

December 2025



THE YOKE

*The newsletter of the Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors Chapter
of the Ministers Council, ABCUSA*

Annual Reports Now Due

If you're in the enviable position of being up to date for all your assignments as a military, federal correction or Veterans Administration chaplain, then you are to be congratulated for having already sent in your Annual Report by November 12 to your Ecclesiastical Endorser, the Rev. Dr. Patricia Murphy. Healthcare, local correctional and community chaplains, as well as associate chaplains and other specialized ministers, have until December 5 to submit their Annual Reports.

Should you need the link for submitting Annual Reports, please see below.

Annual Report Link:

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/5172baaf00b647d0a09e8a5aea81f3f2>

From the Executive Committee

The Executive Committee has appointed the Rev. Bruce Chaplin Chapter Secretary/Treasurer. His gracious acceptance gives the Rev. Jennifer Casstevens-Lopez time needed for increased family responsibilities. She will move to Member at large status.

You may remember Rev. Bruce's enlightening and helpful webinar in early 2022 as a sex offender treatment provider. In addition to his work as a now-

retired correctional and probation case manager for the State of Mississippi, he brings a wealth of experience to his new position. Rev. Bruce has served as a pastor, addictions counselor, Air Force chaplain, hospital chaplain and educator. He will soon be sending you an invitation to re-join the Chapter for 2026. Please give him a hearty welcome with your dues and acceptance!



Advent Candle Lighting 2025



by Rev. Jennifer Casstevens-Lopez

Note: Permission to use as long as credit is given to author

WEEK ONE - Purple Candle

ONE- Wake up! Wake up, People of God!

MANY- “The Lord will give you a sign. Look! The young woman is with child and shall bear a son; and call him Immanuel.”

(Isaiah 7:14)

ONE- In this apocalyptic and prophetic age, we have the opportunity to share the promise that our present-day world of corruption, chaos, and violence will be replaced with honesty, order and kindness.

MANY- During this Advent Season, we are called to be messengers to proclaim that our current despair will become hope, that conflict will transform

to peace, that adversity will turn to joy, and that indifference will be out shone by love.

ONE- Today we light the Candle of Hope

ONE- Scripture reminds us of the prophetic message in this manner.

MANY- "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they learn war no more."

(Isaiah 2:1-5)

ONE- Let us pray

MANY- Help us to act and to speak as a community of Immanuel, assured by the promises granted both in this present age and those that are yet to come. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wonderous things. Blessed be God's glorious name forever. May God's glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen

WEEK TWO - Purple Candle

ONE- Wake up! Wake up, People of God!

MANY- "The Lord will give you a sign. Look! The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and call him Immanuel."

(Isaiah 7:14)

ONE- In this apocalyptic and prophetic age, we have the opportunity to share the promise that our present-day world of corruption, chaos, and violence will be replaced with honesty, order and kindness.

MANY- During this Advent Season, we are called to be messengers to proclaim that our current despair will become hope; that conflict will transform to peace, that adversity will turn to joy, and that indifference will be out shone by love.

ONE- Today we light the candle of Peace

ONE: Scripture reminds us of the prophetic message in this manner.

MANY- "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child shall lead them."

(Isaiah 11:6)

ONE- Let us pray

MANY- Help us to act and to speak as a community of Immanuel, assured by the promises granted both in this present age and those that are yet to come. "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who alone does wonderous things, Blessed be God's glorious name forever. May God's glory fill the whole

earth. Amen and Amen”

(Psalm 72: 18-19)

WEEK THREE - Pink Candle

ONE- Wake up! Wake up, People of God!

MANY- “The Lord will give you a sign. Look! The young woman is with child and shall bear a son and call him Immanuel.”

(Isaiah 7:14)

ONE- In this apocalyptic and prophetic age, we have the opportunity; to share the promise that our present-day world of corruption, chaos, and violence will be replaced with honesty, order and kindness.

MANY- During this Advent Season, we are called to be messengers to proclaim that our current despair will become hope; that conflict will transform to peace, that adversity will turn to joy, and that indifference will be out shone by love.

ONE- Today we light the candle of Joy
(light pink candle)

ONE- Scripture reminds us of the prophetic message in this manner.

MANY- “They shall see the glory of the LORD, the excellency of our God. Say to those who are fearful-hearted: Be strong! Do not fear!

(Isaiah 35: 1-4)

ONE-Let us pray:

MANY- Help us to act and to speak as a community of Immanuel, assured by the promises granted both in this present age and those that are yet to come. “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be God’s glorious name forever. May God’s glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen”

(Psalm 72: 18-19)

WEEK FOUR - Purple Candle

ONE- Wake up! Wake up, People of God!

MANY- “The Lord will give you a sign. Look! The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and call him Immanuel.”

(Isaiah 7:14)

ONE- In this apocalyptic and prophetic age, we have the opportunity; to share the promise that our present-day world of corruption, chaos, and violence will be replaced with honesty, order and kindness.

MANY- During this Advent Season, we are called to be messengers to proclaim that our current despair will become hope; that conflict will transform to peace, that adversity will turn to joy, and that indifference will be out shone by love.

ONE- Today we light the candle of Love
(light purple candle)

ONE-Scripture reminds us of the prophetic message in this manner.

MANY- "We will not turn away from you. Revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, LORD God Almighty and make your face shine on us, that we may be saved."

(Psalm 80: 17-19)

ONE- Let us pray

MANY- Help us to act and to speak as a community of Immanuel, assured by the promises granted both in this present age and those that are yet to come. "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things, Blessed be God's glorious name forever. May God's glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen"

(Psalm 72: 18-19)

CHRISTMAS EVE - Christ Candle

ONE- Wake up! Wake up, People of God!
The Time is Now!

MANY- "The Lord will give you a sign. Look! The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and call him Immanuel."

(Isaiah 7:14)

ONE- In this apocalyptic and prophetic age, we have the opportunity to share the promise that our present-day world of corruption, chaos, and violence will be replaced with honesty, order and kindness.

MANY- During this Advent Season we have been called to be messengers, to proclaim that our current despair will become hope, conflict will transform to peace, adversity will turn to joy, and indifference will be out shone by love.

ONE- This Evening we light the Christ Candle

ONE- Scripture reminds us to share the story in this way.

MANY- "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn.

(Luke 2:6-7)

MANY- Help us to act and to speak as a community of Immanuel, assured by the promises, granted both in this present moment and those that are yet to come. “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be God’s glorious name forever. May God’s glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen”

(Psalm 72: 18-19)

Breakfast at the Biennial

Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors Ministers Council Breakfast. ABCUSA Biennial, Omaha, Nebraska, July 6, 2025



Rev. Dale Pracht, center, participating in table discussion.

All ABCUSA chaplains and pastoral counselors were invited to attend our chapter's Biennial breakfast to meet other brothers and sisters in Christ through table fellowship. The breakfast theme, "Light of Life," taken from John 8:1, provided attendees opportunities to share how our each of our ministry's initiatives spreads light into our communities. We ended with the question, "Where do we need more light in our own lives?"

Our Ecclesiastical Endorser, Rev. Dr. Pat Murphy, brought greetings from her office as well as on behalf of Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray, ABHMS Executive Director. Since 1991, we have been a part of the Ministers Council, which connects us with all American Baptist clergy. We meet regularly with other Ministers Council chapters to share resources and ideas. We also work cooperatively with the Office of Chaplaincy and Specialized Ministers. In the fall of 2024, we co-sponsored a special day of training with them, and we hope to continue working together. Additionally, we

represent you on the Professional Ministries Team, which brings together individuals from across the denomination to foster greater cohesiveness and collaborate on projects that serve various sectors of the denomination.

Our calling as followers of Jesus and ministers of the gospel isn't always easy. Our time at breakfast brought us closer as colleagues. Many people exchanged phone numbers and email addresses to stay connected with old friends and get to know new ones even better. If you did not get to the breakfast, we missed you. There is always space at our table, and especially this breakfast table, for you! Gatherings like this one gave us the opportunity to share and rejoice together and be proud to declare, "I AM AN AMERICAN BAPTIST!"

The breakfast handout is included here. Use it as a meditation during this season of Advent as we await the coming of our Savior, the Light of Life.

Biennial Breakfast Topics

"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." John 8:1

Places in your community (work, family, relationships) that are sources of light to you.

Where does your community need more light?

Places/times you are the source of light to others (work/family/relationships/retirement).

How/when you have seen the light in others.

Places in your life where you need light now.

Places where your community could use more light.

Become a Chapter Volunteer

Want a deeper connection with other ABC chaplains and pastoral counselors beyond your workplace ministry? Join the CPC's Ministers Council Executive Committee. Meeting monthly, you'll get to know other ABC chaplains and pastoral counselors as you plan webinars, newsletters, and opportunities to meet others and learn at denominational gatherings. In the process, you'll develop ever closer bonds of camaraderie with caring colleagues and experience their support and encouragement as you share personal joys and sorrows along the way. Please contact Member at large, Rev. Lee Axtell, at: lee.axtell@gmail.com.

Milestones

Retirement Milestone Navy Chaplain, Captain Lee Axtell

Our Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors Ministers Council's warmest congratulations go out to Chaplain Lee Axtell, his wife Paula, and their children on his retirement from Active Duty. On board the USS MISSOURI (BB63) in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, for the official ceremony August 25th, music filled the air. Ten hula dancers swayed to the sounds of CeCe Winans' "That's My King," a Marine Corps Band soloist lifted his voice in a wonderful version of "Amazing Grace," and the entire band marked the ceremony's conclusion with renditions of "The Marine Corps Hymn" and "Anchors Aweigh." Representing ABCUSA and ABHMS, were Rev Dr Meg Biddle and Rev. Dr. Patricia Murphy, who presented Lee with a beautiful glass plaque commemorating 38 years of service.



Lee and his daughter, Kayleigh celebrating.

Rev. Axtell entered military service through the Navy's Chaplain Candidate Program during his seminary days at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Upon graduating, he returned to his home region, ABCOFLASH and served at First Baptist Church in Claremont, California, until he was recalled to active duty in 1993.

One of Captain Axtell's favorite duty stations was in San Diego, where he and Paula partnered in the Navy's Spiritual Fitness Retreat Ministry of Chaplain's Resiliency for the Emerging Demands of Operations (CREDO). Together, they led marriage retreats and spiritual resiliency training sessions throughout the Pacific Southwest Region.

More Milestones

Send us your milestones--promotions, job changes, ordinations, board certifications, special anniversaries, new family member, etc. We want to rejoice with you! Please contact Member at large, Rev. Lee Axtell at: lee.axtell@gmail.com.



SAVE THE DATE!!

The American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) "**Space for Grace & Spiritual Caregivers Conference**" will be held in Cleveland, Ohio, from **April 21–23, 2026**, at the [Hotel Cleveland](#). The theme is "Storytelling: Discover Its Power for Faith Leaders Today" and will focus on how stories can be used to transform faith, connect generations, and inspire communities. Registration is open, and the cost is \$395 per person.

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