

Monthly Update

December 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

“...behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

“...the star which they had seen in the East went before them till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”

– Matthew 2:1b, 2; 9 – 10 (NKJV)

When I was stationed in Germany in the 1970s, I visited Sam and Gayle Bagley, friends living in the southwestern part of the country. One cold, clear night, we made our way with their two children along a snow-covered footpath through a pass in the low-lying hills and trees, down a gentle slope into a French village. As we walked in the silence of the night, we heard the crunching of our feet as we stepped on the frozen ground. Since their 3-year old girl had trouble keeping up with us in the snow, I hoisted her up and put her on my shoulders. As we unhurriedly made our descent, I looked up into the sky and gazed at the stars – it seemed they were so close that we could almost reach out and touch them. We went into a restaurant, sat down at a table, and enjoyed the bread, cheese, and other food they set before us as the fire warmed, not only our bodies, but our spirits as well. It seemed that all was “right” in our little corner of the world.

Often I have thought of that night. Could it be that as Mary and Joseph made their way down the slopes into Bethlehem that they too saw the stars shimmering in the night sky of another country far to the east of where we had been in France? Could it be that as the wise men made their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, they too saw those same stars but with one shining far brighter than the others and leading them to where the Christ child lay? Could it be that in the midst of their joy at being at the end of their long journey to see the Christ Child that they too felt all was “right” in the world – that there was promise of a better, brighter future to come?

Yes, the wise men were correct. That night brought to us the One who would offer to each of us – and to the whole world – a better, brighter future.

Each December, we make our annual request for contributions. We ask that each of you pray to seek the Lord’s leading as to how you might support the ministry of Concerned Methodists. We make the most efficient use possible of the money you entrust to our work. Since we have no paid employees, we are able to translate the maximum amount of donations into our ministry of informing people about what is happening within our United Methodist Church.

At present we are \$6042.39 behind in our bills in order to finish the year debt free.

We appreciate so much your partnering with us in what we believe the Lord has called us to. May we ask for your continued help through your gifts and your prayers?

From all of us here, we wish you the very best during this Christmas season and throughout the coming year. Let us continue to pray for our United Methodist Church and our country.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

December 2013 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

“Winning is not a sometime thing; it is an all the time thing. You don’t win once in a while; you don’t do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing...” – Vince Lombardi

* * * * *

In this December Update we have decided to declare a moratorium on the news of all that is happening in the United Methodist Church and reprint stories and information for Christmas.

Christmas

The birthplace of the true Christmas carol was Italy. In the 13th Century, Saint Francis of Assisi was the first to introduce the joyous carol spirit, which soon spread all over Europe. Saint Francis wrote a beautiful Christmas Hymn in Latin, Psalmus in Nativitate, but there is no evidence that he composed carols in Italian. From Italy the carol quickly spread to Spain, France and Germany, where many carols were written under the inspiration of the 14th Century Dominican mystics: John Eckhardt, John Taler and Blessed Henry Suso.

A Christmas Tradition

I recently read of a custom in times past called “burning of the greens” done on Twelfth Night or Epiphany, which celebrated the coming of the Wise Men to the stable to pay homage to the Christ Child. Evidently, celebration of Epiphany dates back to the third or fourth century A.D. Ms. Lillian Elders of St. Louis, Missouri wrote of an old family custom of burning the Christmas tree in a celebratory way. This included inviting people to:

1. Take pen and paper, find a peaceful place to sit and meditate. Let your mind go back over the past year, but don’t dwell on disappointments; rather, write down the five most pleasant memories of the year.
2. Then, write down your plans and goals for the new year.
3. Finally, consider the burning of the tree itself. If you can burn your tree without violating fire ordinances, do so. Otherwise, burn some branches of it in your fireplace or other safe place. As they burn, think of it as burning away the unwanted “residue” of unpleasant memories from the past year. Remember the fragrant smell that is left. Let that be the memory you keep.

+ + +

The singing of Hymns and Carols can be a way for families and neighbors to reflect on the wonder and joy of Advent and Christmas.

Good King Wenceslas and Twelve Days of Christmas are examples of carols for Christmas that are not sung in Church services but carry strong Christmas messages and have interesting historic origins.

Good King Wenceslas tells the story of the king who ruled Bohemia in

the 10th Century. While it does not address the story of the Nativity, it is a hymn about Christian charity and his extraordinary efforts to give food to poor families.

The Twelve Days of Christmas originated as a Hebrew hymn which began: “In those twelve days”. In the Middle Ages the song was rewritten in Latin with Christian images, and by 1645 an English version of the hymn had appeared. By the 18th Century, that had, in turn, become the Christmas carol we know today. One author describes this traditional English carol as “a catechetical mnemonic device that Catholics used to teach their children the truths of the faith during the years that the Catholic faith was suppressed in England” and goes like this:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Partridge | The One True God |
| Two Turtle Doves | Old and New Testaments |
| Three French Hens | Three persons of the Trinity (or the Three Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) |
| Four Colley Birds | (“colley” means black) The four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Five Gold Rings | The first five books of the Bible, believed to be written by Moses, called the Pentateuch |
| Six Geese Seven Swans | Six jars of water turned to wine by Jesus at the wedding at Cana. Seven Sacraments |
| Eight maids a milking | Eight Beatitudes |
| Nine Ladies dancing | Nine Choirs (or ranks) of Angels |
| Ten Lords a leaping | Ten Commandments |
| Eleven Pipers | Eleven faithful disciples (not including Judas) or the eleven stars seen in the Old Testament account of Joseph's dream |
| Twelve drummers | Twelve Apostles or the twelve tribes of Israel. |

– Reprinted from the book *This 'N' That*; permission granted.

+ + +

A "I Corinthians 13" Christmas

(Paraphrased)

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows,
strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls,
but do not love my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies,
preparing gourmet meals and arranging a
beautifully adorned table at mealtime,
but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home
and give all that I have to charity,
but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes,
attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir cantata,
but do not focus on Christ,
I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has
coordinated china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way,
but it is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return,
but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Video games will break; pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. . . . but giving the gift of love will endure.
You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

– Reprinted from the book *This 'N' That*; permission granted.

The Tablecloth

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry, to reopen a church in suburban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting, etc, and on December 18 were ahead of schedule and just about finished.

On December 19 a terrible tempest – a driving rainstorm hit the area and lasted for two days.

On the 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high.

The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home.

On the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market type sale for charity so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory-colored, crocheted tablecloth with exquisite work, fine colors and a Cross embroidered right in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. An older woman running from the opposite direction was trying to catch the bus. She missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus 45 minutes later.

She sat in a pew and paid no attention to the pastor while he got a ladder, hangers, etc., to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. The pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area.

Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. “Pastor,” she asked, “where did you get that tablecloth?”

The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials, EBG were crocheted into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman, and she had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria.

The woman could hardly believe it as the pastor told how he had just gotten the tablecloth. The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria.

When the Nazis came, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week. He was captured and sent to prison; she never saw her husband or her home again.

The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth; but she made the pastor keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her home, that was the least he could do. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve! The church was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service, the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door; many said that they would return.

One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood continued to sit in one of the pews and stare, and the pastor wondered why he wasn't leaving.

The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war and how could there be two tablecloths so much alike?

He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee for her safety and he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and put in a prison. He never saw his wife or his home again all the 35 years in between.

The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier.

He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman's apartment, knocked on the door and he saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.

Who says God does not work in mysterious ways?

– Submitted by Pastor Rob Reid; appeared in *Reader's Digest* ca. 1947; reprinted in the book *This 'N' That*; permission granted.

+ + +

The Gift that Lasts a Lifetime
He gave his father something neither would forget.

By Pearl S. Buck

He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth still clung to him after 50 years! He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning because it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep.

Yet what was the magic of Christmas now? His childhood and youth were long past, his father and mother were dead, and his own children grown up and gone. He and his wife were alone.

Yesterday she had said, "Let's not trim the tree until tomorrow, Robert – I'm tired."

He had agreed, and the tree was still out in the yard.

He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was 15 years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known how much until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother.

"Mary, I hate to call Rob in the mornings. He's growing so fast and he needs his sleep. I wish I could manage alone."

"Well, you can't, Adam." His mother's voice was brisk.

"I know," his father said slowly, "but I sure do hate to wake him."

When he heard these words, something in him woke: his father loved him! He had never thought of it before. He got up quicker after that, stumbling blind with sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes tight shut, but he got up.

And then on the night before Christmas, that year when he was 15, he lay on his side and looked out of his attic window. He wished he had a better present for his father than a ten-cent store tie.

The stars were bright outside, and one star in particular was so bright that he wondered if it were really the Star of Bethlehem. "Dad," he had once asked, "what is a stable?"

"It's just a barn," his father had replied, "like ours."

Then Jesus had been born in a barn, and to a barn the shepherds and the Wise men had come, bringing their Christmas gifts.

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not give his father a special gift? He could get up early, earlier than four o'clock, and he could creep into the barn and get all the milking done. He'd do it alone – milk and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking, he'd see it all done. And he would know who had done it.

He must have waked 20 times during the night. At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. A big star hung low over the barn roof, a reddish gold. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised.

He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He kept thinking about his father's surprise. He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant. The cows were still surprised but acquiescent. For once they were behaving well, as though they knew it was Christmas.

The task went more easily than he had even known it to before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else, a gift to his father who loved him.

Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened.

"Rob!" his father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas."

"Aw-right," he said sleepily.

"I'll go on out," his father said. "I'll get things started."

The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. The minutes were endless- ten, fifteen, he did not know how many – and he heard his father's footsteps again.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad –"

"You son of a –" His father was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of a laugh. "Thought you'd fool me, did you?"

"It's for Christmas, Dad!"

His father sat on the bed and clutched him in a great hug. It was dark and they could not see each other's faces.

"Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing –"

"Oh, Dad." He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love.

"Well, I reckon I can go back to bed," his father said after a moment. "No, listen – the little ones are waking up. Come

to think of it, son, I've never seen you children when you first saw the Christmas tree. I was always in the barn. Come on!"

He got up and pulled on his clothes again and they went down to the Christmas tree, and soon the sun was creeping up to where the star had been. Oh, what a Christmas, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother and made the younger children listen about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself.

"The best Christmas gift I have ever had, and I'll remember it, son, every year on Christmas morning, so long as I live..."

They had both remembered it, and now that his father was dead he remembered it alone: that blessed Christmas dawn when, alone with the cows in the barn he had made his first gift of true love.

On an impulse, he got up out of bed and put on his slippers and bathrobe and went softly upstairs to the attic and found the box of Christmas-tree decorations. He took them down stairs into the living room. The he brought in the tree. It was a little one – they had not had a big tree since the children went away – but he set it in the holder and put in the middle of the long table under the window. Then carefully he began to trim it.

It was done very soon, the time passing as quickly as it had that morning long again in the barn. He went to his library and fetched the little box that contained his special gift to his wife, a star of diamonds, not large but dainty in design. He tied the gift on the tree and then stood back. It was pretty, very pretty, and she would be surprised.

But he was not satisfied. He wanted to tell her – to tell her how much he loved her. It had been a long time since he had really told her, although he loved her in a very special way, much more than he had ever loved her when they were young.

Ah, that was the true joy of life, the ability to love! He was quite sure that some people were genuinely unable to love anyone. But love was alive in him, alive because long ago it had been born in him when he knew his father loved him. That was it: love alone could awaken love.

And he could give the gift again and again. This morning, this blessed Christmas morning, he would give it to his beloved wife. He could write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began his love letter to his wife: *My dearest love...*

Then he put out the light and went tiptoeing up the stairs. The star in the sky was gone, and the first rays of the sun were gleaming in the sky. Such a happy, happy Christmas!

– “The Gift that Lasts a Lifetime”; copyright 1955 by Pearl S. Buck. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates.

+ + +

The Seattle Olympics

Some time ago, at the Seattle Olympics, nine athletes, all mentally or physically challenged, were standing on the start line for the 100 meter race.

The gun fired and the race began. Not everyone was running, but everyone wanted to participate and win.

They ran in threes, a boy tripped and fell, did a few somersaults and started crying.

The other eight heard him crying.

They slowed down and looked behind them.

They stopped and came back... All of them...

A girl with Down's Syndrome sat down next to him, hugged him and asked, "Feeling better now?"

Then, all nine walked shoulder to shoulder to the finish line.

The whole crowd stood up and applauded. And the applause lasted a very long time...

People who witnessed this still talk about it.

Why?

Because deep down inside us, we all know that the most important thing in life is much more than winning for ourselves.
The most important thing in this life is to help others to win. Even if that means slowing down and changing our own race.
– Reprinted from the book *This 'N' That*; permission granted.

A “Politically Correct” Christmas

Twas the month before Christmas when all through our land,
Not a Christian was praying nor taking a stand.
Why the Politically Correct Police had taken away,
The reason for Christmas – no one could say.

The children were told by their schools not to sing,
about Shepherds and Wise Men and Angels and things.
It might hurt people’s feelings, the teachers would say
December 25th is just a “Holiday”.
Yet the shoppers were ready with cash, checks and credit –
pushing folks down to the floor just to get it!

CDs from Madonna, an X BOX, an I-pod –
something was changing, something quite odd!
Retailers promoted Ramadan and Kwanzaa
in hopes to sell books by Franken & Fonda.

As Targets were hanging their trees upside down
at Lowe’s the word Christmas – was no where to be found.
At K-Mart and Staples and Penny’s and Sears
you won’t hear the word Christmas; it won’t touch your ears.

Inclusive, sensitive, Di-ver-si-ty are words
that were used to intimidate me.
Now Daschle, Now Darden, Now Sharpton, Wolf Blitzen
On Boxer, on Rather, on Kerry, on Clinton!

At the top of the Senate, there arose such a clatter
To eliminate Jesus, in all public matter.
And we spoke not a word, as they took away our faith,
forbidden to speak of salvation and grace.
The true Gift of Christmas was exchanged and discarded;
The reason for the season, stopped before it started.

So as you celebrate “Winter Break” under your “Dream Tree” –
Sipping your Starbucks, listen to me.
Choose your words carefully, choose what you say –
Shout MERRY CHRISTMAS, not Happy Holiday!

+ + +

On the lighter side, it is good to kind of back off, look at our often-times frenetic activity during this very busy season of the year, and take a light-hearted view. We have entitled this little section – “Preparing for Christmas”:

+ Preparing for a large Christmas Eve family gathering, I had been giving out orders like a drill sergeant: “Pick up your things! Don’t get your clothes dirty! Put away those toys!”

My four-year-old daughter had been underfoot, so I sent her to the next room to play with our wooden Nativity set. As I scurried around setting the table, I overheard her make-believe conversation in an all-too-familiar tone of voice: “I don’t care who you are, get those camels out of my living room!”

– Contributed by Catherine Halverson as appearing in *Reader’s Digest*; sent in to us by James and May Ella Bruner, Indiana.

+ + +

+ People were coming over and I was frantically trying to get the house ready. I was also driving my family crazy, barking out orders to pick up, help set the table and not to mess up the living room. While I was cleaning the kitchen, I realized I'd pushed them too far. "Mary," I snapped at my 12-year-old daughter, "where's the broom?"

"I don't know, Mom," she fired back. "Where'd you put it when you landed?"

– *Contributed by Mary Gzik, Liverpool, New York and as appearing in Reader's Digest.*