

## AREA LEADERSHIP MESSAGE

### Our Gift to Christ

By Elder Allistair B. Odgers

Area Seventy



*Elder Allistair B. Odgers*

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . . , there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. . . .

“ . . . They departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. . . .

“ . . . They saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”<sup>1</sup>

What gift will we give Christ?

For many a season in our family, the best wrapped gift, the best gift

under the Christmas tree, has been for Christ. Each member of our family would make a promise or commitment to the Saviour and place it in the gift-wrapped box. Then we would open it each Christmas to see how well we did in truly giving a gift to Christ.

On Christmas Eve, we would often do treat drops. We would bake and



## Old and New Christ-Centred Traditions

By Henry and Shelby Congerton

*Newlyweds remember Christ-centred traditions from their different backgrounds as they plan to make Christmas Christ-centred for their future family.*

### Henry Congerton: Studying the Scriptures

As I grew up in the Congerton family, my parents maintained a Christmas tradition that always brought Christ to the centre of Christmas in our home. Every Christmas Eve, we gathered around my dad as he read the story of Christ's birth from the book of Luke. I remember going to sleep with a lasting impression of the true reason why we were celebrating Christmas. This made the celebrations of the following day more meaningful and spiritual.

For Shelby's and my first Christmas together, we continued my family's tradition. Likewise, I hope to continue to focus on Christ each Christmas through scripture reading and to bring joy and peace to my future children just as my dad did for me.

### Shelby Congerton: Singing Sacred Hymns

I fondly recall the tradition of accompanying my grandmother to

make all day, and then at night we would choose families to take them to. Often placing them on a doorstep, knocking on the door, then running away, peeking behind to see the response.

We took it to another level on our mission (Philippines Laoag Mission). Our zone leaders baked and packaged hundreds of biscuits. Then on the eve of Christmas conference, we would go out to sing Christmas carols to their investigators and members. I wept when, according to Philippine custom, they would come out and give us all that they had: some rice in a bag or a few pesos. Then they wept when we gave it back, adding to it biscuits and lollies. But theirs was the greater gift, for they were willing to give all that they had.<sup>2</sup> When we returned, we would gather and take time to ponder upon our gift we would give to Christ. Each wrote on a card the gift they would give, then placed it in the gift box.

President Howard W. Hunter gave us some great ideas:

“This Christmas, mend a quarrel. Seek out a forgotten friend. Dismiss suspicion and replace it with trust. Write a letter. Give a soft answer. Encourage youth. Manifest your loyalty in word and deed. Keep a promise. Forgo a grudge. Forgive an enemy. Apologize. Try to understand. Examine your demands on others. Think first of someone else.

Be kind. Be gentle. Laugh a little more. Express your gratitude. Welcome a stranger. Gladden the heart of a child. Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth. Speak your love and then speak it again.”<sup>3</sup>

Oh, how I remember one Christmas Eve in our home. The year had been hard financially—this year we told our children that there would be no gifts under the tree and that dinner would be simple. But we still made treats and did our treat drop Christmas Eve. As we gathered after to do our gift for Christ and to read the scripture story of Christ's birth, someone knocked on our door. Then we heard the running of feet and saw car lights leaving the driveway. As we opened the door, there on our doorstep were gifts for the children and the makings of a feast. Oh, how grateful we are for that Christmas and the anonymous gifts.<sup>4</sup>

As we busy ourselves in this festive season, may we take time to ponder what gift we can give Christ.

And let us remember that real gifts help us centre on Christ. For Christ is the reason. *Christ is the gift.* ■

#### NOTES

1. Matthew 2:1, 9, 11.
2. See Mark 12:41–44; see also Mosiah 18:27–28.
3. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter* (2015), 32; adapted from “What We Think Christmas Is,” *McCall's*, Dec. 1959, 82–83.
4. See Matthew 6:1; see also 3 Nephi 13:1.

my ward's annual seniors' Christmas carol night. It provided a special opportunity for me to serve, for the two of us to bond, and to ponder Christ's birth through reverent song. Even though I am married now and my nan is nearly 94 years old, I hope to continue this tradition for as many more years as possible.

Henry is a wonderful singer, so I'm sure that Christmas hymns will fill our home in the years to come and will teach our future children, spread Christmas cheer, and help us share our testimonies of Christ through song.

A cherished memory is Henry's and my first date, which happened to be on the first day of the 'Light the World' initiative in 2016. I took Henry to the National Gallery of Victoria, and we each chose a flower from an interactive display. The display's artist had only one condition: anyone who took a flower had to gift it to a stranger to make their day.

With that in mind, Henry and I wrote spiritual thoughts on two pass-along cards I had brought, and we gave them and the flowers to strangers in a nearby park. 'Light the World' is a great opportunity for members to not only focus on Christ but also to become more like Him. That experience has inspired me to start a new family tradition where we concentrate on becoming more Christlike over the Christmas period. ■



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# 14,078 Kilometres Away from Home

By Elder and Sister Olsen

When Christmas arrived, we had only been in the mission field for a month. In place of the preparations for family festivities that would fill our time back home, we sent Christmas cards to our loved ones and looked for ways to feel the spirit of Christmas here in Australia.

The Doncaster Ward, which we were attending, encircled us with kindness and love knowing we were so many kilometres away from our family.

The Friday before Christmas we were invited to the bishop's home, where a wonderful meal was shared. We read scriptures around the table

together, each taking a verse and sharing what it meant to us.

We spent Christmas Eve with a family where we ate dinner with all the trimmings. We read the Christmas story from Luke with their three young girls, taking turns to read, and sang hymns together.

The next morning, we were invited to eat breakfast at the Prentice home, where the whole ward had been invited.

Dinner was at another member family's home, where all nine missionaries from the ward were invited. The family were both Greek and German, so they served their favourite foods from both countries.

We visited for a while and re-enacted the Christmas story from Luke with simple props. Then came the desserts—baklava, trifle, pavlova and others. We were so full!

We had been invited for dessert at yet another home and thought if we walked for a bit we might be able to eat more. We went for a walk at the park, but it did not work. We literally could not eat another bite!

We felt our Saviour's love for us through so many acts of kindness. Our stomachs and our hearts were full to bursting. We were so grateful to video chat with our family on Christmas Day, but we had already felt the love of our ward family from the wonderful members here in Australia.

Our Christmas felt complete, even 14,078 kilometres away from home! ■



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*Our Christmas felt complete, even 14,078 kilometres away from home!*

# Our First Australian Christmas

By Elder and Sister Lloyd

Being involved with the daily 'Light the World' campaign really made a difference in helping us to focus on the Saviour at Christmastime and not so much on being so far away from home and family.

We knew that if we could serve, we wouldn't be so lonely.

The first day, we gave our neighbours some garden tools to help with their new backyard installation. Later, we played a major part in our stake's 'Light the World' celebration. I oversaw a Nativity exhibit and we both sang in the missionary choir.

We put up simple Christmas decorations—a tree and our new kangaroo Nativity set. We used the 'Light the World' ornaments as our advent calendar. Each day was a new opportunity to think of someone else.

Halfway through December our flat was broken into—windows broken, garage door bashed, drawers, cupboards and closets up-ended and many valuable and not so valuable items stolen.

As devastating as this was, we were grateful that we were safe and protected from further harm. Other

senior missionaries came to our rescue and truly helped to mourn with us and comfort us with their helping hands and kind words.

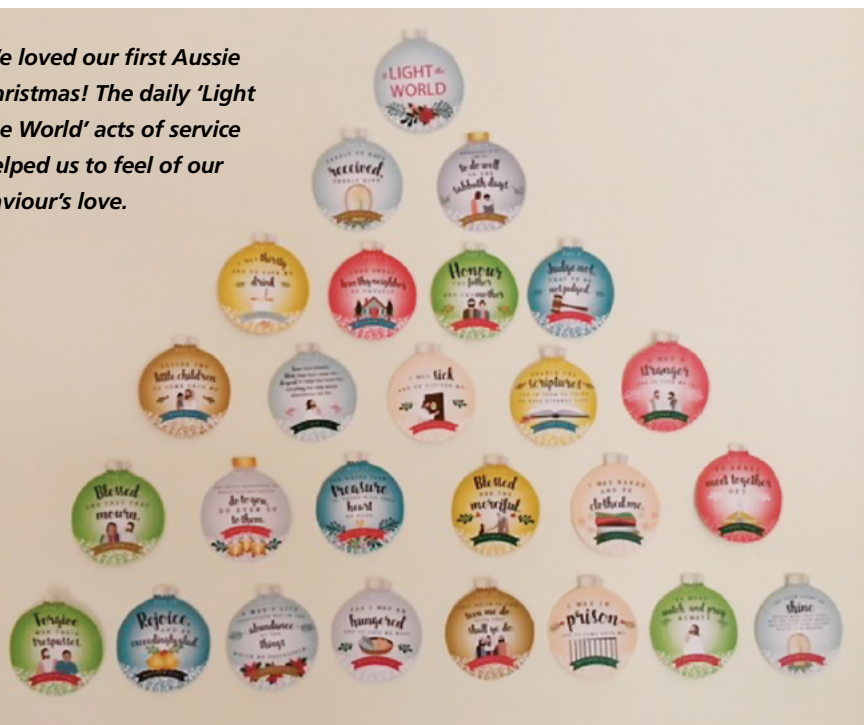
We were determined not to feel sorry for ourselves or lonely on Christmas morning, so we invited all the young missionary elders and sisters to our house for Christmas breakfast. We had such a fun time, sharing stories about our favourite Christmas memories and exchanging simple gifts.

Later that afternoon we were invited for Christmas dinner by some members. After dinner we pulled the Christmas crackers and wore the tissue paper crowns and played Christmas guessing games.



*We had such a fun time, sharing stories about our favourite Christmas memories and exchanging simple gifts.*

*We loved our first Aussie Christmas! The daily 'Light the World' acts of service helped us to feel of our Saviour's love.*



PHOTOS SUPPLIED

We felt at home because we felt their love.

We loved our first Aussie Christmas! The daily 'Light the World' acts of service helped us to feel of our Saviour's love and blessed us to get through some challenging and unexpected trials over the Christmas season.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf said, "No matter our circumstances, no matter our challenges or trials, there is something in each day to embrace and

cherish. There is something in each day that can bring gratitude and joy if only we will see and appreciate it."<sup>1</sup>

'Light the World' helped us to feel that daily joy. Being with our Australian family, made up of fellow missionaries and members, helped us to feel at home while so far away from home. ■

**NOTE**

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Of Regrets and Resolutions," *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 24.

## Christ-Centred Christmas Traditions from across Australia and the Pacific

*Bringing Christ to the centre of our Christmas celebrations can be fun and easy if we are prayerful and creative. Across Australia and the Pacific, individuals and families are creating and continuing wonderful Christ-centred traditions that help to focus their festivities on the Saviour and His birth.*

### Light the World

A few years ago, the Collings family decided to try participating in the 'Light the World' initiative. They had been looking for ways to focus more on Christ at Christmastime and this was the answer to their prayers.

"The tradition we love the most is on Christmas Eve," Waireka Collings said. "This is where we re-create the story of Jesus and spend a night in 'Bethlehem'. We dress as they would have dressed, we try to eat food they would have eaten, and we

talk about Jesus Christ and what kind of life He had."

The Collings family discovered that the fun Christmas activities children enjoy so much can also be a reminder of the true meaning of Christmas.

"On Christmas Day, instead of a gingerbread house, the kids put together a gingerbread stable with Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus."

The 'Light the World' initiative has started many Christ-centred traditions in the Collings home that are already cherished by the children.



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### Singing Praises to His Birth

Christ-centred traditions do not have to be costly. For Rudimiller Taliauli growing up in Tonga, one of her most cherished Christmas memories was the singing.

"I remember the spirit of Christmas filling my home island of Vava'u through the singing of hymns that could be heard from anywhere on the island," she said. "As we'd walk around the neighbourhood, giving our gifts of food to the neighbours, we could always hear all the different churches singing Christmas hymns. Here in Tonga you can definitely feel the spirit of Christmas."

## Comfort Those Who Stand in Need of Comfort

For the last 30 years, Argentina Fatialofa has served Christmas luncheon for the homeless hosted by the Auckland City Mission. She is joined by others of her family when they are available. Before any of her own Christmas presents are opened, she makes sure she gives to those less fortunate—making her own Christmas feast that much sweeter.

“Jesus Christ loves all mankind,” she said. “I’ve felt that same compassion for those who come to the City Mission Christmas luncheon. Regardless of situation or background, we welcome all who walk through those doors, just as the Saviour would. I love seeing them and treating them like family, especially those who are disabled or homeless.”



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## Nativity Countdown

For children, the anticipation of Christmas can be as exciting as the day itself. Using her skills with crafts and sewing, Paula Matenga created a Christmas countdown activity using the characters of the Nativity as the focus of each day. The children would receive a treat for each day and then get to place each Nativity piece in the manger and discuss its part in the story.

“Putting up the Nativity scene bit by bit meant that the story of Christ’s birth was shared throughout the

entire month of December,” Paula said. “Every day, in amongst the hustle and bustle of Christmas festivities, we were reminded of the true meaning of Christmas. When Christmas morning did arrive, the full Nativity, and it’s full meaning, was there at the centre of our celebrations.”

## A Missionary Christmas

For a missionary, being far from home on Christmas can be hard. For President and Sister Vidmar, of the Australia Melbourne Mission, it was important that each and every elder



*Every visit to the mission office included a search of the tree for their badge.*

and sister felt at home and amongst family at Christmastime.

Determined to reach out to every corner of the mission, they also traveled to Tasmania to share a Christmas celebration with the missionaries there.

Early in December a day was set aside for the Australia mainland missionaries to come together and celebrate Christmas as one big missionary family. A touching spiritual devotional was held in the chapel, followed by food and games.

Sister Klomp said, “Because we’re on a mission, the missionaries are like

family. It was a wonderful substitute for our families’ Christmas celebrations. We love them!”

The mission office Christmas tree was decorated with laminated copies of all the missionaries’ badges. Every visit to the office included a search of the tree for their badge.

For the senior missionaries President and Sister Vidmar held a potluck dinner at the mission home, complete with a white elephant exchange.

“President and Sister Vidmar contacted our children and family a couple of months earlier,” said Sister Lloyd.

“They gave us a manila envelope each that contained Christmas letters from our children and coloured messages from our grandchildren. It was very touching and just what we needed.”

Whatever our circumstances, we can focus our Christmas celebrations on Christ. Whether we are young or old, rich or poor, at home with family or thousands of kilometres away on a mission, Christmas can be a joyful reminder of the birth of our Saviour.

### **Our Prophet’s Family Christmas Traditions**

From a 2002 devotional: “Sister Nelson and I enjoy many Christmas traditions. On our mantle over the fireplace we display a small framed photograph of each member of the family. With 10 children, their spouses, and 54 grandchildren, that’s quite a flock of photos. We have been doing this for so long that most of the pictures are no longer current. The children scramble to find their own pictures among the many. . . .

“[Sister Nelson’s] cookies, cakes, and candies are always in great demand. And we love to read scriptures of the Christmas story with our family.

“Through all of our various Christmas traditions, I hope that we are focused first upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Wise men still adore Him.”<sup>1</sup> ■

#### **NOTE**

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Christ the Savior Is Born,” (Brigham Young University Devotional, Dec. 10, 2002), 1, speeches.byu.edu.