

In the Bleak Mid-winter

by Tom Wilkinson, Vice President, Development

The Florida United Methodist Foundation

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Here in Florida, winter is brief and can hardly be called bleak, as droves of tourists and winter residents flock to our state to enjoy the comparative warmth of our sub-tropical climate. But I was reminded of my Chicago roots this past Christmas Day, as several of us gathered in worship and sang one of my favorite carols, *In the Bleak Mid-winter*, the poem written by the great 19th century English poet Christina Rossetti, daughter of Italian parents. Her father was a professor of Italian at King's College. The poem is set to the music of her somewhat younger contemporary Gustav Holst. If you don't know it, and I daresay few Florida United Methodist congregations sing it, I commend it to you. It's in the United Methodist Hymnal, number 221.

And it's also strangely appropriate, as I sit at my computer writing this column in mid-January, that there is a freeze warning in effect for our part of northeast Florida tonight, so I will have to venture out into the "bleak" mid-winter night to cover the tender crotons and herbs.

Most of us don't associate carols with stewardship, but Rossetti's poem is about our response to God's gift to us in Jesus, and she gets serious about giving in the fourth and final verse:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb,
If I were a Wise Man I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*

What does it mean to "give my heart?" How does giving my heart to God change me? How are we changed people, following Rossetti's question, as we respond to God's grace in our lives?

To truly give one's heart to God means that every decision we make, whether that decision is about our time, our money, our children, or anything else, is made knowing that all we are and all we have comes from God. And our generous response honors God, who has given us everything. That's what we can give him, "poor as we are."

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to stewardship. Please call, click or write us at 1-800-282-8011, extension 106; www.fumf.org; or PO Box 3767, Lakeland, FL 33802.