. Headquartered in Cleveland, it is a church of many firsts: the first mainline denomination to ordain a woman, the first to ordain an openly gay man and the first predominantly white denomination to ordain an African American. More on the UCC's justice ministries is [here](#).

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