

AREA PRESIDENCY MESSAGE

The Spirit of Christmas Is the Spirit of Christ

By Elder Kevin S. Hamilton

President of the Africa Southeast Area

To appreciate the spirit of Christmas, we must understand the Spirit of Christ.

Sister Hamilton and I recently visited one of the island nations in the Indian Ocean. It was Christmas and the city we were in had no Church members, so we decided to visit the local Catholic church and attend Christmas Eve mass. We arrived a few minutes early and took our seats with the rest of the congregation. There were Christmas decorations throughout the chapel and the congregation was singing Christmas carols. It was a hot and humid evening and the members were dressed appropriately in summer attire. Some were in shorts and sandals. As we sang together, we could not help but smile as we began the familiar carol that starts with, “Dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh. . . .” How interesting, we thought, that the spirit of Christmas could be the same in the Northern and the Southern Hemispheres!

The spirit of Christmas is, in fact, the same in every part of the world. At Christmastime, hearts are a little softer, words are a little kinder, and families are remembered. Our missionaries even report that people are more receptive and open to the gospel message during

the Christmas season. The Christmas spirit, which draws us to Christ, is in reality the Spirit of Christ, or what the scriptures refer to as the Light of Christ.

What Is the Light of Christ?

From the Gospel Topics essays, we read that “the Light of Christ is the divine energy, power, or influence that proceeds from God through Christ and gives life and light to all things. . . .

“ . . . In the scriptures, the Light of Christ is sometimes called the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, or the Light of Life.”¹

We should be careful not to confuse the Light of Christ with the Holy Ghost. The Light of Christ is not a person but an influence that comes from God and prepares a person to receive the Holy Ghost. It is an influence for good in the lives of all people.

In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Moroni declares that the Light of Christ is given to every person and helps us to choose between right and wrong:

“For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and

gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

“But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; . . .

“Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16–17, 19).

We also know from modern revelation that people who hearken to the Light of Christ are ultimately led to the gospel of Jesus Christ:

“And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

“And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father” (D&C 84:46–47).

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught that “the Light of Christ is as universal as sunlight itself. Wherever there is human life, there is the Spirit of Christ. Every living soul is possessed of it.”²

In 1847, in the village of Roquemaure, France, the church organ had been recently renovated. To



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celebrate the event, the parish priest asked a local wine merchant and poet, Placide Cappeau (1808–77), to write a Christmas poem. Cappeau was not a religious man, but he was impressed to put pen to paper and came up with one of the most beloved of Christmas carols—in French, “Cantique de Noël” and in English, “O Holy Night.” How an unreligious man such as Cappeau could write such glorious and divine lyrics is a testimony to the Light of Christ that is given to all men and which inspired him to write the lyrics. Consider just a few verses from this beautiful Christmas hymn:

*O holy night! The stars are brightly
shining,
It is the night of our dear Savior's
birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error
pining,
Till He appear'd and the soul felt
its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world
rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and
glorious morn. . . .
Truly He taught us to love one
another;*

*His law is love and His gospel is
peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave
is our brother;
And in His name all oppression
shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful
chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy
name.*

Cappeau was truly inspired by God through that light which emanates from God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, even the Light of Christ.

The Living Christ

The ultimate source of light is the Savior Jesus Christ, for He declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). “Jesus Christ is the greatest being to be

born on this earth. [He provided] the perfect example of how [we] should live.”³ Our beloved prophet President Thomas S. Monson has taught that “When we keep the spirit of Christmas, we keep the Spirit of Christ, for the Christmas spirit is the Christ Spirit.”⁴

At this season of Christmas, as our thoughts are turned to the Savior and to the light that He provides, may we find the true spirit of Christmas by understanding and following the Spirit of Christ. For it is His Spirit which “giveth light to every [person] that cometh into the world” (D&C 84:46). ■

NOTES

1. “Light of Christ,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Apr. 2005, 13.
3. Guide to the Scriptures, “Jesus Christ,” scriptures.lds.org.
4. Thomas S. Monson, “Because He Came” (First Presidency Christmas devotional, Dec. 4, 2011), broadcasts.lds.org.

LOCAL PRIESTHOOD LEADERS

What Gift Can I Give?

By Elder Mervyn C. Giddey
Of the Seventy

From the start of December almost through to its end, we find our thoughts turning more and more to that supernal gift given us through the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.

It is a time when the hearts of people in general are softened, and the

spirit of love and charity seems to be more prevalent than at any other time of year. It is a time when the Christian world remembers the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a time when we remember that we have been given a gift most precious. A gift that has



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set us free—free from physical death and, if we heed His counsel, freedom from spiritual death as well.

We celebrate the gift of His birth, but this is only the beginning of a gift that would take 33 years to mature in its offering. Some gifts are given to express love, appreciation, and gratitude, while others are given to provide solace, protection, and even rescue from an impossible situation. The Savior's gift is a gift of pure love that provides us with solace, protection, and rescue. It is given willingly and without any expectation of anything in return.

The earthly preparation of this gift started in the lives of His parents. Joseph and Mary, a young couple engaged to be married, each received a unique call to serve in a way which few will ever experience.

The angel Gabriel was sent forth from heaven to extend a call to Mary to serve as no other young woman has ever been called to serve. I have marveled how Mary, not much older than the young women in our wards and branches, was willing to accept a call of such magnitude, with all the associated social implications. And once having understood the call demonstrates her faith with the simple answer, “behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38; see verses 26–42). Mary willingly gave herself to serve the Lord whom she would yet come to know.

Joseph, still without any heavenly clarification, learned of Mary's

condition and demonstrated that he was a kind and just man. Not willing to make a public example of Mary as the law allowed, he was “minded to put her away privily” (Matthew 1:19). Only then does he learn, through an angel, that the son Mary carries was Jesus, conceived of the Holy Ghost (see Matthew 1:20–21). Willingly Joseph accepted his role as the foster father of the Son of God.

As a father, I have often wondered about Joseph's life and the position he found himself in at that time. I've marveled at how worthy he must have been to be called in this way. It was Joseph who was selected from among all men to be the one who would teach Jesus to work. Who would help Him get to know the scriptures. And, who, in the confines of his workshop, helped Him begin to understand who He was and ultimately what He was to become.

This gift born into the world was prepared and nurtured for 30 years by parents who willingly accepted to give of themselves in every way they were called upon. They got to understand, sometimes in difficult circumstances¹ that they, while integral to His growth and development, were just His earthly parents, for He was and is the Son of God.

I've often wondered how Heavenly Father felt as He watched over the preparation of His Son for His ultimate mission. I recall how we felt as parents when we gave our sons to the world to serve the Lord. How we

trusted the Lord that He would ensure they were protected, and they were!

Yet Father in Heaven knew that He would be allowing His Son to come into a world that would shun and mock Him, where those of His creation would take of the materials of the earth, the very creation which was His, and scourge Him over and over again until eventually they would crucify Him.

As we consider the gift which has been given to us, a gift given with no expectation of anything in return, let us consider how we can show our gratitude for what we've received by demonstrating our willingness to serve the Lord, to follow His example, and to strive to live as He did.

This Christmas, let us take the time to seek out a forgotten friend. To dismiss suspicion and replace it with trust. To write a letter. To manifest our loyalty to the Lord in word and deed. To give a soft answer. To keep a promise. To forgo a grudge. To forgive an enemy. To apologize to a loved one.

As we follow the Savior with full purpose of heart, His promise to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well will be fulfilled in our own lives: “Whosoever

drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

“But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:13–14).

I pray that our spiritual thirst may be quenched by the living water of the Savior, and that He may become and

remain our focal point this Christmas season and always. That we may learn to give as He has given.

I testify that He lives today, now the risen Lord, and that He and our Eternal Father love and care for each of us in a sacred and personal way. ■

NOTE

1. See Luke 2:40–52.

We were most fortunate to have a Church member recommended to us who had previously completed construction projects for the Church. His name is Edouard Kayumbe, and besides being well-informed on how to supervise construction, he pushed his crew to work hard and to accomplish building tasks. He taught the village workers skills in construction that have increased their abilities immensely. They accomplished a professional job. The workday opened and closed with prayer, led usually by the village chief (who turned out to be the preacher of the church). The workmen were willing to give full days of work, if we could provide lunch for them, and that element was worked into the budget.

To improve the lighting in the new building (there is no electricity in the village), we adapted our roof plan to use transparent fibreglass for two

LOCAL PAGES

Mwenda Village—Building More Than a School: A Brighter Future!

Elder and Sister J. Nick and Sister Irene Eastmond

Lubumbashi DR Congo Mission

As Welfare Services missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we had been in the Democratic Republic of the Congo only three months when the mission president’s counselor invited us to a village to see a partially completed three-room primary school.

The classes had been meeting in the poorly lit local church, with younger students coming in the mornings and older students in the afternoon.

Villagers had determined that a better school was needed, so they had made the bricks of local clay, fired them in a homemade kiln, and had built the walls up to adult eye level. When we saw their faith and

willingness to work, we proposed a Welfare Services project to help with completing the school.

The involvement of 100 schoolchildren carrying bricks to build the school was most impressive.





This school-building project was an exercise in faith: these villagers had the vision and went ahead.

roofing panels per classroom. These panels have made a big difference with the classrooms having substantially more light.

Toilets (latrines) were built using a septic tank and sump that were built with local methods, and rainwater will be collected from gutters on the roof during the rainy season and stored in a bricked-in tank to be used for hand-washing basins. During the dry season, water can be carried by hand from either of two village wells.

The classrooms were furnished with 75 desks, providing space for 2 or 3 children at each desk. The desks were built by a local contractor who also runs a vocational school. By employing students learning carpentry and woodworking skills, these desks were built at a lower cost than that offered by other contractors.

Finally, by using an innovative technique for finishing the outside



walls, enough cement was saved to allow for laying floors for all classrooms at no additional cost. The villagers were to have provided those funds, but the pedal-pump well refurbishment that would have generated the money was not initially successful. Having the floors finished was a great boon.

The children helped build THEIR school

Without question, the involvement of 100 schoolchildren carrying bricks to build the school was most

impressive. Midway through the construction, it became evident that many more bricks were needed. The distance to the brick kiln was half a kilometre. After the money allocated for brick transport on motorcycle taxis ran out, the teacher had an idea! He had all the students in both morning and afternoon classes walk the distance to the brickyard and then each carry one brick back on top of their heads. It did the job, and it helped each child feel that this is *their* school and that they did their part in helping to build it. The children also

carried soil from the latrine site to the school to level the ground before the cement floors were finished. On one occasion when we arrived to see the progress, the children surrounded us with joy in their faces. They showed us what they had accomplished, and then with the children playing “follow the leader,” we danced and waved our arms together while the children sang in French, “We have found our friends.” Our Swahili interpreter said the best moment was “seeing those old gray-haired sister missionaries dancing with the children.”

We have been so impressed with the positive attitudes shown by the Mwenda villagers. They began the school, acting in faith that they would find a way to finish it. They know that this is their project and they have ownership of the results. We helped with refurbishing the water well, built 10 years ago by a Belgian NGO. They now have a water committee that will charge a small fee to each household each month to pay for future pump repairs. We have proposed to help with 15 other communities having the same problem, and that project has been approved. This school-building project was an exercise in faith: these villagers had the vision and went ahead. At the ceremony, the schoolteacher told how this school could lead to a larger one and then a secondary school and finally a university in their village. Now that is vision! ■

The Greatest Gift Ever Given, the Son of God Sent to Redeem All Men . . .

Africa has been influenced by Christianity since at least the first century AD, and whether church services are held on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, families gather to share the joy of the Savior's birth.

Luke 2:11-14

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Christmas Memories in Africa

Pearl Cindi Thembelihle (Zulu):

When we celebrate Christmas, we

gather as a family—me, my mother, sister, and our children.

On Christmas day, we switch on the lights on the Christmas tree and prepare food, drinks, and a delicious dessert.

The children change to new clothes and we also buy clothes for children of other families who we know are in need.

We also buy everyone in the family Christmas presents. The cost of the presents is shared by those family members who can afford to pay for them.

Sandile Makasi (Xhosa): Although I did not grow up as a member of The

Pearl Cindi Thembelihle



Sandile Makasi



Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Christmas has always been a special day in our family.

As children, we got to wear brand new clothes on Christmas day. We were taught that the sun danced on Christmas day, so we would wake up early in the morning and wait for the sun to rise. The sun would never dance, and after some years I realized that this was a way to get us to wake up early so we could help with preparing our family's traditional Christmas lunch. The lunch took place at my grandmother's home where my grandmother, great-grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousins, mom, and siblings would gather together to enjoy a special lunch. The lunch was especially exciting for me because there would be a variety of delicious foods and puddings and it was one of the only times that we prayed together as family each year.

On Christmas day, we also had a tradition of going from house to house to "ask for Christmas." As one would enter a neighbor's home after saying they were "asking for Christmas," you would get sweets and food or anything they could offer you. It was also a pleasure to see my mom give out sweets and food to neighbors.

Now, as a young father, my wife and I continue the same tradition and we also follow Christmas advent calendar where, in the days leading up to Christmas, we watch videos and read scriptures to our children to teach them about the birth of Jesus Christ. Last

Christmas was a big highlight because we took part in the #LightTheWorld campaign and on one of the days my daughters and I visited a widow who lives at our apartment building and gave her a Christmas card and a Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas edition CD. Doing this was so heartwarming and the lady was so touched by this gesture.

Caroline Mabula Raisibi (Tswana): Christmas Eve was shopping time—buying food and clothes for all the children. First priority was school clothes and then clothes to wear to church. Preparation included slaughtering a sheep or chicken to have for lunch. After breakfast, we would all get dressed in our new clothes.

All the neighborhood children would go from house to house to show their new clothes.

Everyone in the family would be invited to grandmother's house for lunch.

Muriel Mushariwe (Zimbabwe):

Our Christmas traditions when I was young involved first going to church in the morning, where my grandmother would read the story of Jesus's birth to the children. I remember a Christmas tree without any fancy decorations but instead ribbons and flowers.

After church we would go home to prepare for Christmas lunch. Chicken and rice were served. (Chicken and rice was always reserved for special occasions growing up.) After lunch we would get to open our presents which were always brand new clothes usually for church. I remember my grandfather buying me a cute little blue dress, and my mother says I wore this dress for days!

My grandparents had seven children and Christmas was all about spending time together as a family at their house. ■



Suzen—Service Warrior!

Back in 2007 my husband and I were assigned to the Ennerdale Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our time there exposed us to many choice people, but one became synonymous in our minds with service. Her name was Suzen Thandi Nkomo.

When we arrived, a missionary couple was also assigned to the branch. The sister was an accomplished organist, but their departure was imminent. Music is important to the people of Ennerdale, and I worried what would happen. The sister in question started teaching Suzen, who, as far as I was aware, had nothing more than a desire to learn and a love of music to help her on her way. By the time the couple left, Suzen was adequately playing for all the meetings. On many Sundays, she would come to me at the end of the meetings, and ask, “Sister Gina, how was my playing?” Her happy smile testified that she was pleased with her accomplishment but wanted my affirmation too.

Soon after our arrival, the branch started a welfare project in the form of a vegetable garden. Suzen approached the branch president, wanting to be involved. “She asked if she could work in the garden to earn money for transport to church on a Sunday.” The project paid a menial stipend generated by contracts for gardening services at various chapels. “Although the wages paid were insignificant, it gave some people their first opportunity to realize the blessing of paying tithing, grow produce that could sustain their families, and provide vegetables for NGOs in the community,” said the branch president. These included a Catholic Aid’s orphanage



Suzen speaking from the pulpit at the Ennerdale chapel

and a home for disabled children. Soon Suzen headed up the project, spending most days at the chapel grounds.

She handled many projects through this program: arranging for a wheelchair for a severely handicapped child, building a wall outside the home of his grandfather, building a home from scratch for a member, repairing another home, starting a garden at the SOS Children’s village, to name some. The garden became so impressive that the Department of Agriculture sank a borehole and supplied seeds and compost. Why? “This is the only successful gardening project I have come across,” said the regional manager.

Suzen served the branch by doing her callings to the full extent of her large capacity. “When I first met her, she could barely speak English,” commented the branch president. She worked at her language skills, soon becoming more fluent in English. She was called as a Primary teacher, and later as the Primary president. One day, a senior missionary couple attended the Primary presentation in Ennerdale. The elder said, “Before leaving the USA, I attended the Primary presentation in my home ward. However, in all honesty, I have to say that this presentation was the finest I have ever witnessed.” Suzen’s commitment to the children of the branch ensured that they internalized



Suzen with her middle son, Sihle, and her youngest son, Gift.

important gospel principles as she helped them to write and learn their parts for that presentation.

When called as the Relief Society president, she had no transport. Using the little she earned working on the welfare project, she visited every single sister in her branch, assessing their needs. These words from her funeral program:

“We miss you as our Relief Society president—those visits to our homes, the revival of the less active . . .”

In her home, she taught her children the gospel truths. Although terminally ill, she sent her eldest son, Mthandeni, off on mission. He wrote from the mission field, “I’m glad that she encouraged me to come on mission and love every moment of it.”

In another letter from Elder Nkomo, he said, “He [Elder Ellis] mentioned the importance of temple ordinances. As he continued to talk about temples, I couldn’t help but feel my eyes getting warm and the sudden, poignant sensation that overcame me. A shower of thoughts about my mom and the joy she felt when she went and came from the temple; she would ask me to prepare dinner and she would lay down to listen to hymns.”

This remarkable, quiet, and humble woman touched so many lives. May her legacy live on. ■