



The Lutheran **WITNESS**

DECEMBER 2003

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Bethlehem

2,000 Years Later

*Also: Before the Word Became Flesh
The American Christmas*



The Lutheran WITNESS

A MAGAZINE FOR THE LAYPEOPLE OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD

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DECEMBER 2003

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Carlo Maratta, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1660, Kunsthistorisches Museum/Vienna/Austria, Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource

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The Alabama judge

It is obvious that the First Amendment's purpose was not to take God out of schools and all of public life, but to protect religious freedom.

Gene Harms
Warsaw, Mo.

JUDGE ROY MOORE HAS BEEN RIGHT about many things, and possibly mistaken about others ("The Judge and the Ten Commandments," Oct. '03). But his placement of a block of granite inscribed with the Ten Commandments (and other notable quotes) in the Alabama Judicial Building was not in any sense equivalent to an act of the U.S. Congress officially establishing a state religion, which is what is prohibited by the First Amendment.

Perhaps there does exist a constitutional or legal bar to Judge Moore's action—some provision of real substance, unlike the unwritten law that apparently undergirds the decisions of federal judges that have been helping the ACLU expunge all physical symbols of Christianity from public view. But such a bar has not been revealed to date.

Leonard C. Johnson
Moscow, Idaho

OUR FOUNDING FATHERS FEARED THAT A single government-sponsored Christian denomination would leave Christians of other denominations feeling oppressed. They never intended to leave God out of the law. Our Supreme Court and most other court buildings have Biblical references abounding in stone sculptures. I am among the 77 percent of Americans who are in favor of the Ten Commandments, and I think it's about time we show support of those in authority who still uphold morality.

Grant Schienbein
Wichita, Kan.

WHILE I SHARE DR. TAPE'S CONCERN over the American shift in moral viewpoint, I believe his argument

defending Judge Moore's statuary is undermined by at least two misperceptions.

The first is that the images of Moses found inside the U.S. Supreme Court and Senate constitute an endorsement of the *ideas* the prophet set forth. They do not. They are acknowledgments of the man as a sterling, effective and famous lawgiver (like Blackstone and Hammurabi). In a capital setting where image routinely exceeds substance, we should not read more into what we see than what is actually there.

Second, the Ten Commandments is more than a neutral expression of natural law—and thank God for that. The "First Tablet" (the first three commandments) has very specific religious doctrine attached to it. There is *nothing* from natural law to predict the existence of a God who is jealous of His honor, demands respect for His holy name, and requires observance of a special day for His worship.

Astoundingly, there appear to be good Christian folk unable to come to terms with the fact that the Ten Commandments have some definite "special revelation" character. We should not expect the general public to accept such divine revelations under the persuasion of governmental force.

Dr. Michael L. Anderson
Columbia, Md.

Be light and salt

I WELCOMED YOUR ADDRESSING "GOD and the Gay Lifestyle" (Oct. '03).

The homosexual lobby is as powerful as any in the country. We can ill afford to sit back and be apathetic. Lutherans need to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth in actively reacting to the rapid spread of this sin and its growing acceptance by our fellow citizens.

Rev. E.J. Otto
Milwaukee, Wis.

UNFORTUNATELY, TOO MANY CHRISTIANS speak harshly against the sin of homosexuality while at the same time condoning sins of breaking marriage, live-in relationships and watching marriage-destroying television shows, movies, etc. The serious issue with practicing homosexuality, as with all "ongoing" sins, is the sin of impenitence. Every sin is forgivable until hardness sets in and persistence in sin leads to unbelief. Luther spoke about this when he pointed out that the Christian life is one of daily repentance.

Rev. Carl E. Pullmann
North Platte, Neb.

IN JUST ABOUT EVERY CHRISTIAN denomination, members claim that while the sin of homosexuality is hated, the homosexual as sinner is loved. Yet, very often homosexuals are kept at arms' length. When invited to the home of Matthew the tax collector for dinner, Jesus didn't stand across the road from Matthew's house yelling words of the Good News, asking, "Can you hear me now?" Jesus entered Matthew's home and life as a friend as well as his Savior, sharing the Good News.

If homosexuals (and erring heterosexuals) are expected to give up their sexual activity, then the issue of what sex achieves for them—love, acceptance, companionship—has to be addressed. As Christians, with God's guidance and help, we need to offer something worth-

while and concrete in exchange for this proscribed sexual activity. Their emotional and spiritual needs must be met in a Christian manner to prevent a return to previous behavior. Of course, this is true for all of us in all walks of sin.

How do Christian heterosexuals ask sincerely and respectfully of homosexuals to make the lifelong choice of celibacy when married heterosexuals do not have to make such a decision? Do Christian heterosexuals understand that homosexuals are giving up companionship, possibly decades-long relationships, to be right with God? How do Christians help homosexuals once the choice is made, if it is made, and welcome homosexuals into the church?

*Charlotte Coolidge
San Antonio, Texas*

I COMMEND YOU FOR YOUR ARTICLE ON homosexuality. This issue is threatening to destroy the basic family unit as God designed it. I pray all our members will contact their congressmen and ask them to pass the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would define marriage as "only the union of a man and a woman."

*Helen Bunge
Mayer, Minn.*

LCMS president Gerald Kieschnick has encouraged support for this proposed amendment. In an Oct. 23 letter to Missouri Synod Lutherans, he wrote that marriage is "so intrinsic to the very fabric of society and the essence of life itself, that we can ill afford to look away when others, after thousands of years, suddenly try to recast its sacred meaning."

The Federal Marriage Amendment was introduced in the House of Representatives as House Joint Resolution 56 (H.J. Res. 56). To become an amendment to the Constitution requires approval by a two-thirds vote of each the House and the Senate, then ratification by three-fourths of the states. —Ed.

BETHLEHEM 2,000 YEARS LATER

The town of Jesus' birth today is in the Palestinian territories. There's still a Christian community there, but one that's been shrinking in the face of safety concerns and hard times.

by David L. Mahsman

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
the silent stars go by ...*

Sari took me down the hallway and into his bedroom. Flipping on the light, he pointed to the window.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Here," Sari said.

Sure enough. A bullet hole.

Sari Karoub is 10 years old. He was nine when the Israeli bullet tore through his second-floor bedroom window a year and a half ago. His room is on the Israeli side of the house. A Palestinian bullet would have entered on the other side of the house.

It was in April 2002 that the Israeli army invaded Bethlehem, the town of Jesus' birth, and nearby villages. The nights in Bethlehem weren't so silent then. Tanks rolled through town. Explosions could be heard. Shots were fired.

It wasn't at all like the carol says it was on that first Christmas.

The Biblical Bethlehem of Judea today is in the West Bank, the Israeli-occupied territories—land supposedly under the control of the Palestinian Authority.

Sari is a Palestinian Arab. He is

not Muslim, though, as many (if not most) Americans might assume. He is a Christian, as the crucifix in the hallway outside his room gives witness. His father is a university professor; his mother is principal of the Lutheran school in Bethlehem.

A Christian community

Yes, there are Lutherans in Bethlehem. Palestinian Lutherans.

And while the Lutheran church has been there for only about 150 years, these fellow believers in Jesus come from families that likely have been Christian for more generations than yours or mine.

"One of my great-great-great grandmothers used to babysit for Jesus," jokes Rev. Mitri Raheb when asked how long his family has been Christian.



An Israeli army armored personnel carrier blocks access to the Church of the Nativity May 27, 2002, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem.



Sari Karoub, then 9, comforted his mother, Nailah, during a night of Israeli shelling last year, telling her, "God will protect us." Pastor Mitri Raheb says that Nailah Karoub, principal of the Lutheran school in Bethlehem, did much herself to comfort and protect the school's students during Israeli military operations in the town.

Raheb is third-generation Lutheran (his ancestors were Greek Orthodox) and pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, where he was born and raised.

In September, I joined a small contingent of U.S. Lutherans who traveled to Bethlehem with Wheat Ridge Ministries, a recognized service organization of the Missouri Synod that focuses on health and healing. There we spent time with Raheb and members of his congregation.

Christmas Lutheran Church is one of six congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan, a name to which often now is added, parenthetically, “(and Palestine).” While Bethlehem and the other cities and towns in which ELCJ congregations are found once were in Jordan, changed political lines after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War leave most of them in the occupied territories.

“We are the only Lutheran presence in the context of 300 million Arab Muslims,” says Raheb of the religious landscape in the Middle East. The small church body has a total of about 2,000 members. There are other Christians, too, of course—a total of 15 million Arab Christians in the Middle East, Raheb says.

The number of Christians is dwindling, however. In the occupied territories, the number has dropped from 110,000 in 1948, the year the state of Israel came into existence, to some 50,000 today. As many as 30,000 of them live in the Bethlehem area.

“I can remember when Muslims and Christians were 50-50 in Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahur,” says Jalal Odeh, whose statistics include two additional villages in the Bethlehem area. Odeh, a 52-year-old microbiologist who operates his own medical laboratory, is an active lay leader at Christmas Lutheran Church.

“Sunday was a very special day here in Bethlehem,” Odeh continues, thinking back to his younger years. “We would get up very early. The bells from all the churches were ringing. All would dress for Sunday service. Most of the shops were closed because the shopkeepers were Christians. It was a day of rest.”

Today, Odeh says, no more than 12 to 15 percent of those who live in the Bethlehem area are Christians, and maybe not that many. Fewer than 2 percent of the West Bank population still is Christian, he adds.

“Many have emigrated,” Odeh explained. Most who leave go to the United States, Canada or Australia, he said. Some go to Europe.

“Many have known nothing for the past 30 years but [Israeli] occupation,” Odeh said. Safety concerns have been on the increase in the last two years, he said. Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has escalated.

At the same time, the Palestinian economy has taken a beating. Tourism is almost nonexistent—visit the Church of the Nativity, a crowded shrine in days gone by, and you’re likely to have the place nearly to yourself, as we did. Many Palestinians are jobless or if, like Odeh, they have their own businesses, they have seen earnings drop by 60 to 65 percent, he said.

“They want to live in a place where it’s quiet, safe and there is a future for their children,” Odeh said of those who emigrate.

“But if it keeps going on, you may find here Christian churches and Christian places—but no Christians.”



Rev. Mitri Raheb, left, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, greets Dr. Richard Bimler, president of Wheat Ridge Ministries, after the Sunday service Sept. 7. The two have worked together to provide a health and wellness center for the people of Bethlehem.



Christmas Lutheran Church is a prominent landmark surrounded by a busy market in Bethlehem, the town of Jesus’ birth.

Violent times

Nailah Karoub, Sari's mother, gets a little emotional when she talks about those days in the spring of last year that left the bullet-hole souvenir in her son's bedroom window. There were six "major invasions" then by the Israelis into the Bethlehem area, according to Pastor Raheb.

The Israeli checkpoint that controls the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, a mere five miles away, is one direction from the Karoub home. Palestinian gunmen had taken a position in the other direction.

"We were in the house under emotional stress," she said. "There was shooting. Sometimes our older son, who is 22, would be out with friends, and we would worry."

"Usually there was shooting every night," added Nailah's husband, Jrasmus.

"A bomb exploded near the house," Nailah went on. "I was at one window. A bullet came through another window."

"I was very nervous," she said. "I got the children on the ground."

"Every night we have a hard time sleeping," she continued. "The F-16s [Israeli] would come—we knew what would happen. I tried to get the children to sleep in the hallway."

One night, she said, there was heavy shelling. The Israelis shelled a nearby restaurant, she said, killing a young Palestinian paramedic whose mother ironically had sent him to the West Bank from the even more-dangerous Gaza Strip for safety.

"Sari during the night said, 'God will protect us,'" said Nailah, smiling warmly at her 10-year-old son. Sari, a cross dangling from a cord around his neck, smiled, too.

The occupation

Though caught in the middle between Israelis and Palestinian Muslims, the Palestinian Christians with whom we met said they see a greater threat in the former than in

the latter.

"Muslims are not a problem in the sense of [Christians] being persecuted," Jalal Odeh, the microbiologist, said. "We have lived together for a long time—more in Palestine than elsewhere [in the Middle East]."

"It's normal for us to be with Muslims," said one of Odeh's daughters, Lydia, a recent high-school graduate.

"We are part and parcel of the Palestinian community—we are one people with the Muslims," Rana Khoury said of civil society in Bethlehem. Khoury's grandfather was a pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church.

The Israeli occupation is another matter. Even though Bethlehem had no Israeli soldiers on its streets when we visited, the occupation is a daily reality for the Palestinians, whether Muslim or Christian.

We stayed at a Christian guest-house in Jerusalem and commuted the five miles to and from Bethlehem each day. While our wait at the Israeli army checkpoint on the Bethlehem road never exceeded 45 minutes, it can be hours for Palestinians, we were told. And even after that amount of time, they may be turned back.

Pastor Raheb said that since 1991, he has been unable to drive his car to Jerusalem. His 8-year-old daughter has been to Jerusalem only once in her life.

"More than 600 checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip restrict movement between villages and towns and in and out of Israel," says an article published Nov. 7 by the Financial Times. "About 60 percent of the 3.3 [million] Palestinian population lives beneath the poverty line, unemployment is close to 50 percent

and health and education has been severely disrupted."

From the road and from various points in Bethlehem, we could see gleaming new Jewish settlements astride hilltops and ridges, built in Palestinian territory.

Also very visible was the wall and fence that the Israelis are building between Israel and the West Bank. The Israelis say the barrier is needed to keep out suicide bombers; the Palestinians say it's only an excuse to take their land and to make it impossible for any future Palestinian state to be economically viable.

The United Nations General Assembly in October called on Israel to dismantle the barrier, which could dip deeply into Palestinian territory to include some Jewish settlements there. The vote was 144 in favor and four countries, including the United States, opposed. Israeli officials have said that construction will continue.

Christians and peace

In spite of their anger and frustration, the Christian Palestinians with whom we spoke say they are thoroughly opposed to violence. They have no more use for Palestinian suicide bombers than they do for Israeli tanks.

"Christians here believe they can fight Israel with praying and by talking with Americans and Europeans—in a peaceful way,"

said Rami Khader, a 21-year-old Palestinian Lutheran. He studied hotel management at Bethlehem University and



Jalal Odeh, a microbiologist and member of Christmas Lutheran Church, says he can remember when there were as many Christians in Bethlehem as Muslims. Today, no more than 12 to 15 percent of Bethlehem's residents are Christian.



Angie Saba, kneeling, right, poses with some of her friends, all members of Christmas Lutheran Church and most of them university students. Saba was the only Christian among the best students in the West Bank to be interviewed on Palestinian television. Her pastor said she purposely wore a large cross on TV in witness to her faith.

is training to manage a new health and wellness center funded through Wheat Ridge Ministries and operated by Christmas Lutheran Church.

Khader noted that militant groups such as Hamas are Muslim, and he is a Christian. He said the Israelis and Palestinian militants must stop the oppression and the violence.

"Israel and Palestine need each other," he said. "We need peace."

Jalal Odeh, who has more than 30 years on his younger fellow-Lutheran, said that he, too, is committed to seeing peace.

"I have always been committed to the idea that peace sooner or later will prevail," Odeh said. "When it does, I want to be part of peacemaking and rebuilding."

But, he added, "It will take a very strong peace movement on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, and commitment from Americans and Europeans to see this through."

Odeh has experienced relatively peaceful times.

Help from U.S. Lutherans

"When we stood here four years ago, there was nothing," Rev. Mitri Raheb said as we stood on the hill at the edge of Bethlehem. We were looking at the gleaming white-stone building, children in their school uniforms and furious final preparations for a celebration.

It was Sept. 5, the date for the official dedication of the new Dar al-Kalima ("House of the Word") Health and Wellness Center.

Four years ago, there was only the hill and Raheb's vision for an academy that would comprise a model school, a wellness center and a health center. It would be a Lutheran, Christian enterprise to serve the Palestinian community.

Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, shared his vision in 1999 with Wheat Ridge Ministries, a recognized service organization of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that focuses on "health and hope."

Now, four years later, the school building has been open for more than a year. And those who had worked so hard to make the newest facility there also a reality—along with hundreds of students, their families and members of the Bethlehem community—would hear Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan (and Palestine) say, "I dedicate this wellness center for the healing of the Palestinian people, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The health and wellness center includes a swimming pool, gymnasium, playground, outdoor amphitheater and a still-to-be-completed park area filled with plants and trees. It has the staff and facilities to provide vision and dental care, trauma counseling, and other health and wellness services. Its audiology clinic is state of the art.

To date, Wheat Ridge has received more than \$1 million for the wellness center and related ministries in Bethlehem. Among other Lutheran organizations that have gotten involved in one way or another are the Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis, the Mill Neck Foundation, the Lutheran Education Association and Lutheran Hour Ministries.

"Wheat Ridge Ministries is committed to continue seeding health and hope ministries in Bethlehem and throughout the Middle East as the Lord provides opportunities and resources," says the organization's president, Dr. Richard Bimler.

More information about Wheat Ridge Ministries, including its work in Bethlehem, is available on the Web at www.wheatridge.org.

— D.L.M.

Hundreds gather Sept. 5 outside the Dar al-Kalima ("House of the Word") Academy building in Bethlehem for the dedication of the Dar al-Kalima Health and Wellness Center, which is housed in the building along with a Lutheran "model school." A banner on the covered stage proclaimed, in part, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us."





Two students at Dar al-Kalima Academy wait for the beginning of dedication ceremonies for a new health and wellness center that is associated with their school.

During such times, he said, “it turns good in Bethlehem. It is a good little town, a good place to raise children.”

The next generation

And children there are in Bethlehem. More than 230 of them are students at the Dar al-Kalima (“House of the Word”) Academy and Model School, operated by Christmas Lutheran Church.

The Palestinian Christians with whom we talked clearly place a high value on education. Most of them are college graduates or still in college; many of them have advanced degrees. When the German Lutherans came to Bethlehem 150 years ago, they started a school even before they planted a congregation.

Today, the school is in a gleaming new building. It’s at the edge of town, on a mountain with a panoramic view of Bethlehem and the surrounding area. On a clear day, Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives is visible in one direction, the Dead Sea in another. The Palestinian Authority gave the mountain to the Christmas Lutherans if they would promise to have the new school in operation within a year.

Being an entrepreneur, Raheb agreed, and with help from Wheat Ridge and others, he met the deadline.

Like most schools, Dar al-Kalima is in session five days a week. The two days off, though, are Friday and Sunday. Some 30 percent of the students are Muslim, and Friday is their holy day. But on school days, they have Christian devotions from the Gospels. They get Christian religious instruction, too, as part of the curriculum.

Rev. Munib Younan, bishop of the ELCJ, told us that the little 2,000-member Lutheran church body has six schools with a total enrollment of 3,000. Of the total, 35 percent are Muslim, he said.

“Our schools have an impact on one-sixth of the future Christian Palestinian population,” Younan added.

One of those is Angie Saba, a graduate of the Lutheran school in Bethlehem and a student at Bethlehem University.

“When we are under curfew or there is shooting, we are locked in our houses, in danger,” Saba told me. “We don’t find anything to do but to pray to our Savior to save us.”

Saba recently scored a 97.8 on government exams, the 11th highest score among 57,000 students in the West Bank who took the test.

Raheb said that Saba was interviewed on Palestinian television, along with other top West Bank students. She was the only Christian; all the rest were Muslim.

“She decided to wear a big cross,” Raheb smiled. “This is a generation that is not shy to stand up for their faith and confess Christianity in a non-Christian environment.”

The Dar al-Kalima school emphasizes what Raheb calls the “five Cs”: Christian values (“There is a crisis in values in our region, when there are Israeli tanks, and Muslim fundamentalists are blowing up themselves”); critical thinking; creativity; commu-

nication; and commitment—commitment to the community.

“In the past, Christian schools gave a good education, but the [Christian] people emigrated,” Raheb said. “We want them to stay and make a difference in Palestine.”

An integral part of the school and located in the same building is the brand-new Dar al-Kalima Health and Wellness Center. We were in Bethlehem for the Sept. 5 dedication of this center, which was funded and is supported in large part by U.S. Lutherans through Wheat Ridge Ministries (see article, Page 9).

Wheat Ridge President Richard Bimler, who led the delegation to Bethlehem, said that “even with these injustices, pains and despair, there continues to be a strong sense of hope and a vision for a better future. This comes through in the ministries of Christmas Lutheran Church, the International Center [of Bethlehem], Dar al-Kalima school and the wellness center.

“The staff’s hopes and visions are contagious,” Bimler continued. “Their ministry style reminds me of St. Paul’s words, ‘Whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord’s.’”

Raheb said, “We are keeping the Christian faith alive in the home town of Christ, in the homeland of Christ.” He invited fellow Lutherans to come and see what God is doing today in Bethlehem.

“The Holy Land,” he said, “is not only a story from 2,000 years ago.”

*O holy child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born is us today. ...*



Rev. David L. Mahsman is executive editor of The Lutheran Witness.

Americans have dreams
of a "White Christmas."
We Christians can give
them something real.

THE AMERICAN CHRISTMAS

by Gene Edward Veith

Today's holiday of Christmas, we are now told, has its origins not in the church year, not in the early church, not even in Jesus. Rather, Christmas as we know it in America today was an invention of Irving Berlin.

According to Jody Rosen's book *White Christmas*, the great American songwriter—whose many hit songs include what has become the post-9/11 anthem, "God Bless America"—changed the way Americans think about Christmas.

When this Russian Jewish immigrant released "White Christmas" in 1942, America was at war. Many Americans on the battlefields had never been away from home on Christmas, and the song captured their yearning for home and family. Bing Crosby's recording of the tune became the biggest selling record in history (just recently eclipsed by Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" tribute to Princess Diana).

And, of course, "White Christmas" never so much as mentions Jesus. The record's success paved the way for one secular Christmas tune after another: "I'll Be Home for Christmas," "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer." With the 1950s, Brenda Lee was "Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree," and the Chipmunks were rejoicing about hula hoops.



Irving Berlin (Israel Baline) launched the age of secular Christmas music when he wrote "White Christmas" and Bing Crosby recorded it in 1942. Left to right are Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Danny Kaye and Vera Ellen during the 1954 production of "White Christmas."

Non-Christians started celebrating Christmas, too. It became a distinctly American holiday, with all the "Jesus stuff" being optional.

Says a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial, summarizing Rosen's book, "It was Irving Berlin who made Christmas inclusive." Berlin "secularized a Christian celebration and made it an American holiday."

According to this approach to Christmas, it is possible to surgically remove Jesus from the holiday, while leaving intact all

of its warm feelings, nostalgic memories and sentimental associations. Those feelings are the true meaning of Christmas, along with all of those presents.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus has to do with the history of Christmas. But today, novelist Philip Roth can say that it's become mainly "a holiday about snow."

Beyond commercialization

This goes beyond the "commercialization of Christmas." One can over-commercialize a religious holiday, but it remains a religious holiday. With this new "inclusive" Christmas, the holiday itself can become something less than that.

In one of the new fables of the inclusive holiday, the Grinch steals Christmas. He takes everything objective away—all of the presents, the trees, the dinners—only to find that he cannot really steal Christmas, since it is something that exists “in our hearts.”

This is exactly what has happened: Secular forces would eliminate its objective meaning and content—the Incarnation of God in Christ—leaving only a subjective, fill-in-the-blank feeling as what Christmas is all about.

How are Christians to celebrate their holiday in this kind of cultural climate? Should we pull away from the secular celebrations, turning Christmas into our private holiday?

That has happened, to a certain extent, with Easter. Irving Berlin contributed there as well, with “Easter Parade”—reducing the feast of Christ’s Resurrection to, in Roth’s words, “a fashion show.”

But even with the Easter bunnies and Easter bonnets, the non-Christian world is not all that taken with Easter, leaving it mostly for the Christians.

Occasion for praise

Christians, though, should see in American’s culture’s desire for the trappings of Christmas an occasion for praise and an opportunity for evangelism.

Society, it seems, wants the Christmas wrappings without the Christmas gift—the “peace, goodwill to men” without the One who alone gives peace. The challenge for Christians is to put back the meaning into the otherwise empty forms of Christmas, showing their non-believing neighbors how their Christmas can be fulfilled.

That non-believers decorate their homes and buy each other gifts to honor the day Christ was born is fitting. That even those dead in their sins should pay an unwitting homage to the Christ child is a foreshadowing of what will happen at the Last Day. “So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

Christ remains

Irving Berlin did not quite cut Jesus out of his song. His name remains in the very word “Christmas.” Of course, the very word now makes secularists squirm, so

that they try to avoid it for more “inclusive” terms, such as “Happy Holiday.” To which a Christian might reply, do you know why this is a happy “*holy* day”?

The language can get even more vague, with “Seasons Greetings,” something that could logically be said anytime during the year. But the language of Christmas cannot be easily gotten rid of—there is a “Saint” in Santa Claus and a blessing in the greeting cards.

We also still have the symbols. The evergreen wreaths, emblems of life coming out of the cold, dead, snow-covered earth, are reminders of the Gospel. Gift-

giving symbolizes God’s gift of everlasting life through the gift of His Son.

Christmas trees symbolize life through the tree of the cross.

They are decorated with lights (as in the Light

of the World) and are topped by a star.

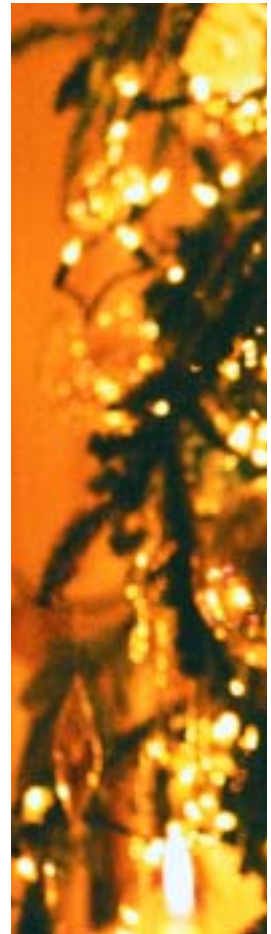
We should look at our non-Christian friends and neighbors, celebrating Christmas despite themselves, as something like the Magi. They, too, were at first non-believers, their heads filled with astrology and New Age-type philosophy, looking for someone whom they did not really know, following an uncertain guide, not having a clue, bearing gifts but with only a vague idea why, asking the wrong people for advice. They needed someone to open for them the Word of God, which directed them to Bethlehem.

Our opportunity

The word “Bethlehem” means “House of Bread.” And, as Lutheran pastor Burnell Eckardt points out in his devotional book *Every Day Will I Bless Thee*, a manger is a place from which the sheep are fed. By way of analogy, we could say that the Christ child lying in the manger is the One who gives His body for the forgiveness of our sins and bids us eat.

We Lutherans are in a unique position to bring Christmas back to life. After all, we brought many of the old European customs—such as the distinctly Lutheran Christmas tree—to the New World, whose Puritanism had turned Christmas into just another day. We can now charge them with their true meaning.

*Christians are free to sing
“White Christmas” or watch
“How the Grinch Stole Christmas”
with no harm done, as long as
they are in Christ.*



In a time when much of American Christianity is twisted and confused, and when non-believers associate Christianity with legalism and austerity, we can proclaim the Gospel, which is what underlies both the symbols and the joy of Christmas, and the freedom that it brings. And for those searching vaguely for Jesus, we can offer the real presence of Christ.

Filling Christmas with its true meaning means put-

themselves with looking upon and venerating the Host. But on Christ Mass, the laity, too, would receive the Body of Christ.

To this day, churches have members who manage to come to church only on Christmas Day and perhaps Easter. Yes, they should come every Sunday, but there is a reason why they—and even many non-members—are drawn to church on this holy day. And it is a reason to build on.

There are those who, like the shepherds, would like to see the Christ child. We can bring them to Bethlehem, the House of Bread that is our sanctuary, right to the manger that is our altar, where they can be in the actual presence of their Savior, who comes in His Body and Blood.

Lutherans know that what is done out of unbelief is sin. Unbelievers can sing “Silent Night” instead of “White Christmas,” but it will not do them any good if they have no faith. Conversely, what is done in faith is good. Christians are free to sing “White Christmas” or watch “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” with no harm done, as long as they are in Christ.

“White Christmas” may be the definitive song for those who want the form of Christmas without its power, but—being a really great song—it is honest in facing up to its own limitations. “White Christmas” is a sad song, actually, all about dreaming, rather than reality; about yearning for

the past; about being a long way from home. The work of Christians confronting this American Christmas is to bring the singers back home, in a manner of speaking—that is, to the church—and to wake them up from their dreaming into the reality of Jesus.



Dr. Gene Edward Veith is professor of English at Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon.

The symbols of Christmas remain what they were designed to be, reminders of Christ's purpose on Earth, renewed life, eternal life, undeserved gifts given to us by God through His precious gift of His Son.

ting “Christ” back into Christmas. It also means putting “mass” back into Christmas.

Before Christmas was co-opted by Irving Berlin and the department stores, before even earlier secularizing influences (“’Twas the Night Before Christmas” was written in 1822), that day in the church year was celebrated primarily by worship, and, specifically, in receiving the Lord’s Supper. The holiday was called Christ Mass.

In the Middle Ages, the Mass had been distorted in a number of ways. In a typical service, only the priest communed, with the laity having to content



Enrollment hits all-time record high at Synod schools

The total enrollment at the Synod's 12 colleges, universities and seminaries hit an all-time record high this fall.

The schools reported a total of 17,568 students, 479 more than a year ago. This fall, 4,907 students at the colleges and universities, 13 fewer than fall 2002, said that they are LCMS members.

There are 2,805 church-work students at the colleges and universities, 79 fewer than last year.

At the two seminaries, 882 men are enrolled in programs leading to ordination, 56 more than last fall. Total enrollment at the seminaries is 1,136, or

125 more than last year.

The colleges and universities reported 413 pre-seminary students, compared with 431 a year ago.

Eight schools reported enrollment increases from a year ago and four had declines.

The most dramatic enrollment increases were at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with 111 more students than last fall (an 18 percent increase) and at Concordia University,

Portland, Ore., with 186 more students (a 17.1 percent rise).

Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Mich., and Concordia College, Selma, Ala., had the largest percentages of enrollment decrease.

Rev. Glen Thomas, vice president for seminary relations at the St. Louis seminary, said that the fall enrollment there rose primarily because of 178 new first-year students, a 44 percent increase from last year and "the largest

entering class in 32 years."

"Pastors and lay people throughout the church have been much more intentional in identifying and encouraging appropriate candidates for the pastoral ministry," Thomas said.

Dennis Stoecklin, chief financial officer at Portland, said that the university has about 80 percent of last year's freshmen returning for classes, its "highest-ever retention of students."

Event targets gaining, keeping workers

Pastors and key lay leaders from Missouri Synod congregations focused on recruiting and retaining professional church workers when they met for the second "One Mission Ablaze: Igniting Congregations" event Oct. 24-25 in

Lafayette, Ind.

Eight "Igniting" events are part of Synod President Gerald Kieschnick's initiative to "move [the Synod] forward as a dynamic church body that will reach many people for Christ."

Kieschnick told the

leaders in Lafayette that, in the last 15 years, the Synod has "lost 1,750 more pastors than gained, and 3,000 more teachers than gained."

"Are we going to be a church in mission or in remission?" he asked. "This should be a church body of leaders leading our people with the Gospel to share with their neighbors."

"I believe that in order for our churches to go ahead with the Gospel," Kieschnick said, "we need to refocus on the recruitment and retention of church workers."

Event participants shared "trade secrets" for recruiting and retaining workers and prepared "covenants" for their congregations to meet recruitment and retention objectives in the next five years.



"One Mission Ablaze" is the theme for next summer's Synod convention, July 10-15 in St. Louis, and preparations are well under way. Voting delegates have been elected, the Commission on Convention Nominations meets for the first time this month, and nominating ballots for president and vice presidents were mailed in October. Completed ballots must be received by March 10.

New hymnal to use ESV

The Synod's Commission on Worship in October selected the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible as the "primary translation" for the Synod's new hymnal.

That decision follows an opinion of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) that the ESV and the New American Standard Bible are preferable to other versions, on "theological and linguistic ... [and] text-critical grounds."

Lutheran Worship, the Synod's most recently published hymnal, uses the New International Version, which the CTCR found less preferable "on theological and linguistic grounds.

"This ... is not to be seen as an endorsement of an official translation for the Synod," said Dr. Paul Grime, executive director of the worship commission, who pointed out that "members of our congregations use a variety of translations."

Sem program enrolls 66 immigrants, mostly Africans

This fall, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, welcomed 43 new students to its Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT), a distance-education, pastor-training program for immigrants.

The 43 came to the

campus in October—along with 23 others who enrolled in February—for orientation and classes.

Although the program is open to any immigrant serving in a pastoral role, the vast majority are from Africa, said Rev. Yohannes Mengsteab, director of the program and facilitator for new African-immigrant and urban missions with LCMS World Mission.

While the Synod has more than 70 African-immigrant ministries, most are led by laymen. Fewer than 12 African-immigrant leaders are ordained, he said.

Most of those in the program are working full time in other jobs while they serve as pastors to immigrants.

For more information, contact Mengsteab at (800) 433-3954, Ext. 1336, or yohannes.mengsteab@lcms.org.

For more news...

For more news—and more timely news—visit <http://reporter.lcms.org> on the Web. That's the Web site for *Reporter*, the official newspaper of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.



Mekru Bekele, left, pastor of Emmanuel Ethiopian Christian Fellowship in Dallas, talks to Rev. Yohannes Mengsteab, director of the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT), during a gathering of EIIT students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

LCMS Praesidium responds to Valparaiso complaint

Valparaiso University President Alan Harre, Dean of Chapel Joseph Cunningham and three parish pastors have expressed “sincere repentance” for roles in a 9/11-memorial “interfaith prayer service,” according to the LCMS Praesidium.

The service was held in the university’s chapel in September 2002.

The Praesidium—the Synod’s president and five vice presidents—received the case on appeal. In a Sept. 23 letter to those involved, the Praesidium wrote that it “considers this matter to have been concluded and can now report that those who provided a setting within which blasphemy was uttered and syncretistic

worship occurred have repented of their wrong.”

Complaints against the five clergymen were brought to then-Indiana District President Timothy Sims by nine LCMS pastors and two congregations. Sims concluded that the event did include elements of worship and syncretism, “even though the intent was that it not be worship.” He wrote in January that the five defendants had asked forgiveness “for offenses given to the church and to our Lord.”

The complainants in February appealed to the Praesidium, which in turn wrote that after receiving “clarifications” from Sims, it “voices the

following understanding” of the case:

- “The service that took place was indeed worship of a unionistic and syncretistic nature. Thus, the charges of the complainants were upheld by President Sims, who has stated, ‘I found in favor of the complainants (there was worship and syncretism involved).’”

- “The defendants expressed sincere repentance for the wrong that they did in authorizing and conducting the service. President Sims has reported, ‘I received that repentance verbally in the presence of Reverend Dan May and Reverend Mark Pflughoeft (two of my vice presidents) and I received it in writing.’”

In a Jan. 14 letter to the complainants, Sims also asked forgiveness for his own “lack of diligence” in supervising the event. He added that Harre “acted properly.... He consistently referred Rev. Cunningham to me in reference to any questions as to the propriety of the Gathering....”

In its Sept. 23 letter, the Praesidium wrote that it “urges all within our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to continue to honor our Scriptural doctrine and practice of fellowship in our walk together in order that our Triune God may be glorified and the Gospel of Jesus Christ be proclaimed clearly throughout the world.”

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

by Carol Albrecht

Forgiveness.” We hear it said often, from Christians and unbelievers alike. But only Christians can truly understand the meaning of that word and all it implies.

Before we can even use the word *forgiveness*, we have to look at another important word: *sin*. To enjoy the benefits of forgiveness, what do we have to know about sin? Read the following Bible passages and write your answers to that question.

Ps. 51:5 _____

Rom. 5:12 _____

John 8:34 _____

1 John 1:8 _____

What does God tell us that must be done with our sin? Read His Word and write the answers it provides.

1 John 1:9 and Ps. 38:18. _____

Jer. 15:1 and Acts 3:19. _____

These two acts, however, wouldn't be enough if there was not One with the power to forgive sin. Who alone has that power? See Matt. 9:4–6, Luke 24:46–47 and Acts 13:38.

Because Jesus is both God and man, He alone has the power to forgive sins. And once we as Christians have experienced the peace and comfort of knowing our sins are forgiven through Christ's suffering and death, what does God expect us to do?

Eph. 4:32 _____

Col. 3:13 _____

Why is it so important that we do this?

Matt. 6:12, 14–15 _____

Mark 11:25 _____

Luke 6:37 _____

God wants us to appreciate His gift of forgiveness. And, as with any great gift, we are happiest when we share it. How often does God tell us to share His gift?

Luke 17:3–4 _____

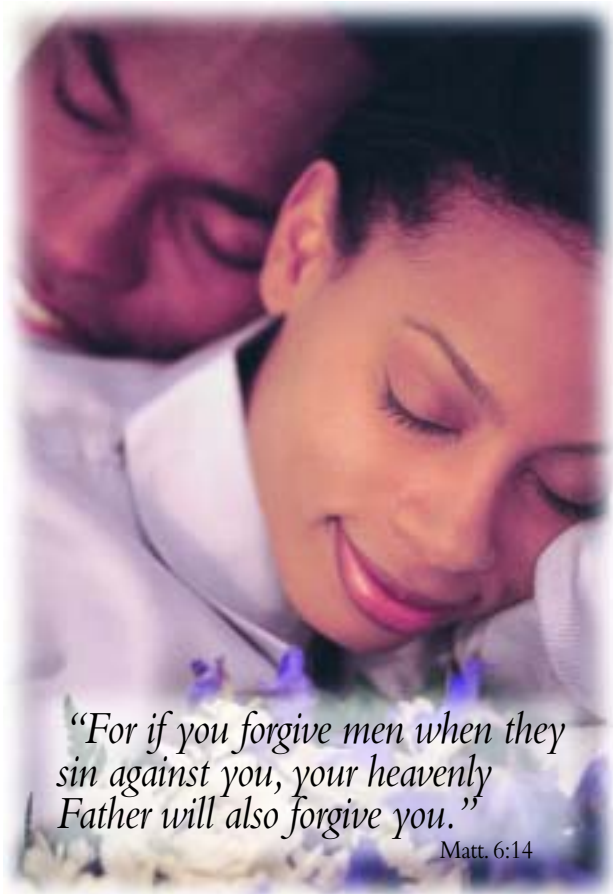
Matt. 18:21–22 _____

God gives us such explicit directions about forgiveness because He knows what will happen when we in love practice His command to forgive. What are some of the positive results of forgiveness that Paul shares in his letter to the Corinthians?

2 Cor. 2:5–7 _____

2 Cor. 2:10–11 _____

List some of the other positive experiences you may have found in



“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

Matt. 6:14

your own life as a result of forgiveness.

Eph. 1:7 tells us, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” Forgiveness is God's unequalled gift to us. He wants us with contrite hearts to long for it, ask for it, possess it, share it.

Forgiveness is our gift from a loving God—pass it on!



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

from the PRESIDENT

BRINGING GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY!

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:8–11).

Approximately 2,000 years ago, an angel of the Lord first spoke these words to a group of shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. Since that night long ago, Christians have celebrated the expression of

A hallmark of the Lutheran Church is our focus on God's gifts of peace, joy and hope through faith in Christ, itself a gift of God's grace.

good news of great joy throughout the world at Christmas time. We do so again this Christmas, as have those who have gone before us and as will those who come after us.

As Lutheran Christians, we place special emphasis on the announcement of the good news of great joy of the birth of Christ! The reason is simple, but significant. Since the beginning of the Lutheran Church, great focus has been placed on the word "*evangelical*" (from Greek for "Gospel"). Indeed, "*evangelical*" was once a part of the earliest names of what we now call The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Originally (in German) *The German Evangelical Lutheran*

Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States, our Synod was next named, in English, *The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States*. In both cases, the word "*Evangelical*" was important. Indeed, many congregations incorporate this word in their legal names. It is not uncommon to see legal documents for St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church or The Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Matthew.

Martin Luther himself, at the conception of the Reformation, experienced the good news of great joy about which St. Luke writes. For many years, Luther had sought that which had escaped him throughout his life, namely, peace with God. He had tried everything he could think of to find this peace with God. But try as he did, nothing produced that elusive peace.

Not, at least, until he understood the message found in such passages as Rom. 1:17 ("The righteous will live by faith")—and found throughout the New Testament, as in Eph. 2:8–9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

The peace that had escaped him was found! For Luther realized that the peace and joy he had so diligently sought could be found only in the precious gift of faith, given by God's grace, not earned by works. That discovery was the beginning of the end of his search and the beginning of the church that now bears his name.

A hallmark of the Lutheran Church is our focus on God's gifts of peace, joy and hope through faith in Christ, itself a gift of God's grace. We call this *good news of*



great joy the Gospel. The proclamation of the Gospel in its sweetness, truth and purity is a distinguishing characteristic of the Lutheran Church.

As you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ this Christmas, my prayer is that you will once again receive the assurance of God's love for you, tangibly demonstrated in the person of God's greatest gift to the world, His only Son, Jesus. I further pray that God's love will motivate you, along with all who call themselves *Christian*, especially those who call themselves *Lutheran*, to share this good news of great joy with those in the world in which you live!

Bringing good news of great joy is in itself an activity that produces even more joy in the hearts of those who bring it to others, including "*Evangelical*" *Lutheran Christians*!

Terry and I express to each of you our fervent prayer that you may receive abundantly the blessing of the love of God in Jesus Christ. May your life, your heart and your home be filled with "*the peace that passes all understanding*," the peace that is ours through Christ alone!

Jerry Kieschnick

**Lives Transformed through Christ,
in Time ... for Eternity!**

John 3:16–17

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