# New Year’s Eve Liturgy and Service: Celebrating the Renewal of Our Covenant with God

## Welcome and Introduction

People around the world eagerly anticipate and commemorate the arrival of a new year. Iconic events like the Times Square ball drop in New York City initiate joyous champagne toasts in communities across the country. In Spain, the tradition involves consuming twelve grapes at the stroke of midnight, symbolizing hope for twelve prosperous months ahead. Meanwhile, the Dutch ignite bonfires using Christmas trees, and in Greece, it’s customary to savor St. Basil’s cake while searching for the hidden gold coin.

As the clock approaches midnight on December 31, many participants revel in a cacophony of noise and merriment, often pausing to sing “Auld Lang Syne.” However, within the Christian church, its own set of rituals, feasts, and music take center stage. Watchnight services and covenant renewals provide an opportunity to break free from old habits and make resolutions for the upcoming year.

Watchnight services, initially introduced by John Wesley in the 18th century, have deep historical roots. These gatherings were typically designated as covenant renewal services, aiming to inspire a renewed dedication to personal and communal spirituality in the approaching year.

In contemporary renditions of watchnight service, faith communities often experience a profound spiritual rejuvenation by welcoming the new year within the sacred space. As Ed Phillips, Professor of Worship and Liturgical Theology at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, emphasizes, the focus should not solely be on the worshiper’s convenience but rather on the act of distinctive covenant renewal as a gift to God—a means of making oneself spiritually open to God’s guidance in preparation for another year of faithful discipleship.

However, it’s worth noting that not all church communities find New Year’s Eve to be the ideal occasion for holding covenant renewal services. Some prefer to explore alternative dates and times to avoid scheduling conflicts with New Year’s Eve festivities. For instance, covenant renewal may be observed on Epiphany Sunday or incorporated into the service of baptismal renewal on the first Sunday following Epiphany.

The following liturgy and sermon are offered as a means of celebrating the renewal of our Covenant with God. It can be shared on New Year’s Eve Sunday (December 31st) or celebrating Epiphany (January 7th).

## Land Acknowledgement

(Settler communities of faith, please use your local observances)

## Call to Worship

Leader: What a past year this has been!

**People: So much has happened; some wonderful and some very challenging.**

Leader: In all of this, God journeyed with us, guiding, healing, comforting, and rejoicing.

**People: We are filled with gratitude for God’s presence with us.**

Leader: Today we are on the precipice of a new year.

**People: In all that is to come, we commit to trusting in God’s love.**

Leader: Together, we walk into this future as a faithful community of generosity, compassion, and joyfulness.

## Opening Hymn

Voices United #91 *The First Nowell* (December 31)

Voices United #79 *Arise, Your Light Is Come* (January 7)

## Prayer of Approach

God of past, present, and future, we give thanks for the gift of gathering to worship, singing, praying, and hearing how you lead us toward a faith-filled future. At the end of each year, we reflect on all that has been experienced in our lives, moments of joy and wonder, times of anxiety and confusion. Throughout it all we are grateful for your covenantal love and guidance. In this new year upon us we ask your continued presence as we strive to live out the Good News of Jesus Christ, to comfort the lonely, attend to the suffering, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, and speak for those whose voices are being ignored. In a spirit of togetherness and oneness we pray. Amen.

## Prayer of Confession

Artist of all Creation, we know that we have a blank canvas of a new year before us, filled with promise and possibility. We also know that the blank canvas of a new year is an illusion. Time ticks on, moment after moment, day after day, month after month. There are times that we are remarkable and generous, yet far too often we can succumb to selfishness and individualism. Forgive us, restore us, and guide us. Be a reminder to us when we seek only to look after our treasured abundance while others are left with so little. In the Spirit of your generosity, allow us the courage to share all that we have, all that we do, and all that we are in your name. Amen.

## Assurance of Forgiveness

Friends, sisters, brothers: hear this Good News and live into the promise that you are forgiven. We are now free to create something new! Let us commit ourselves to being open, generous, inviting, and always seeking the faithful path before us. Thanks be to God!

## Hymn

Voices United #58 *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* (December 31)

Voices United #82 *A Light Is Gleaming vs. 1, 3-4* (January 7)

## Children’s Time

Perhaps ask children to reflect on a moment they felt proud in the previous year, or a time when someone told them they were proud of them. Was it accomplishing something they were working towards? Was it helping a family member or someone at school? Was it sharing something they had? Have a discussion on how it felt to do something kind, good, or generous. Ask if they can think of a New Year’s resolution for the coming year that includes being kind and/or generous.

## Passing of the Peace

## Prayer of Illumination

Living God, help us to listen to what we need to hear in these stories of our living faith. May we be given understanding to allow us to honour and follow through with your message of generosity and gratitude. We offer this prayer in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## First Reading

Matthew 2: 1–12

## Second Reading

Luke 21: 1–4

## Anthem or Musical Offering

## Sermon/Reflection

Phew, finally, it’s over! What a relief, right? I don’t know about you, but Christmas can be seriously exhausting.

Right after today’s time of worship [December 31 if preached on New Year’s Eve, or January 7 if used for 1st Sunday of Epiphany], it’s time for Operation Take Down the Christmas Decorations. The Christmas tree, the garlands, the ornaments, the decorations—they’re all going into storage until next year. Maybe you’ve already done this at your house? Or perhaps you’ve got a pile of stale Christmas cookies you’re not sure what to do with. Are they for the birds, your unsuspecting kids’ lunchboxes, or still awaiting their fate on a plate?

For many of us it’s back to the grind. Kids, maybe grandkids, head back to school, and adults return to work, if they had some time off during the holidays. You know the holiday is over when routine sets back in.

But you know what? I notice that at Christmas, we tend to be kinder to family, friends, strangers, even people we don’t necessarily like. We’re a tad more thoughtful, generous, and considerate. The world just seems happier when we’re all kinder. It’s like we get a glimpse of how God intends us to be.

It’s beautifully captured in part of a poem by Edgar Guest, which goes something like this: “Human beings are the finest towards the finish of the year; We are almost like we should be when the Christmas season’s here...”

The danger is, once our Christmas stuff is safely packed away, we may also pack away the spirit of kindness and generosity that permeates the Christmas season. That is why it is so important for us to hear Matthew’s account of the Wise One’s seeking out Jesus.

After all, this story takes place after the birth of Jesus.

And it’s a great story. Strangers on a mysterious quest. A jealous king. A guiding star. Extravagant gifts, given in awe and wonder to a young child, and a secret escape.

Mary, standing there watching all of this unfold, must have been dumbfounded by the generosity of the three visitors. How wonderful that these three strangers from the east were not only committed to finding this special child, but they were also willing to do whatever was needed to bestow their joyful excitement in finding him and offering the best of what they could give as an expression of their joy.

The Rev. Stephen Iverson tells this story about giving and generosity:

Several years ago, a faithful member of a congregation I was serving offered me a gift. In this instance I was hesitant to accept it for a whole host of reasons, the biggest being that I considered the gift to be far too extravagant and costly for what I knew this person could afford. But I could tell by the expression on this person’s face and the joy that radiated from their eyes that they had thought long and hard about offering such an expensive gift.

When I tried to dissuade them from giving me this gift, they looked at me and began to sob, almost uncontrollably. Through their cracking voice they said to me words so powerful that I will never forget them: “Please, please do not reject my blessing that I am giving to you.”

They were willing to do whatever was needed to bestow their gift to me.

The person in this story is reminiscent of the poor widow in the story from Luke. Jesus points her out as an example, when “she out of her poverty put in all that she had”. Again, someone willing to do whatever was needed to give and bless.

Faithful offerings, gifts of faith, can never be evaluated by the number of zeros contained in the price of the gift. Faithful offerings, offerings of blessing, come from the deep and profound joy in knowing that what we have offered makes a difference and is significant and meaningful. What joy we feel in our hearts when we offer the least is nothing compared to when we offer our best. Doing whatever it takes, in order to be generous and share whatever we can, is certainly part of following the Way of Jesus.

Faith, commitment, and compassion form the bedrock of generosity. Offering meals for those at risk and who live daily with food insecurity, visiting a neighbour who otherwise lives in isolation, financially supporting broader community projects in Canada and around the world, are opportunities to practice generosity and grow deeper in our faith. This is the blessing that we get to take part in through our generous gifts to the Mission and Service of the United Church. Mission and Service works to transform lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and helps in the building of a better world.

Let me give you just two examples.

### Mission and Service Story #1

Storytelling is a powerful way to preserve and share history. The theatre performance, [Bunk #7](https://www.bunk7.ca/), does just that.

Bunk #7 shares the true story of six boys rioting against the mistreatment and many forms of abuse they received at Edmonton Indian Residential School in St. Albert, Alberta, in the early 1960s. Written by the late Nisga’a MLA Larry Guno, the play is based on his own experience at the residential school and named for his bunk number.

The cast features Indigenous youth and young adults, offering a powerful way for the cast and audiences to learn and share the story of cultural resilience. In November 2021, the play premiered at Raven Theatre in British Columbia to a full audience. With overwhelming support, the performers went on a tour of northwestern BC to share the transformative journey.

Your gifts to Mission and Service open opportunities for storytelling to move forward in an impactful and powerful way. Thank you for your generosity.

### Mission and Service story #2

When we think of education, many of us envision a classroom with books and chalkboards. But education extends far beyond that. Through education, we can learn how the world works and how we work in the world.

The Women and Family Services division at the Church of Christ in Congo provides children with the education and training they need to take charge of their own lives when they leave school. With a combination of traditional education and life skills, they provide each child with the skillset they need to thrive after graduation.

Through funding, livestock and seeds are purchased to teach children sustainable agriculture. Older children have the opportunity to assist with livestock after their classes. They learn to care for chickens and take part in odd jobs in the fields.

Your generosity through Mission and Service helps fund programs that inspire learning and skills for life. Thank you.

So, as this New Year unfolds, having just experienced a glimpse of how God intends us to be, and if we really want to be change and see change, the question is this: what gifts are each of us called to offer?

Imagine feeling and believing so deeply that you have an extravagant gift to offer, because you do. The kind of gift that you are willing to do whatever it takes to offer, because it will literally save lives. This is the type of generosity that unleashes powerful, transformative, and holy blessings. I invite you to be generous. Please consider making a special year-end (beginning of the year) gift in support of the ministries provided by Mission and Service.

There are many ways to give: through the [United Church donation page](https://united-church.ca/donate), by phone (1-800-465-3771), or in through a special offering with Mission and Service envelopes.

Thank you for all the ways you shine your faith through your generosity and sharing.

Amen.

## Hymn

Voices United #55 *In the Bleak Midwinter* (December 31)

Voices United #575 *I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me* (January 7)

## Invitation to make an Offering

As one year ends and another begins, together we commit to making a difference. Your generosity to this church and to Mission and Service assists friends and strangers, those who believe as we do and those who believe differently, neighbours across town and partners across the globe. Your generosity is such a gift.

Scan this QR code to make an online donation to Mission and Service today!



## Offering Prayer

Gracious and loving God, bless now these gifts and those offered through PAR or online, that through them we transform lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and build a better world. Remind us that in giving freely as you do, O God, we embody your own self-giving nature. Thanks be to you. Amen

## Renewal of Stewardship Covenant

Leader 1: As we begin a new year, let us pause and commit ourselves to the spiritual practice of generosity and stewardship.

We are not alone,

We live in God’s world.

We believe in God:

Who has created and is creating,

Who has come in Jesus,

The word made flesh,

To reconcile and make new,

Who works in us and others,

By the Spirit.

We trust in God.

### Hymn Voices United #581 *When We Are Living vs. 1-2*

Leader 2: A covenant is a promise we make with God and others to live God’s way. I ask you now, do you renew the covenant with God and with each other to walk in the Way of Jesus?

***All: In the presence of God and one another, we renew our covenant as we give thanks for the example and lasting love of Jesus Christ, who shows us how to generously offer our gifts as an expression of our gratitude and faithfulness.***

Leader 1: We remember today promises made at baptism to support one another and all of God’s people as we grow in faith. We commit again to honour and fulfill these promises. Do you promise to participate in the ministry of the church and to use your resources to support others in need locally and through the Mission and Service of the United Church of Canada?

***All: We share in the life and ministry of the church. We commit ourselves to share our resources so that we may joyfully live out the ministry that Jesus calls us to follow.***

Leader 2: Let us pray. In your image, O God, we are created. Be with us as we reflect on that image in our work and play, as we sing and pray, laugh and cry, give generously and serve others. Help us to accept our responsibility as members and adherents of this congregation and as followers of the Way of Jesus Christ. We ask for the encouragement of your Spirit and the energy of your love, as we live out this covenant together. Amen

### Hymn Voices United #581 *When We Are Living vs. 3-4*

## Prayers of the People

God of all time,
help us enter the New Year quietly,
thoughtful of who we are to ourselves and to others,
mindful that our steps make an impact
and our words carry power.

May we walk gently.
May we speak only after we have listened well.

Creator of all life,
help us enter the New Year reverently,
aware that you have endowed
every creature and plant, every person and habitat
with beauty and purpose.

May we regard the world with tenderness.
May we honour rather than destroy.

We Pray...
For healing...
For strength...

For vision....
For transformation...
For messengers and messages...
For community....
For acceptance -
For making room at our tables...
For Truth-seeking...
For support...

For an abundance of generosity…

Lover of all souls,
help us enter the New Year joyfully,
willing to laugh and dance and dream,
remembering our many gifts with thanks
and looking forward to how we can use them to be a blessing.

We offer these and all our prayers in the name of the One who will walk with us upon the journey of this New Year; Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray….

## Lord’s Prayer

## Hymn

Voices United #43 *Go, Tell It on the Mountain* (December 31)

Voices United #420 *Go to the World* (January 7)

## Commissioning and Benediction

As you have been fed, go to feed the hungry.
As you have been set free, go release the imprisoned.
As you have received—give.
As you have heard—proclaim.
Knowing that the blessing of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit is always with and is more than you can ever imagine. Amen.