

THE 

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LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR



CHRISTMAS



THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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ENCOURAGING
WORD

ENCOURAGE AND BUILD UP

BY PASTOR BOB RIETH

Booksellers know that one of the largest selling categories of literature is the how-to book. We recognize that we need advice on just about everything—and you can find a book full of advice on just about every topic. The Bible is the best how-to book.

One of the popular topics in Scripture deals with relationships, and one specific reference uses the illustration of the relationship between parent and child.

“... we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (I Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Perhaps this letter could be titled, “How to Build Up Others Effectively.” This Scripture also applies to relationships between any leader and those he or she is responsible for leading, and between you as a Christian and those with whom you are in contact. Consider this admonishment: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (I Thessalonians 5:11). If we were to learn nothing more on earth but were able to live out this verse in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, we would be blessed ourselves and a blessing to others.

Paul wrote, “encourage one another.” You

may be tempted to agree with your friends in their despair and disappointment and thereby discourage them from their plans. What happens when we join in the complaints and criticism? What can we do to encourage them? May we be a part of the solution and not the problem.

He also wrote, “build each other up.” In a counseling class we were told that when dealing with children we should encourage them nine times for every time we make a correction. It is amazing how quickly a discouraging word can change the attitude of a person or even crush his or her spirit.

It takes a lot longer to build a house than to tear it down. A house does not get built by itself any more than a child or a new Christian will automatically mature into a fine person. God enlists us to join the crew to help with the building process.

Let us not forget the urgency of our mission. We have a message that can change lives for eternity.

Rieth, a member of Our Redeemer Lutheran, Kirkland, Wash., is founder and president of Media Fellowship International. Adapted from “Pastor Bob’s Two Minute Devotions,” from July 28, 2008.

When the Angel's message came to me [Mary], the Lord put a song into my heart. I suddenly saw that wealth and cleverness were nothing to God—no one is too unimportant to be His friend.

—Dorothy L. Sayers

Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son.

—Corrie ten Boom

The Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

We must both read and meditate upon the Nativity. If the meditation does not reach the heart, we shall sense no sweetness, nor shall we know what solace for humankind lies in this contemplation. The heart will not laugh nor be merry.

—Martin Luther

In our world, too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than the whole world.

—C.S. Lewis

All the Christmas presents in the world are worth nothing without the presence of Christ.

—David Jeremiah

CHRISTMAS in Brazil





W

by Jonni Sliver

When I first arrived in Brazil, many long years ago, Christmas snuck up on me unaware. All the signals that stirred up the Yuletide glands were missing. November came and there was no nip in the air; in fact, it just got warmer every day. The stores had nary a red sock on display and no familiar Christmas carols were played over loudspeakers (that, by the way, has changed over the years). The aroma of cardamom was nowhere to be found. *A Christmas Carol* and *It's A Wonderful Life* were not on television, and though our churches definitely prepared for Christmas, the way they did it was different. The familiar cantatas and big Sunday school programs were not very present. I missed the clues that Christmas was coming.

But come it did. I spent my first Christmas with a precious family who had adopted me as their own. I was a little surprised when they said to come to their house at 10 p.m. on Christmas Eve. "So late!" I thought. But that was just because the Christmas service began at 10:30 p.m. We were back to their home shortly after midnight and everyone went into fourth gear, getting the meal ready. The girls had been cooking all day, but they need to heat up the hot dishes—pork roast, turkey, lasagna, beans, and rice—and get the cold dishes—potato salad, fruits, olives, pickles, and a yummy chicken and carrot salad present at all big events—decorated and on the table. Not a single piece of lefse was to be found, not even a *krumkake*. On the other hand, there wasn't the slightest smell of lutefisk. I had never seen such a big meal that late at night, and it seemed like it lasted forever. Meals in Brazil are seldom quick affairs; though the food is wonderful, it is really an excuse to spend time with people they love. If that is true in the day-to-day, imagine at Christmas! Combine the late hour with a seriously full tummy, and I was ready for bed by the time we were done.

But the celebration didn't end when the last plate was removed from the table; it really had

just begun. Sometime around 2 a.m. someone began clapping his hands outside the kitchen door. It was a neighbor coming to wish us a Merry Christmas. Then another and another neighbor arrived. Soon my family divided in two; half stayed at the house to receive neighbors, and the other half headed out to make their own rounds. These visits weren't long, but they were sweet. Brazilians are very affectionate people, and Christmas hugs take the place of Christmas cards as a way of celebrating the good news of great joy. The celebration went from being a family gathering to an opportunity to reach out to those around us, and it was so special. But I have to confess, by this time I had gone from being excited to sleepy, on to tired, and now arrived at weepy. One of the girls took me aside and asked if I was okay. Was I homesick? Did I miss my mom? I sniffled, "No, I'm just tired!" She patted me on the arm and asked if wanted to lay down with the babies, and I said yes!

After an hour or so, everyone was back in their own homes, I was up and semi-lucid again, coffee and panettoni (something like *julekake*) were ready, and it was time to open presents. This also took quite a while, not because there were so many presents—there were two or three for each person—but there were stories to be told with each gift. It was time to laugh, to remember, to be grateful for the blessings of ... 1988 (I said it was a long time ago!) and dream of the wonderful things God had prepared for us in the new year.

The sun rose before the celebration ended. This morning person was knackered—and blessed. So many of the elements that had typified the Christmas season for me were absent or different, but the heart was the same—rejoicing in the great good news of God's love come down, and celebrating it with the people we love.

Sliver (center in photo inset) is an AFLC missionary serving at the Miriam Home in Campo Mourão, Brazil.

C

by Doris Pulscher

hristmas. A time for celebration, for traditions, for presents, for family. But one is missing—Ron: husband and father. Grandfather (Papa), pastor, friend. He was so sick and in so much pain. The doctors said there was nothing more that could be done for him medically. God was merciful and took him home to his eternal rest.

Paul wrote about this separation. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Our hope is in the fact that we will see him again at that great meeting in the sky. Ron is celebrating with the saints, singing around the throne of God. We would not wish him back for anything. We are here ready to celebrate Christmas, but he is gone. How do we celebrate when he is missing? We will miss him but we will press on, not forgetting, but tenderly remembering,

Traditionally, we would attend Christmas Eve services as a family. Not one service, but two! Since Ron was the pastor, we would go to support him. Ron always had a fresh take and outlook on a very old theme. He loved candlelight communion services, with *Silent Night* being played or sung until every one was served. We will continue to attend Christmas Eve service as a family, but only one. We will press on.

After the service on Christmas Eve everyone would open one present. We’ll keep doing this! Ron would begin buying presents around February. He would buy gloves for work or riding for the guys, gadgets of all sorts that he thought someone would enjoy, tools, pocket knives, and jewelry for the girls. These little things were generally used as stocking stuffers. I suppose I should start buying these stocking stuffers—maybe next year. After breakfast Christmas morning we would open the rest of the presents. When all the presents were opened, Ron would disappear and then come out of the bedroom with an envelope for each child and grandchild. There was an amount of money in the envelope. This was a gift above and beyond the other presents; I was never sure how he had saved this money but he always did. For the last couple

of years he would say, “This is probably the last time I will get to do this.” Last year he was right. We will miss his generous spirit, but we will press on.

Sometime during Christmas vacation, when everyone was home, Ron would take us to a restaurant for a meal. He would pay for this outing from pocket change. Throughout the year Ron would empty his pocket change into a clay cow. The cow was supposed to be a planter, but Ron turned it into a bank. There was generally enough money in that old cow to finance the whole meal, that is until our family grew and the grandkids got too old to order off the kid’s menu. He would have to supplement a bit then. This meal was his treat. But now he is gone and we will miss him. We’ll have to do something different—perhaps we’ll go Dutch treat—and we will press on.

We would rarely have the big meal on Christmas day. We started having pizza on Christmas day instead. Our big meal would be a different day. Often times Ron’s brothers would join us for that day and meal. Traditionally, it was Ron’s job to carve the turkey no matter at whose house we were. He worked his way through college as a butcher so he knew how to carve a turkey! As no one else can carve a turkey, we’ll have to give up this tradition—none us were that fond of turkey anyway. But we will press on.

Picking a Christmas tree was always a dilemma. Do



When someone is missing

we get a real tree or an artificial one? When we pastored in northern Minnesota, the decision was simple. Ron loved going to the tree farm, riding the horse-drawn wagon to the middle of the trees, and finding the perfect tree. We would cut it down and tote it home. When we moved to the middle of South Dakota, the decision was a little more difficult. We bought an artificial tree just in case we could not find the perfect real one at the store. Then we moved to Rapid City, S.D., and the real tree won out again. I will miss hunting for that perfect Christmas tree with Ron. I'll have to settle for the artificial tree our daughter gave me and press on.

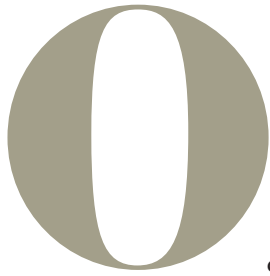
As a family we will continue to celebrate Christmas. We will go to Christmas Eve service and open one present afterward. We will open the rest of our presents after breakfast Christmas morning. We will miss the envelopes

of money and the special little things Ron bought us. We will miss Ron—husband, father, grandfather. But we will remember his generous spirit and his love for us as a family. We will remember that he taught us that without Christmas, Easter would be meaningless. Before the crucifixion we had to have the incarnation. We will miss him, but we will press on. We will press on because we know that one day we will celebrate with him in glory. There won't be presents under the tree, but we will be casting our crowns around the throne of God and celebrating our greatest gift, eternal salvation. Because of this hope we will press on.

Pulscher is a member of Shiloh Free Lutheran, Rapid City, S.D.

The EXCHANGE





by Scott and Tina Erickson

Opening our home to students from other cultures was a rewarding and growing time for our family. Along with our youngest daughter, Joanna, we had the honor of hosting three foreign exchange students: Lucy and Eric in 2016, and Anh in 2017. Lucy, from Vietnam, is an artistic young lady who loves to read. Eric, from China, is a brilliant young man full of energy who loves to eat and cook. Anh is a sweet, soft-spoken Vietnamese young lady from Germany who brought much joy into our lives.

Celebrating Christmas in the States was a new experience for our three students when they stayed with us. This was especially true for Eric and Lucy. Eric didn't celebrate Christmas because he believed that we just live our lives the best we can to make a better living. Lucy did not seem to have very strong religious beliefs, even though she comes from a Buddhist background. She knew of Christmas because there were Christian students studying in her school in Vietnam. Anh, on the other hand, was a believer who came from a Lutheran background. She had similar traditional celebrations at Christmas with gift giving and similar foods, but especially celebrates Christmas as the remembrance of the birth of our Savior.

While our exchange students lived with us, they took part in church and Sunday school activities with our family. Eric and Lucy had many questions. They asked us about baptism, so Tina had the privilege of sharing with them about the means of grace. Many questions such as, "What do you mean by Jesus Christ as our Redeemer?" sparked curiosity about God's Word. There were some intense conversations during Sunday school.

One particular Sunday morning, Joanna asked Eric and Lucy, "Do you know where you will go after you die?" Eric answered, "Nowhere, that's the end!"

Lucy said she wasn't sure but believed in Buddhism because that is what she grew up with. We shared our testimonies and prayed for them. We continue to pray that their hearts may be softened to the Holy Spirit's work in their lives.

During the year that Anh was with us, she took part in adult Sunday school with Joanna, who was a senior in high school. We had at first decided not to take in a foreign exchange student during Joanna's senior year, but with what we realize was God's providence, we were offered the opportunity to be blessed by taking in Anh. She had already arrived in the states and needed a place to go due to some unfortunate circumstances or else she would have

to go back home. Anh truly was a perfect fit for our family and became a great friend and sister to Joanna.

Eric and Lucy took part in our church Sunday school Christmas program. It was a blessing as they put on two skits with Joanna and sang Christmas songs. Lucy enjoyed acting, so this was an effective way for her to experience the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus. Eric, who had a beautiful voice, sang out joyfully. It was his first experience seeing Christ's birth portrayed through the young children acting out the manger scene. The Christmas program the following year had Anh and Joanna singing "Silent Night" and "Oh Christmas Tree" in both English and German. In small and big ways, these international students took part in our small country church's Sunday school program, and in doing so experienced some of our traditions.

They also experienced celebrating Christmas with our families. There was plenty of food, exchanging of gifts, and family fun, but the most precious time was singing carols together and reading the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. Eric's mom sent Christmas sweaters for our whole immediate family, including Lucy, which we wore for our 2016 Christmas cards. In 2017, we enjoyed a variety of German chocolate from the advent calendar that Anh brought. We each took turns to see what chocolate was behind the next door in counting up to Christmas Day.

Our prayer is that seeds were planted and encouragement given to these precious ones. Before they returned home, Tina asked if she could keep on praying for them and had them write down their hopes and dreams. We do pray that Eric and Lucy may come to know Christ in a personal way. We also pray that Anh may grow in her walk with the Lord.

It was very hard when it was time for our new children to leave and go back to their homes. Eric had tears in his eyes and was reluctant to get on the plane as he gave Scott a big hug. Anh was hard to let go! She called us and video chatted with us on Christmas Day. We miss Lucy and Eric greatly and pray that Christ would become the center of their lives. May Jesus be your hope and rock this Christmas and always! "Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1).

The Ericksons are members of Oiland Lutheran, Badger, Minn. Scott is also a middler at the Free Lutheran Seminary, Plymouth, Minn.

I by Brenda Carr

was born and grew up in big cities and have lived more than three-fourths of my life there. I tell you this because our family will soon celebrate seven years of living in rural North Dakota, or as

I like to state it, “We have survived seven North Dakota winters!” I’m not telling anyone anything new when I say big city life is completely different than rural life. There are things I love and dislike about both. Those things tend to be magnified over holidays, such as Christmas.

When I think about Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Minneapolis—to name some of the big cities I have called home during the Christmas season—the first thing that pops into my mind is the abundance of people busily going about their tasks to get everything done. I have images of parking lots being full of cars for weeks before Christmas Day. Or the paranoia of thinking I’ll be late for an engagement because traffic isn’t moving, as I rack my brain wondering why it is so congested that day only to shortly remember its Christmas time. I remember the daily planner packed with Christmas parties and times listed in it for the weekends leading up to Christmas. There was never a shortage of Christmas concerts, plays, or extra events offered that could occupy one’s time. When Christmas Eve and Christmas Day finally arrived, it was yet another frenzied event involving getting everyone to church and then making the rounds to visit family.

Life in a big city moves at a fast pace. Add Christmas into the mix and everything seems more rushed. At least this was my experience. Honestly, unless I was intentional about slowing down and focusing on the meaning of the Christmas season, I often flew through it in a whirlwind. To be fair, part of this journey was also a reflection of where I was spiritually, not just physically. If I had been wiser and more Christ-focused, I would like to think that I would have sought out Advent or Christmas devotionals at the countless bookstores I could have gone to. I might have sought out more meaningful events in which I

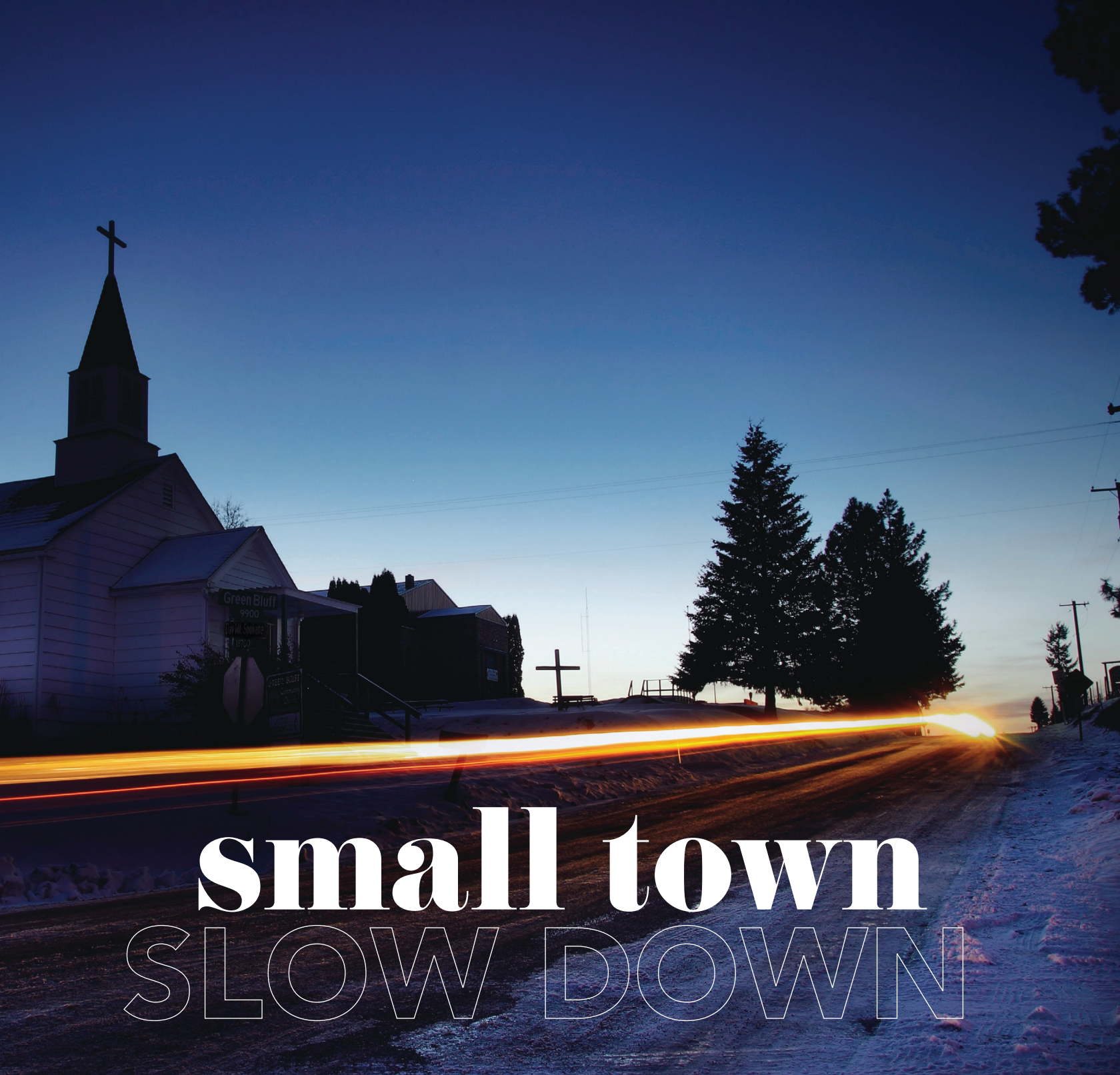
walked away reflecting upon the glory of the coming Messiah. The opportunities are plentiful in a big city, but in order to avoid the trappings of the season, one must be intentional.

Put on the brakes, because life in rural America just got a lot slower. Again, being mindful that I am not in the same place spiritually from my younger days, celebrating Christmas in small town North Dakota has been very rich and fulfilling. I certainly believe some of the reason for this change has been the environment. The slower-paced environment allows me to plan what is going to take up my time.

It has been extremely important for my husband and me to sit down each night during Advent and read a story or devotional with our kids and discuss it. I believe our children look forward to this each year, as well. The lack of shopping centers around us finds me sitting in my chair with pen and paper in hand, writing down what I am going to buy and then tackling that list on a visit to a bigger town or on the internet. I spend much less time on the actual shopping experience.

Community and community events, anytime of the





small town SLOW DOWN

year, are so enjoyable in a small town. Seeing the same faces day in and day out lend to a connection that can't be experienced in big cities. At Christmas time, the trip to the nursing home to walk the halls and sing Christmas carols brings a much more connected joy to both carolers and residents. We seem to make more time to visit at church and town events, like the lighting of the Christmas tree. A most welcomed surprise to us was the high school Christmas concerts at our public school. They include a mix of Christian and secular songs. What a delight to feel worshipful at your children's high school!

No matter where life finds you this Christmas, small

town or big city, be intentional about focusing on Christ's birth and what that means for mankind. We are nothing without Christ's birth and ultimate sacrifice. Let that ignite us to be the light in our community, whether big or small. Remember Matthew 5:14 this Christmas season, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."

A merry Christmas to you from our family.

Carr is a member of Zion Free Lutheran, Tioga, N.D.



Different TRADITIONS

I

by Marika Ivsina

come from Latvia, a small but beautiful country in northern Europe. The tradition of decorating Christmas trees supposedly originated in our capital city of Riga in 1510, a tradition that continues today. Since we have plenty of forests, every family is allowed to get one fir tree for the celebration of Christmas from the Latvian state forests. Traditionally, the men of the house go to the forest a few days before Christmas to find the right tree for the home while the women are taking care of the Christmas tree decorations. Besides the fragile Christmas decorations, most people will light real candles in their Christmas trees, too.

When the Christmas season comes near, most Latvians—including myself—are definitely “dreaming of a white Christmas.” That is just part of the Christmas spirit I have grown up with. In Latvian, Christmas is called *Ziemassvētki*, which translates “festivity of winter.” Before I became a Christian at the age of 17, I did not think much about what we celebrated at Christmas. Of course, I was excited to have the Christmas tree, candle lights, and decorations at home, excited to share greeting cards with friends, and to receive candy and other gifts. Since my family did not attend church, I had a very poor understanding of the real reason for Christmas.

In an effort to get the Christmas feeling, many people pack churches on Christmas Eve for a “Silent Night, Holy Night” service.

There are many pagan traditions and beliefs for Christmas time also that non-Christians are still following in Latvia, calling them the ancient Latvian traditions. One is that at Christmas you should eat nine times in a row, e.g., you need to have nine kinds of dishes on the Christmas table so that next year you will be wealthy and rich. My family did not follow this tradition, but I remember my dad putting fish scales in his wallet and my mom’s wallet, too, believing it would help the family budget.

Traditionally for a Christmas eve meal we baked *pīrāgi*, bread rolls that are filled with bacon and onions, and make *rasols*, Latvian potato salad with green peas, pickles, smoked meat, and boiled eggs. Most people bake gingerbread at Christmas. My cousin makes them a real artwork and sells them at the Christmas market. The smell of gingerbread is the traditional smell of Christmas in Latvia.

A few years ago, I had a completely different Christmas experience when we celebrated with my family far away from our homeland in Mexico. My older sister is married to a Mexican man and lives in Cholula, Puebla. Because of the huge distance from Latvia, it was my parents’ first visit to meet our new Mexican relatives. The

time together was great with my family and I’m still very thankful for those sunny and amazing holidays. I have since spent Christmas there again and have learned a few things about their traditions.

Many Mexicans display replicas of the nativity story in their homes, in restaurants, shops, and also in city squares. It seems obvious to everyone in Mexico that Christmas is about Jesus’ birth. While our Mexican family doesn’t share gifts on Christmas, they do share something sweet with their neighbors while going from one house to another and “preparing the way for Jesus.” My sister told me that usually children in Mexico get gifts for Epiphany, remembering the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus, the newborn King.

Mexicans don’t have the traditional Christmas Eve service we have in Latvia. Instead, my sister’s family attends a congregation which organizes a children’s presentation of the real Christmas story of Jesus’ birth, with quite a loud celebration afterward. People shout for joy; some kids have whistles to make even greater noise! After church the families gather at home for supper and the celebration continues until the next morning. I caught myself that night thinking that their way of celebration—their “Joy to the World!” expression at Christmas—could be closer to the origins.

We can celebrate Jesus’ birth with “Silent Night, Holy Night” or “Joy to the World!” The question is, do we grasp the greatness of the event that we are celebrating? How is Jesus the reason for this Christmas season in my personal life, in my family? With whom can I share Him and the joy of Christmas this year?

I appreciate the spirit of Christmas that I experienced among my Mexican family. For the last 20 years they meet together with their two neighbor families for Christmas Eve supper and the Christmas morning breakfast. They start the Christmas Eve supper with a prayer and songs, remembering the birth of Jesus. They meet every year at a different house and each family prepares something for the common meal. They share the joys of their lives and show support to those who are struggling, like a family of believers should. Although they have different dishes for the Christmas meal, and although there is no white Christmas in Mexico and a different way to worship, I think sharing with our fellow brothers and sisters and loving our neighbors is something very Christ-like that we all can do no matter where we are.

Ivsina, a senior at the Free Lutheran Bible College, is from Saldus, Latvia.

by Emory Flaten

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered ... And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son ..." (Luke 2:1-7).

T

he reality of Luke 2 goes back more than 2,000 years. My memories of Christmas go back more than 60 years. For my childhood family, the

Christmas season centered on home and church. Our home setting was simple and rural, modest tree decorations and one treasured gift. We were enchanted with the seasonal decorating, although we knew that the birth of Jesus was the real focus.

Sunday school Christmas programs involved reciting memorized Scripture messages. Participants usually dressed in simple robes and headpieces, attempting to give an authentic view of the original nativity scene.

Travel for Joseph and Mary would have been on foot, tedious, dusty, and very exhausting. But even for our family in the latter 1950s, it was rare to travel more than a short distance from home. Our small town was a mere five miles away and it offered most of what we needed.

Though we did not usually travel far, we did on one occasion venture out about 25 miles to attend a Christmas program at my grandparents' church. That program highlighted the Messiah's birth, but it also gave special recognition to at least two military men. Their presence in full military garb made a strong impression on me. They were home for Christmas and surrounded by their church family. For them it was literal, not just in their dreams. My father, on the other hand, knew what it meant to be a soldier away from home during the holidays, so I'm certain that's why he made the effort to attend that program. He knew those young men and wanted to honor their service and welcome them home.

"In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord ...'" (Luke 2:8-11).

My teenage years in the mid 1960s were blessed with a very active church youth group. That meant Christmas caroling in the neighborhoods around the three churches in the parish on three separate nights. We sang the traditional Christmas carols, took turns reading Luke 2, and often had very cold feet. Many of these folks did not attend any church. Praise God we had pastors and youth leaders who took a high view of Scripture and saw this as an opportunity



Christmas MEMORIES

to share the good news of “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” As Isaiah prophesied so many years before, “... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Most often we stood outside the homes and sang, however, some folks invited us inside. Believe it or not, some of those homes did not yet have rural electricity, so it was not unusual to see kerosene lights. Some in those homes neither ventured out to church nor even to town. It was not uncommon for us at times to only see the slight movement of a window curtain. Thank you, pastors and youth leaders, for your enthusiastic willingness and determination. God be praised!

As my wife, Jennifer, and I raised our four children, we continued this same practice. The birth of Christ was always the focus at Christmas. With our children we walked to Bethlehem, the neighbor’s nativity scene, to witness the birth of the Savior. We participated in Sunday school

Christmas programs, sang the carols, and read the Scriptures. Now we are blessed not only to make memories with our children but with grandchildren, as well.

Christmas is a time of anticipation. Colorful decorations, presents, special foods, and the longing to get together are all a part of the season. But there is much more. Through our church Christmas programs we continue to be reminded of the star of Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men, the angel’s approach to Mary, Joseph being informed of this unique birth, and Herod despising it.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:13-14).

Flaten is a member of Westaker Free Lutheran, Newfolden, Minn.

IN THOSE days



"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus ...

"And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ...

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

—Luke 2:1, 6, 15

T by Carl Fredrik Wisløff

Three times we find it expressed, "and it came to pass," in the Christmas gospel. We can well say so ourselves, "that it came to pass." For Christmas speaks of something which really happened.

Christmas isn't only a mid-winter festival. That's what it was among our forefathers before they came to know the Christmas gospel. Christmas was celebrated to honor something that happens again and again each year anew. When winter darkness is the deepest, a turn is made and the days become longer again. That happens each year. But that which the Christmas story speaks of happened "in those days," when Augustus was emperor.

Something happened in the emperor's palace. That was the first happening. It happened that there went out from Emperor Augustus a command that the whole world should be enrolled in a census. Strange to think about that. The emperor's command fit into God's plan. God's son was to be born in Bethlehem. The emperor was determined in his decision and all must obey. But the emperor himself must serve God's will even if he didn't know it.

"It came to pass" in a stable. That is the second. It happened that the time had come that she should have a child. Mary gave birth to her Son, her first born, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. All of this was of such little importance and so little noticed by people that it produced little comment

by those in the inn. But God's angels knew of it and rejoiced. The Savior was born.

This was the greatest and most remarkable event that has happened in the history of mankind. Yes, writers of history haven't made note of it, but this was greater than all the other that they have written about. God's eternal Son came down to earth and was born of a woman. He became our brother.

Over Bethlehem's fields the angels rejoiced and sang, "Glory to God in the highest, good will from God to men."

And so something happened in men's hearts. This is the third happening. And it came to pass when the angels were taken up from the shepherds to heaven that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this which has happened, and that the Lord has made known to us!"

That which happened in the stable in Bethlehem doesn't need to be repeated. But that which happened in the hearts then should happen many times, also at this Christmas. Then it will be a good Christmas. For that which they got to see—that was Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Originally published in "Daig Brød" ("Daily Bread"). Translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, who is a member of Westaker Free Lutheran, Newfolden, Minn. "Adoration of the Shepherds, by Pieter Bout (1668-1719).

Mission Corp membership elected during fall meeting

Members of the AFLC Missions Corporation met Sept. 17 on the campus of the AFLC Schools, Plymouth, Minn., during which they held their annual meeting. Elections for the Missions Corporation membership were also held. Elected to serve five-year terms were 20 nominees, including:

Pastor Matthew Ballmann, San Antonio, Texas
 Pastor Michael Brandt, Rapid City, S.D.
 Pastor William Buck, Sioux Falls, S.D.
 Gloria Flaa, Sioux Falls, S.D.
 Linda Fugleberg, Moorhead, Minn.

Paul Handsaker, Radcliffe, Iowa
 Pastor David Johnson, Boyertown, Pa.
 Pastor Rick Long, Arlington, Wash.
 Pastor Paul Nash, Brooklyn Park, Minn.
 Pastor Mark Olson, Minneapolis, Minn.
 Andrew Quanbeck, Fargo, N.D.
 Pastor Mark Richardson, Faith, S.D.
 Jordan Ruhmor, Monticello, Minn.
 Pastor Greg Schram, Loveland, Colo.
 Bill Sheldon, Ray, N.D.
 Ken Sletten, Duluth, Minn.
 Pastor Scott Stroud, Salinas, Calif.
 Hans Tanner, Fargo, N.D.
 Pastor Craig Wentzel, Edmore, N.D.
 Dr. Lyle Westrom, Crookston, Minn.

Congregation breaks ground

Activity center to be used as community outreach tool

Members of Stillwater Free Lutheran, Kalispell, Mont., broke ground on Oct. 13 for a new activity center, the first phase of which will cover 3,600 square feet and house youth and children's programs, as well as the congregation's after school program.

According to Pastor Craig Scavo, the congregation is excited to begin building after dreaming up the project nearly a dozen years ago and developing a solid plan four years ago. Estimated to cost \$1.2 in total, the building will be constructed in four phases, including the central activity center, a kitchen and bath during the second phase, office and storage in the third phase, and classrooms in the fourth phase. Once completed, the square footage will total 9,000 feet. The first phase, costing just over \$300,000, is expected to be completed by spring 2020.

Scavo stated that most of the funding raised to date, totalling



Members of Stillwater Free Lutheran, Kalispell, Mont., broke ground on a new activity center on Oct. 13. Representing generations of the congregation were the three oldest, the three youngest and their parents.

\$400,000, has come from faith commitments from the congregation, as well as from generous gifts from the community.

"We expect this building will allow us to expand our youth and children's programs," said Scavo, "as well as being able to reach out to the community around us and share Jesus with our neighbors," a goal that comes directly from the congregation's mission statement.

Currently, the congregation looks forward to hosting community events such as the firefighters and first responders appreciation dinner, harvest dinner, and other similar events as time allows.



Pastor David Jore (left) was installed Sept. 29 at Maple Bay Free Lutheran, Mentor, Minn. Pictured with Jore is his wife, Judith. The congregation also celebrated its 125th anniversary on the same day.

Maple Bay Free Lutheran celebrates 125th anniversary

Members of Maple Bay Free Lutheran, Mentor, Minn., celebrated the congregation's 125th anniversary on Sept. 29, while at the same time installing Pastor David Jore as the congregation's new pastor.

The congregation was organized in 1894, and began meeting for worship in a new building later that year. The building was completed in 1895, but burned down in a fire in December 1930. The congregation met for many years in a basement built in 1931, until the upper part of the church was completed in 1947. When the AFLC organized in 1962, Maple Bay Lutheran was one of its charter members. A parsonage, built with volunteer labor, was completed in 1984.

The congregation has been served by pastors and laymen, including Lynn Kinneberg, Rolf Heng, Todd Peterson, Everett Hind, and Bruce Dalager. Pastor David Jore recently accepted a call to serve the congregation. He was installed Sept. 29, with Pastor Lyndon Korhonen, AFLC president, officiating.



“Peé niko jukyicha hína ko yvy ári. Juky nahé’evéi ramo niko ndaikatu véima oñemohe’ë jey, naiporã véima mba’everã. Upevare, okápe oñemombo ha oñepyrúmba hese” (San Mateo 5:13).

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Matthew 5:13).

W

e have been in Paraguay for almost a year, during which we have been dedicated to

language study. Guaraní is the language we are attempting to acquire. Learning to say hello and how to buy bread in a new language isn’t easy; learning to tell stories in different tenses is hard; learning to share ideas is tough; but learning to communicate spiritual truth to the heart of a nonbeliever is impossible! Yes, it is impossible. Without the work of the Holy Spirit revealing Christ to the unbeliever, the task is unattainable. Thankfully we have the promise that God works through the preaching of the gospel. No matter how beautifully

SALTY, AND SWEET

BY MATTHEW ABEL

words are employed, revelation is an act of God. Nevertheless, words are important and necessary. Words and their meanings combined with their practical application lived out in society are catalysts for gospel transformation.

It is interesting how a different language can bring new perspectives into life and even into the study of Scripture. Pastors, theologians, and Christian authors often bring out explanations about Hebrew or Greek words behind our Bible translations because a word often carries nuances that gets lost in translation. Guaraní can also help us to gain perspective. *Juky* (joo-k’) is the Guaraní word for salt. Interestingly in Guaraní the word *juky* also means “graceful, attractive, courteous, and sweet (as in nice e.g. “what a sweet child”).”

The Greek word for salt is ἅλας (*halas*) and is metaphorically used as “the salt of wisdom and prudence” (*Mounce Greek Dictionary*). Colossians 4:6 says, “let your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt ...”

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus says that we are the

juky of the earth immediately after telling about the blessedness of enduring persecution and immediately before speaking about how good works before men bring glory to God the Father. The way I understand it, all of the Guaraní meanings for the word *juky* fit with the text and express part of what it means to be salt of the earth.

As missionaries we strive to be *juky*: graceful, attractive, courteous and nice. We must be *juky* in order to bring the salt of the gospel into the insipid world so that through faith people may be preserved unto eternal life.

The Matthew Abel family are AFLC missionaries currently living in Luque, Paraguay. Their mission is to plant churches among the unreached people by preaching the gospel, making disciples, teaching and gathering the believers into free and living Lutheran congregations. Matthew, Ednay, and Zoey will be joined by baby Ian in January 2020.



TOP: Friends and family members joined the Free Lutheran Bible College combined choir for the Festival of Praise on Oct. 27, directed by Andrew Hanson (above). A children's choir (left) also sang.



AFLC Schools host Festival of Praise

Members of the Free Lutheran Bible College combined choir were joined by alumni and friends in a Festival of Praise concert on Oct. 27. The concert featured six new pieces commissioned by the schools and composed by local artist Lloyd Larson. The Hallel,

as the pieces are known, are taken from Psalm 113-118, and following the Jewish tradition, would have been chanted or sung during a major Jewish festival or feast.

"I have been moved by the power of the message of God's Word in the texts," said

Larson. "They are honest and transparent reflections of Israel's journey and of the presence of God's Spirit in that journey. They are filled with optimism and hope that, even in the most difficult of circumstances, God has promised to be present and to guide. As a result, these

words are not just words for ancient Israel, but they are for us today as we claim the promises of God in our own journeys of life and faith."

The festival choir was joined by a group of professional musicians as well as a children's choir.

ADOPTED INTO CHRIST

BY IONA FOUKS

WMF

WOMEN'S
MISSIONARY
FEDERATION

1 t's a boy!" I shouted as I ran to tell my husband. It was October 1998. My husband, Derrick, and I had been waiting for almost two and a half years to get a referral for adoption. The wait was over.

Years earlier, we had talked about adoption as an engaged couple, not knowing what size family God would create for us. Our family began this eventful journey in the spring of 1996. It was a nine-year marriage by this time, with one daughter in heaven, a 7-year-old daughter, and two sons, 5 and 3. I was a busy stay-at-home mom. Listening to *Focus on the Family* had become part of my daily routine. One day, Dr. James Dobson was bringing to light the crisis of orphaned, unwanted children in third-world countries. I cried when their plight was described and wished I could adopt them all. After discussing adoption, Derrick and I agreed that it was an opportunity to mirror God's great love for each one of us. "In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will" (Ephesians 1:5).

As Christ followers, we have been adopted into the Lord's forever family through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. God chose us, and because of Jesus' gift of salvation, when we claim Christ as our Savior, we become children of God. My husband and I wanted to add to our earthly family and hopefully our forever one, too.

Some thought we were crazy since we had three healthy children. Even our parents were a little leery. But God affirmed our decision with each completed step. There was the home study, the group study, the paperwork, the fees, deciding what country to choose, cultural gatherings with our whole family, the social worker's visit, and foster care certification. Then, we waited.

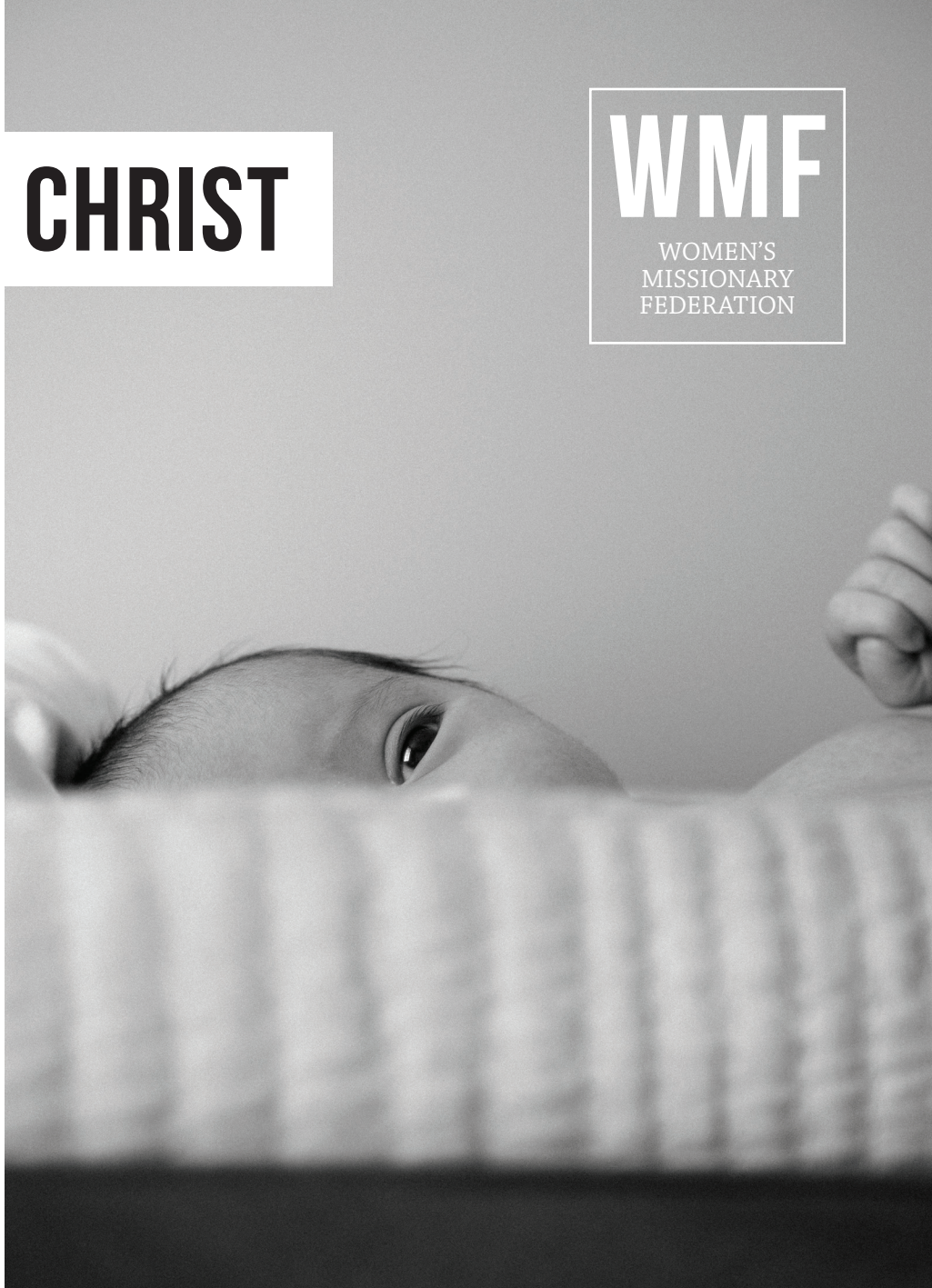
On March 29, 1999, we met our baby boy, Sung Min, at the international gate at Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport. His American name is Cameron Jon Fouks, with his Korean name included on his birth certificate. Both his Korean and American names mean "spokesman of the people." Now that is a name that will be challenging to live up to.

The moment I took Cameron from his escort's arms, he was mine. My motherly love encompassed him, just as it did with my other children. His brothers were extremely protective

of him and his sister became a second mom. The extended family, though a little cautious, accepted Cameron as one of the clan. Cameron became a celebrity of sorts in our church and community. We were no longer Derrick and Ilona Fouks, now people referred to us as "Cameron's dad," or "Cameron's mom," "Cameron's sister," or "Cameron's brother." It was such a blessing to see him and other children who had been adopted in our community accepted so readily. I tried to use the opportunity to tell others about how God has adopted us into His family. It was also a great time to build up and encourage the other families we walked beside in the adoption journey.

Adoption wasn't easy, and we did make some sacrifices. But the positives greatly outweighed the negatives. Children are truly a great heritage from the Lord. I tell my children that they are only borrowed to us for this short life on earth. When each of my children were infants, I gave them back to God. I know that He loves, cares, and protects them more than I ever can. My prayer is that they will join me in eternity with Jesus Christ.

Fouks is a member of Amery Free Lutheran, Amery, Wis.



PEOPLE & PLACES

Pastor Christian Andrews has accepted a position on the Editorial Board of the *Lutheran Ambassador* magazine. Andrews is serving as interim pastor of Immanuel Lutheran, Springfield, Mo.

Pastor John Brennan has accepted a call to serve First Lutheran, Oklahoma City, Okla., and plan to begin ministry there in June 2020. Brennan currently serves St. Peter's Lutheran, Melvin, Ill.

Pastor Del Palmer, who recently resigned as director of AFLC World Missions, is now serving as interim pastor of Triumph Lutheran, Ferndale, Wash.

Karen Floan, who has served as executive assistant to the AFLC president since 2007, retired on Oct. 31. Floan served under two presidents: Pastor Elden Nelson, who served from 2007 to 2012, and Pastor Lyndon Korhonen, 2012 to present. Floan previously served in the Development office with Vision 2004 for the AFLC Schools.

The **Free Lutheran Schools** will host a weekend of events Dec. 6-8 for family and friends of current students centered on the annual Christmas concerts. Gospel teams will present a concert on Friday evening at 8 p.m. On Saturday, the men's and women's basketball teams will compete in games during the afternoon, followed by a Christmas Coffeeshouse from 4:30 to 6:30. The first of two concerts, featuring choirs from the seminary and Bible college, as well as a handbell choir and wind ensemble, will be held at 7 p.m. The second concert will be held at 4 p.m. Sunday.



Pastor Thomas Baker

Pastor Thomas Baker, 75, of Big Spring, Texas, died Oct. 29 at Ussery Roan Texas State Veteran's Home, Amarillo, Texas. Born Sept. 7, 1944, in Connellsville, Pa., he was the son of Chalmer and Doris Baker.

Baker served in the United States Army from 1965 to 1968 in Korea. He returned to the States where he attended the University of Pittsburgh, Pa., graduating in 1971 with a bachelor of arts degree. He earned a master's degree in 1975 from Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. He attended the Free Lutheran Seminary, graduating in 1982. He married Patricia Jacobs in 1986. He was ordained and served AFLC congregations in Pittsburgh, Pa., Cumberland, Wis., Rice Lake, Wis., Evergreen Park, Ill., and Tulia, Texas. He served as a missionary to Brazil from 1991 to 1992. Most recently he served as chaplain for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in Plainview, Texas.

Surviving are his wife; one son, Andrew Baker; one daughter, Hannah Baker; one brother, Bruce Baker; and one sister, Carol Ross. The service was held Nov. 4 at St. Paul Lutheran, Plainview, Texas, with Pastor Michael Heckman officiating.



A group of 12 people traveled with AFLC Journey Missions Nov. 4-15 to Israel, touring biblical sites and volunteering with local ministries. Pictured are (front, from left) Elise Kramer, Hannah Kramer, Cathe Erhardt, Jan Raasch, Hannah Swanson, and Mike Anenson; (back row) Jon Nelson, Pastor Craig Johnson, Ruth Gunderson, Pastor Kevin Olson, Pastor Nathan Olson, and Josiah Johnson.

OCTOBER MEMORIALS

FLBC

Nancy Tollefson
John Zak, Sr.
Ruth Claus
Lucile Skadsem
Arnold Woodbury

FLS

Nancy Tollefson

AED

Pastor George Knapp
Pastor Tom Baker

Home Missions

Glenn Zillmer
Felix Bedlan

World Missions

Pastor George Knapp
Alice Rudebusch
Marvin Halstad

Youth

Felix Bedlan
... in honor of

FLS

Dr. James Molstre

All Departments

Pastor Michael Brandt

AFLC BENEVOLENCES October 31, 2019

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$38,961	\$342,381	\$330,787
Evangelism	12,864	107,819	93,627
Youth Ministries	13,103	113,046	120,467
Parish Education	9,093	121,989	146,001
Seminary	33,086	225,323	231,930
Bible College	37,332	429,577	449,250
Home Missions	52,612	328,424	344,669
World Missions	49,404	354,812	322,014
Personal Support	59,514	511,556	611,017
TOTALS	\$305,968	\$2,534,927	\$2,649,762

For additional financial information for each department, go to www.aflc.org/giving

THE CHRISTMAS TREE AUCTION

My Norwegian Lutheran grandmother was quite ecumenical, and often visited other churches in Escanaba, Mich.—not on Sunday mornings, of course, but usually for ladies aid programs and lunches. She liked the Sunday evening services at the local Salvation Army corps, which was walking distance from our home on north 16th Street, and sometimes her little grandson was allowed to come along with her.



Pastor Robert Lee

It was quite a different experience from the Immanuel Lutheran services. Our pastor wore a black robe, and we called him “reverend.” The army pastor wore a military-style uniform, and he was called “captain.” A few other church workers wore uniforms, too, and some also had other military titles. The worship area was quite plain compared to ours, without even an altar or a cross ... no organ, just a piano. Our church had a pulpit high in the air while the army had only a small lectern for the speaker. Their music, though, was much more spirited than I had ever heard and provided quite a contrast to our somber hymn singing.

The Christmas tree auction was apparently quite a popular affair, with many guests from other churches present, providing an important annual fund-raising function—like the familiar Christmas bell-ringers with the kettle on Ludington Street—to support the many community ministries of the army. I only attended one of them, but the memory is still with me, more than 70 years later.

There was a huge decorated Christmas tree in the front of the packed auditorium, with scores of small wrapped packages hanging on the tree and beneath it. As this was my first auction, I was sitting tall on the seat, not wanting to miss anything. The

captain might have been the auctioneer, and he would hold up one of the packages. “Who’ll give me a quarter? Yes, I see your hand, thank you, fifty cents? A dollar? Who’ll give me two?” I was enthralled!

Grandma was not bidding, much to my disappointment, and finally I could stand it no longer. Conquering my shyness, I shouted: “Five cents!” ready and willing to spend the nickel she had given me for the offering. Everyone turned and looked at me, laughing uproariously, and I was absolutely horrified. What had I done wrong? I didn’t have a clue.

There’s sort of a happy ending to the story, since afterward the person who won that particular bidding war came over and gave me the small package that he or she had purchased. It was a box of little cards with Bible verses on them, and I still have it today. Somewhere.

The embarrassment has long since faded away, but there’s a lesson that remains with me. No, the lesson is not to be careful when you are bidding at an auction, although that’s a good idea, too. It actually is a matter of life and death.

How foolish to imagine that you and I could ever pay for a gift that He freely gives us without money or price! “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat” (Isaiah 55:1). We are not our own; we have been bought with a price (I Corinthians 6:19-20), far beyond anything that we could ever hope to afford. “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like

silver or gold ... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (I Peter 1:18-19). “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling,” the old hymn writer wrote. What part of “nothing” is so hard for us to understand?

How like our old natures to put a ridiculous value on the little that one might think he or she could offer to the Lord! It’s like visiting a Cadillac dealer and telling him that we are willing to pay \$19.95 for his latest model. He’d laugh of us, right? Maybe he’d think we are crazy. It’s even sort of like bidding five cents for a mystery box that is worth a lot more.

How like our old natures to put a ridiculous value on the little that one might think he or she could offer to the Lord!

Christmas is a time for gifts, and we are often pointed to the wise men with their costly offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the true heart of Christmas is not about our gifts to God or to one another, it is the incredible gift that He gives to us ... loving us so much that He gave us “His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Best wishes for a blessed Christmas to all our readers!

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR
3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd.
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441

Periodicals

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

something to share

IT IS WHAT IS ON THE INSIDE

BY SARAH NELSON

"I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

~Colossians 1:25-27

I love hearing from my youngest nephews. Their voices usually tell me about the latest happenings at school, the football field, or their family farm. Last week they called, not with news, but to tell me about something that I did. Or maybe I should say, that I did not do. "Aunt Sarah, we were so excited to listen to those Adventure in Odyssey CD's you lent to us. We picked out one, opened up the case, and guess what? It was empty! And then we opened another one, and it was the same thing—just an empty case."

I started apologizing and giggling at the same time. I could hear my sister also enjoying overhearing her sons' phone call with me as they let me know that I gave them a gift that was empty. You see, several years ago when our children had outgrown their *Adventure in Odyssey* stories on CD, I set aside a box to give to my nephews to enjoy. However, I forgot an important detail. I forgot that I had placed the majority of the CDs in a book sleeve system for storage, and thus gave my nephews colorful CD cases that promised intriguing and adventurous stories, but when opened, were

completely empty.

My gift giving blunder reminded me of how sometimes we want to make our Christian faith look enticing. We want the cover of our lives to look appealing, alluring, and perfect. Sometimes we may even do a good job of that. But what happens when the case of our faith is opened? Do people see Jesus, the One who gives us faith? Or do they see an empty void—nothing of substance, nothing of eternal value? Let's spend more of our time pointing people past our covers to the One who is the center of our lives, Jesus, the One to whom all glory is due.

*Nelson is a member of the Badger Creek/
Oiland Lutheran parish, Badger, Minn.*