

WHITE WING
MESSENGER

DECEMBER 2023

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE CHURCH OF GOD OF PROPHECY

*Christmas
Stories:*
Reconciling
the World to
Christ



- We Need the Prince of Peace

- The Gift of New Life



Dear COGOP Family,

What does the Assembly mean to you? The International Assembly of the Church of God of Prophecy is a global gathering that occurs every two years. As I think back over the years, for me, the Assembly is much like a family reunion where I get to see fellow laborers who have been busy working for the Lord in their fields of labor. I have fond memories from my childhood of walking the hallways, visiting the White Wing bookstore, and browsing the Global Missions Encounter. And what about the Parade of Nations? There is just something electric when the Bahama Brass Band leads us in exciting music as we march through and declare the glory of the Lord and display the flags that represent our nations of ministry. Yes, these are all fond memories indeed. What are those memories worth to you? They are priceless to me. The great news is that there is no price established for you to attend the Assembly or for you to take advantage of the livestreaming events. However, there is a cost in producing such an amazing event. Does your local church collect its annual Assembly Expense Offering? If not, be the voice that speaks up. Maybe consider a donation yourself. For me, there is no price I could place on the value of the Assembly in my life. I encourage you to reflect upon this for yourself, and I pray that the Lord of all blessings would richly bless you as you remain faithful in stewardship.

Bishop Daniel K. Gann, DMin

International Assembly Expense Committee Member
Fiji, New Zealand, and Rabi Island National Bishop
Hazel Green, Alabama, COGOP Pastor



WHITE WING MESSENGER

WE BELIEVE in the Holy Trinity—one God, eternally existing in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We believe in one God, the Father, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father. All things were made through Him and for Him. He is true God and true man. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and was born of the virgin, Mary. He suffered, died, was buried, and on the third day He rose from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of the Father, and He will return to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who eternally proceeds from the Father. He is Teacher, Comforter, Helper, and Giver of spiritual gifts. Through Him the saving and sanctifying works of Jesus Christ are applied to the life of believers. He is the empowering presence of God in the life of the Christian and the church. The Father has sent His Son to baptize with the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues and bearing the fruit of the Spirit are New Testament signs of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

We believe that salvation is by grace through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross and that He died in our place. The believer's sins are forgiven by the shedding of His blood. We believe that healing of mind, body, soul, and spirit is available to the believer through the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe in one baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

We believe that the grace of God brings forgiveness and reconciliation to those who repent, as well as transformation in holiness, enabling them to live a Christ-like life. Sanctification is both a definite work of grace and a lifelong process of change in the believer brought by the blood of Jesus, the Word of God, and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

We believe in one holy, universal church, composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ, offering fellowship and calling for service to men and women of all races, nations, cultures, and languages. We believe in the spiritual and ultimate visible unity of the church.

We believe that the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—is the inspired Word of God. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His will to humankind, sufficient for instruction in salvation and daily Christian living. The Bible is the Christian's rule of faith and practice.

We believe that God will ultimately reconcile all things in heaven and earth in Christ. Therefore, we look forward to new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Executive Editor/Publisher: Tim Coalter
Managing Editor: Marsha Robinson
Copy Editor: Katherine Osborn
Editorial Assistant: Roxanne Corbett
Graphic Designer: Sixto Ramírez

About the Church of God of Prophecy

The Church of God of Prophecy is a vibrant, worldwide body of believers, united in worship, working hand-in-hand to share God's love and a message of hope to the brokenhearted. The organization has more than a million members and more than 10,000 ministers, worshiping in more than 10,000 churches or missions in 135 nations of the world.

Church of God of Prophecy Core Values

- Prayer
- The Harvest
- Leadership Development
- Biblical Stewardship
- Service

Vision Statement

Reconciling the world to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit

Mission Statement

The Church of God of Prophecy is a Christ-exalting, holiness, Spirit-filled, all-nations, disciple-making, church-planting movement with passion for Christian union.

General Presbytery:

Tim Coalter: Presiding Bishop
Brian Sutton: North America
Clayton Endecott: Wider Europe and the Middle East
Benjamin Feliz: Mexico/Central America/
Spanish-Speaking Caribbean
Clayton Martin: Caribbean/Atlantic
Ocean Islands
James Kolawole: Africa
Tim McCaleb: Asia/Australia/Oceania
Gabriel E. Vidal: South America

White Wing Messenger (ISSN 0043-5007) (USPS 683-020) is published monthly as the official publication of the Church of God of Prophecy, 3720 Keith St. NW, Cleveland, TN. Send all materials for publication to Editorial Department; PO Box 2910, Cleveland, TN 37320-2910; email: editorial@cogop.org; fax: (423) 559-5151. For a free subscription, email www@cogop.org, visit whitewingmessenger.net, or call (423) 559-5540. Donations for the White Wing Messenger may be sent to the above address. All Scripture references are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated. POSTMASTER: Send address change to White Wing Messenger, PO Box 2910, Cleveland, TN 37320-2910. Please submit all material to the White Wing Messenger; Managing Editor; PO Box 2910; Cleveland, TN 37320-2910; phone (423) 559-5320; email us at editorial@cogop.org.

FEATURES

- 6** Christmas Stories: Cuba and Mexico
- 8** Christmas Stories: Zimbabwe
- 9** Christmas Stories: Samoan Islands and Philippines
- 10** Christmas Stories: North America
- 12** Christmas Stories: Germany
- 16** Faith at Christmas
Leadership Development and Discipleship
- 18** We Need the Prince of Peace
DeWayne Hamby
- 20** Christmas Stories: Reconciling the World to Christ
Marsha Robinson
- 26** The Gift of New Life
Trilby Richie

DEPARTMENTS

- 14** Global Ministries: Christmas Traditions Around the World
- 22** Accredited Ministry Development: A Tennessee COGOP Family Christmas
Carimet Sidney
- 24** Children's Ministries: Finishing the Commitment in West Africa
- 28** Leadership Development and Discipleship: The Battle Rages
Devon Blanton, DRE

COLUMNS

- 4** Facing Forward:
Facing Forward with Jesus,
the Light of the World
Bishop Clayton Martin, DMin
- 5** Connections
- 30** In His Presence
- 31** Messages: My Favorite Things about Christmas
Marsha Robinson

Visit us online—whitewingmessenger.net

The White Wing Messenger is a member of the Evangelical Press Association



FACING FORWARD

Facing Forward with Jesus, the Light of the World

In various places all around the world during the Christmas season, there is a festive atmosphere with food, giving of gifts, merrymaking, music, singing, dancing, and bright displays of different types, styles, and colors of lights. This Christmas, let us be reminded of the fact that Jesus Christ is the great Light that has come into the world, bringing the good news of God's salvation to every person. The Bible tells us that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2 NIV).



Bishop Clayton Martin, DMin
Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean Islands
General Presbyter

The life of Christ serves as a light to all people. "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11). John tells the purpose of Jesus coming to earth as a human: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). Jesus, the Son of God, is described as "the true light that gives light to everyone" (John 1:9). While on earth, Jesus made the claim that he is the exclusive source of spiritual light that is available to humankind. He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

John continues to focus on the theme of light and darkness throughout his gospel. In John 8:12, Jesus proclaims to the people, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life" (NLT). John 1:5 says the darkness "has not overcome" the Light because evil cannot overpower Jesus Christ, who states, "I have come into the world as a light,

so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46 NIV).

Christians have passed from darkness into light (Ephesians 5:8). Everyone who accepts Jesus as the true Light should endeavor to walk in the light. He commands us to be "lights" as well. In Matthew 5:14, we see believers being shown as the light who should reflect the Light of Christ so that all can see it in us. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew

5:16). The Light is manifested to others by the good deeds we do in faith. The Light we have is not to be covered, but is to be on display for all to see and benefit from, so that they, too, may leave the darkness and come into the Light. Let us, the followers of Jesus, seek to reflect the Light of Life to the unbelievers, seeking "to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18).

The world is darkened by evil. The brilliance of Christ's life and truth can shine like a light into the darkness of this world. "For God, who said, 'Let there be light when there was darkness,' has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6 NLT). Let us share the good news that people do not have to live in darkness; but by believing on Jesus, everyone can have their lives transformed as they make the choice to come out of darkness into the marvelous Light. Together, as we go forward, we can sing, "Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory."

CONNECTIONS

RESCUED from Religious Quagmire

This testimony is written to reveal a modern-day example of God's benevolence to an undeserving person. I do hope that the glory of God's mercy will be his and his alone.

I grew up as a staunch Muslim. My devotion to the teachings of the Islamic prophet was second to none. Typically, my day started off with a dash to the Islamic school in the early hours of the day to read, study, and memorize the Qu'ran. That devotion came first on a daily basis before I was permitted to attend a secular, government-owned school. I must submit



that how I performed in school was inconsequential compared to my attainments in the former.

Naturally, to please my mother, I advanced in my commitment to Islam and logged a substantial portion of the Qu'ran in my memory. An eventful graduation ceremony was conducted for me when I completed the reading of the Qu'ran from cover to cover. My excited dad bought a medium-sized ram for the august occasion. The ram's blood was shed for me. This was followed by intensive qur'anic recitations. The senior cleric at the school laid his hands on me and I was possessed with the spirit of Islam.

Thereafter, I was systematically introduced to extra-qur'anic books—literally another phase of Islam. To further prepare myself to advance the course of Islam, I joined a gang of fighters where I learned how to give and receive punches. I must confess that I became very vocal about Islam, preaching Islamic doctrines to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. My default stance against Christians and their beliefs was always confrontational. At that time, I "hated" Christ and preached against him passionately to whoever lent me his or her ears!

While I was in my element doing my utmost—I did all that and much more which time and discretion won't permit me to put in black and white—I contracted a devastating disease that kept me so bedridden that I lost my physical mobility and had to be carried helter-skelter and from pillar to post without any respite.

To make matters worse, I was fast becoming a skeleton overlaid with flesh. One time, I was unable to eat or drink for three days due to a protracted nausea that would not subside. I was carried to the hospital without remediation. After that, an herbalist was consulted, and he honored my foster mother's invitation to come to the house to demonstrate his craft, which he did, but all to no avail. A verbal altercation erupted when I bluntly

Continue on page 17



Cuba: Unveiling the True *Spirit of Christmas*

In the bustling streets of Cuba, Christmas holds a special place in the hearts of families, churches, and communities. While the true meaning of this joyous occasion may have been obscured over the years, the spirit of unity and celebration remains deeply ingrained in Cuban culture.

A Cuban Christmas is a time for families to come together and share a meal. The table is adorned with a feast of traditional Creole dishes, including *Moros y Cristianos* (literally, Moors and Christians, a Cuban version of black beans and rice), corn tamales, flavorful meats, yucca with garlic *mojito*, and crispy plantain *tostones*. As the family gathers around the table, the focus is not on abundance, but on the delicious flavors and the joy of being together.

For Christians, Christmas holds a deeper significance. The Christian churches are transformed into enchanting spaces, adorned with garlands and a resplendent cross. The nativity scene, complete with the stable, serves as a reminder of the humble birth of Jesus Christ. The choir fills the air with melodious voices, and the children, dressed in vibrant costumes, bring the Christmas story to life. The play of lights adds a touch of magic to the atmosphere, while the message of love and hope resonates with all who attend.

However, it hasn't always been this way. In the 1960s, Christmas celebrations in Cuba were not as joyous as they should have been. It was only in 1998 that Christmas was officially recognized as a holiday, allowing workers to have a day off to celebrate this momentous occasion. The declaration marked a turning point in the history of Cuba, differentiating its culture from others around the world.

For many Cubans, Christmas is a time of reflection and reconciliation. Memories of bustling homes filled with loved ones preparing for the much-anticipated dinner still linger. Children, even those living far away, plan their trips well in advance to ensure they do not miss out on this important family gathering.



As the years go by, Christmas customs evolve. For some, the most cherished memories revolve around the gathering of cousins, regardless of age differences, and the joyous reunion of extended family. The strumming of a guitar by Uncle Pepe creates a harmonious backdrop, while the melodic voices of family members singing together fill the room with warmth and happiness.

As individuals grow older, their involvement in church activities deepens. Teenagers, on the cusp of adulthood, participate in vigils organized by the national youth board. These gatherings, held in iconic locations, become transformative experiences. For some, it is during these vigils that they embrace their faith, symbolized by water baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The *Majagua*, a sacred place, becomes the stage where Christmas finds its true meaning. The significance of the birth of a new creature and the joy it brings is not confined to a single day but becomes a year-round celebration of faith.



Through the way Cubans celebrate Christmas, the world can catch a glimpse of their culture and values. Unity is a core principle that resonates deeply with the Cuban people. Neighbors become an integral part of the festivities, sharing not only a plate of food but also their precious time. The prodigal son returns home, seeking reconciliation with his family and with God. The message of repentance and love permeates the air, reminding everyone of the importance of forgiveness and second chances.

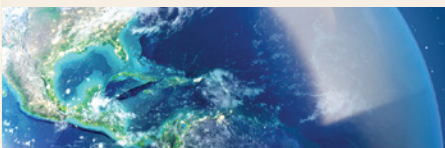
However, there are challenges to be faced. The true meaning of Christmas often gets lost in the midst of parties, revelry, and even worship of false gods during the "Mass of the Rooster" celebrations. It falls upon the church to convey the good news to those who celebrate in ignorance, offering an alternative path filled with love, hope, and redemption.

As Cubans continue to celebrate Christmas, they are reminded of their responsibility to share the true message

of the season. The Christmas scene serves as a constant reminder that the good news should be preached not just once a year, but in every aspect of life. The challenges faced in organizing celebrations in limited spaces only fuel the determination to spread the Christmas spirit throughout the year. The identity of Christmas is not just a vacation for teachers, but a time to reflect on the birth of Jesus and the impact it has on individuals and their families.

So, if you ever find yourself in Cuba during Christmas, be prepared to witness a celebration that goes beyond the decorations and feasts. Embrace the unity, the joy, and the unwavering faith that define a Cuban Christmas. Experience the transformation that takes place when a humble stable in Bethlehem becomes the focal point of celebration, reminding us all of the true meaning of Christmas.

—Elianays Corrales
Cuba



Mexico: *Las Posadas* and the Three Wise Men

Christmas is important to my family and my church. It is observed with great expectations and careful plans for the occasion. A special celebration is prepared in our church so that family and friends can attend on Christmas Day and receive the testimony and story of the birth of Jesus, our Savior.

In my native country, depending on a person's age, the expectations for Christmas are different. For children, the Christmas celebration actually ends on January 6 with the commemoration of the arrival of the Three Wise Men. On this day, they will eagerly get up early to find the gifts they asked for next to the nativity scene or the Christmas tree. This is, of course, because they have behaved very well throughout the year. For adults, it is a time of meetings and celebrations that begin on December 16 with *Las Posadas* (a word that means *inns* or *lodging*), a time when family and friends re-enact the journey of Mary and Joseph and gather in different homes where *posada* and welcome songs (carols) are sung to enter the house. Once inside,

everything that has been prepared—decorations, music, and food—is shared with the guests. When December 24 arrives, after attending Christmas Eve service at church, the whole family meets for an evening of communion to share the food prepared especially for this occasion. It may be a turkey, red mole, and traditional drinks such as punches or some drink characteristic of the family

While our cultural traditions differ, we can learn from one another. These few traditions that have been shared demonstrate that Christmas is a celebration where the family gathers and shares with friends and with neighbors. We share the joy and harmony of the season that help to build a healthy community of camaraderie that is very contagious. At the same time, we communicate with great seriousness the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and look forward to celebrating his arrival each year.

—Sixto Ramírez
Communications Graphic Designer



A Zimbabwe Christmas

In Zimbabwe, Christianity's many sectors make it the most dominant religion in the nation, with up to 90% of the population claiming faith in Jesus. While Christians and non-Christians commemorate Christmas, it is especially important to my family and church, since it is the time we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christmas is a time for family get-togethers—to organize and throw Christmas parties or visit parents and grandparents in the rural areas to give them gifts and groceries. Children like this day because parents buy new shoes and clothes for them. Most people slaughter cattle, goats, and chickens for feasting. (Chicken is considered a special treat since it is so expensive.) Some families will rent powerful PA systems and disco lights to enjoy loud music and dancing throughout the days and nights of the holiday season. On Christmas Day, we attend a church service for an hour and half in the morning. The pastor usually teaches on the importance of this day—the birth of Jesus—and we sing Christmas carols before going back to our homes to celebrate with friends and family. It has become a fixed cultural day for all Zimbabwe, and the people plan for months in preparation for it.

One of the favorite traditions in Zimbabwe is to dress up on Christmas Day. At church and the family gatherings that follow, everyone is excited to show off their special attire. My wardrobe will consist of my best suit, while women like to sport colorful African styles. The children prefer modern clothing with top-notch labels like Michael Jordan sneakers, Polo, Gucci, and Chino pants.

Zimbabweans value family unity and extended family connections. Since our grandparents stay at home instead of in nursing homes, the Christmas gathering literally includes all family members. And because Christmas and New Year's Day are public holidays that occur in the same week as the ending and beginning of the year, it is a time for us to hold family meetings and reflect on the year that is passing and talk of family plans for the coming year.

With the value we place on unity and family connection, it is also important for us in Zimbabwe to keep good relationships with our neighbors. During this festive season, we take the opportunity to give to the less privileged and needy in our communities. In this way we are spreading the love and joy that Christmas brings.

—Rev. Simbarashe Mandla
COGOP Zimbabwe Field Secretary



Samoan Islands: Happy Birthday, Jesus!

"Do you celebrate Christmas?" seems like a strange question to me. My answer is a resounding "Yes!" My family and I celebrate Christmas! We celebrate the birthday of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, on Christmas. If we celebrate the birthdays of our loved ones because their lives have brought us joy and love, how much more should we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord?

Being a Christian has shaped how we celebrate Christmas in the Samoan Islands. The season is filled with family gatherings, festive meals, united efforts in decorating and making preparations, Christmas songs and carols, community Christmas events, a wide area of light displays, and charitable acts and gift giving. Of course, attending Christmas Eve church service is a highlight. All of this is done in honor and acknowledgement of the glorious event of Christ's birth!

For my brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a time to celebrate! Luke 2:10-11 (NIV) states, "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.'" The birth of our Lord is a time of great joy and good news to all people! Christmas is that time to rejoice in the hope and redemption that Jesus brings to all of us!

As you gather with your loved ones, I wish you all a merry Christmas. Enjoy the blessings Messiah brings!

—Nonito Que
Samoan Islands National Bishop

Philippines: The Longest Christmas Celebration

Christmas is an important day, and I celebrate it for several reasons. First, it is a family tradition that has been around even before I came to know the Lord personally, and its observance has continued with some adjustment to align with Protestant practice. Second, even from my early age, being raised a Catholic, we saw the celebration of Christmas as having biblical significance and felt that Christians are supposed to commemorate the birth of its Founder. Although the death and resurrection of Jesus is the large part of the message of the gospel, it was necessary for him to be born first for the Incarnation to be a reality. Lastly, on the practical or relational level, Christmas gives the family a chance to nourish our relationship when we are deliberate in spending time together and visiting our loved ones during this season.

Filipino observance of Christmas is possibly the longest of any culture. We begin our Christmas season, signaled by the singing or playing of Christmas carols, once the "ber" months start, i.e., September. The season ends after the feast of the Three Kings in January. Catholics in the Philippines still observe the *Simbang Gabi* (Evening Mass), which is a series of nine masses or services that actually occur early in the morning around 4:30 a.m. Some Evangelicals and born-again Christians adopted their own version of *Simbang Gabi*. It usually begins on December 16 and goes through December 24, followed by a mass or service on Christmas Day. Many people, especially Catholics, believe that you will be blessed, or prayers will be granted, if you complete the nine days of *Simbang Gabi*.

While Christmas is celebrated in different ways around the world, may we as Christians remember that the focus is on the Incarnation. May you enjoy the blessings of God's love and peace as you gather with family and friends. And from the Philippines, "Maligayang Pasko at Manigong Bagong Taon!" (Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!)

—Rogelio Justiniano
Philippine Islands National Bishop



North America: Food, Family, and the Baby Jesus

I grew up in a twice-broken broken home. My parents divorced when I was nine, and then my mom and stepfather divorced during my junior year of high school. For us, holidays would often get distorted by the chaos of our lives. However, when things were going well, Christmas brought much excitement and anticipation. As a young child, I remember anxiously waiting for the arrival of Santa Claus—trying to stay up all night with my siblings and wondering what goodies we would find under the tree on Christmas morning. The tree, with its lights and colorful decorations, was probably the focal point of our celebration since we seldom attended church. While our focus was on what we would receive from Santa, we did learn the art of giving as well, and we grew up appreciating the “magic” of the season. When my mom married my stepfather (who happened to be British), we would have a special Christmas dinner complete with Yorkshire pudding (which is not a pudding and which I never acquired a taste for) and some kind of Christmas dessert that would contain a coin for some lucky person to find. Although we were a dysfunctional family in many ways, Christmas was a special time. And even though we were not a religious family, the underlying message of Christmas was heard through the carols and occasional church programs we attended. When I accepted Christ as my Savior at age 15, I made it a point to try and share the Christmas story with my family as part of our celebration.

After I was married, and especially after we had children, it was important to me that we develop some of our own traditions and memories. Decorating the Christmas tree was a family event. There were ornaments from family vacations or “field trips” to unusual places, some from family members or special friends, and some were priceless treasures made by my own boys. This is something I have missed since my children have grown up and moved out on their own. Decorating the tree always sparked sweet moments of nostalgia as we reminisced on memories we made. We worked together to put up lights and other décor as well. The end result brought awe and wonder, and the final touch—setting out the nativity—seemed to keep our focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

Reading or quoting the Christmas story from memory was (and still is) reserved for Christmas morning, but we also had two special children’s books we would read to our boys: *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and *Santa, Are You for Real?* by Harold Myra. We wanted to help our children recognize the great gift God sent to us in Jesus. At the same time, we wanted to teach them the beauty of giving, especially sacrificial and secret giving, while keeping some “magic” and wonder in the Christmas season.

Reflecting on Christmas has stirred some long-forgotten memories. My dad was in the Navy and was stationed on the U.S.S. Enterprise. During Christmas, if the ship was in dock, we would get to go on board for a family Christmas celebration. While not a typical





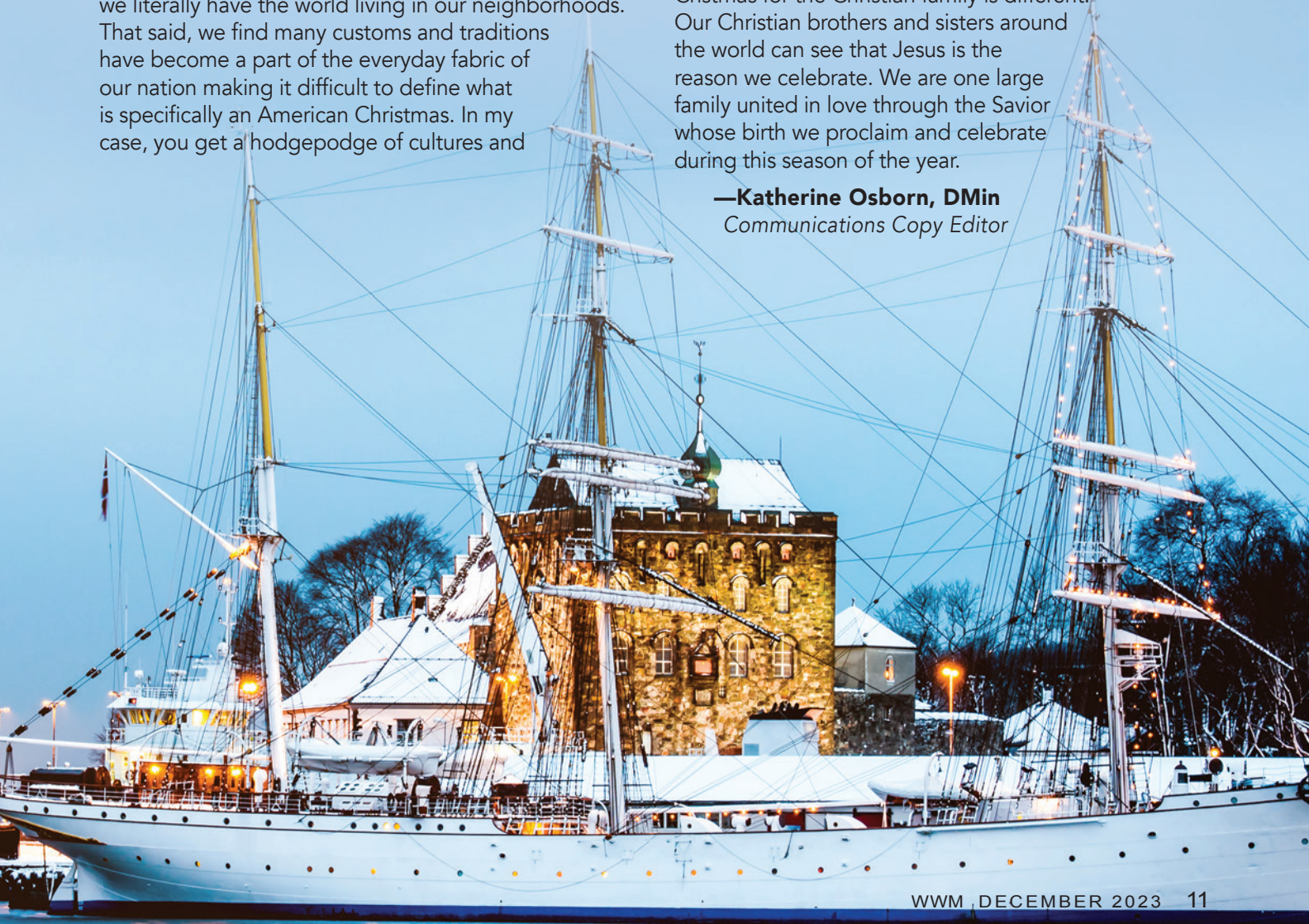
KATHERINE OSBORN, DMin | EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT COMMUNICATIONS

tradition, this was an important part of my early Christmas memories. I still remember the beautiful Christmas tree on the ship and receiving a gift from Santa; one year it was a cheerful jack-in-the-box. Later as we got older, a favorite tradition was doing jigsaw puzzles during the Christmas holiday. This may seem trivial to some, but with our lives often in tumult, holiday puzzles created relaxing space to enjoy one another's company as a family. This is one tradition that we have carried on with our family.

Traditions change over time. Today's world is interconnected in so many ways. Not only do we have access to information and people via the internet, but we literally have the world living in our neighborhoods. That said, we find many customs and traditions have become a part of the everyday fabric of our nation making it difficult to define what is specifically an American Christmas. In my case, you get a hodgepodge of cultures and

traditions—not only because of my own heritage as Finnish/German but also through marrying a Filipino American and having been surrounded by friends from many diverse cultures. You might find us eating Filipino lumpia, Finnish gingerbread cookies (my grandma made the best), German stollen (if I can find a good baker), or Mexican tamales at a Christmas celebration. While we still eat our traditional holiday foods and sometimes authentic or modified versions of ethnic favorites, we all enjoy the fellowship that comes with sharing a meal together. This is especially true when we gather as a Christian family. And though the Western world may promote individualism and materialism, Christmas for the Christian family is different. Our Christian brothers and sisters around the world can see that Jesus is the reason we celebrate. We are one large family united in love through the Savior whose birth we proclaim and celebrate during this season of the year.

—Katherine Osborn, DMin
Communications Copy Editor





Germany: Celebrating Advent

Growing up as a missionary family from the United States in Germany, Christmas was very special to us. Our Christmas, interwoven with my dad's obligations as a pastor, was uniquely fun and beautifully family oriented. In Germany, Christmas Eve is the big Christmas event where extended families eat together and exchange gifts. Living far from family, we only celebrated with my parents and siblings. We would get ready for church, and my dad would conduct the Christmas Eve service. Afterwards, we would talk and take pictures and be the last to leave the building. Since we gathered late afternoon for the special service, there was no time for my mother to cook. All German restaurants close for this holiday, so we would have Chinese food for our evening meal. We did not go out to eat much growing up, so this was always something very special. One gift was exchanged on Christmas Eve—usually a book, game, or movie—something we could do as a family. My parents would prepare the Christmas meal late that night and finish packing presents, all for us to enjoy on Christmas day. Early in the morning, we would get up and exchange gifts in our pajamas. Then later in the day, we would have an American Christmas dinner with close friends.

The Advent Sundays—the countdown and preparations for Christmas as we remember the birth of our Savior, Jesus—were always special in our house. New devotions were shared while preparing our hearts for the greatest miracle of all. In our church, Advent Sundays were (and still are) filled with Christmas programs or family Sundays, a time to invite friends and loved ones to come and see the children in the Christmas plays. Being a smaller congregation, our church family would meet together and have Christmas

dinner and gift exchanges. Growing up, Christmas to me, in both my family and at church, was all about love and joy, which is exactly how God intended Jesus to be for us all! Christmas is a time to remember the gift God gave out of love that brought joy to himself and to all of us who have been saved through Jesus Christ.

My favorite custom in Germany is the lighting of one candle each Sunday of Advent in remembrance of the coming of our King. As a candle on a wreath is lit, the light shines stronger each Sunday, filling the room and then lighting the world. It is a reminder of those who waited in expectation for the true Light, Jesus, who came at Christmas, and we now anticipate he will soon come again.

Christmas in Germany is one of the few times a year the nation returns to its roots of Christianity. People that normally don't attend church get dressed and attend with families. Christmas could possibly be the most evangelistic service that we can offer. Often, we can have multiple services on Christmas Eve because so many attend. It is a time when many attend out of custom and for the sake of family members—to be together and to share the love and joy of the season. What an impact Christmas could truly have if we all tried to be more focused on our neighbors and cities rather than on having a perfect Christmas dinner in our homes! In reflecting on this topic, I believe I personally may need to reevaluate the importance of Christmas in my life and in my home, to make it more than a story and a custom. I can use the opportunity to share what Christmas truly is about!

—Tessa Dietze

*Administrative Assistant
Wider Europe and Middle East
General Presbyterian Offices*



Germany: A Holiday Family Gathering

In Germany, Christmas is, without a doubt, the most important holiday of the year. It is a time for families to come together and share food and quality time together. While many of our traditions are similar to those of other countries and cultures, one tradition that may be different is that the kids receive their presents on Christmas Eve, after the family dinner, instead of Christmas Day in the morning. So, if you have small children around, there is usually a demand from them to get the evening dinner out of the way as quickly as possible. Christmas Eve services tend to be at 3:00 p.m. and are rather short, since people still have to go home and prepare dinner. To avoid any kind of extra rush, the traditional food for many German families on Christmas Eve is simple potato salad and wiener sausages. The fancier foods are kept for Christmas and Boxing Day. All in all, Christmas is a holiday that is all about family in Germany.

While many traditions have been around for decades, even centuries, my favorite Christmas tradition has only come about in the last eight

years. All of my extended family live in one place, except for my family and me; we live about a three-and-a-half-hour drive away from the rest. My family of four usually helps in the Christmas Eve afternoon service at our church. Then we pile into the car to drive to our extended family. The drive there is one of my favorite traditions now. It reminds me that not only am I going home to my family, but I am returning to the place where I grew up. In addition to this, I know I can take some time to slow down, I get to enjoy some days off, and the kids get to spend time with their grandparents.

The gathering of loved ones for the holiday is a reminder that Christmas in Germany is all about family. In today's day and age, we are all likely to encounter family strains and other struggles, but we still get together knowing that even with the difficulties that each person brings with them, it is somehow better for us to be together than to be apart. Christmas, with its message of love and hope, helps to stimulate and strengthen these all-important family relationships.

—Simon Röck

*Education and Translation Coordinator
COGOP Wider Europe and Middle East*

Merry Christmas! This seasonal greeting fills the air in preparation for the rapidly approaching holidays. The Christmas season is a favorite time of the year all over the world. Celebrations include special services, fellowship with family and friends, the aroma and consumption of wonderful food, and loving gift giving as we remember and rejoice in God's greatest gift to us in his own Son.

During this season, sacred and secular organizations alike see the importance of making sure that everyone is remembered. We do the same thing for our children in the Church of God of Prophecy orphanages and children's homes, as well as our missions ministries around the world through the connection of Harvest Partners and Helping Hand Ministry.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the generosity of the Macedonian churches in what he calls the grace of giving: "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. . . . [T]hey urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people" (2 Corinthians 8:2-4 NIV). In this passage, Paul reflects upon the Macedonians' self-sacrifice and giving as a means of showing the sincerity of love. They were not giving from their material abundance—in fact, they were living through desperate days—but they gave because of their love.

Through your response in love over the years, specifically this year, we have provided small gifts and meals to our children in orphanage ministries throughout the world. Your gifts are so much more than a Christmas gift; rather, you have conveyed a tangible expression of God's love placed in the hands of a child.

For many of our ministers who live in some of the most deprived nations of the world, this time of year can be challenging when limited finances prevent participation in the gift-giving aspect of Christmas, even for their own families. Through your giving and other undesignated funding, we have been able to send a small offering of \$100 to each national bishop throughout our mission network. While we realize this amount is not a significant gift, it serves as an expression of love and remembrance. Thank you for your participation in making this a reality.

The following are short reflections from four global areas that share the importance of Christmas to family, church, or culture. They highlight favorite Christmas customs and/or ways in which national/cultural celebrations enhance the power of the Christmas story, the gospel of Christ. Enjoy!

—**Catherine Payne, DMin**
Global Missions Ministries Coordinator

Christmas Celebrations in the Republic of Guinea

In Guinea, with a predominately religious (non-Christian) population estimated at 89 percent, Christmas is not widely celebrated as compared to nations with higher concentrations of Christians like Liberia, Ghana, Zimbabwe, etc.

Christmas Day in Guinea is a national holiday by law, and the government spends time and funding to decorate important public buildings and principal streets in the capital city. All government offices and banks are closed to celebrate, but some businesses choose to remain open.

What is remarkable in Guinea is how Christian churches celebrate Christmas differently than many Christian-dominated countries. It has become a tradition for all Christian churches to initiate the Christmas celebrations on December 24th with an all-night prayer and fellowship vigil just as is done on December 31st for the "watch night" service to pray in the New Year. During the night, the youth department will dramatize the events leading up to the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. On Christmas day, many churches (including ours) sponsor a party for the children after a special children's Christmas service. Many families use Christmas celebrations as a time to visit relatives and friends.

One tradition that is common here is the sharing of food with neighbors, relatives, and friends. As much as is possible, every family attempts to have a very nice dish prepared for the day and new clothes for their children.

In Guinea, the non-Christian religious people will not celebrate Christmas Day, but at night they flood the streets, restaurants, bars, hotels, and other recreation centers in their own holiday-type celebrations.

—**Peter W. Koyea**
Republic of Guinea National Bishop



Christmas in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands

Growing up in Alabama, Christmas not only meant colder weather, hot cocoa, and live trees, but being in the "Bible Belt," it was celebrated by most people as a spiritual holiday honoring the birth of Jesus. Moving far away to multicultural Hawaii more than forty years ago was a culture shock. Only 38% of Hawaii's population are categorized as Protestant Christians. My Buddhist and agnostic coworkers and neighbors observe Christmas, but only as a secular, cultural celebration.

In these islands, with so much Asian influence, you are far more likely to see Santa Claus than a baby in a manger.

Traditions

t h e W o r l d

However, as Christians, we try to influence the culture as much as possible, pointing out the real reason for the season. We take the opportunity to invite our non-Christian friends to special services around



Christmas, hoping to introduce them to the Savior of the world. Utilizing outreach programs such as Operation Christmas Child (Samaritan's Purse) we have been able to reach out and partner with non-Christian private schools and organizations.

At our home, we decorate excessively for Christmas and extend the holiday as much as possible because it is the one time of year our neighbors are more receptive to hearing songs about Jesus and seeing symbols celebrating his birth. While the trees here are likely artificial, the joy is real!

—Gary Langley

Hawaii & Pacific Island Nations Area Bishop

Christmas in Nepal

It has been a while since Christmas was a public holiday in Nepal. Due to midterm examinations for most schools being held during this season, many Christian students are sadly unable to attend Christmas service even if they want to. If a holiday is granted, it will be a one-day public holiday.

Whether they understand it or not, most people in Nepal today—whether Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists—might decorate a Christmas tree in twinkling lights in commercial areas like shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants throughout the month of December to attract customers or help their businesses flourish.

There seems to be competition among some churches attempting to celebrate Christmas in a grander way beyond the small, old church building. The competition focuses on whether celebrations should be held in a party palace or in a five-star hotel. Some will spend millions of rupees, but in reality, they do not understand the true meaning of Christmas.

In the Church of God of Prophecy in Nepal, we teach

that what we eat and where we celebrate Christmas is not important; what is most important is to affirm that Christ is the CENTER of the



celebration. The question that arises for us is whether or not Christ has really been BORN in each person's heart. If so, the celebration will be important and fulfilling.

Your financial condition may be shaky, but you can celebrate Christmas simply, even with a small cup of black tea and biscuits. If you understand the true meaning of a Christ-centered Christmas, you, your family, and the whole church will feel the loving, living presence and wonderful blessing of the Savior even in the middle of a simple celebration. By keeping the focus on Christ, Christmas will be significantly more meaningful.

To all our beloved brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers of the Church of God of Prophecy who are scattered throughout the world, my prayer is for unity, reconciliation, success, prosperity, peace, joy, and blessings in abundance. May the Lord bless everyone abundantly.

—Gopal Lama

Nepal National Bishop

Christmas in Russia

Christmas is a very important season in our family. We celebrate Christmas at home with family and friends and at the church. Of course, when we are home, we have Christmas dinner and a time to share testimonies. We always talk about the significance of the birth of Christ, and then we give each other presents.



As a family, we celebrate Christmas in December. In Russia, Christmas break is in January because of the influence of the Orthodox Church. This means that most Russians would give gifts during the New Year's celebration. But in our family, we would get a gift on December 24th. As a child, I was always happy to get gifts earlier. And as a bonus, since we would stay up late, my parents would let me skip school if there was school the next day.

As I mentioned earlier, because of Orthodox influence, we have two Christmas services at our local church each year. The first one is a more traditional service with a Christmas orientated theme in December. In January, we have a more ceremonial service with lunch and fellowship. Since so many people are not believers, they are still willing to come to church in January to celebrate Christmas. This is always a good time to share the gospel.

—Albert Murza, MDiv

AMD Endorsement Liaison and Spirit and Life Seminary Academic Dean



Faith at Christmastime

Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24–25 KJV)

Submitted by Leadership Development and Discipleship

The first chapter of Matthew reveals the dynamic genealogy of Christ. In his genealogy we find the identity of Christ, the character of his family, and key people in his life. We also find the promise of God to Israel, through Abraham and King David. We see the hand of God weaving together with precision the people and circumstances to produce the outcome that he intended from the beginning. The end result is, God's promise is fulfilled: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given . . ." (Isaiah 9:6) to redeem all humanity.

But where there is a promise there must be a response and faith; there must be those who, through faith, carry out their role in obedience to God's promise. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Faith begins with God. However, faith can be exacting, costing reputation, privilege, and rights and so much more. Faith does not consider the circumstances; faith considers that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). God gives us reason to believe. But faith does not work without obedience. God's promises will not manifest without the proper response. We must be willing to believe and carry out God's plan.

The passage above introduces into the Christmas narrative Joseph and Mary. Joseph learns that his espoused wife is with child. In his heart he is thinking, "It's not supposed to be this way." Have you ever had those thoughts or feelings? I have. Truth be told, this can be said of much of the Christmas story. It was a season filled with deep disappointment, political chaos, financial instability, breached relationships, unexplainable occurrences, lost dream, barrenness, shame, scandal, deception, genocide, and hopelessness. Surely Zacharias and Elisabeth felt this way prior to the birth of John the Baptist. A close look reveals that the Christmas story emerges from dark and difficult times. It is, in part, why Jesus came; the world needed joy, peace, an answer to their problems—a Savior. The hope, dreams, and prayers of the Jews hung in the balance; the desire to have children delayed. It seemed that people had questions—issues—that no one could answer but Jesus. I am sure it felt this way for Joseph as well, but the angel of the Lord assures and instructs him, "Fear not"; the child is from the Holy Ghost. And despite the 400 years since hearing a fresh word from the Lord to Israel, Joseph had a working knowledge of who the Holy Ghost was. This was the only way he could

wrap his mind around it being possible for Mary to be with child without having known a man. Joseph believed God! He had to believe that God spoke to him and that his dream was not the result of eating too much. And he had to believe that the promised Messiah was due to come. Wow! He was called to parent a child that he did not have the privilege of fathering, birthed by a wife he had not yet had the pleasure to know intimately. He was to stand with her against the pressure and currents of society, to accept what was painful, and to secure what was promised by God. His faith had to have something to hook itself into. The hymn writer Roy Palmer worded it well, "My faith looks up to Thee."

The fact is, sometimes our life's journey will take us on paths that we cannot understand nor explain. The calling of God on our life does not always line up with our personal plans, desires, or expectations. It was true of Joseph, and it may be true for you. That is when we need the hope and the truth of God's promise to anchor our souls (Hebrews 6:19). Jesus is the answer, and he has plans and a purpose for us (Jeremiah 29:11). And he is able to keep us no matter the test or trial (2 Timothy 1:12). We know he loves us: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28 NASB).

The ends result of Joseph's and Mary's faith was the beginning of life abundant for all of us; Christ was born—joy came to the world, peace that passes understanding—and salvation came to mankind. Two thousand year later we are still celebrating the birth of Jesus—because Joseph and Mary had faith!

During this Christmas season, let us pause to remember God's promise. Let us remind ourselves and our loved ones of his faithfulness. Let us pray his promises over our lives and act on his Word. The world is out of control; but God, well, he is still in full control. Let us allow our faith in him to move us to obedience, not considering the cost, loss, lack, or risk. Let us remember that he who has promised is faithful (Hebrews 11:11).

Prayer Application: Lord, help me to remember the promises that you have made to me. In the midst of all the chaos happening in the world and in my life, remind me of your faithfulness in years past with the expectation of a victorious future.

RESCUED from Religious Quagmire

Continued from page 5

refused to consent to the herbalist's quest to make numerous physical incisions on my body. My stance ostensibly infuriated my family, and I was thereafter left alone.

The future for me was uncertain and bleak. The worst was anticipated. The trauma left me sleepless and alone. Just when I thought the last chapter of my existence was about to be closed, at about 2 a.m., while I was still wide awake, someone appeared to me. Sporting a glistening white robe with a red sash laid across his shoulder, he was standing about twelve feet from me. I heard a manly voice: "This is Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom the Christians are talking about." He started walking towards me authoritatively with a frown on his face (which I initially thought meant he was very displeased with me).

With every step he took, I could feel the vibration of an invisible heat permeating my entire being. There and then, he showed me my two "selves"—my dressed body lying on the bed, while my other self was tied to a tree with both hands raised. I also noticed that my other self was naked but the exact prototype of my person in looks. The more steps he took toward me, the more agitated the diabolic spirits residing within me became. I could hear a voice other than mine, muttering stuff, obviously afraid of this imposing personality standing before me!

He put forth his forefinger and touched my chest and with that, the evil entity was dislodged from me. Then the Master's countenance changed from a frown to a smile right before my eyes. He put forth his forefinger again the second time towards my face and said: "Omotayo! Repent!" With that, he dematerialized before my eyes. For a while, I could still see through his silhouette where he had been standing.

The consequence of that unanticipated visit was that I slept for more than eight hours like a baby. When I awoke, I drank a hot chocolate and ate without getting sick. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is NOW my Lord, my Savior, and my eternal devotion. Come rain, come shine! My conversion came with its resultant life-threatening persecutions, but God has kept me through thick and thin!

—Lawal Omotayo
Lagos, Nigeria



We Need the
Prince of Peace



DEWAYNE HAMBY | WINTER GARDEN, FLORIDA

DeWayne Hamby is the executive pastor of Southside COGOP in Winter Garden, Florida. He has served the Church in many capacities including *White Wing Messenger* managing editor and Assembly Chief Clerk. In 2016, he published, *Gratitude Adjustment: Finding Joy through Thankfulness* (White Wing Books). He was recently chosen as executive director of Trek Through Truth, an emerging Bible museum coming to Cleveland, Tennessee, that will tell Bible stories through hands-on, interactive exhibits.

In major cities on any given day, there are areas where homeless people sleep on the sidewalks. It is a ghastly, heartbreaking image. Seeing human beings—someone's father, son, daughter, mother—living without access to shelter or the basic necessities of life will continue to haunt you well after you drive home. If you have children in the car, it is even more difficult to explain. Troubled voices from the backseat will ask, "Don't they have family or people who love and care about them?"

Like me, you may have wondered how to address this epidemic. You might see a large, empty building and think, "We could at least offer this place to get them out of the rain. It's a shell of a building anyway, and no one lives there; what could it hurt?" An empty stadium, for instance, could house thousands with cots spread all over. Except that wouldn't work. The tension of a large group leads to aggression, theft, and assaults. Humans are unable to gather in large groups without one person wanting to take advantage of another. Why?

Because we are inherently broken. In every attempt we make to live in peace, we fail miserably, whether it's in our intimate family gatherings or entire countries in conflict with each other. Our schools, shopping malls, and even our churches have become targets of violence and aggression. It happens so often that we are not shocked when it continues to happen. The original sin of Adam and Eve, along with the first murder committed by their son Cain, continue to mark us all. This nature was seeded into our DNA. We just cannot get along.

This is the world into which Christ was born—a planet that desperately needed a lifeline, a way out of the madness. He was the child so hoped for; the fulfillment of a promise that one day there would be a history-making transformation and an entirely new way of thinking. The prophet spoke, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6 NIV).

"Prince of Peace." What a promise! A promise there would be a kingdom of peace with a princely heir to rule it. What a Savior! Everything we had ever hoped for was wrapped up in a manger, offering us the only way out of our human mess!

When we are fully aware of our own shortcomings, and when we grasp we will never measure up to anything worth mentioning, it is in that humbled state we marvel at the beauty of heaven's baby in the manger. He came to a broken world to offer wholeness. He arrived in darkness to bring light. He showed us how to counter hate with love. We celebrate the season and sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight," and "A child, a child, sleeping in the night, He will bring us goodness and light." God saw the need. He came to dwell among us, to show us a better way.

The only true peace is found in Christ. As the Babe in the manger grew and his ministry was launched, he reminded us of that. Trust in him and lean on him, even in your struggle: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace" (John 16:33). "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27).

We are limited in what we can achieve. We can try our best to come up with a way forward and still somehow wind up making it worse. We need to call on Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the Wonderful Counselor, to work through the Church of God to model love and unity for a world seeking hope.

Thou art giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blest,
Well-spring of the joy of living,
Ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our brother,
All who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other,
Lift us to the joy divine."
— Henry van Dyke (1907), "Joyful, Joyful"

MARSHA ROBINSON
MANAGING EDITOR



Throughout history, literature and folklore have been filled with heartwarming Christmas tales centered around reconciliation. These stories often depict characters who have strayed from their "true north" but find redemption. Whether it's Charles Dickens' iconic Ebenezer Scrooge or Dr. Seuss' beloved Grinch, Christmas narratives highlight how even the most hardened hearts can be softened through love and kindness.

Christmas holds a special place in the hearts of many people around the world. It is celebrated everywhere as a season marked by joy, love, and the spirit of giving. For most cultures, it has retained its deep Christian roots and significance. Thus, Christmas has also become a time for individuals to reflect on their own lives and to engage in acts of kindness towards others. Christmas themes in literature, movies, and songs can serve as powerful reminders and not-so-subtle nudges that Christians should exhibit kindness and fully operate in the ministry of reconciliation during this season.

Calling others to be reconciled to God goes beyond a one-time experience; reconciliation is about an ongoing relationship. The ministry of reconciliation involves intentionally seeking to help people repair relationships and let God heal wounds caused by past actions or misunderstandings. Christmas stories remind us that true reconciliation

Christmas Stories: Reconciling the World to Christ



requires effort and empathy. The themes of these stories also show that reconciliation can come in unexpected ways or from unlikely sources. Even people who believe they are irredeemable often find themselves on a journey towards transformation when they encounter compassion and generosity. Christmas tales often emphasize how reaching out in kindness can lead to personal redemption for even the most lost souls.

Christmas stories can also provide profound insight into the ministry of reconciliation. As we look closer at these traditional narratives, we see various examples of characters who experience transformation through selfless deeds during Christmastime. Christmas sagas, steeped in tradition and folklore, unveil a truth that transcends time and culture. If we are listening, they beckon us to embrace the ministry of reconciliation; for along with the preaching of the good news, selfless acts of service extend solace and healing to a hurting world.

A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, tells of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man consumed by bitterness and greed. As he slumbers on Christmas Eve, he is visited in his dreams by three persons who guide him through his past, present, and future. Witnessing his callousness and indifference towards others opens Scrooge's eyes to the pain he has inflicted upon those around him. Overwhelmed with remorse and regret, he awakens on Christmas morning with a newfound sense of purpose—to right his wrongs and spread joy in the world. Through various acts of kindness—providing financial support to those in need, mending broken relationships—Scrooge finds redemption not only for himself but also for those whose lives he has touched.

Conversely, in Hans Christian Andersen's **The Little Match Girl**, we are challenged to not overlook others in need of kindness. The story tells of a young girl shivering in the bitter cold as she tries to sell matches during the holidays. She is ignored by passersby who are too engrossed in their own celebrations. The heartbreaking result of their indifference is that she dies. It is a harsh reminder, reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan, of how that story would have ended without the intervention of one compassionate man. We must not disregard people in need at Christmastime.

In **It's a Wonderful Life**, George Bailey learns the true value of his life through an angel's intervention. His seemingly small, selfless actions have touched countless others, fostering hope and love within

his community. This should tell us that even small gestures can have a ripple effect. In today's world, marked by division and strife, the Holy Spirit will use us to bring peace as we embody the Spirit of Christ through acts of kindness towards others. We become God's agents of reconciliation in our communities.

Through the years, these stories have served as powerful lessons about the transformative power of compassion, and the theme of reconciliation is woven through many of them. Scrooge is reconciled in his present relationships by being confronted with his past and future. George Bailey is reconciled in himself as to his intense value as an individual who has touched his community. Even the Grinch, whose heart is touched by the kindness of a young child, is reconciled with his neighbors. These and other tales emphasize that no one is beyond redemption. Through acts of kindness and generosity, characters who were once bitter and cold are able to find forgiveness, love, and a renewed sense of purpose. Each one of us has the capacity for change and growth. After all, Jesus came to give new life to everyone!

Such stories should goad us to live the life of love that reconciles the world to Christ. As we enter into the cacophony and a myriad of traditions at Christmas, as we revisit the stories we have grown to love, we must always return to the main story—the true story—of Jesus Christ. The truth is Christmas is a celebration of the birth of God's one and only Son, sent to reconcile us to God and bring us love, hope, and peace. His story is filled with adventure and wonder: the miraculous, the difficult, a journey, a baby, a manger, a sky filled with angels, lowly shepherds, majestic kings, a mysterious star, ancient promises fulfilled.

Jesus went on in his story to live a life that taught us to be kind, to spread love, to reach out, and to reconcile the world to God. What better time to do those things than during this special season? It is often through seemingly random acts of kindness that people are touched and become receptive to the gospel.

Ultimately, timeless Christmas stories illuminate the beauty of reconciliation. They inspire us to seek it for ourselves and those around us. Through intentional acts rooted in love and ignited by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can create for those who hear the true story a new, more loving Christmas season—one in which everyone who comes to the table may be reconciled to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

A Tennessee COGOP Family Christmas

CARIMET SIDNEY | AMD/SLS ADMISSIONS AND MARKETING MANAGER

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"¹

A Tennessee Church of God of Prophecy Christmas begins at church. Our music worship minister directs our church choir in a spectacular program for all the families to enjoy. We use these special events to bring reflection and gratitude for the birth of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord! Church music might begin with more traditional and familiar Christmas songs. Everyone in the church is invited to participate in the special programs, including the children with the congregational-led songs. A Christmas cantata, usually narrated by a speaker, presents a prepared listing of songs for the adult choir, soloists, and children's choir.

Every aspect of the program focuses on the birth of our Lord. Christmas is the season for reflection on prophecies fulfilled beginning with the virgin birth, life of Jesus, crucifixion, and

resurrection. Our pastor's role may include reading Luke 2:1–40 to best tell the story of the birth of Jesus. Here are some excerpts:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. . . . And Joseph also went up from Galilee, . . . unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; . . . To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. . . . And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1, 4–5, 7)

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. . . . And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. . . . (2:8, 10–11)

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. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a

manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. (2:15–17)

And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (2:21)

And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; . . . And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. . . . Then took he him [Jesus] up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. (2:22, 25, 28–32)

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. (2:34–35)

And there was one Anna, a prophetess. . . . And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (2:36–37)

And . . . they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. (2:39–40)

Christmas COGOP programs are spectacular events that bring families together. It is a time for families to be encouraged, to build their faith, show charity with giving, and to pray for one another. In the Bible, we are encouraged to “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

As I reflect on my Church of God of Prophecy family memories of Christmas, my gratitude goes out to the ministers for sharing the Christmas story and for all the planning, rehearsals, and preparation that make the Christmas events for church services special.

Our church family has faced good times, hardships, and the loss of loved ones together.

The holiday season provides us the opportunity to share our recollections of people and events. Music and songs bring back memories, especially with traditional congregational songs. One special song that my parents have enjoyed is “Trust and Obey.” In the Bible, we are instructed, “Trust in him: ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah” (Psalms 62:8).

A Tennessee COGOP Christmas is an opportunity for the church members to spend time preparing favorite holiday recipes. Immediately following the church cantata, the congregation may be invited to spend time in the fellowship hall or gymnasium where they can enjoy these savory snacks as they fellowship with one another.

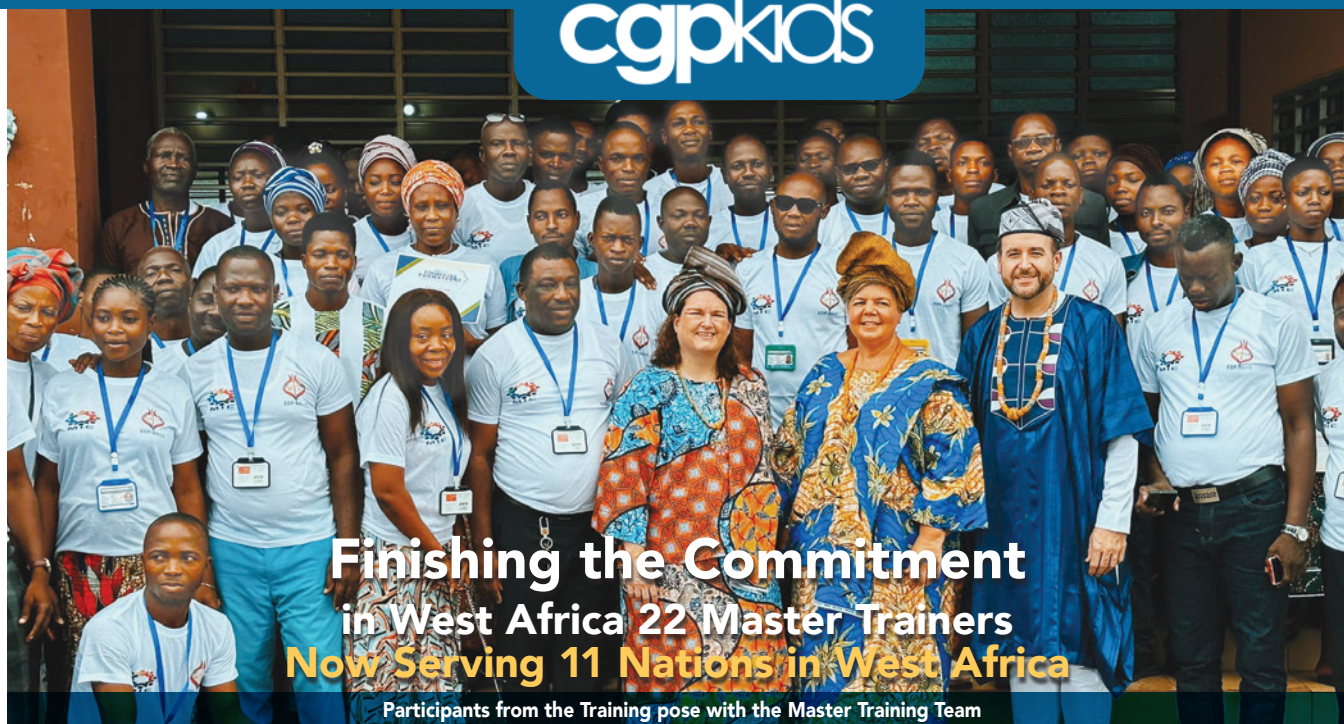
The Christmas season is a good time for all the cooks in the church to dust off their cookbooks in search of those special seasonal favorites. We sometimes spend hours in the kitchen cooking and baking so we can share some savory snacks at holiday gatherings (like the church cantata) or as folks pay a visit to our home. We deliver packages of homemade holiday cookies to widows and elderly couples. My parents are generous with their time to visit on Sunday afternoons with the elderly who can no longer attend church. We have helped them decorate their homes with their own Christmas decorations. Mom will play the piano and Daddy will lead the singing of hymns from our songbooks, especially Christmas songs. Another family tradition has been to mail out Christmas cards to all our family and friends. We also bring Christmas cards to church to put in a basket for families to pick up.

At home after Christmas dinner, our family gathers in the living room where one of my uncles will lead us in prayer, and then he reads the Christmas story from Luke 2:1–40. It seems a fitting way to end our Christmas Day celebration.

My wish is for you to spend time with your family reading the Christmas story. It is found in Matthew (chapters 1 and 2) and Luke 2. Jesus is the reason for the season!

From my family to yours, we wish you a merry Christmas!

¹ Lyrics by Charles Wesley (1739); revised by George Whitefield (1758) and later Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady (1782).



Finishing the Commitment in West Africa 22 Master Trainers Now Serving 11 Nations in West Africa

Participants from the Training pose with the Master Training Team

In 2017, the first French-speaking Institute of Children's Ministry in Africa was held at the local church and national office of the Church of God of Prophecy in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. Nine nations participated, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. The historic training was sponsored through a partnership with the churches of the state of Tennessee.

Following that institute and realizing the strategic importance of West Africa for gospel advancement, the vision was birthed to host four more institutes for these nine nations. The purpose was for the further development of these leaders and for further impact throughout the region. The state of Tennessee committed to raising the necessary funding for these events, which ultimately would cost more than \$170,000.00 to accomplish the goal.

In subsequent years, trainings were held in Togo (2018), Guinea Conakry (2019), Cote d'Ivoire (2022), and Benin (2023). It was at the third Institute in Guinea-Conakry that the Holy Spirit began to refine the original vision for training these leaders. The International Team began to pray and dialogue with the national bishops about how best to guide the remaining trainings so that the leaders of West Africa were not only developed as leaders but were equipped to multiply themselves throughout the area and beyond. The vision was enlarged to include offering a Train the Trainers event in 2022, in which a small group of capable individuals were taught the essentials of training and would then lead the fifth and final training in 2023.

In pursuit of fulfilling this new vision, International Children's Ministries developed a new curriculum called

Train the Trainers, which was first presented in 2022 to a select group of 22 potential trainers. For four days, individuals participated in this intense training experience that taught them how to conduct needs assessments, modeled various training methods when teaching adults, and enhanced their skills and presentation techniques. Participants were also taught elements of effective training design, including the use of icebreakers, alternatives to lectures, and the development of quality visual aids. They also identified their preferred learning styles, learned the basics of a positive learning environment, discussed dynamic delivery techniques, and learned how to address challenges when training others.

Each trainee also presented a 10-minute class to the entire group on the final day. They were critiqued by the International Children's Ministries training team and their peers based on seven categories of effective training that were presented throughout the week.

In addition to the development and offering of Train the Trainers, International Children's Ministries worked with the World Language Department of the International Offices to translate its 300-page Trainer's Notebook into the French language. The notebook includes 30 core lessons that can be taught by our network in multiple categories of ministry, such as creative teaching, classroom management, evangelism, and discipleship. Each lesson includes a teaching manuscript, a student guide, and learning activities.

September 14-17, 2023, eight years after the initial commitment was made to West Africa, International Children's Ministries hosted our fifth and final training event in the series. Those who graduated from the Train the Trainers in Cote d'Ivoire were the principal instructors



for this event. Over the four-day Institute, more than 260 children's ministers and pastors from throughout the host nation of Benin participated in 19 workshops covering a wide variety of topics.

While at the Institute, the Holy Spirit began to speak to Dr. Shaun McKinley, international director of Children's Ministries, about the need for a training coordinator and liaison who could shepherd the work in the coming year and provide support, as well as accountability, to these master trainers. As he began to share the vision with the International Team and national bishops, a leader emerged who agreed to serve in this new role. Additionally, by the end of the trip, the funding for a monthly allotment for this liaison was also offered.

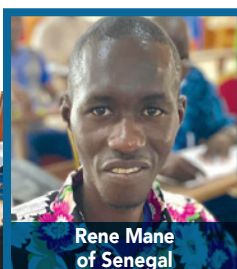
At the conclusion of the event, the announcement was made that Pastor Setin Minwalo Aubed of Cote d'Ivoire had been selected to serve as our first-ever training liaison. "When our training team and national overseers began to discuss how best to ensure that the investment we've made in developing training in West Africa is not only sustained but grows in the future, we agreed that someone needed to be selected to serve as a training liaison for our ministry," Dr. McKinley told the audience. "After prayer and dialogue," he continued, "the team was unanimous that

God's hand was on Setin to serve in this vital connection for accountability, reporting, and resourcing."

"It has been a joy to witness Setin's passion, anointing, and calling throughout this five-year commitment," said KidServe Coordinator Michelle Brooks-Young during the announcement. "There is no doubt that he will lead this area of Africa to reach the harvest of children that is so abundant around them." Setin will also continue to serve as pastor of the Danane Church of God of Prophecy, which is located in the western part of the Cote d'Ivoire, where he has served for six years.

International Children's Ministries is excited to see the work in West Africa thrive and continue to receive weekly reports of what the trainers are doing throughout their nations. Thank you to our generous donors, primarily the state of Tennessee, but also other congregations and children's ministries, who have partnered to help us keep our five-year commitment to West Africa. We are also grateful for the trainers who have sown into this fertile soil—Kim Batson, Michelle Brooks-Young, Kathryn Creasy, Gladys Hawkins, and Shaun McKinley.

If you would like to help support the work in West Africa, please visit cogop.org/children to give online or contact cgpkids@cogop.org to learn about the many possibilities to partner with us.





I was raised by godly parents. We lived in one house all my growing-up years. I attended a great church, went to a Christian school, and was surrounded by good people, teachers, musicians, and the most caring pastors. I had every advantage of good teaching and guidance.

Having such blessings, how did things go so wrong? I believe it began when we moved away from my childhood home. When my father began to pastor his first church, my life changed in multiple ways. I began to work two jobs and attend college classes. I met many new people and saw different ways of living. I soon began to stray from my Christian upbringing. The temptations of the world took me further and further away from a godly life. On the outside, my life looked "Christian." I attended church, played the piano for services, and helped my mother teach the children. But my inner life was moving in the wrong

direction. At one point, I was so aimless that I considered marrying a man with three very young children. Their mother had died, and the young father desperately needed a wife for himself and a mother for his children. I fell in love with those children and was looking for something to fill the emptiness I felt inside, but my father intervened. He spoke to the young man and told him I was not the person for him. My father also offered to pray for God to bring him just the right person to love him and his children. In just a few months, God did just that!

For a while, I worked at "the happiest place on earth"—you know, the Orlando theme park with a certain mouse as a mascot. There, I was introduced to coworkers from other cultures. They seemed like world travelers, and their ways were exciting to me. Some of the men I worked with had come to the United States to find American wives to take back



A Testimony

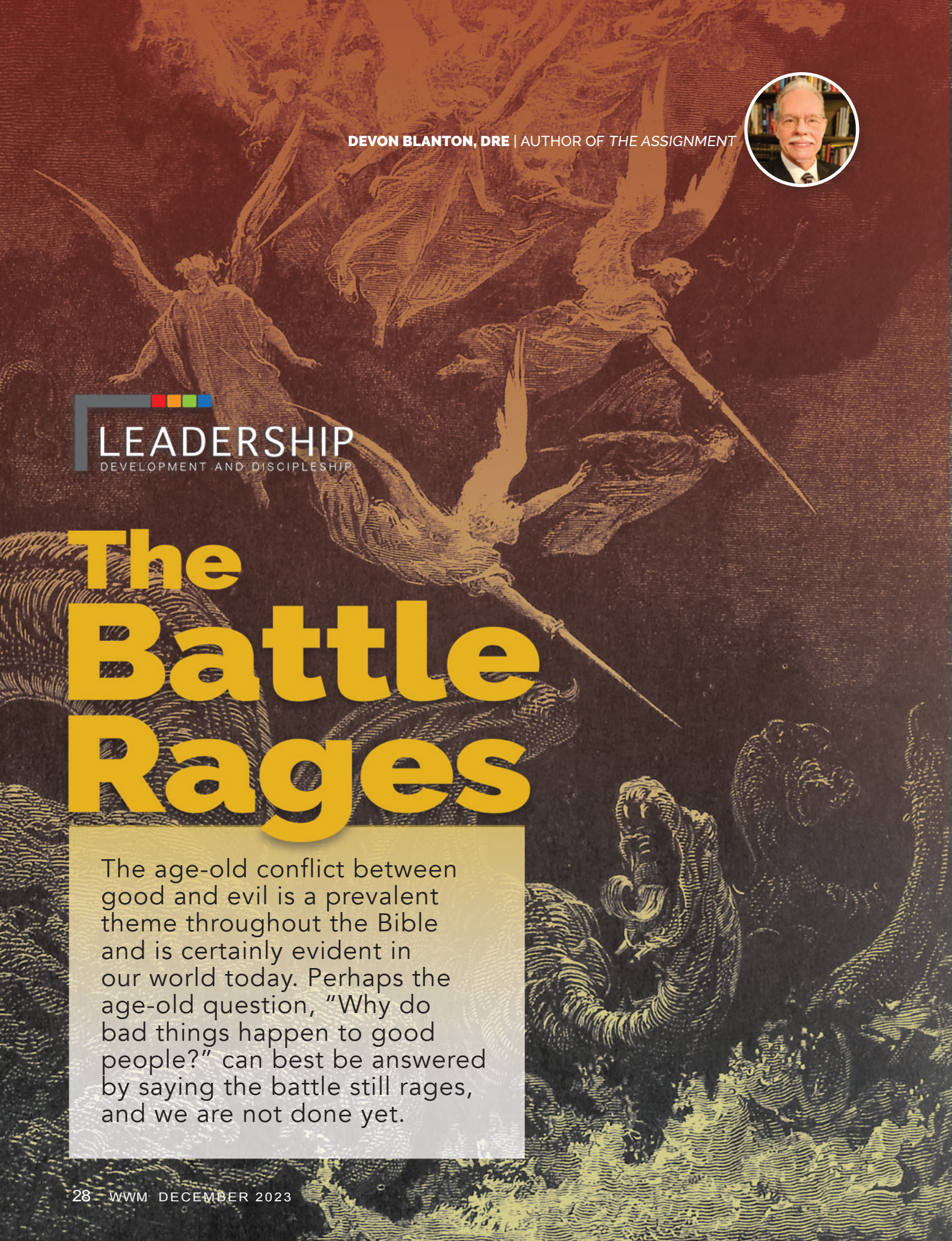
TRILBY E. RICHIE | HUDSON, FLORIDA

to their countries. Even though I was not living for the Lord, God rescued me. He gave me the wisdom not to go down that road. It would have ended with heartache and separation from my family. Although my life was filled with parties, I still attended church every Sunday, still played the piano, and still helped my mother. But my heart was running hard the wrong way—away from God. My father went on to pastor three churches, and with each move, I would tell myself, “Now I’ll get my life back on track.” But by the end of the first week in a new place, I would meet new people and be invited to yet another party.

One night, I returned home from a party at the beach. I found the house filled with family. I politely said hello and quickly went to my room. I knew three things: I was in no shape to visit with them, I was worn out from the life I was living, and something had to change. Along with these thoughts, I felt

salvation knocking at the door of my heart. I said “yes” to the voice of God calling me home. I went to my parents’ room and woke my mom. I asked her to pray the “sinner’s prayer” with me. She replied in a kind voice, “You know how to do that.” I told her, “Yes, but I have faked it for so long, I need to know I’m doing it right.” So, we prayed together and my mom, with tears in her eyes, went back to bed. I spent the next hours rejoicing that the Lord is kind and merciful, and he comes looking for us when we have lost our way.

Christmas has had a special meaning for me ever since that night. I remember each year that the Baby in the manger didn’t stay a baby, but he grew and gave his life for sinners like me. Being a daughter of grace, I continue to tell others how good and faithful God is, and that with God, all things are possible.

The background of the page is a detailed, dark-toned illustration depicting a celestial battle. Several angels with large, feathered wings are shown in dynamic poses, some holding long, pointed weapons. They appear to be fighting against demonic forces, which include figures with horns and other monstrous features. The scene is set against a backdrop of swirling clouds and smoke, creating a sense of intense conflict and drama. The overall color palette is dominated by dark browns, greys, and blacks, with some highlights on the angels' wings and weapons.

DEVON BLANTON, DRE | AUTHOR OF *THE ASSIGNMENT*



The Battle Rages

The age-old conflict between good and evil is a prevalent theme throughout the Bible and is certainly evident in our world today. Perhaps the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" can best be answered by saying the battle still rages, and we are not done yet.

As believers, we are recruited through the Cross of Jesus to join the spiritual fight here on earth. Bad things *frequently* happen to soldiers, especially those in the direct line of fire. To our advantage, we are privy to the Book's last chapter. Even in difficulty, we are primed to establish salt and light where darkness initially prevailed. "Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

**We must maintain
our trust in the plan
of God and know
that our being here
is an assignment of
the highest order.**

The Scriptures reveal that God created a perfect and harmonious world (Genesis 1:31). However, evil entered the picture through the rebellion of Satan, who sought to usurp God's authority (Isaiah 14:12–15). His rebellion continues today, evidenced by the mayhem we see worldwide. This is a spiritual battle that easily supersedes the usual nation-against-nation wars that we have seen for centuries. The Apostle Paul put it in a proper perspective when he said, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12).

The cure for the world's ills is not found in psychology, better laws, moral adjustments, or financial gains. The sole solution for man's fallen nature is to be reconciled to the Father through his Son, Jesus. Despite the intensity of this earthly battle, the Scriptures provide us with an encouraging hope that righteousness will ultimately prevail. We must keep our eyes on the "prize" (Philippians 3:14).

The Bible correctly portrays humanity as inherently flawed, prone to succumb to the allure of evil (Romans 3:23). Despite our best intentions, we can find ourselves entangled in the web of sin, experiencing the internal battle between our sinful nature and the call to righteousness (Romans 7:15–20). This internal conflict underscores the human heart's universal struggle between good and evil. This encapsulates the very reason that we need a Savior. Truly, we need Jesus to lead and guide

us in living out our divine assignment.

Central to the biblical narrative is the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus dealt a decisive blow to the forces of evil (Colossians 2:15), giving his followers a distinct spiritual advantage. Because of this, we have full access to him! He conquered sin and

death, providing a means for humanity to be reconciled with the Father and experience the transformative power of his grace (Romans 5:8). In Christ, we find the ultimate embodiment of goodness and our source of hope in the ongoing battle against evil.

The Scriptures vividly portray the reality of spiritual warfare, with believers constantly resisting the forces of darkness. Evil manifests through deception, temptation, and the enemy's schemes, which seek to hinder God's redemptive plan for humanity and the entire cosmos. We have the means necessary to carry out our divine assignment through faith in Christ. However, the Bible assures us that through the power of the Holy Spirit and our relationship with Christ, we can stand firm and overcome evil (1 John 4:4).

In the historical account of Peter walking on water, we know he was only successful when his gaze remained on Jesus (Matthew 14:22–33). When he began to notice his turbulent surroundings, he embarrassingly sank. He was undoubtedly a great swimmer, but his skills were not enough to save him. He needed the skills of Jesus. This is key for us, as well. Our walk can only be of faith, not based on our physical perceptions. Our spiritual journey is just that—spiritual. We must maintain our trust in the plan of God and know that our being here is an assignment of the highest order. As believers, we are called to persevere, knowing that in the end, God will prevail, and evil will be forever vanquished. Let us find strength and courage in this hope as we navigate the seemingly unrelenting battle, trusting in the power of God's unfailing love and assignment.

HERITAGE MINISTRIES

IN HIS PRESENCE

MINISTERS

Bobby R. Baker, Sr.

Virginia
September 12, 2023
Licensed minister for 49 years

George Nathaniel Jones

Nebraska
September 4, 2023
Licensed minister for 30 years

Elwood Orville Brumley

Maryland
July 1, 2007
Licensed minister for 29 years

Eugene Lewis

Maryland
DOD not available
Licensed in 1982

Andre Domonic Bush

Maryland
DOD not available
Licensed in 2007

Elmera McLeggan

New Jersey
DOD not available
Licensed in 1963

Ed Ray Cook

South Carolina
May 13, 2023
Licensed minister for 42 years

Sterling Lindbergh Moss

Bahamas
August 20, 2023
Licensed minister for 37 years

Sylvia D. Evans

Maryland
September 4, 2010
Licensed minister for 5 years

Lorina B. Nottage

Florida
September 20, 2023
Licensed minister for 41 years

**Jacqueline Blondell
Huyler-Rahming**

Bahamas
August 23, 2023
Licensed minister for 36 years

William Russell Smith

Maryland
DOD not available
Licensed in 1958

Dannie K. Tackett

Kansas
September 2, 2023
Licensed minister for 55 years

Christmas PRAYERS

December Prayer Points

The Christmas and New Year holidays are generally a joyous time of celebration, but for some, it can be quite the opposite. In addition to the hustle and bustle of the season that can often distract us from what matters most, many people experience an array of emotions as the holidays bring feelings of loneliness, loss, anxiety, and depression. When we couple these feelings with the challenges of the current economy, health issues, and global crises—surely, we don't have to search too far or too long for something to pray about. The opportunities to pray are limitless.

This month, we invite you to think about those around you who may be suffering this holiday season. Consider those who might need extra prayer covering and support. Pray with us, remembering those who are far from loved ones or facing unusually difficult circumstances this holiday season. Below are prayer directives to help you engage in intercessory prayers of hope, help, and healing for those in desperate need this season.

Prayer Directives

- Pray for God's protection upon all who are traveling throughout the Christmas holidays.
- Pray for a sense of God's presence and mutual love as families and friends gather.
- Pray for healing and harmony for strained family relationships.
- Pray for those whose countries are torn apart by war, and pray for those who have been displaced because of the same.
- Pray that those unable to be with family will enjoy the fellowship of friends. Remember missionaries, pastors, students, and those serving in their nation's military to name a few.
- Pray for families and friends who have loved ones in the military, and pray for divine protection and comfort upon military personnel separated from family.
- Pray for missionary parents and children who are apart during the holidays.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit's comfort upon family and friends who have lost loved ones this year.
- Pray for those struggling financially who cannot afford gifts and special holiday meals.
- Pray that people who do not yet know Christ as Savior will accept his gift of salvation.



HELP US PROCLAIM GOD'S FAITHFULNESS!

VISIT COGOP.ORG – click on “DONATE” then select “QUICK GIVE” and select “FIELDS OF THE WOOD” from the drop-down list, or make your check or money order payable to Church of God of Prophecy and mail it to P.O. Box 2970 Cleveland, TN 37320-2970.

My Favorite Things about Christmas

MARSHA ROBINSON | EDITOR



God is with us.

The Bible says that, in Jesus, God made his home right where we are. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). God is not detached or distant. He dwells with us.

God works in the darkness.

Jesus came to destroy the devil's work. Christmas is a reminder that even in our broken world full of darkness, sin, and evil, God is still at work. He brings light to those in darkness. When you can not see the way and your world seems enveloped in darkness, remember—God is at work. The Bible says darkness is no impediment to him. He sees and is always working things out for our good.

God has not forgotten us.

The songs surrounding Christ's birth in Luke 1 echo God has not forgotten his people. Mary sings, "He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy" (Luke 1:54 NKJV). The prophet Zechariah sings, "He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant—the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham" (Luke 1:72–73 NLT). God remembered his mercy, covenant, and promises, and sent Christ to save us. So be encouraged! God has not forgotten you. "Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15–16 NLT).

God keeps his promises.

The accounts in Matthew and Luke show that Jesus' birth fulfilled many long-awaited promises to Abraham, David, and the prophets. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22). We often struggle with waiting on God. Peter encourages us to remember that God is not slow in keeping his promises, but rather, he is patient with us.

God is altogether great and astonishingly humble.

He came to show us his love and save us. He left his throne in heaven's perfect holiness to live in the earth's sin-sick chaos. The Lord, whose royal robe filled the temple of heaven (Isaiah 6:1), became a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7). It seems no one expected the Messiah to come as a baby. At Christmas, we stand in awe of God's majesty and humility, who came to us in a

small rural town, on the backside of obscurity, with infant hands and a helpless cry from a manger.

Good news. Great joy. For all people.

That's the wonderful proclamation of angels on a hillside. Christmas means we have a Savior, Jesus Christ, and God fulfilled the plan he had from before the foundation of the world when he came to us in the person of Jesus, lived among us, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and continues to offer us the free gift of salvation. That is joyful good news.

God understands.

At Christmas, we remember that the Son of God became a man and experienced the full range of human emotions, hardships, and temptations. He can truly say to each one of us, in whatever we are experiencing, "I get it." Our High Priest understands human weaknesses, so let us come boldly to the throne of grace to find his help in our time of need.

God gives.

He gave us his one and only Son to save us from our sin, and we are to joyfully receive his Son as a gift. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God is worthy of praise.

We love singing songs at Christmas, and you can't read the Christmas story without hearing the songs and praises of God's people. At Christ's birth, shepherds worshipped (Luke 2:20), as did the Magi (Matthew 2:11). When you consider all that God has given us in Christ, praise is the proper response. He is worthy of all our worship.

Jesus is coming back!

Christmas is not just about looking back at Christ's first coming but also about looking forward to his second coming, when he will reign over all the earth in righteousness, truth, and grace. We will dwell with him forever, rejoice in the wonders of his love, and "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever" (Revelation 21:4 NLT). In our current world with so much fear, uncertainty, and confusion, we have hope in a living Christ, who was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to gather to himself all who are eagerly waiting for him!



Merry
Christmas
and a Happy New Year

to our COGOP family and friends around the world!