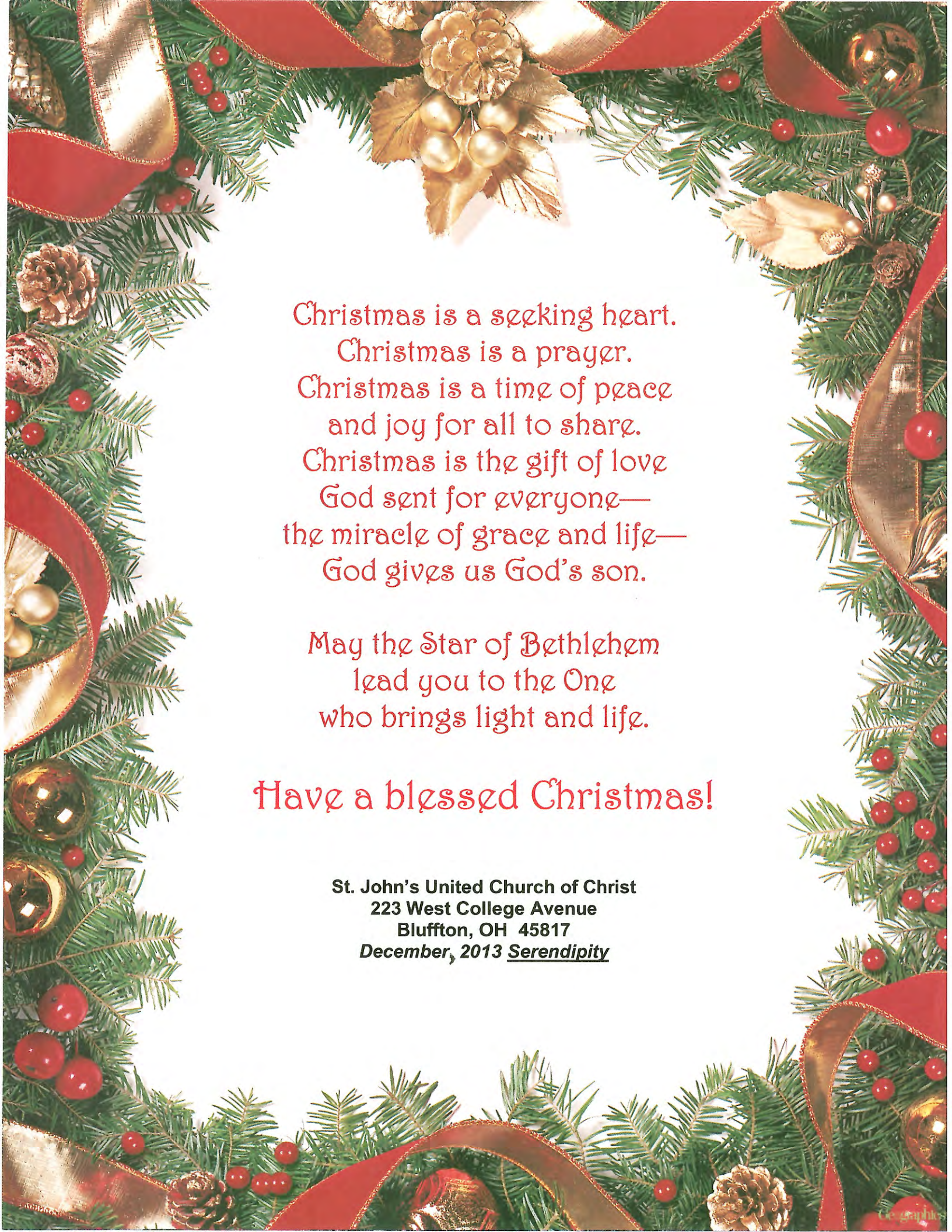

Christmas is a seeking heart.
Christmas is a prayer.
Christmas is a time of peace
and joy for all to share.
Christmas is the gift of love
God sent for everyone—
the miracle of grace and life—
God gives us God's son.

May the Star of Bethlehem
lead you to the One
who brings light and life.

Have a blessed Christmas!

St. John's United Church of Christ
223 West College Avenue
Bluffton, OH 45817
December, 2013 Serendipity

ST. JOHN'S UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Jenny Bracy (President)
Nancy Yeager (V.P.)
Ron Badertscher
Steve Kindle
Deacons
Jason Cox
Randy Cox
Pam Everett
David Herr
Matt Jordan
Roger Scoles

Treasurer
Ed Yeager
Financial Secretary
Blaine Bauman

"That baby Jesus--
He makes me
laugh."

"I have set the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure." (Psalm 16: 8-9)

In his book, The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus, Brennan Manning tells of an experience he had. It was just before Christmas, and he was in the Chicago airport waiting to get a flight to Texas for a week-long retreat. Because of a severe storm, he and thousands of others were not going anywhere; the flights were all delayed. Public address systems were blaring, people were at the ticket counter demanding a projected departure time, children were crying, some people were just sitting and staring.

Then he noticed a middle-aged woman tenderly cradling a child in her arms and laughing. Manning asked her, "Would you mind telling me why you're so happy?" "Sure," she replied. "Christmas is coming, and that baby Jesus—He makes me laugh!"

According to Psalm 16, verses 8 and 9, focusing on Jesus at all times is the key to a happy and joyful heart. How about you? During the Christmas season, our already busy life becomes even busier. Are you "setting the Lord before you" today? Do you want to have a merry Christmas? Then bring Jesus into all your activities. Talk to Him all day long. He will make you laugh!

Jesus is the gift that perfectly fits the size of every heart. May all that He is bring you all that you need at Christmas and throughout the new year.

Holy God, you fill us with joy in your presence. Give us the grace to remember to enjoy your presence. We want to laugh, Lord. Amen.

'TWAS THE BEGINNING OF ADVENT . . . .

'Twas the beginning of Advent and all through the church
Our hope was all dying–we'd given up on the search.
It wasn't so much that Christ wasn't invited,
But after 2000 plus years we were no longer excited.

Oh, we knew what was coming–no doubt about that.
And that was the trouble–it was all "old hat."
November brought the first of an ending series of pains
With carefully orchestrated advertising campaigns.

There were gadgets and dolls and all sorts of toys.
Enough to seduce even the most devout girls and boys.
Unfortunately, it seemed, no one was completely exempt
From this seasonal virus that did all of us tempt.

The priests and prophets and certainly the kings
Were all so consumed with the desire for "things!"
It was rare, if at all, that you'd hear of the reason
For the origin of this wholly holy-day season.

A baby, it seems, once had been born
In the Mid-east somewhere on that first holy-day morn.
But what does that mean for folks like us,
Who've lost ourselves in the hoopla and fuss?

Can we relearn the art of wondering and waiting,
Of hoping and praying and anticipating?
Can we let go of all the things and the stuff?
Can we open our hands and our hearts long enough?

Can we open our eyes and open our ears?
Can we find him again after all of these years?
Will this year be different from all the rest?
Will we be able to offer him all of our best?

So many questions, unanswered thus far,
As wisemen seeking the home of the star.
Where do we begin–how do we start
To make for the child a place in our heart?

Perhaps we begin by letting go
Of our limits on hope and of the stuff that we know.
Let go of the shopping, of the chaos and fuss,
Let go of the searching, let Christmas find us.

We open our hearts, our hands, and our eyes,
To see the king coming in our own neighbors' cries.
We look without seeking what we think we've earned,
But rather we're looking for relationships spurned.

With him he brings wholeness and newness of life
For brother and sister, for husband and wife.
The Christ-child comes not by our skill,
But rather he comes by his own Father's will.

We can't make him come with parties and bright trees,
But only by getting down on our knees.
He'll come if we wait amidst our affliction,
Coming in spite of, not by our restriction.

His coming will happen–of this there's no doubt.
The question is whether we'll be in or out.
"Behold, I stand at the door and knock."
Do you have the courage to peer through the lock?

A basket on your porch, a child in your reach.
A baby to love, to feed, and to teach.
He'll grow in wisdom as God's only Son.
How far will we follow this radical one?

He'll lead us to challenge the way that things are.
He'll lead us to follow a single bright star.
But that will come later if we're still around.
The question for now: Is the child to be found?

Can we block out commercials, the hype, and the malls?
Can we find solitude in our holy halls?
Can we keep alert, keep hope, stay awake?
Can we receive the child for ours and God's sake?

From on high with the caroling host as he sees us,
He yearns to read on our lips the prayer: Come Lord Jesus!
As Advent begins all these questions make plea.
The only true answer: We will see; we will see.
(J. Todd Jenkins, First Presbyterian Church, Fayetteville, TN)

Christmas Trees . . .

Some things you may not have known!

It's the season when many of us will start shopping for the "perfect" Christmas tree. The idea of the evergreen tree standing proudly stage-center in our homes has been around for generations, but here are some facts you perhaps didn't know. Enjoy your reading!

The use of evergreen trees to celebrate the winter season occurred before the birth of Christ.

The first decorated tree was in Riga, Latvia, in 1510.

The first printed reference to Christmas trees appeared in Germany in 1531.

Using small candles to light a Christmas tree dates back to the middle of the 17th century.

Thomas Edison's assistant, Edward Johnson, came up with the idea of electric light for Christmas trees in 1882.

The official Christmas tree tradition at Rockefeller Center began in 1933. Since 2004, the tree has been topped with a 550-pound Swarovski Crystal star. Since 2007, the tree has been lit with 30,000 LED lights which are solar powered.

In 1856, Franklin Pierce, the 14th President of the U.S. was the first President to place a Christmas tree in the White House.

President Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony on the White House lawn in 1923.

Teddy Roosevelt banned the Christmas tree from the White House for environmental reasons.

From 1948-1951, President Truman spent Christmas at his home in Independence, MO. He lit the National Community Christmas Tree by remote control.

In 1963, the National Christmas tree was not lit until December 22 because of a national 30-day mourning period following the assassination of President Kennedy.

In 1979, the National Christmas tree was not lit except for the top ornament and was done to honor the American hostages in Iran.

Ninety-eight percent of all Christmas trees are grown on farms while only two percent are cut from the wild.

It takes six to ten years to cultivate a mature tree.

Artificial Christmas trees were developed in Germany during the 19th century and later became popular in the U.S. The trees were made of goose feathers that were dyed green and attached to wire branches. The wire branches were then wrapped around a central dowel rod that acted as a trunk.

In 1930, the U.S.-based Addis Brush Company created the first artificial Christmas tree made from brush bristles. The company used the same machinery that it used to manufacture toilet brushes, but they were dyed green.

DECEMBER BIRTHDAY AND ANNIVERSARY WISHES TO . . .

12/5 – Crystal Sellers Battle

12/19 – Jon Theis

12/22 – Gene Long

12/23 - Duane Bollenbacher

12/27 - *Ed and Nancy Yeager

Best wishes to all! Enjoy your day!

St. John's offers its deepest sympathy to the family of Rod Slessor, former pastor here at St. John's who died on November 27 from a rare form of liver cancer. Sympathy cards can be sent to the family at:

Karen Slessor
408 Seventh Ave.
PO Box 591
Biwabik, MN 55708

May Rod's soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

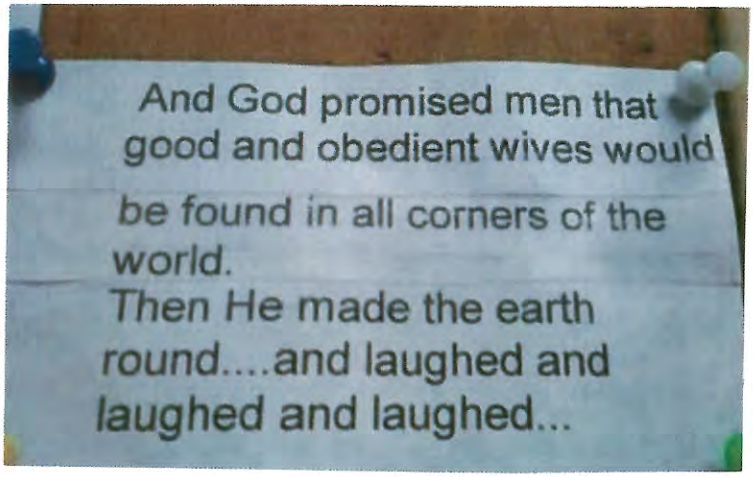
FYI

A meeting of the Bluffton Area Inter-Church Board will meet on Monday, December 9, at 7 p.m., at the First Mennonite Church. If you have any thoughts, ideas, or projects you would like to see BAMA consider, please come to that meeting to have your voice heard.

UPDATED INFO NEEDED . . .

If you have moved and have a new address, changed a land line phone number or an E-mail address, or if you have a winter address, please inform the church office so that a new church directory can be printed.

Please have this information to Sue by January 15. (419-358-5641 or stjohnucc@embarqmail.com)



I Met Jesus and My Life Is Not Better

Excerpt from John 9:8–9

"The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.'"

Reflection by Anthony B. Robinson

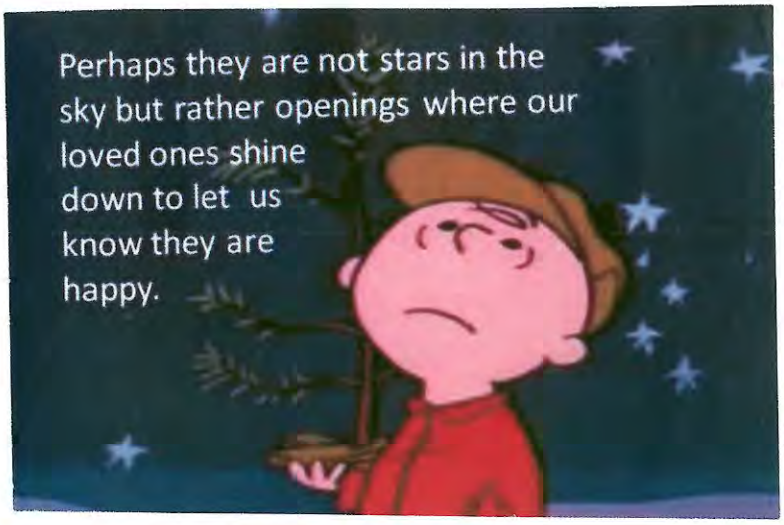
What happens to someone who is touched and changed by Jesus?

When I watch a religious TV show or listen to some personal testimonies, it seems that after meeting Jesus everything is better. "Jesus came into my life and now business is great, my wife and I are super in love, and the kids, who were on drugs, are getting straight A's. Thank you, Jesus."

It may be that way for some people. But I'm struck by what happened to the blind beggar, in John 9, who was touched and healed by Jesus. He got healed and his neighbors no longer knew him. His parents disowned him. And he was kicked out of the church. If he'd given a testimony it might have been, "Yes, I was healed by Jesus and my life turned into a mess. People I'd known for a long time acted as if they didn't know me, my family didn't want anything to do with me, and the authorities threatened to arrest me."

I imagine his testimony might continue. "Yes, since meeting Jesus my life is harder in many ways. But, you know, I wouldn't have it any other way. Because now I see. I see how afraid many people are, how afraid I was. Afraid to tell the truth, afraid to live, afraid to take any risks. It's like we're blind. It makes me sad. But I don't want to go back."

Being touched and blessed by Jesus may not mean our lives are suddenly successful, as society defines success. Jesus may make life harder, but in ways that matter. He gives us problems worth having. And when we experience hard things on his account, that is when we come to really know him.



THE ST. JOHN'S CHRISMON TREE

(The following articles appeared in the Serendipity in December, 1978 and 1979, and were written by LaDonna Derringer).

Some of us (about 62) got together and decided to work on Chrismons. When did the Chrismon tree begin? And why? . . . The evergreen tree symbolizes eternal life. The Chrismon tree began as an offering to God. God blessed the offering, and it became a song of praise and thanksgiving to Him. It continues as a witness to His love and His glory and as a proclamation of His Holy Name through His Son, Jesus the Christ, and our Lord.

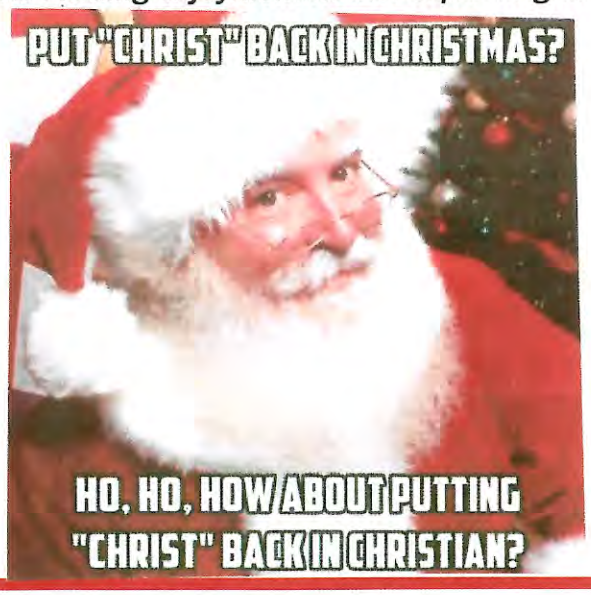
The very beginnings were in 1940 but, then in 1956, as Frances Kipps Spencer of Danville, Virginia, while searching for a way to honor the Christ, came upon some drawings of designs called Chrismons. Chrismon is a part of two words—**Chris**t and **mon**ogram. Early Christians used them to identify themselves to one another, designate church meeting, and places to show unbelievers where they stood.

All Chrismons are made in gold and white with very few exceptions. White is the liturgical color for the season ofChristmas and refers to our Lord's purity and perfections. Gold signifies His majesty and glory. We point to the Christ as the Light of the World by using tiny white lights. Twenty-three Chrismons appeared on the tree in 1978.

1979's tree grows with more Chrismons! This year's Chrismons have almost doubled in the number of symbols as a result of a special team of workers in LaDaonna Derringer, Nina Rupright, Ethel Bedertscher, and Juanita Swank. If you would like to help with the Chrismons for the 1980 tree, be sure to contact one of these gals now! Plans are underway for an even bigger and fuller tree next year.

The Chrismon tree is complete only when those who see it understand its meaning. If the tree is in a public place, an explanation of its symbolism should be given to those who see the tree.

****** FYI—*A Bluffton Newspaper article dated December 23, 1999, has been placed on the back bulletin board for your reading enjoyment further explaining our church's involvement in this project.***



December's Schedule at St. John's

12/3	Ladies meet at Arby's (9 a.m.)
	TOPS (6 p.m.)
12/4	Men meet at Arby's (8:30 a.m.)
	Choir practice (7 p.m.)
12/5	Community dinner at the Sr. Center (6 p.m.)
12/7	Tree of Remembrance Ceremony at Chiles-Laman Funeral Home (2 p.m.)
12/8	Second Sunday potluck
	Choir sings
12/9	Inter-Church Board meeting (7 p.m. – First Mennonite Church)
12/10	Ladies meet at Arby's (9 a.m.)
	TOPS (6 p.m.)
12/11	Men meet at Arby's (8:30 a.m.)
	Choir practice (7 p.m.)
12/12	Consistory (7 p.m.)
12/15	Christian Education Committee meets after worship
	Choir presents Christmas music
	Special mission offering collected for Bluffton Food Pantry
12/17	Ladies meet at Arby's (9 a.m.)
	TOPS (6 p.m.)
12/18	Men meet at Arby's (8:30 a.m.)
	Choir (7 p.m.)
12/19	Community dinner at the Sr. Center (6 p.m.)
12/20	Walker Day at Bluffton Elementary
12/21	Christmas distribution for food pantry (9 a.m. – noon)
12/24	Candlelight Christmas Eve service (7 p.m.)
12/25	MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Coping With Christmas

You mean it's that time of the year? Where has the year gone? It seems we just celebrated Christmas several weeks ago.

I don't know about you, but I'm getting ready for Christmas – not in the way you probably are thinking. Yes, there are lots of activities going on at church, home, at work, in schools and the communities around us. And we wonder just how will we get everything done? Somehow we do!

Do you realize how much we have to get done BEFORE Christmas? There are gifts to buy, then wrap the presents; get the Christmas Cards addressed and mailed; get boxes for mailing packages to those we won't see before Christmas. O, yes, there's the Christmas tree to get down from the garage, and all the decorations that go on it, plus putting all the lights, garlands, shiny balls on the tree, and the outdoor decorations. Then to keep in the festive mood, Christmas goodies: special breads, and all kinds of delicious cookies. Don't forget the Christmas dinner preparations either and who will be invited.

With all these kinds of things going on, it is easy to forget just what Christmas is all about - - - L O V E.

If we forget the love that comes with Christmas we will miss the real meaning of Christmas – God's love.

Think now of how these things are a part of your Christmas:

Love stops cooking – to hug a child.

Love stops - while decorating, to kiss your spouse.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way. You are thankful they are not elsewhere.

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

Now add some of your own to this list. . .

Paul's letter in **1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NRSV)** reads:

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

And if this isn't enough to make you appreciate the LOVE that we have in the world for one another – begin to recall all the popular songs of your day that express Love.

Now, turn to our Chalice Hymnal and count the number of Christmas Carols/Hymns we use to express our love for this time of the year. There are 51 of them. We may not know all of them but we do know that the writers have expressed their meaning of Christmas to us in the words they wrote.

Now turn to Luke 2: 1-20 and read with love what God has given to us.

Let's keep LOVE for one another in Christmas this year and all the years to come. That's how to do it.

A very Merry Christmas to all…

Pastor Don, Interim Pastor at Immanuel UCC, Kettlersville, Ohio

Ring The Bells

(A Christmas shopping carol to the tune of "Jingle Bells")

Dashing through the aisle,
With a silver four-wheel cart,
Trying to pick out clothes,
Don't know where to start.
Signs on toy-racks say
This is where to buy,
What fun it is to blow the wad,
It's easy if you try.
OH-----
Ring the bells, ring the bells,
Cashiers ring those sales.
See how good a purchase feels,
You know it never fails.
Ring the bells, ring the bells,
Bring the season cheer.
Ring them well so you can keep
Your job until next year!

Thank you . . .

My sister Joanna Firestone and I are touched that you are including our mother, Berda Gratz Firestone, in your annual All-Saints Day service. Coincidentally, just today, I came upon and read a biography/ genealogy of our third great-grandfather, Conrad Frederick Gratz, who helped to found Bluffton and St. John's Church. It is fitting that our mom's name will be read and her passing remembered along with so many other "Bluffton" surnames whose descendants continue to serve God and their neighbors into a third century. Although Joanna and I will be singing in our respective church choirs Sunday to mark the year's deaths of other saints in our congregations, we rejoice about our roots in Bluffton and are thankful for your service of remembrance for those who have gone to glory this past year.

Janice Firestone Nelson

We have a St. John's church pew (full size) in our possession that we cannot use. We would like another St. John's family to have it if they want it. Its free to whoever wants it. Please call Jason Cox at 419-234-8422.