



SPRING 2026

Giving Thanks for Those That Help Us Grow



About Our 2026 Spring/Summer Materials

The materials you have before you are intended for use anytime after Easter, but were created with Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the "green, growing season" that follows Pentecost in mind. We know that some UTO congregations use these holidays as a time to collect their UTO Ingathering and that these holidays might bring up a great deal of mixed emotions for our UTO members, congregations, and communities. With that said, the intention of these materials are to help your congregation (or family) come together to consider and give thanks for the ways a variety of people have helped us to grow and how we can help others in our community grow.

These materials are rooted in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The part the parable leaves out is that for the tiny seed to become the giant plant, it needs to be cared for. Together we'll give thanks for those who have cared for us and then we'll think about ways we can care for others.

It is about halfway to Christmas. At Christmas time we are given so many ways to help our community, but not so much in June. Many local non-profits report that during the summer the need increases (many families rely more on food pantries during the summer when school breakfast and lunch are not available) but the giving decreases. There are so many ways we can grow kindness in our world, we hope one or more of the suggestions inside resonate with you and become as beloved a tradition as those that take place at Christmas time.

Whatever option you decide to take on as a congregation, family or individual, we hope that in growing kindness, giving thanks for those that helped you grow, you'll start the summer off with a heart full of love and gratitude.

INTERGENERATIONAL

Our materials for Spring/Summer are meant to be used by the whole congregation regardless of age. Inside you'll find options for giving thanks and for giving back to the world around you. While you can do all of the activities inside, you can also pick the ones that are the best fit for you, your family, or your congregation.

MAKE A LEGACY GIFT

The materials included for this season are asking you to give thanks for those that have made a difference in your life by sending them a note. If the people you are most grateful for are no longer living, consider making a gift in their memory to the United Thank Offering Memorial Trust. Not only will their name (and yours) be added to our legacy book, but your donation will support the creation of materials like this one for generations to come.

Use the QR code to the right to learn more.



SUPPORT THE WORK OF UTO

If you are grateful for these free Lenten resources, consider making a donation to support the ongoing work of UTO. 100% of all donations given to UTO are given away the following year through our grant process to support innovative mission and ministry projects around the globe. Use the QR code to the right to learn more.





GIVING THANKS

The parable of the Mustard Seed appears in three out of the four Gospels, which tells us that it holds an important teaching not only for the early church but for all of us who follow Jesus today. The Parable is quite short and reminds us that the mustard seed, while the smallest of all seeds, becomes one of the largest plants, so large that it give shelter to birds. This story gets told so frequently, that the message sometimes gets lost. In addition to the message about the potential found in the seed, we may also overlook the fact that for that seed to become the large plant, a lot of love, care, and nurturing had to go into it. Plants grow because they are in fertile soil, get enough water and sunlight (but not too much!), and aren't taken over by weeds. Just like plants, humans require a great deal of care and support to grow and thrive. This love may come from parents, family members, community members, adults we got to know at church or other community events growing up, and mentors. We grow and thrive thanks to so many people and things, so we want to take some time to give thanks for them. During this green growing season, UTO invites you to consider all of the times or things in your life, that while small like the mustard seed, have grown substantial in your life today. Below (and on the back of this handout) you'll find activities to help you give thanks for all of the things in your life that have helped you grow as well as an opportunity to share your gratitude with those that have made a difference both big and small in your growth and development over time.

Congregations: HOST A MIXER

You don't have to look very hard to learn about the loneliness epidemic facing many people today. While many people experience connection via social media and the internet, science shows that we need to show up and be seen in person. In many congregations, there are groups of people - divided by age, interest, or what events they have time to participate in during the year. For many congregations, programs slow down in the summer, which makes it a great time to host mixers for your congregation! This is a chance to bring back old favorites that got lost with the pandemic like progressive dinners, or simply make an intentional effort to bring together a diverse group of people for a cookout or potluck. Want to cast the net wider? using the groups that already exist, host an "invite a friend" event. For families you could rent out a local fun spot and have them invite a friend to come and play. Want to invite your neighbors? Think about what is important to them. If you've got a dog park that is popular, host an adoption event with the local animal shelter along with a pet toy/food drive. Think about your context and come up with an event that makes the most sense for you that brings together people inside and outside of your congregation to have fun and make new friends and connections.

Individuals/Families:

THANK YOU CARDS

Many of us are really good at writing thank you notes for gifts - or at least a quick text message of gratitude. What we aren't always as good at is saying thank you to those people who have impacted your life through their kindness and care. Today we want to invite you to make a list of all of the people who have impacted your life and take sometime to send them a note of thanks. You can send them a postcard, a quick text, or a social media post to remind them that they made a difference in your life. For many of us, some of the most impactful people in our lives may no longer be alive. Consider making a gift in their memory in gratitude for the ways they shaped your life to the United Thank Offering Memorial Trust. You can learn more about solidifying their legacy and how to donate on the front page of the packet. If they are buried near you, you could visit their grave and take flowers if allowed. It is never too late to say thank you, and when we give thanks for the ways others have impacted us, it is always a gift to receive the stories of how our lives have impacted others.

GROWING KINDNESS

You're likely reading this about halfway through the year to Christmas. Christmas is a time that most of us associate with taking care of others and giving thanks for the people around us. What if we took some of the traditions from Christmas time and did them now? Many social service agencies are desperate for help during the summer because it's not typically a time of year when people are thinking about taking care of others. So we want to encourage you to celebrate Christmas in the Summer. For congregations, this can mean bringing out some of the things you do to care for your community at Christmas time, from giving trees, to sock drives, all of these things are just as needed in summer. At UTO, we always talk about the things we use every day that we might forget to give thanks for, from deodorant to toothpaste to clean underwear, these are reasons to be grateful and a way we can show kindness to others and help them grow. When we support our local non-profits by volunteering or donating, we are letting our community know that we care for them. Just as the mustard seed needs water and sunlight, so do our neighbors in need, and now is a great time to help out.

Congregations:

SANTA IN THE SUMMER

Our guess is that Advent is a really busy time at your congregation with opportunities to gather and give back to your community. During the weeks leading up to Christmas it isn't uncommon to see barrels collecting gently used coats, toys, and canned goods through out the community. We know that all of our local non-profits are grateful for the support they receive in December, but for many of them, the shelves are quite empty come June. What traditions does your congregation participate in during the winter holiday season that you could do during the summer? One of the ways our churches can help others grow is to show up when others may have forgotten or gotten busy and be there to support those in need. Here are some ideas for helping others in your community grow:

- host a sandwich making party for all ages - come together and make sack lunches for those in need to either donate to an organization helping the unhoused, or take to parks where folks may need a meal
- collect donations of new socks and underwear for the local clothing pantries that support your school district or help those in need
- contact a local foster care organization and host a giving tree to support kids in care - many kids enter foster care without many belongings and need clothes, toys, and other items throughout the year
- stock the shelves at your local food pantry - both by collecting non-perishables and by sending a group to volunteer and learn more about this important work in your community

this is also a great chance to find new community partners for your outreach committee or congregation and get the word out about the great things happening at your church.

Individuals/Families:

STOCK THE SHELVES

Summer is a great time to do some tasks that might get overlooked during the rest of the year. One thing that is fun to do is to go through your books and decide which ones you're ready to part with and then find little free libraries to put them in. Many times in the summer these community sharing boxes end up pretty empty due to use, so it's a great time to make space in your home and help others. Summer is another time when food pantries could use our help. Common things that we are thankful for, especially during the hot months, are hard to come by for people or families in need. Consider stocking up on soap, shampoo, deodorant, and other hygiene products for local shelters and pantries. Find ways to volunteer that feed your soul and help your community, from pulling weeds at your local botanical gardens to reading stories (or volunteer for the summer reading and learning programs) to kids at the library, there are a lot of unexpected ways to share your gifts with others to help them grow.

GRATITUDE FOR GROWTH

Use this handy journal sheet to reflect on the ways you are growing, helping others to grow, and give thanks for those that have supported you in growing.

Draw or Describe Something New You Learned

Who is someone who has helped you grow? What is the best thing they taught you?

Write Down Four Ways You Could Help Someone or Something Soon.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Top Five Ways You Take Care of You