**PRESS RELEASE**

**It’s the most wonderful time of the year… or is it?**

**Churches create compassionate space for grief during the holidays**

*December 2, 2024 (Montreal, QC) -* For those who are feeling lost and lonely, experiencing financial or emotional difficulties or living with trauma, the bright lights and holly jolly sparkle of the holiday season can feel uncomfortable or alienating.

Communities of faith may be one source of comfort, inviting their neighbours to a "Blue Christmas" or "Longest Night" service: a quiet, contemplative gathering for those who are grieving a loss or struggling with other challenges over the holidays.

**History of Blue Christmas**

The origin of the Blue Christmas service is uncertain, but some say it originated in British Columbia in the late 1980s. Others believe it originated in the hospice community and spread to churches in the 1990s. (1)

**Addressing an overwhelming need**

The Canadian Grief Alliance (CGA), recently released the findings of its landmark public survey on grief. (2) With nearly 4,000 respondents, the survey is the largest ever on grief in Canada and will inform a National Action Plan for Grief which the CGA will present to the federal government in 2025.

Some of the key findings include:

* 53% of respondents said their grief went largely unrecognized by others
* 50% of respondents felt inadequately supported in their grief
* 83% of respondents identified being asked about their loss as being helpful
* 52% of respondents thought educating the public on how to better support each other would be helpful

**Rituals may help with healing**

Rev. Read Sherman, a United Church minister serving Trinity-Anjou Pastoral Charge in Montreal, shares the following insight about how elements of a Blue Christmas gathering might offer solace:

*“Christmas being a holiday time that people gather, it can naturally be a time when the cycle of grief peeks out to say ‘I still love and miss you,’ or ‘I feel lonely.’ Lighting a candle, among the other liturgical things we say and do during the service, allows one to act on that feeling, to honour the person and what they meant and still mean to you, and to bring light into a time of feeling blue.*

*We also invite people to light a candle for a prayer for themselves, others, the community and world. At this darkest time of the year, knowing there is still light out there, of love, hope, peace – and joy! – is a balm that many people find comforting and perhaps, healing.”*

**Faith traditions highlight the importance of compassion**

Rev. Sherman also shares some of the reasons why his pastoral charge will be offering a Blue Christmas service in early December *(event details below*):

*“Deep faith is central to who and what we are as the United Church. We need to offer times of comfort and solace to people at a time in the world, and in their lives, where all can seem chaotic and scary. We need to offer to people a reflective, quiet, time, to contrast the din of Christmas rush and commercial pressures. If the story of Jesus’ birth is to take a rightful place in who we are, it is to slow us down, to look at the gift of this birth, and all our births, as what is truly meaningful at Christmas and throughout the year. Blue Christmas is just one way to address the deeper layers of people’s lives, beyond the glittery (or not so glittery) realities that we allow people to see. Once we delve deeper, finding Christ dwelling with us as we really are, loss and imperfection and all, we get stronger. This faith allows us to grow our commitments then to Bold Discipleship and Daring Justice.”*

**Other compassionate initiatives by United Churches across the province of Quebec**

* Lennoxville United Church has set up a number of lighted trees around the church property with an invitation to anyone in the community to decorate the trees in memory of loved ones.
<https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0EzuA7Hqic4rfgRKDNtaFnS5xKz7Jkdm3oM8xWNoBnwHzPsC72C9LrPANpqr5S7dHl>
* Beaconsfield United Church has developed a dynamic and active refugee support and integration program (including a Black Santa initiative).
<https://www.beaconsfieldunitedchurch.com/refugee-integration-and-support-program.html>
* Emmanuel United Church in Cowansville participates year-round with other community partners to support newcomers from Africa, France, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Ukraine to the area, welcoming families with a quilt or handwoven cover and other resources.
<https://www.emmanuelcowansville.ca/>

The United Church of Canada is just one of several faith traditions that offer compassionate spaces for those who are seeking acceptance and belonging, just as they are, especially at this time of year.

And of course, communities of faith are just one partner in supportive networks of care. People who are struggling with a variety of challenges may also find resources and assistance through food banks, community centres, government agencies, mental health services and others.

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**BLUE CHRISTMAS** *(event details)*

**Thursday, Dec 5 at 7:30pm**[*https://nakonhakaucc.ca/event/blue-christmas-2024-trinity-united-church-montreal/*](https://nakonhakaucc.ca/event/blue-christmas-2024-trinity-united-church-montreal/)

On December 5 at 7:30 pm, Trinity and Anjou United Churches in Montreal will hold their Annual Blue Christmas & Memorial Service, a gentle gathering (in person and online) offering hope and light for those missing loved ones and all those mourning the state of the world.

**Address:** Trinity United Church, 3050 Blvd. Rosemont, Montreal, QC H1Y1M2.
**Parking**: available at Nesbitt School across the street, access by 8th Ave. via Bellechasse.

**Phone:** 514-721-1830 for more information or for Zoom link.
**Email:** Rev. Read Sherman: *trinityanjoupc@bell.net*
**Web site:** [*https://trinityuc.net/*](https://trinityuc.net/)

**SOURCES**

1. **History of Blue Christmas**
[*https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/12/blue-christmas-services-honor-the-dark-depressing-side-of-the-season.html*](https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/12/blue-christmas-services-honor-the-dark-depressing-side-of-the-season.html)
2. **Statistics from Canadian Grief Alliance**[*https://www.canadiangriefalliance.ca/*](https://www.canadiangriefalliance.ca/)

**BACKGROUND**

***Deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice****: As The United Church of Canada moves towards the celebration its 100th anniversary in 2025, the national organization has created a strategic plan that has growth as a leading priority, with other activities and resources dedicated to climate, indigenous pathways, justice, leadership and common good.* *Deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice are the foundation on which these activities and resources are being developed.* [*https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision*](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision)

***Conseil régional Nakonha:ka Regional Council*** *consists of ministry personnel and lay representatives from United Church of Canada communities of faith across Quebec, supported by regional council staff members.* [*https://nakonhakaucc.ca/*](https://nakonhakaucc.ca/)

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