



THE LUTHERAN WITNESS™

‘The Nativity Story’

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TO THE READER

In this month's cover story, Dr. Ardon D. Albrecht of Simi Valley, Calif., offers an inside peek, replete with pastoral and professional insights, into the soon-to-be-released movie, *The Nativity Story*. Headlining the film, as the Virgin Mary, is Keisha Castle-Hughes, best known as the Maori girl who rode ashore on the back of an orca in 2003's *Whale Rider*.

Dr. Albrecht knows of what he speaks when it comes to celluloid. For 17 years he was a writer and then producer of the Synod's legendary TV show, *This Is the Life*. He wrote the five-hour *Yeshua* documentary on the life of Christ, hosted by the late Dr. Oswald C.J. Hoffmann. And in recent years, along with fellow southern Californian Dr. Charles Manske, he has been the prime mover behind *Point of Truth*, the LCMS TV program built around worship and exceptional

preaching.

As you will note, Dr. Albrecht was highly impressed with *The Nativity Story*, which he screened on Nov. 9th in Los Angeles. It remains to be seen how this film, which opens on four times as many screens as *The Passion of the Christ* did in 2004, will stack up at the box office versus the Mel Gibson blockbuster.

*David L. Strand, Executive Director
Board for Communication Services*

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Overlooking a major player

Thank you for including the insightful and moving article by Anna Meyer regarding her short-term teaching experience in Indonesia, ("Moving Rocks in Indonesia," October '06). The article highlighted our Synod's sustained involvement and assistance to the people in tsunami-devastated areas of Indonesia, as well as the ongoing need for LCMS members to serve as short- and long-term volunteers there.

However, the article was not clear in describing the significant involvement, work, and partnership of LCMS World Mission in Indonesia. LCMS World Mission is the international sending arm of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Anna and the teachers mentioned in her article are all LCMS World Mission long-term personnel, but the

by-side in our collaborative efforts to reach out to those affected by the tsunami-reaching out with Christ's love in Word and deed.

Again, I thank you for bringing attention to this important task God has placed before the LCMS, and I urge members throughout the Synod to answer the urgent call for short- and long-term servants to continue the work of "moving rocks" in Indonesia. The appropriate Web site for international service information, which was not provided in the article, is www.lcmsworldmission.org/service. Individuals interested in serving can also speak with one of our placement counselors at 1-800-433-3954.

*Dr. Robert M. Roegner
Executive Director,
LCMS World Mission
St. Louis*

"Together LCMS World Mission and LCMS World Relief/Human Care are providing long-term hope and assistance to tsunami victims in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand."

*Dr. Robert M. Roegner
Executive Director, LCMS World Mission*

article did not note that.

Dennis Denow, the career staff-person coordinating education and assistance projects for tsunami survivors, serves on behalf of both LCMS World Mission and LCMS World Relief/Human Care in Indonesia. Together we are providing long-term hope and assistance to tsunami victims in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. Our collaborative work has a long history, and in the case of Indonesia, began just days after the tsunami.

In January 2005, LCMS World Mission sent two survey teams of our personnel sponsored by LCMS World Relief/Human Care. From those initial days, we've stood side-

We are in the world

Dr. Siemon-Netto ("We Are Needed," November '06) asks why Lutherans don't face the world head-on. I believe that Lutherans do just that. Every day they go about their work as Christians in the world—in kitchens, classrooms, or construction sites. They may not be in Congress, but they do vote. These things are not usually the stuff of earth-shattering news, but they really are world-shaping activities.

It is possible that many do not *know* they are serving Christ as they carry out these ordinary tasks of daily life. That means we must more clearly teach about Christian

vocation. But along with worrying whether Lutherans are doing what they should be doing, we must also be concerned with seeing that there are more of them (more Christians to carry out their Christian callings)—by proclaiming the earth-shattering news we do have, of Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

*Carol Geisler
St. Louis*

Mercy!

Thanks for the superb "Mercy—Lutheran style!" (November '06). The writer neatly encapsulated why we Missouri Synod Lutherans have been, and should be, involved in charitable works. I particularly appreciated the history section of the article, which highlighted the leadership of Pastors Buenger and Herzberger. They and their peers knew that concern for and involvement in charity has been a characteristic of Lutherans of all nations and ages.

*Dr. Martin R. Noland, Director
Concordia Historical Institute
St. Louis*

You can do better

Undoubtedly you get lots of letters expressing differing opinions. As editor, in all fairness, you choose responses representing both sides of an issue. In answer to the positive response regarding *Lutheran Service Book* provided by one letter-writer, you chose a negative response provided by another whose complaints, frankly, were trivialities. Surely you could have chosen something more substantive if you felt it necessary to have a negative.

In view of the very recent publication of the new hymnal, I feel that printing anything negative serves no good purpose and is better not done at all whether the comment is true or not.

*Ron Royuk
Seward, Neb.*

The reliable Word

Professor Jeffrey Kloha has provided a commendable article for the church's study in his "The Revelation and Inspiration of the New Testament" (September 2006). His unveiling of the "lost gospels" as generally unorthodox, late rivals of the truth recorded in our four Gospels is particularly useful given the recent unpleasantness unleashed by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

What Professor Kloha might have explored further is the important truth that the Church grew up around the preaching and documents that essentially became our New Testament collection. Further, one would hope for greater clarity about the relationship between faith, Christ, and Scripture than is presented in Kloha's piece.

His conclusion is along the lines of "our faith is not in the Bible, it is in Jesus Christ." While I appreciate his emphasis on Jesus, one must ask, "Whence does faith come?" It issues from hearing words about Jesus as this testimony is drawn from and based on the prophetic and apostolic witness! As St. Paul wrote, "Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

We trust that God has left us with the prophetic and apostolic witness concerning Himself in the Bible. It is not intellectually honest or fair to pit faith in Christ against faith in the Bible. Faith in Christ and faith in God's revelation of Himself in Sacred Scripture go together. Apart from His Word, we do not know Jesus Christ as our loving Savior.

So, indeed, extol God for the gift of faith in Christ! But also praise Him that He has moved us to trust in Him through the very reliable Word that we proclaim in order to elicit faith!

*Rev. Lowell S. Sorenson
Red Wing, Minn.*



PARTIES

ornaments

TINS SEL

mistletoe SHOPPING



GIFTWRAP

CAROLERS

BELLS

I AM
COMING

fruitcake

greeting cards

colored lights TOYS

wreaths

eggnog

garlands

YULELOG

CANDYCANES

Jesus Is Coming for You — Sooner and Later

Advent reminds us that God comes to us—
in Bethlehem, today and every day, at the end
of our earthly life, and at the end of time.

by Robert E. Smith

Even before children put on their costumes to go trick-or-treating, colored lights and hot, new toys already had appeared in stores from coast to coast. It seems the world can't wait as Christmas carols blare in the malls, Santa Claus invites children to sit on his lap, and catalogs, party invitations, Christmas cards, and gifts fill the mail.

But not too far below the surface of all the carols, colors, and cheer, the realities of everyday life still wait for us. Even at Christmas, friends and relatives grow ill and die. Broken marriages and broken homes leave many people alone in a season of togetherness. Disease cripples our elderly, leaving them in institutions away from their children and grandchildren.

If the sorrows of normal life are not bad enough, war and the threat of terrorism cast their shadows over our nation. Sometimes the season can help us forget, but not for long.

"Where is God?" we ask again and again.

Hidden in the glitter of the season, God replies, "I am coming soon!" All but forgotten in the rush of buying and celebrating, the season of Advent announces the Good News that He is watching us, not at a distance, but in our hearts.

Jesus first came to us in Bethlehem. Today, He comes to us in His Word and His Sacraments. Soon, He will come at the end of time. At the end of our lives, He comes to bring us home to heaven.

So, in the darkest month of the year, the season of Advent joyfully shouts out to us: "Rejoice ... your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation."

"Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance," Christians pray.

And Jesus does come.



Jesus Is Coming Again

As the new millennium approached, many people expected Jesus to return. In preparing to meet Him, they sold property and gave the proceeds to the poor. They went on pilgrimages to holy places. Some were so convinced that the end of the world was coming, they decided to spend New Year's Eve with the pope. Some were so afraid that Jesus was returning as a judge, they died of fright. But when the New Year's Eve service came to an end and the bells of St. Peter's rang, the trumpet did not sound, the dead were not raised, and the relieved Christians greeted the *year 1000* with great joy and relief.

There's something terribly wrong with this picture.

For Christians, the return of Christ is not frighteningly *bad* news, but very *good* news. Jesus will come back to bring an end to sin, sorrow, grief, and death. The graves of all Christians will open. Everyone who died trusting in Him will rise to life again. All Christians will live with God forever. God will dry every tear from our eyes and turn our mourning into dancing.

Advent tells us to cheer up. God will restore all things, so we can live every day with hope, looking forward to eternity. After all, Jesus will return for us at any moment. It may be at the end of time itself or at the end of our days. One thing is certain. At a moment we least suspect, we will be at rest in His eternal kingdom.

Jesus Comes Today

Jesus is not only a historical figure from the past and our hope for the future. He actually comes to us each and every day of our lives. Jesus was there when we were conceived in our mother's womb. God took us in His arms and made us His children in Holy Baptism.

Through parents and pastors, relatives, friends, teachers, and fellow Christians, He teaches us, cares for us, and helps us to grow. Through the preaching of God's Word, He causes faith to grow in our hearts. Countless times, He forgives our sins and feeds us with the body and blood of Jesus in His Supper. Every time we gather to worship, He meets us to give these good gifts.

In Advent, we remember that Jesus doesn't wait in heaven for us to seek Him, accept Him, repent, or do good works that please Him. As our Good Shepherd, He searches for us until He finds us. Jesus comes for us—here and now. He's by our side in the struggles of our lives with His good gifts and Spirit.





Jesus Came

We can be confident that Jesus will come because He came for us before. Advent calls us to remember the real reason for the season. It prepares us to celebrate Christmas with joy by showing us what it really means for us. We all once were lost in our sinfulness, separated from God and condemned to hell forever. But God loved us; He was not willing to lose us forever. So Jesus put aside all His power and authority and became flesh for our sake. He lived a perfect life for us and died on the cross so that our sins may be forgiven and so that we may live with Him forever. He rose again so that we, too, would rise from the dead.

In Advent, we prepare with joy to meet Him. After all, He's coming not only to our house, but also to our hearts.

We hear again the voice of John the Baptist, who reminds us how to get ready for Him. What gift can you give to God, who has everything? What present can you give to the Child who is the greatest Gift we ever have received? With His help, we love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Twenty-First Century Advent

Advent calls us to slow down, even in our busy American holiday season. We desperately need to hear its message: Jesus is coming for you—sooner and later. Don't be discouraged; don't despair. Jesus is coming. In fact, He's already here. Rejoice! You're sins are forgiven. Your God will never forsake you! He is here with gifts to live with hope in the valley of the shadow of death. He will take you home when life is done, where He will dry every tear from our eyes.

Take a few moments to count the days and light the candles. Hear God in His own words as He repeats His promises to you. Come to His house and prepare for His coming. Listen to the soundtrack of the season. Can't you hear it? "Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, will come to Thee, O Israel!"; "Joy to the world! The Lord is come"; "Oh, tidings of comfort and joy!"

Then go to the manger with the Shepherd and see for yourself. It's true! God has come to you and will come to you again.



Rev. Robert E. Smith is electronic resources librarian at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

THE NATIVITY STORY

This surprisingly accurate and wonderfully moving portrayal of what Mary and Joseph might have felt, said, and believed can refocus the holidays for millions of viewers.

Keisha Castle-Hughes portrays Mary in *The Nativity Story*.



by Ardon Albrecht

“Can any good thing come out of Hollywood?”

To this frequent Christian complaint, an unexpected answer is, “Come and see.”

In February 2004, it was Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. In December 2006, it is *The Nativity Story*.

When *The Nativity Story* opens in 8,000 theaters worldwide on Dec. 1, millions will come and see. What they will see is an inspiring depiction of the Christmas story that is faithful to the biblical account, yet wonderfully fresh in its portrayal of the principal characters.

Most striking is Mary, played by Academy Award nominee Keisha Castle-Hughes (*Whale Rider*). She is a first-century girl-next-door reacting without a halo to challenges she would not have chosen.

Unhappy over her father’s unexpected announcement that she will be betrothed to Joseph, she accepts her father’s will with stoic resignation characteristic of her time, then later complains to her mother, “Why him? Why do I have to marry a man I do not love?”

But then Joseph, played masterfully by Oscar Isaac, proves his unstinting devotion during the arduous 100-mile trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem and later serves caringly as midwife at the birth of Jesus. Mary cannot resist. Her heart is touched, and love is born.

Similarly, Mary reacts with human emotion to the angel’s message that she will be the mother of the

THE WISE MEN



Oscar Isaac plays Joseph in
The Nativity Story.



Savior. There is no honeyed piety in her response: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Instead, she worries about how she will handle the biting gossip that is sure to follow when it becomes obvious that she is pregnant while still unmarried.

Although minus a halo, Keisha Castle-Hughes plays Mary with unabashed faith in God and His promise to her. Martin Luther would have liked the way the movie shows Mary accepting Gabriel's announcement so matter-of-factly, without the slightest doubt. To Luther, that was the true miracle of the Christmas story. He said: "The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become man is a greater miracle; but the most amazing of all is that this maiden should believe the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God."

Theological and historical accuracy

Another miracle, one might say, is *The Nativity Story* as a cinematic achievement. It's hard to believe that the writer, Mike Rich, hadn't begun drafting the script until 12 months before the picture's worldwide screening; or that the director, Catherine Hardwicke, completed the filming in just nine short weeks; or that



Mary brings food to local children in *The Nativity Story*.

The contribution of historians is obvious. For example, the Magi as astronomers from Persia and the star of Bethlehem as a triple convergence of planets is not terribly far from theories offered by LCMS vice-president and distinguished historian, Dr. Paul L. Maier, in his book, *In The Fullness of Time* (See also Maier's article "The Visit of the Magi—Fact or Fiction," *The Lutheran Witness*, January 2006).

Similarly, Herod the Great's obsession with threats to his crown, resulting in his execution of a favorite wife and two sons, is historically accurate and explains his paranoid alarm when the Magi come looking for the newborn "king of the Jews."

The writer's search for linguistic accuracy was rewarded by wonderfully authentic scenes of Hebrew prayer. My favorites are the traditional Jewish prayer over bread offered by Joseph, and the prayer of priestly Zechariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist, as he burned incense in the Temple. Jewish scholars clearly served as mentors for such scenes.

the producer, Wyck Godfrey, brought in so elaborately crafted a movie for \$37 million. The comparatively small cost is all the more amazing when you find that it was shot on location in Matera, Italy (the location for *The Passion of the Christ*) and Morocco.

You will come away with your faith strengthened by a cinematic approach to the Christmas story that portrays a God who worked His will through people not much different from you and me.

You would think that shortcuts would be obvious, but they aren't. Before filming, *The Nativity Story* was carefully researched biblically, culturally, linguistically, and historically. The screenwriter says: "We got the script into the hands of as many historians and theologians as possible. They have all helped elevate the authentic feel of the film, not only visually, but from a standpoint of culture and tradition."

Asking God's help

Prayers in English bathed this project from beginning to end. Before he put a word on paper, Rich shared his idea for the movie with his pastor, and he reports: "They put me on the prayer chain immediately, and I stayed there a good long time."

Just as Rich's work on *The Nativity Story* began with prayer, so it ended at the screening I attended. When a pastor from Los Angeles' Bel Air Presbyterian Church opened the private showing with a prayer for the Lord's blessing upon the audiences who will see this film, someone whispered how uncharacteristic it was to hear a prayer at a Hollywood screening. It reminded me of a famous story from the first shoot of our LCMS television series, *This Is the Life*. Before the camera rolled that morning in the early 1950s, one of our own pastors led the cast and crew in prayer. A surprised but grateful crew member was heard to exclaim, "That's the closest I've been to God since Cecil B. DeMille."

The Nativity Story is not a film that will leave you floating on cloud nine or with a warm, fuzzy feeling in your heart. The director deliberately opted for realism



One family. One journey.
One child who would change the world forever.

An Opportunity to Share

The distributors of *The Nativity Story* want this production to be a helpful outreach tool for pastors and churches. A visit to the website www.Outreach.com is worth your while. There you will find order information for sermon ideas related to the film including door hangers, invitation cards to Christmas worship, bulletins, and banners.

One of the banners depicting Joseph leading a donkey carrying Mary and the Christ child reads: "One family. One journey. One child who would change the world forever." He did change the world forever! And *The Nativity Story* beautifully chronicles the beginning of that story.

— A.D.A.

The movie presents Joseph and Mary as very human, very Jewish, and very much in love when Joseph shows his devotion to Mary during their journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus.

rather than sentimentality. You will find images from the film resurfacing in your mind days after you've seen it. And you will come away with your faith strengthened by a cinematic approach to the Christmas story that portrays a God who worked His will through people not much different from you and me.

Dr. Ardon Albrecht is the producer of "Point of Truth," a television series of LCMS worship-service programs. He also was producer of "This is the Life," the TV program of the Lutheran Laymen's League.



Saint Nicholas— The Real Story



Modern marketing may have morphed him from a devout and caring Christian church bishop into the ubiquitous, seasonal pitchman, but the real Saint Nicholas is worth knowing.

by Julie Stiegemeyer

Several years ago, when our son was still very small, my husband and I had the “Official Santa Claus Discussion.” What would we teach our child about Santa? Most families go through it with their first child, and we did too.

We wondered, should Christians tell their kids that Santa Claus would make gifts for them, fly on a magical sleigh, pop down the chimney, and leave the gifts? About the same time as our Official Discussion, a pastor on the radio recommended that Christian parents avoid telling their children about Santa. How can we justify acting like this myth about Santa is true when we’re also telling our children about the Son of God who truly did come to earth to save them? Wouldn’t it follow that once your child discovers that Santa is a myth, he or she might also question the truth of Jesus?

That argument seemed compelling to me, particularly because I happened to know a little bit about the real Santa Claus—Saint Nicholas.

So what would we tell our son? We could have started with the Santa Claus legends. Santa, it is told, is a rotund, magical person who lives in a toy factory at the North Pole. All year long, he and the elves build their

toys until finally, on Christmas Eve, they load up the sleigh, Santa hops aboard, and reindeer, led by Rudolph, fly around the world. Santa deposits gifts under the Christmas trees of good children; the bad kids, however, miss out on gifts.

I admit that, as a child, I loved this story. My brothers and I would watch the weather report on Christmas Eve and see the weather forecaster in mock surprise say that he saw some unidentified object that looked like a flying sleigh on the radar. I’d go to sleep wondering if Santa would really come to my house. And of course, he always did.

But if we don’t tell our son this story, what else could we say? We could have indulged in other lesser-known legends about Saint Nicholas. These legends tell us that Nicholas was a believer in Christ. But they go on to exalt the man Nicholas to an almost god-like status in which he performs miracles of healing, raising the dead, and transporting himself through time and space to rescue sailors in distress.

Or, my husband and I decided, we could tell our son the true story of Saint Nicholas.

What we know to be true is that a man named



Nicholas lived in Lycia (modern-day Turkey) in the fourth century. He was orphaned as a teen and inherited a great deal of money from his wealthy parents. However, he did not use this wealth for himself; instead, he gave much of his money to others.

The most famous story of Nicholas' generosity is generally considered to be factual. There was an impoverished father who had three daughters. Being so poor, the father did not have money to pay the dowries of his three girls, so the girls could not get married. In those days, a young woman could not simply go out and get a job. One of her few opportunities for "employment" was prostitution. So, in order to save the girls from that terrible fate, Nicholas secretly donated enough gold to the family so that the girls would have money for their dowries and could get married.

Scholars do not agree on how or when Nicholas became a bishop. In one version of the story, he was ordained as a young man and became bishop simply because he had the right name. As the church authorities were attempting to choose a new bishop for Myra, one of them had a dream in which God told him that the man who comes to the door named Nicholas should be the next bishop. When Nicholas came to the door and told them his name, he suddenly was a bishop.

Or it could be that his acts of generosity as a young man earned him respect of the church, so he rose to the rank of bishop.

Once, Saint Nicholas showed his Christian compassion by anonymously providing dowries for three young sisters, thus saving them from the terrible life they would have had.

However he got to that position, what is undeniable in terms of historical fact is that, as bishop, he attended the Council of Nicea called by Constantine in 325. At this gathering, church leaders produced the important Nicene Creed.

A colorful tale of Nicholas took place during the Council of Nicea. Bishop Arius of Alexandria was asserting falsely that Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, was not equally divine with the Father. In the face of this falsehood, Nicholas could not restrain himself. He got up and punched Arius in the nose. How's that for a nasty church-council fight? No matter what, you could definitely say that Nicholas was not afraid to defend the truth of the Gospel. He was put in jail for the incident, but later the bishops decided he should be released.

Teaching kids about the real Nicholas is helpful because it can give them insight into this very real man of faith who served the church and was generous to his neighbor. It may also help younger kids understand how old Christianity is. Christians have been sharing the Good News of our Lord for many hundreds of years.

The story of Nicholas is also intriguing because his homeland of Turkey and the surrounding area today is thoroughly non-Christian. It was not always so.

Occasionally, around Christmastime, I see figurines of Santa kneeling before the Christ child in the manger. In some ways, this image is jarring. Why would Santa, this secular image for Christmas, be paired with the real meaning of the holiday? But knowing the back-



Some ideas for Christian Christmas celebrations

- * December 6 is celebrated as Saint Nicholas Day because that is likely the day of Nicholas' death. Children, particularly in European countries, set their empty shoes beside their beds before going to sleep on December 5. The next morning, they find a treat inside their shoes. Maybe your family can make this a tradition.
- * Attend Advent and Christmas services. Do not skip a week because you are busy shopping and wrapping and baking and running errands. Make it the priority.
- * Find a Christ-centered children's book that you read with your family on Christmas Eve every year. And have family members read aloud the nativity story as told in Luke, chapter 2.
- * Use a nativity scene or crèche in your home. Have the figures Mary and Joseph begin a long way from the stable (for example, in a bedroom). Every day, your children can "walk" them a little closer to the stable. Wait until Christmas morning to place the figure of the infant Jesus in the manger.

ground of the Nicholas' story helps us realize that this image is completely appropriate. It's silly, in some ways, to show a chubby red-suited elf worshipping Christ. But in actuality, a pious Christian bishop named Nicholas who lived in the fourth century really did worship the Babe in the manger.

The Santa Claus myth focuses on whether children are "naughty or nice." While it's important for parents to discipline and instruct their children in proper behavior, being good or being bad is not the central idea of Christmas. And it certainly is not the main message of Christianity.

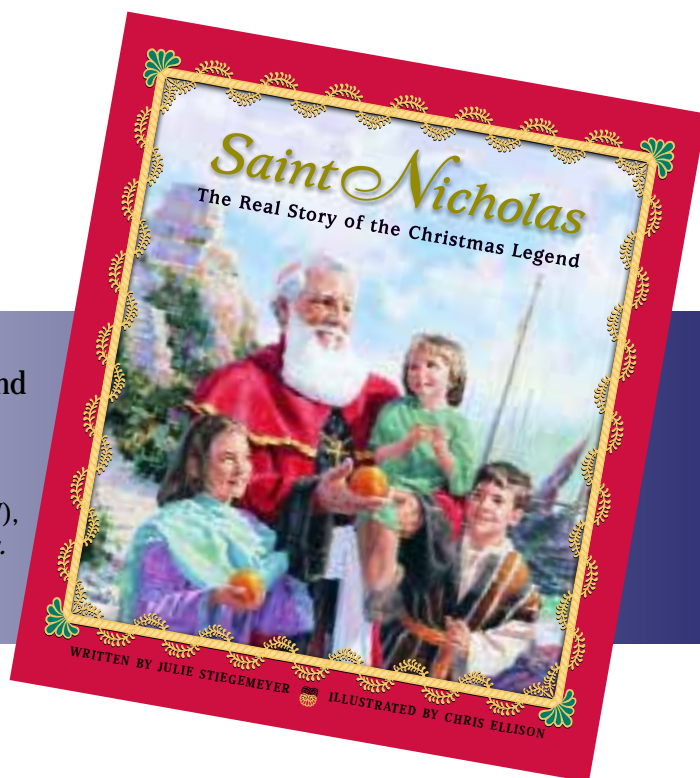
Christmas is about God's gifts—a baby, a Savior, a miracle, and how God forgives our sins. Understanding the true story of Nicholas can support this. He was a devout believer in Christ who, because of the undeserved mercy of God, gave to those around him.

So, instead of teaching our children that a rotund supernatural person will reward them for being good and punish them for bad behavior, our family turns toward Christ at Christmas and all year long. We focus on the kindness and mercy of God that prompted Him to send His only Son to earth as a baby for our sakes. Jesus became one of us so that He could die for us. He became incarnate specifically to go to the cross. And, like the real St. Nicholas, we find that the real joy of Christmas is Jesus.

Julie Stiegemeyer is a member of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind. For more information about Julie's books, see www.juliestiegemeyer.com.

Saint Nicholas: The Real Story Behind the Christmas Legend

Author Julie Stiegemeyer and illustrator Chris Ellison reveal how Saint Nicholas' true story became today's legend of Santa Claus. It is available in two formats: for ages 2–5 (order number 56-2299GV), and 5 and up (order number 56-2230GV). Order at www.christmas.cph.org or by calling 1-800-325-3040.



Who Are You?

by Carol Albrecht

Christians haven't always been called "Christian." They were first given that name at Antioch in the days of the early church (Acts 11:26). Before that, they were called "believers" and "the Way," referring to the fact that Jesus is the way to salvation. The name "Christian," however,

take note of Jesus' imperative for His disciples.

What else are disciples of Jesus expected to do? You'll find some answers in John 13:35 and 15:8. What "example" is He referring to in John 13:35?

We are, however, more than just disciples. We also are witnesses for

To *what* do we witness? 1 Thess. 4:14 clearly tells us what we are to testify to the world.

Another name for Christians is ambassador, or representative, as stated in 2 Cor. 5:20. Think about the qualifications and duties of an effective ambassador for a nation or an organization. Now, think about how those qualifications relate to Christians as ambassadors for Christ.

As His ambassadors, how ought we to live and treat others? Titus 2:12 and Col. 3:12–14 give us some advice. Read those passages before moving on to the next question.

Why do we want to behave in this manner? Paul answers that for all of us in 1 Cor. 9:19–23.

Disciples, witnesses, ambassadors. From what you've learned today, write out your definition of a Christian using the concepts of these three words.

Your definition should reveal to you that carrying the name *Christian* is more difficult than it looks. In fact, by ourselves we certainly couldn't do it at all. But of course, the good news is that we don't have to uphold that name alone. In Rom. 8:26 we find the comfort we need for our daily struggles to live as disciples, witnesses, and ambassadors. Paul tells us there that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness."

What wonderful encouragement for all of us very human servants of the living God!



This mosaic of the loaves and fishes is in an early Christian church.

is only one of the designations we carry. In the New Testament, Christians also are referred to as disciples, witnesses, and ambassadors.

The word "disciple" refers to someone who follows a certain teacher. Many people call themselves followers of Jesus, but He had some things to say about what really makes us disciples. For instance, read John 8:30–32 and

Jesus. One definition of a witness is someone who can give a firsthand account of something. The disciples lived at the time of Jesus, so they can be called true witnesses to His life, death, and resurrection.

But witnesses also can be people who testify to what they know to be the truth. What enables us to be witnesses of Christ? Read 1 John 4:13–16 and 1 Cor. 12:3 for some insights.

Carol Albrecht is a member of Centennial Lutheran Church in Superior, Neb.

Mission Investments

LCMS Early Childhood Centers are a way of doing Gospel outreach for many congregations.

by Robin R. Mueller

When congregations grow effective preschools and early childhood centers, the mission field is on their doorsteps and in their buildings,” says Dr. Judith Christian, director of LCMS children’s ministry. “Often, the

children’s ministries more realistically reflect the diversity and culture of a community than our churches do.”

Statistics bear out her view—78 percent of families who choose Lutheran preschools and child care centers are not Lutheran; 20 percent claim no church affiliation. “Our early-childhood centers (ECC)

ought to be an outgrowth of each congregation’s mission statement, which is founded on the Great Commission!” Christian says.

The Synod’s approximately 2,100 ECCs are “entry points” for unchurched families, says Christian. Congregations become “an extended family for parents who seek advice and support,” and who live far from their extended families.

“Who better than the church to care for families?” asks Christians. “If people are going to seek child care, shouldn’t we provide that caring, [in a] Christian place?”

Training and commitment

Well-trained leaders and dedicated teamwork among the pastor, the ECC director and staff, and congregational volunteers are crucial to “caring for children and speaking the Gospel. A top challenge nationwide, Christian adds, is finding qualified Christian staff and teaching them Lutheran doctrine. Every teacher needs to have a firm commitment to ministry and be able to articulate her faith with conviction.”

Christian love permeates LCMS preschools and early-child-care centers; the majority teach daily Bible stories (or “Jesus” time), sing Christian songs, and hold weekly chapels.

“Children’s most important needs are to know Jesus and the grace we have in Him. We want our early childhood centers to be harbors of hope for kids. When they enter our spaces, they can depend on us to act, speak, and behave in certain ways. Our goal is to give them hope in Jesus Christ and hope for their future.”

Judy Christian, director of LCMS children’s ministry, talks to some school children at Abiding Savior Lutheran School, St. Louis, about the book *A Day with Samuel*. The book is published by Concordia Publishing House.



Seeking moral values

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Orange, Calif., and Trinity Lutheran Church, Clinton Township (a Detroit suburb), Mich., have 2,500 members each. They also have large, successful preschools and early childhood centers in suburban areas.

"The preschool is the first arm of the ministry," says Esther Jow, the preschool director of St. Paul's, located in a conservative part of California. "Non-Christian parents come here because they like our moral character development. Their child talks about Jesus at home and they become interested in faith. Each year, about 10 percent of our students and families become members. At least half enter St. Paul's elementary school. God has richly blessed us.

"One third of the members in our New Members class typically have a connection to the ECC," says Trinity's ECC administrator Judy Williams. "Many were connected to a Lutheran or [other] Christian church previously, but had fallen away. Now, they have the need and desire to bring their children into the faith."

St. Paul's Early Childhood Development Center, opened in 1985, has grown to a staff of 30 who care for more than 200 children in 12 classrooms and an infant/toddler center. Trinity, meanwhile, launched its early childhood center nine years ago. Today it serves more than 200 children, including infants, preschool, and child care. Seven public-school buses pick up and drop off about 150 children for the congregation's latchkey "before and after" school program.

A summer camp, a recently added "Terrific 2s" program, and a MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) program also demonstrate Trinity's commitment to children. In fact, Trinity has always had a school; when they moved to a larger site 50 years ago, they built their new school before building the sanctuary.



Shannon Fettue, a caregiver, left, and Sandra Shippy, a lead teacher at Trinity Lutheran Early Childhood Center, Clinton, Mich., share a happy moment, with preschool student Roma Palmer.

"You can tell the Spirit is mightily at work in these children," says Trinity's Williams. "We're here to tell them who Jesus is, because that relationship is the most important thing in their lives."

Both early childhood centers purposefully reach out to parents and families. St. Paul's offers parenting tips in a monthly newsletter and hosts events for non-Christian parents and their friends. Last year, the church bought *The Chronicles of Narnia* tickets at a local theater and offered them to families.

Once a month, the staff hosts Camp Runamuck from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m., when "kids have dinner, do fun activities, get into their pajamas, and watch a video. It allows parents to have a night out," says Jow.

At Trinity, the preschool children sing in Sunday services three times a year. This helps connect parents to the congregation. Senior pastor Ken Wise introduced an 11 a.m. "children's church, in a room of their own to hear an age-appropriate sermon," Williams explains. A "parish pizza pumpkin picnic" in the

fall and a "kite day" in the spring attracts parents and visitors, who are welcomed by congregational members.

When families face illnesses, job loss, or other trouble, the congregations and pastors reach out. At St. Paul's, parents are encouraged to write their needs onto a prayer board. The school community prays for them, refers their names to a pastor, and forwards their needs to St. Paul's prayer chain.

"We show our children affection, and through our interaction with each other and with their parents, we show them how we care for each other as a community of God," says Jow. "That model works—last year, our children lovingly cared for a child with cancer."

Trinity members pray for young families, many affected by automakers' lay-offs, marital problems, and special needs. "Last year, one family had a toddler with major health concerns, who later died. Our pastor served them and held the funeral service for them. They know we're here for them," says Williams.

Seeking quality care

The preschool of Martini Lutheran Church, a 138-year-old congregation near the inner harbor of Baltimore, is experiencing “slow, hopeful, steady growth,” says Rev. Elliott Robertson. The congregation reaches out to young, unchurched families in the newly gentrified Federal Hill neighborhood.

Half the congregation fled to the suburbs 20 years ago, “but now [Federal Hill’s] old townhouses and row houses are suddenly desirable,” explains Robertson. “Double income, professional couples like the patchwork of different nationalities in the city, and want to raise families here.”

Martini’s preschool, begun four years ago, is also a “patchwork” of 17 students 3 to 4 years old. During its history, the preschool has served children from white, African-American, Asian, Chinese, Argentinean, and Turkish families. “Most of these families are unchurched,” says Jan Watson, the preschool’s director. “You don’t just get a child, you get the whole family.”

Watson, a graduate of Concordia University, Seward, Neb., says this mission field is as challenging as New Guinea, where she grew up, or Nigeria, where she and her husband served for four years. “These young couples are self-sufficient and not seeking a Supreme Being to be in charge,” she says. Robertson adds that “new post-moderns have cobbled together their own religions and have a hostility to absolutes.”

But Martini’s Christian message stands firm. “We tell the parents that we know and love Jesus and He loves us. That’s what we teach here.” The children take home lessons once a week and retell a Bible story to their parents, sing “Jesus songs,” and learn daily Bible words. “I know that most of them would not be taught about salvation if they weren’t coming here,” says Watson.

Parents discuss Martini’s preschool with other parents in parks

and on the community Web site, comparing it to other church preschools and city-run, federally funded preschools. “If they’re hesitant about the Christian atmosphere, they’re willing to try it because we have such a good reputation,” adds Watson.

“It takes a long time to build relationship and trust,” she continues. “In our year-end evaluations, some parents have said ‘Thank you for teaching my child about Jesus.’ Now we’re seeing the siblings of our first preschoolers.”

Watson visits families in their homes and asks if the pastor may visit them. Most agree. Robertson builds relationships in weekly chapel (“the kids run up to hug me,” he says happily) and joins preschoolers and parents on field trips.

About 90

Martini members—suburban dwellers who still feel strong ties, older members who never moved away, and a few newcomers—gather for Sunday worship services. Members mingle with preschool families at three Preschool Sundays each year, generously support the min-

istry, volunteer for clean-up days, and serve as “prayer pals” for children and their families. Some have bought Bibles for their prayer pals.

The congregation has baptized just one preschooler in the four years of the school’s existence. “This is God’s preschool,” Watson says simply. “He’s put it here, and He has promised that His Word will not return to Him void. He will bring us the families, and we pray that He will open their ears. It’s a constant walk of faith.”

Plant and grow

An established church can begin an early childhood center. But can an early childhood center establish a church? That’s the premise of the Open Arms Institute, Inc. (www.openarmsinstitute.com), a brainstorm of the LCMS English District. Their “guinea pig” was Christ the Shepherd Lutheran Church in Alpharetta, Ga., sponsored by Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Buckhead, a suburb of Atlanta.

A well-managed childcare ministry not only pays for its staff and materials, but it also can help to underwrite the mortgage, maintenance, and utilities of a new church facility “without taxing that small body of believers who are planting the church,” explains Bonnie



Children at St. Paul's Lutheran Early Childhood Development Center, Orange, Calif., sing in the church sanctuary for a devotion.

Elseroad, the director of Christ the Shepherd’s Open Arms Child Development Center.

“About 20 percent of our church membership has come through the children’s center.”

In 1989, Lutheran Church of the Ascension called Rev. Kevin Elseroad to plant a new congregation in nearby Alpharetta by first building a Child Development Center. All he and his wife had to work with were “seven acres of scrub pines, grass, and a sign,” recounts Bonnie.



Students and staff at St. Paul's Early Childhood Development Center in Orange, Calif., enjoy playing with a colorful parachute.

Going door to door, Rev. Elseroad invited people to worship services at a rented facility, while overseeing the building of the child development center.

Meanwhile, Bonnie Elseroad, a social worker, worked at Ascension, which had begun its own Open Arms Child Development Center. Mentored by other directors, she learned about staffing, curriculum and financial oversight, and became director of Christ the Shepherd's Open Arms Center in 1994.

In October 1990, Christ the Shepherd's Center was completed. Seven years later, their sanctuary rose. In 2004, a ministry building with celebration hall, youth loft, offices, and Bible study rooms connected the Center and sanctuary.

Today, Christ the Shepherd Church has 700 members, and its Open Arms Child Development Center has a staff of 35 who care for 200 children, ages 6 weeks to 5 years old. Church vans pick up another 30 children for after-school care.

"Our goal is interconnectedness and community," says Elseroad. Teachers highlight activities in a weekly newsletter to parents. Twice a year, prechoolers sing at a church service, and a special Christmas Eve service welcomes them. Two years

ago, the church began an "Open Arms Sunday" and dinner.

This year, the church called Steve Armbrust to serve as Adult and Children's Discipleship Minister to train, support, and connect church volunteers with the early childhood center ministry.

Planted in a high-tech computer/telephone systems corridor, Christ the Shepherd reaches out to many nationalities, who speak 13 languages beyond English. "Families come here to train and then head back to their country," explains Elseroad.

The Center's diverse staff and assistants "are trained to work with different belief systems and cultures. Often it's Mom who has no socialization or language skills. Our next step is to offer English-as-a-second-language classes for families. Our church members said they'd love to volunteer for that."

Nearly 50 congregations in 18 states have followed the Open Arms model. Five years ago, Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Iowa, bought land and built a spacious Open Arms children's center in an upper-middle-class suburb.

When financial difficulties arose, the Iowa District West stepped in to "take on a significant commitment to maintain and grow this ministry" in

October 2005, explains Rev. Bob Riggert, executive assistant of youth, education, and stewardship for the district. While Riggert became educational consultant, the district business manager oversaw finances, and the Center's two-dozen-plus staff became district employees.

"One major challenge is our society's consumer mentality; everything must be done with quality," says Riggert.

Center Director Cheryl Nieland and newcomer Curriculum Director Julie Camp are reaching out to 85 children, 6 weeks to 5 years old. Colorful murals of Jesus lining bright hallways demonstrate the Center's mission. Nieland says, "The children soak up the Gospel like a sponge, and parents appreciate our loving, nurturing staff."

A core group of a dozen Mount Olive families meet in the Center's gym for Sunday worship, to plant a new church—Messiah Lutheran. The district called local hospital chaplain Rev. Jim Brammeier as Messiah's part-time pastor. He and his wife, Loreeta, a musician, also lead weekly chapel services for the children. "Our hope is that we will continue to grow the day care center and the church, and make them one," says Nieland.

Each Tuesday during the summer, at the Farmer's Market across the street, Messiah members sell tea and coffee, hand out information, and interact with families. In August, they hosted a free Family Fun Day.

"It's taken a tremendous amount of energy," adds Riggert. "But the heart and core of our district is mission. George Barna's studies have shown that children are a fertile field for faith, and that the church should put its time and energy into children's ministries. This is a mission investment."

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Love Came Down

A son's letter from Afghanistan helps his family focus on the only important truth of Christmas.

by Bill Simmons

"Right now, it's 0400 [4:00 a.m.] Christmas Day, and I am on post. But it's still Christmas Eve back home and it's only 1930 [7:30 p.m.], so you guys have a long Christmas to go."

Our son, Lance Cpl. Benjamin Simmons, United States Marine Corps, wrote those words from the forward operating base of Mehtar Lam in Afghanistan on Dec. 25, 2005. It was his first Christmas away from home and devoid of most comforts we take for granted.

His mother had written him an e-mail earlier on Christmas Eve, and she was trying to be upbeat about his absence. Like any mother with a child in harm's way, she may have sounded less than convincing.

His response, at 4:00 a.m. on Christmas Day, continued with both a mild scolding and strong words of encouragement. I share them now with the hope that they can be that for all our LCMS families and for all families who celebrate Christmas this year with loved ones far from home.

"It's Christmas day," Ben wrote. "This holiday is for Jesus, not for me. It's His birthday."

That is a good reminder when we become too preoccupied with our own concerns and issues. We've all been there. We all need the reminder. We often bear burdens that seem too heavy for the Christ child to carry. Perhaps a loved one has died during this past year, and this is the first Christmas without him

or her. Certainly the unrest in the world fills our hearts and minds, a world where "peace on earth" seems as elusive as a rainbow following a spring thunderstorm.

As we gather with family and friends this holiday season, we do well to focus our attention where true peace is to be found and where heavy burdens are to be laid. Our son gave us just such counsel from his post half a world away.

"There is more to Christmas than what we are used to," he continued in his Christmas e-mail. "Sometimes we have to feel pain before



U.S. Marine Lance Cpl. Benjamin Simmons, looking at the camera, spent last Christmas in Afghanistan. This Christmas, he is in Iraq.

we can be happy. If you remember [that] Christ felt the world's pain for all of us, then me not being there is just a tiny bit of the pain that He felt for us."

My wife and I read these words with tears in our eyes. Here we were trying to console him, and he was consoling us. My pain in being gone and your pain in my absence, he was telling us, are nothing compared to the pain Jesus felt. Pain in leaving the Father's house and setting aside His glory as the Bethlehem child. Pain in experiencing how far the world had fallen and how enslaved to sin it had become. Pain in the Father's judgment upon sin that was His destiny.

Let this be your focus, too, so that you don't think your burdens are too heavy, your cares too great. Jesus did the heavy lifting when He shouldered our sin on the cross. This Christmas, He invites us to "Cast all your cares on Me because I care for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Love came down at Christmas. Let that be your focus. His love will bridge any absence, heal any wound, forgive any wrong.

We needed those words. We need them again this year. Christmas 2006 finds Benjamin gone once again—this time to the Al Anbar Region of Iraq, engaged in Operation Iraqi Freedom. There seems to be no shortage of hostility in this fallen world where "wars and rumors of war" abound.

Ben's closing words from Afghanistan are as appropriate in Iraq as they are in whatever place we may call home:

"Remember Christmas is for family, but is meant to celebrate Christ's birth. My way this year was without the gifts and happiness of being home. But it was a reminder of how people in the world really are and why God has a bigger plan for all of us. Well, I need to get back to work. I can't wait to be home. I love you all and to all a good night.

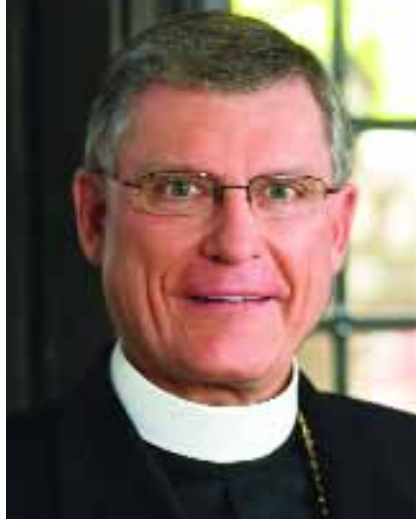
Ben

P.S. Be happy. It's Christmas."



Rev. Bill Simmons is pastor at Christ Memorial Lutheran Church,
St. Louis, Mo.

Gifts from the Heart



It was about this time last year that a young lady from Yorba Linda, Calif., sent a gift to the Synod, along with a letter of explanation. Here's what she wrote:

*Dear Lutheran Church,
I am sending you my week's allowance of \$3.75. I know it's not tons but it might be able to help. I live in California and I'm currently taking my last year of 8th grade confirmation. In our homework books, I talked about fasting and sending the \$ to your church. Although I can't fast because I will get low blood sugar and faint, I can contribute my allowance. I hope it helps.
Have a blessed day.
Love,
Carly Yates*

Carly's gift and letter landed on the desk of Rev. Tom Ries, president of The LCMS Foundation. Tom sent Carly a personal letter of thanks.

"While you noted in your letter, 'I know it's not tons,' to me it is a big gift," Tom wrote her. "More importantly it is also a big gift to Jesus. I am reminded of the story in Luke 21, where Jesus saw a woman put two small coins into the temple treasury and said that she had given a remarkable gift because it came from her heart and was all that she could possibly give.

"Your gift will help support the training of pastors, teachers, and other church workers; the work of missionaries around the world; the Christian education of children, young people, and adults; and the care of the hungry, the homeless, and the hopeless in the name of Christ. We will make sure your gift gets sent to where it is needed most!

"I'm glad you are learning about giving through your confirmation instruction," President Ries continued. "I learned the same thing when I was in confirmation class many years ago and have enjoyed a lifetime of giving to Jesus from what He has given me. Around here we like to say, 'You have learned how to live when you've learned how to give!' I'm happy for you that you are learning the joy of giving early in your life."

Carly's gift was far greater than the \$3.75 that she

thought she was giving. She was giving a lesson in Christian giving, even as she obviously had been receiving lessons in giving from Christian models and mentors in her life.

As Jesus watched the people put their gifts into the temple treasury, He was particularly moved by the gift of the widow in Luke 21, because she gave from the heart in an act of love, gratitude to God, and sacrifice. This is the attitude that caught our Lord's attention and that He in turn called to the attention of His disciples.



The greatest gift the world has ever known is the very first gift of Christmas—the gift of the infant Jesus. God gave the whole world a present when he gave Jesus.

Jesus Himself, of course, is the greatest gift that the world has ever known. This is the Gift of God for which we prepare during Advent and celebrate in the Festival of Christmas. This is the Gift that moves us to give gifts to our

friends and loved ones at Christmas—more than that, to give of ourselves for others throughout our lives.

Our heavenly Father gave from His gracious heart when He gave His only-begotten Son to be the Savior of the world. The Son of God gave everything He had to pay for our sins and to give us the free gift of eternal life.

May your Christmas be blessed as you celebrate yet again God's gift from the heart, His only Son, born of a virgin—God in the flesh—for us.

Lives Transformed through
Christ, in Time ... for Eternity!
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Jerry Kieschnick
John 3:16–17