

Monthly Update

December 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In this December Update we have (for the most part) declared a moratorium on the news of what is happening in the United Methodist Church and the world – and will print stories and information on Christmas, which seem to be timeless, from last year’s December Update. However, we did include as our Update a 6-pager handout that can be reprinted and given out to people as a way of outreach to others. The recent presidential election and Colin Kaepernick’s disrespect are before us and will be discussed at greater length in the January 2017 Update.

However, reference to the presidential election, I observe that some evangelicals say that the result is an “answer to prayer” while other people seem to be so visibly upset that they were crying with some being on university campuses. I offer the following to help put things in perspective: after one election in the not-too-distant past and my favored candidate had lost, I had to have a serious talk with myself and remember that my sure foundation is not in any candidate, nor any political party, nor even in any country; it is in Jesus Christ. Trump may have won, but we as Christians still have much work to do. It may be that God is giving us more time as a country, but we need to make good use of that time and pray. On our knees, we need to pray that there would be a move of the Holy Spirit across the United States so that every single person living here would have a life-changing experience with Jesus Christ. Until we come back to the foot of the cross, we as a country will still go in the wrong direction and we’ll continue our moral slide.

Again, Christians, we have work to do: on our knees in prayer to the God of Miracles.

Each December, we make our annual request for contributions. We ask that you pray and seek the Lord’s guidance as to how you might support our ministry. We translate the maximum amount of donations into our ministry of informing people about what is happening within our United Methodist Church, since none of us take a salary and we minimize overhead in our operations. When we travel to conferences in which we have a part, we often pay for our own individual travel and personal expenses. As it stands right now, we need \$8,000 so that we can finish the year debt-free; the bulk of this is leftover obligations from the expenses incurred by our involvement at General Conference 2016. A bit of good news is that one of our financial supporters has offered a matching challenge of \$4,200; in other words, for each person’s donation before December 31st your contribution will be matched dollar-for-dollar. This enables you to double your gift.

From all of us here, we wish you the very best during this Christmas season and for the coming year – our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ!

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

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December 2016 Update

We offer this to you so that it will help to make your Christmas brighter, happier, and you more appreciative of all the good things that we enjoy. When we think back to what happened 2,000 years ago, it helps us to put in perspective the challenges we face today.

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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.

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.

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 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	Six jars of water turned to wine by Jesus at the wedding at Cana.
Seven Swans	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.

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+ 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*

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The "Christmas Truce of 1914" during WWI

When the First World War began, British women suffragists sent an Open Christmas Letter "To the Women of Germany and Austria" imploring peace as the first Christmas of the war approached. Pope Benedict XV, December 7, 1914, begged for a truce, asking: "that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang." These requests were officially rebuffed. Nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1914, an estimated 100,000 British, French and German troops near Ypres in Belgium along the Western Front, ceased fighting. The thunderous booming of artillery fell silent that night. German troops started decorating their trenches with Christmas trees and candles in their branches. They began singing "Stille Nacht" – "Silent Night." As this was one of the Christmas carols that soldiers on both sides knew, English, French and German troops began to sing along across the battle lines.

"Silent Night" was written a century earlier by the priest Father Joseph Mohr, with the melody composed by Austrian headmaster Franz Xaver Gruber. The song came to be on December 24, 1818, at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Austria. The organ had broken for their Christmas eve service, so they quickly composed the song to be accompanied by guitar. "Silent Night" has been translated into over 44 languages.

"Silent night, holy night,
 All is calm, all is bright
 Round yon virgin mother and child.
 Holy infant so tender and mild,
 Sleep in heavenly peace,
 Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
 Shepherds quake at the sight,
 Glories stream from heaven afar,
 Heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
 Christ the Savior, is born,
 Christ the Savior, is born.

Silent night, holy night,
 Son of God, love's pure light
 Radiant beams from thy holy face,
 With the dawn of redeeming grace,
 Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
 Jesus, Lord, at thy birth."

The 1914 unofficial Christmas Truce continued as soldiers from both sides started shouting Christmas greetings to each other. C. Ernest Furneaux of the British Rifle Brigade wrote in a letter to his parents: “About five o’clock on Christmas Eve the Germans started lighting up Christmas trees in their trenches. We took no notice of them until they began to sing. Then we began to cheer them and talk to one another as we are only about 80 yards apart. So by the light of their searchlight our officers went across halfway and their officers came to meet them. They shook hands and conversed for a while. It was agreed that we should have a day off and they would fire the first shot to start again. So from five o’clock on Christmas Eve until ten o’clock this morning (December 26th) neither side has fired, only walked about. Some of the Germans came across to us and we shook hands and had some chocolate and cigars from them.”

Venturing across “No Man’s Land,” they recovered bodies and held joint burial services. Lance-Corporal Imlah of the Gordon Highlanders wrote in a letter to his father: “Our padre then gave a short service, one of the items in which was Psalm XXIII. Thereafter, a German soldier, a divinity student I believe, interpreted the service to the German party. I could not understand what he was saying but it was beautiful to listen to him. The service over, we were soon fraternizing with the Germans just as if they were old friends.”

The *Hertfordshire Mercury*, January 9, 1915, published a letter, January 9, 1915, from British rifleman C. H. Brazier: “All through the night we sang carols to them and they sang to us... On Christmas day we all got out of the trenches and walked about with the Germans, who when asked if they were fed up with the war said ‘yes, rather.’ They all believed that London had been captured, and that German sentries were outside Buckingham Palace. They are evidently told a lot of rot. We gave them ...our newspapers to convince them.” Soldiers even played soccer together; the Germans won 3-2.

Bruce Bairnsfather, who served during the First World War, wrote: “I wouldn’t have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything... I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons... I brought out my wire clippers and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange... The last I saw was one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche [slang word for German soldier], who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck.”

In *Christmas Truce* by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, they recorded: “There was general handshaking; the dead were buried; cigars, cigarettes and newspapers were exchanged and a general celebration ensued. Then the Frenchmen suggested that we shoot no longer, promised that they themselves would not resume hostilities in that event.”

When General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of the British II Corps, heard what was happening, he was irate and issued strict orders forbidding friendly communication with the opposing German troops. Someone else who was opposed to the truce was a young corporal in the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry named Adolf Hitler.

World War I went on for four years... – Bill Federer. Permission granted by Mr. Federer.
AmericanMinute.com

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The First Christmas Tree in the White House

The Christmas tree’s origins can be traced back to the 200 AD’s, when the early church father Tertullian wrote: “You are the light of the world, a tree ever green, if you have renounced the heathen temple.”

St. Boniface (680-755), also called Wynfred, was Apostle of the Germans, being sent forth by Pope Gregory II as a missionary to heathen Germany. In the year 716, St. Boniface confronted the Chieftain Gundhar, who was about to offer the little Prince Asulf as a “bloody sacrifice” to Thor, their pagan god who supposedly lived in the huge “donar” oak tree at Geismar. St. Boniface boldly took an ax and after a few swings at the mighty “blood” oak, an enormous wind blew the tree over. The heathen throng was in awe and converted to Christianity. Then pointing to an evergreen tree that was next to it, or that had miraculously grown up, St. Boniface said: “This is

the word, and this is the counsel. Not a drop of blood shall fall tonight, for this is the birth-night of Saint Christ, Son of the All-Father and Saviour of the world. This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be a home tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of fir. It is the sign of endless life, for its branches are ever green. See how it points toward Heaven! Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child; gather about it, not in the wild woods but in your homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and lights of kindness.”

Lights at this season can be traced back to the Jewish Festival of Lights, or Feast of the Dedication, in Hebrew called “Hanukkah.” Candles are lit to celebrate the driving out of the heathen army of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes from Jerusalem in 165 BC by Judas Maccabaeus. Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple by using it for idol worship. When the Temple was cleansed of all the pagan defilement, the oil lampstand, known as the menorah, was to be relit. There was a problem, though, as there could only be found enough holy olive oil to burn for one day, and it would take a week before more could be made. The decision was made to pour the small amount in the lamp, and miraculously, it burned for an entire week! The feast of the dedication of the Temple was mentioned in the New Testament, John 10:22: “And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch.”

In 1520, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was walking home on Christmas Eve under the cold December sky and noticed the countless stars illuminating the night. Martin Luther returned home, and to the delight of his wife and children, set up an evergreen tree placing a great number of small candles on its branches. He set up a creche scene under the tree so that the lights would appear as the stars above Bethlehem on the night of Christ’s birth. Martin Luther said that all gifts come from the Christ Child, which in old German was pronounced “Kris Kindl” (Christkindl), later pronounced “Kris Kringle.”

President Franklin Pierce placed the first Christmas Tree in the White House in 1856. Franklin Pierce, born November 23, 1804, was elected the 14th U.S. President. Elected to Congress at age 29, he was a Senator at 33. He resigned from Congress during the Mexican-American War and enlisted as a private. He was eventually promoted to brigadier general. His leg was crushed at the Battle of Churubusco. He ran for President against General Winfield Scott, whom he had served under during the War. Tragically, while campaigning for President, Franklin Pierce’s only son, 11-year-old Bennie, was killed when their campaign train rolled off its tracks. On the second anniversary of his wife Jane’s death, Pierce was baptized into the church she had been a member of, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Concord, New Hampshire. He was also friends with the famous American writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and with Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was with him the night he died.

Hawthorne wrote in a biography of Franklin Pierce: “Whether in sorrow or success he has learned...that religious faith is the most valuable...of human possessions... With this sense, there has come...a wide sympathy for the modes of Christian worship and a reverence for religious belief as a matter between the Deity and man’s soul.”

President Franklin Pierce said in his Inaugural, March 4, 1853: “It must be felt that there is no national security but in the nation’s humble, acknowledged dependence upon God and His overruling Providence.”

Lighting the National Christmas Tree, December 24, 1952, President Harry S. Truman stated: “Shepherds, in a field, heard angels singing: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’... We turn to the old, old story of how ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life’...Let us remember always to try to act...in the spirit of the Prince of Peace. He bore in His heart no hate and no malice – nothing but love for all mankind. We should...follow His example... Let us also pray for our enemies... Through Jesus Christ the world will yet be a better and a fairer place.

– Bill Federer. Taken from the book *There Really is a Santa Claus-The History of Saint Nicholas & Christmas Holiday Traditions* and as published in American Minute; www.AmericanMinute.com. Permission granted by Mr. Federer.

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St. Nicholas

Greek Orthodox tradition tells of Saint Nicholas being born around 280 AD, the only child of a wealthy, elderly couple who lived in Patara, Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). When his parents died in a plague, Nicholas inherited their wealth. Nicholas generously gave to the poor, but did it anonymously as he wanted the glory to go to God.

One notable incident was when a merchant in town had gone bankrupt. The creditors threatened to take, not only the merchants' assets, but his children. The merchant had three daughters. He knew if they were taken it would probably mean a life of sex-trafficking and prostitution. The merchant had the idea of quickly marrying his daughters off so the creditors could not take them. Unfortunately, he did not have money for a dowry, which was needed in that area of the world for a legally recognized wedding. Nicholas heard of the merchant's dilemma and threw a bag of money in the window for the oldest daughter's dowry. Supposedly the bag of money landed in a shoe or a stocking that was drying by the fireplace. It was the talk of the town when the first daughter got married.

Nicholas then threw a bag of money in the window for the second daughter and she was able to get married.

Upon throwing money in for the third daughter, the merchant ran outside and caught Nicholas. Nicholas made him promise not to tell where the money came from, as he wanted the credit to go to God.

This was the origin of the tradition of secret gift-giving on the anniversary of Saint Nicholas' death, which was December 6, 343 AD.

The three gold balls outside a pawnbrokers shop represent the three bags of gold St. Nicholas used to rescue a family in their time of financial need.

– Bill Federer. *There Really is a Santa Claus...*; Permission granted by Mr. Federer.

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+ 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!"

– By Catherine

Halverson as appearing in Reader's Digest

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+ ***The Birth of Jesus***. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart....

– From the Bible, Luke, chapter 2; New International Version (NIV). NIV®; ©: 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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Naughty or Nice Retailer List

Which stores recognize Christmas in their advertising...and who's the Scrooge?

As the Christmas shopping season begins full swing, the American Family Association (AFA) has prepared its annual “Naughty or Nice” retailer list. We have taken the top national retailers and reviewed their websites, media advertising and in-store signage in an effort to help you know which companies are Christmas-friendly.

There are secular forces in our country that hate Christmas because the word itself is a reminder of Jesus Christ. They want to eradicate anything that reminds Americans of Christianity. That is why it is important to remind governments and companies to keep the word Christmas alive. AFA wants to keep Christ in Christmas and Christmas in America.

Criteria – AFA reviewed up to four areas to determine if a company was “Christmas-friendly” in their advertising: print media (newspaper inserts), broadcast media (radio/television), website and/or personal visits to the store. If a company’s ad has references to items associated with Christmas (trees, wreaths, lights, etc.), it was considered as an attempt to reach “Christmas” shoppers. If a company has items associated with Christmas, but did not use the word “Christmas,” then the company is considered as censoring “Christmas.” –

The American Family Association

+ **An AFA “5-Star”**-rated company that promotes and celebrates Christmas on an exceptional basis: AFA Online Store (<https://www.afastore.net>), Hobby Lobby, Kirkland’s, Lowe’s, Michael’s Stores, and Wal-Mart.

+ **Christmas-friendly.** Company uses the term “Christmas” on a regular basis, we consider that company to be Christmas-friendly: 1-800-Flowers.com, Ace Hardware, Banana Republic, Bass Pro Shops, Bed Bath & Beyond, Belk, Big Lots, Books-A-Million, Cabela’s, Dick’s Sporting Goods, Dillards, Do-It-Best Hardware, Dollar Tree, H.E.B. Stores, HSN.com, Hallmark, Harris Teeter Stores, Home Depot, Hy-Vee Stores, J.C. Penney, JoAnn Fabrics, K-mart, Kohl’s, Kroger, L.L. Bean, Macy’s, Marshalls, Meijer, Menard’s, Neiman Marcus, Pier One Imports, ProFlowers.com, Publix, QVC.com, Rite Aid, Sam’s Club, Scheels Sporting Goods, Sears, Super D Drug, Target, TJ Maxx, Toys R Us, True Value, and Zappos.com.

+ **Marginal.** Company refers to Christmas infrequently, or in a single advertising medium, but not in others: Amazon.com, CVS Pharmacy, Fred’s, Old Navy, Safeway, Starbucks, Walgreens, and Whole Foods.

+ **Naughty.** Company may use “Christmas” sparingly in a single or unique product description, but as a company, does not recognize it: Academy Sports + Outdoors, Barnes & Noble, Best Buy, Dollar General, Family Dollar, Foot Locker, Gap, Inc., The Limited, Maurice’s, Nordstrom, Office Depot/Max, Pet Smart, Staples, Stein Mart, Supervalu, UncommonGoods.com, and Victoria’s Secret.

Note: AFA does not list local or regional companies, but only nationally-recognized companies. This list only reflects a company’s “Christmas” advertising and does not take into account other corporate policies AFA may not agree with.

With all good wishes to you for this coming year,

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