

The Light of Christmas around the world

Ukraine *by Oleg Schewtschenko*

When asked to write about Christmas in my homeland, one would expect descriptions of time-honoured Ukrainian Christmas customs and unique foods. But I come from a land that, in many ways, had become a stranger to Christmas.

I was born in Dnepropetrovsk, a city of nearly 2 million in eastern Ukraine. We celebrate Christmas according to the Julian (Eastern Orthodox) calendar, not on December 25, but January 7. But Ukrainians did not always celebrate Christmas.

For a long time, Christmas was not popular among my friends, or friends of my family. For 70 years the Communists tried hard to destroy Christianity and to take Christ away from the culture, traditions and memories of our people. Imagine the result of their work after several generations. There were people who had never heard about Christmas in the right or positive way. They didn't care much about Christmas. The focus was on New Year's Eve. This was an important time when they would decorate their homes and put up a New Year's tree complete with toys, lights, rings and balls. People exchanged presents and stay up all night with their best friends to celebrate the coming of another year. Tables were filled with food and drinks. So it became just another reason to forget or even escape

the difficulty and bitterness of everyday reality, and to hope for a "good and bright future."



LCC foreign mission student Oleg Schewtschenko served as crucifer at the installation of LCC president, Rev. Robert Bugbee in September.

Some might go to the Orthodox Church and light candles before icons, praying to one of the saints. Perhaps they'd stay for some parts of the liturgy, without paying much attention to the priest. By the time I was born, Christmas was almost forgotten and removed from people's memories.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, when the Gospel could be preached more openly, people like me, heard for the first time the story about Jesus, His birth, life, death and resurrection. We heard the real meaning of feasts like Easter, Pentecost and Christmas.

I remember the first time I heard about Jesus' birth. At first, I couldn't understand why we were always picturing Jesus as a baby and not celebrating His birthday by focusing on how old He might be now! Then I discovered in the Bible that His was not a usual birthday. It was God Himself who was born. The Son of the holy, eternal and almighty God came to earth and was born a man. He did all this for us, His people, created in His image, who sinned and broke with God. He was born to die for me so that I could have eternal life through faith in Him.

In that moment I was shocked: "How long will this go on? How many

Christmases will we mark Jesus' birthday without ever coming to Him, the saving birthday Child?"

I will never forget Christmas Eve 1994—my first Christmas with Jesus. In the Gospel readings I listened to the story of His birth. I also heard it predicted in the Old Testament long before He came, and the pastor's explanation in the sermon finally got through to me. It was also the first time I heard and sang so many of the old German Christmas carols.

This first Christmas changed a lot in my family. I remember when someone from church gave me my first Christmas present with the words, "This present is just a small reminder or symbol of the most wonderful Gift from God, which we have received in the birth of His Son!"

It was not about me, to please or make me happy. Even the present I received was about Him! We came home very thoughtful and quiet, but with a great joy, thinking about Christmas and its impact for this world, for our family. "Can every day be Christmas?" asked my sister, when she was almost asleep, holding her present in her arms.



A new generation of Ukrainians in Dnepropetrovsk know about and celebrate Christmas

"No, but one thing is for sure! Now we're going to celebrate His birth every year!" I answered. After that, Christmas became one of the most important holidays for my family and me. New Year's Eve was no longer as central as it once was.

Since this first Christmas, I have celebrated many others. During Advent I tried to tell friends about Christmas and its significance for my life and the whole world, about a new hope and joy, faith and reason to live. I wanted more people to have the opportunity to receive the Gift of Christmas. (I haven't given up yet!)

I wish for all of you what came to me that day: A wonderful Christmas in the presence of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And maybe, too, the eyes to see how the Lord might use you this year to bring the joy of a Christmas with Him to your family and friends.

Oleg Schewtschenko is an LCC foreign mission student currently studying at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Thailand *by Leonard Harms*

If you came to Thailand during the Christmas season, you would find a very familiar scene, although with an artistic flair unique to the culture. As in most of the world, Christmas in Thailand is a secular holiday centred in two elements. It is a time when people with a deep desire for peace in their lives, homes, communities and countries celebrate that hope with peaceful actions and objects—birth, gifts, colours, songs, food, fellowship and friendship.

It is also a time when people find great opportunities to create and maintain profitable commercial enterprises. Thailand elevates both objectives to the highest degree, perhaps more than any other southeast Asian country.

How does the Lutheran Church distinguish its celebration of Christmas from those of Buddhist and secular society? Not really by much, but they try.

In Bangkok, Journey Into Light, (Lutheran Hour Ministries in Thailand) holds a Christmas party in the short soi (alley) between the offices of Concordia Gospel Mission and Luther Institute Southeast Asia. It starts about 5 p.m. during the week before Christmas. Food is always a draw, so the first event was a meal. They had ordered food from a local food shop, rice noodles with a soy sauce mixture and served it to whomever came into the soi. As it became dark, they had games for the children in which they won small Christmas trinkets. By dark, the spot lights around the stage were turned on and the staff of Journey Into Light and Concordia Gospel Mission sang carols and hymns in both Thai and English. There was a draw for gifts for everyone. Finally, the team served cake and ice cream to everyone and the people left sat around the area talking to each other. About 9 p.m. the soi emptied and the stage and loudspeakers were dismantled.



Children gather for games, gifts and to hear the Christmas story.

Concordia Lutheran Church, in Phong Phet has a day care centre. On the day of the Christmas celebration, the congregation hosted students from a daycare centre in south-central Bangkok which is funded by LCMS, Concordia Welfare and Education Foundation Thailand. The students came to the church and presented a beautiful nativity pageant along with dialogue and singing in Thai. The daycare children from Concordia were hosts to their parents and families.

For most Thais, the more important celebration is New Year because every culture in Southeast Asia considers it to be most auspicious for the year to follow. The birth of a Saviour does not impress the people of Thailand because they know no need for a Saviour.

Rev. Dr. Leonard Harms is LCC missionary-at-large seconded to Lutheran Institute Southeast Asia, a theological education organization. He lives part-time in Bangkok.



Singers proclaim the birth of the Saviour

Nicaragua *by Sandor Arquello*

Christmas in Nicaragua is linked to worldwide traditional celebrations, but also include some uniquely Nicaraguan elements tied to the country's culture and history.

The whole month of December is loaded with celebration, joy, family traditions and religion. For many, La Purisima (The Pure One, December 7) is as important as celebrating Christmas Day. It celebrates the Conception of the Virgin Mary. Nicaraguan families throughout the country hold to this tradition and spend time in devotion, thanking God for Mary's Immaculate Conception and the miracles they believe she has performed in their lives. Shrines to Mary decorate doorways as children travel from house-to-house collecting candy, much like Halloween. Families have inherited images of the Virgin, passing them on from generation to generation.

Before Christmas Day the Roman Catholic churches celebrate masses in honour of Baby Jesus. They start December 15 and end at midnight, Christmas Eve which is considered to be the proper day to celebrate Jesus' birthday.

The morning of December 24, most households become places of reunion and joyful party preparations as families and friends await Christmas Eve. The Nativity Celebration will come to its fulfillment at midnight. People will sing or play on their stereos popular and ancient songs (Villancicos). They exchange gifts and children will receive the toys they have asked Saint Nicolas or Baby

Jesus to bring them, through a special request written with much anticipation.

The dinner tables become the spotlight of the celebration as people enjoy special meals and fellowship.

Fire crackers are very popular around this season, and blossoming fireworks and handmade bombs accompany the celebration making it noisy but joyful.

Our Lutherans do not participate in all of these folkloric, colourful and cultural traditions of the Nicaraguan society. There is no reason to be for or against this celebration. People know clearly that the core of their rejoicing at Christmas is because God the Father sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to be born of the Virgin Mary. After all, Jesus' Birthday is a precious and invaluable gift given by God the Father to all humanity.

Pastors, missionaries, deaconesses and teachers of the Iglesia Luterana Sínodo de Nicaragua use the Advent and Christmas seasons as great opportunities to guide adults, youth and children into a permanent and stable relationship with our gracious

and merciful God. The expectation and joyful environment allow the heralds to proclaim the Gospel through special worship services, evangelism campaigns, Christmas parties for children, and many other faith-promoting activities which may help the church workers bring and keep many souls into God's kingdom even when the traditional celebration comes to its end.

Rev. Sandor Arquello is LCC's missionary in Nicaragua.



The December 7 celebration of Mary's immaculate conception overshadows Christmas Day