

WESTMINSTER UNITED CHURCH

Christmas 2015 Newsletter

Merry Christmas! The Holiday Season is upon us once again and we are anxiously awaiting the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ! As we travel through the season of Advent together, may God bless us and keep us safe. Best wishes to everyone for a wonderful Christmas season!

.....*Anna Marie Hancock*

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MISSION STATEMENT:

“We are a faith community building relationships with God, all people, and our world.”

OUR VALUES:

1. Foster understanding of the divine through the ministry of Jesus Christ.
2. Work for justice, peace, love, and wholeness for all.
3. Encourage ecologically sustainable lives.

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Jan’s Jottings.....

Something Happening?

“Something’s happening here/What it is ain’t exactly clear...” Remember that old song? It’s that strange sensation that something is out of whack, imbalanced. There’s something alien about decorations in Florida in November: fake pine boughs and poinsettia tacked on palm trees. What’s wrong with this picture?

It emerged as a dizzy nausea as Christmas trees having little relationship to real evergreens appeared and elevator-music Christmas songs resounded through malls and public places. Thanksgiving (last Thursday in November) is apparently the time when consumers gorge themselves with turkey dinner to fuel the marathon of Black Friday consumer frenzy—the big event of the year. All of this is preparation for Christmas, which, it seems, celebrates the birth of Santa Claus.

“Something’s happening here. What it is, is painfully clear...” We have lost the spirit of thankfulness that precedes Christmas. Even Remembrance Day gets lost in the maze, this year with the “no Christmas marketing until after”—poppies before poinsettias—campaign. That we have to think of

such a thing is evidence where we have gone wrong.

Some argue that we must “put the Christ back into Christmas”, but too often—and too easily—this becomes an excuse for Christian triumphalism. We keep the Christ spirit alive by greeting our neighbours with Eid Mubarak, Happy Hanukah, Happy Diwali, Happy Kwaanza, each according to their own cultures. The time around winter solstice is significant everywhere. The date chosen for the birth of Jesus was, coincidentally (?), the birth of Mithras, the Persian god worshipped by the Roman military. When we unthinkingly greet others with ‘Merry Christmas’, do we assume that Christianity is preferable or normative? How would you appreciate a Wiccan neighbour wishing you ‘Joyous Yuletide’?

If you, like me, are a victim of creeping cynicism concerning Christmas commercialism; if you dread the task of finding the perfect gift for someone who has everything already; if the tinsel, lights and ka-ching of the mall are your personal vision of hell—then take heart. This year you can make a real difference for at least one household. Instead of emptying your bank account on seasonal gimmicks and gadgets, spend on something that has meaning. Donate to help settle a

refugee family, recalling how the Holy Family fled Herod and sought refuge in Egypt. Make your Christmas carol O Come Let Us Adore the Christ Child who comes to live among us, not Santa Claus Is Coming to Town. Give generously. Give thankfully. This really is the gift that gives twice: maybe we all need a nudge to remind us that Christmas is for giving, not getting.

That’s how we, as people of faith, can re-claim Christmas as a season of hope, peace, joy and love as we reflect on its spiritual depth. Have a meaningful holy day! And a happy holiday.

To you and yours, may the birth of the Christ child transform your life.

.....Rev. Jan Stevenson, Rev. Gordon C. Saville, & Sir Winston Pugglesworth (the dog)

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Advent Reflection

by Chelsea Masterman

Sarah Slean, Canadian singer-songwriter, has a song called “Shadowland” in which she sings:

*Love's the only alchemy
Love, the killer of despair
Love, the true nobility
Love, the armour angels wear
Love.
Love will make your eyes clear*

*The order of the universe
The only reason we are here.*

In my first semester at Vancouver School of Theology, I remember learning about Christian mysticism. One day, Shadowland drifted out of my subconscious to echo in my mind and heart throughout class. Weaving itself through Janet's lecture and the writing of Dorothee Soelle, this was the melodic reminder my spirit needed to lay down some of the cynicism I had gradually gathered up over the faith-inspired justice work I was losing my commitment to. I could breathe again. The weight of disappointment over the apparent lack of "accomplishment" by my little actions was lifted, replaced by the realization that it is an act of worship to love the world as God loves us. As 1 John 4:12 reminds us, "if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

During Advent, I am reminded that the One I recognize as perfect manifestation of this love waits to be born – again – in our hearts, in our lives, in the world. It's just in time. My doubts have started again. The problems of the world seem so big, and human judgment so riddled with error. Come, O Christ child. Transform us, inspire us, fill us with awe. Protect us, clear the windows to our soul. Remind us who we are.

Rev. Chelsea initially wrote this Advent reflection for VST's 2015 Advent Reflections booklet.

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Letter from the Moderator of the United Church

The following letter from the Moderator of the United Church was sent November 2015 in response to recent acts of terror in Paris, Beirut and Baghdad. It is edited for length; the full letter is available at: <http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/151123>.

Dear members and friends of the United Church,

I am writing to you with a heavy heart but also with a sense of hopefulness. The horrific acts of terror committed over the past month in Paris, Beirut, and Baghdad suggest that a new phase of terrorism has begun. Our hearts go out to all whose lives have been thrown into grief, fear, and chaos by these barbaric acts. Yet amidst the sorrow and grief, there have been glimpses of humanity at its very best. A friend saving the life of another as bullets rage, a father refusing to respond to the murder of his wife with hate, and community groups insisting that, despite what has happened, they will leave their doors open to welcome

Syrian refugees. These are living testimonies to the resilience of compassion....

...There is a growing political awareness that this kind of terrorism cannot be effectively countered through the traditional means of war. Addressing the brutality of organized terror will require many years of coordinated resistance. To that wisdom we add our conviction, as followers of Jesus, that love is the only power strong enough to conquer the forces of hatred and death. Resistance rooted in love is our best hope for defeating terrorism....

...Refusing to become mired in fear and hate requires both courage and discipline. Personally, I have found the practice of daily prayer to be a great source of strength and courage for me. I invite us all to pray for our government, our law enforcement agencies, our security services, and ourselves—praying that there will be wisdom to engage this threat with resilience and with care for the democratic principles that define us as a people.

Honouring what is good and life-affirming in our communities is another important form of resistance. The United Church has been involved in refugee sponsorship in Canada since 1979, which has richly blessed us as well as those we have sponsored. Congregations across the church are

preparing for the arrival of Syrian refugees to Canada. We need to resist the fears that call for a withdrawal of support for Syrian refugees and remember that the vast majority of these people are victims of the very terrorism we also face....

... One of the strategies of the terrorists is to divide Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in order to create a war of civilizations. In this context it becomes even more critical for the church to strengthen relations with Muslim neighbours, to invite visits between our congregations and communities, and to affirm that we are all Canadians together.

In these difficult and frightening times, let us draw on the inspiration of the one we name the true and only head of the church. Let us practise once again what it means to follow Jesus: to live a life of compassion, to be courageous in faith, to resist fear and hatred, and to believe that, finally, love will win.

Thanks be to God for the work all of you are doing in this troubled time.

The Right Reverend Jordan Cantwell
Moderator
The United Church of Canada

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CAN YOU HELP A FAMILY?

Westminster is active in the local group: Medicine Hat & Area Refugee Team. We are collecting financial donations to co-sponsor Refugee families coming to Medicine Hat. Donations may be made at the church office and are eligible for a tax receipt. Also we are looking for volunteers who are interested in volunteering a few hours a week or a month to assist these families once they arrive. There will be an opportunity to make donations of needed household items or furniture. We urgently need someone to act as co-ordinator between our church and Saamis Immigration for these donations. Please speak to Dawn Skogen, Jan or Chelsea if you can help in any of these areas.

Thank you

Dawn Skogen

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Stop The Press! Breaking News! **Hot Off the Wire!**

As of Tuesday December 1, MHART--Medicine Hat & Area Refugee Team--announced that we, a coalition of churches, are opening an account at Servus and are ready to receive our first refugee family. We have spent the past month networking far and wide to reach this point. We really appreciate the collaboration and personnel support

of Saamis Immigration Services whose staff bring their wisdom and skills in resettlement processes to the table.

A handful (3-4) of local clergy gathered after a meeting of the Medicine Hat Ministerial Association to explore how we could assist the masses of Syrian refugees we saw on the evening news. In late October Westminster hosted our first public information session; a larger team constituted itself as MHART; and congregations were invited to sign on as partners. Now we have at least 11 congregations participating, and many others offering moral, financial and volunteer support. Westminster has made space available to store in-kind donations and has agreed to receive and receipt financial donations. Thus far MHART has raised and/or pledged \$39,000 !

So what can **YOU** do? Check MHART's Facebook page for the latest update on most needed items. Donate: long-term funding needs will continue. Buy gift cards for newcomers--the gift that gives twice in that it offers the opportunity to learn how to shop, Canadian style, as well funds to do so.. Volunteer to 'walk with' these new Canadians: Saamis has offered to sponsor a training session for congregational volunteer coordinators, and to facilitate security checks for those dealing with such a vulnerable population.

So here at Westminster we need a volunteer coordinator now, to prepare to organize community ambassadors (the folks who escort newcomers to stores, medical care, schools etc.), ESL teachers, people to receive, sort and deliver in-kind donations, mentors (it's a steep learning curve), drivers and LINC classroom coaches. What skills do you have--organizational, people, educational?, We expect a 2-3 week advance notice about the arrival of MHART-sponsored families, so we work to get all our ducks in a row, to have resources and volunteers lined up.

In the meantime, we wait. How appropriate for this season of Advent anticipation! As we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ child, so also we ready ourselves to welcome our new neighbours with open arms.

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News from Taylor Croissant....

In June 2015, I ended my pastoral relationship with Two Hills-Myrnam pastoral charge in St. Paul presbytery. I had an excellent experience with the people there in resident student ministry and was quite happy to agree to a one year appointment while my fiancée MiYeon Kim was finishing her residency in Spirit River, Alberta in Northern Lights presbytery. In May 2015 MiYeon and I were married at the St. Andrew's College Chapel, a very

meaningful place for us as it is where we first met. A month later we had another wedding, this time in Korea, at Neungdong Presbyterian Church in Seoul, where MiYeon's father serves as the senior pastor. Following our weddings I took a position as ordained supply with our global partner in South Korea: The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK). I do English language ministry at Kangnam Presbyterian Church in the working-class Hwagok district of Seoul. MiYeon accepted her first-call with Banpo Hanshin Presbyterian Church in the Gangnam district (yes, the place the song "Gangnam Style" is named for, where all the celebrities live in South Korea); she will be ordained on November 24th, 2015. We are applying for MiYeon to receive spousal sponsored permanent residency in Canada and are both hoping for a quick return to Canada so we can resume doing ministry for the United Church of Canada, preferably in Alberta.

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The Real Meaning of Christmas

One week before Christmas, a well-known visitor made a surprise appearance...

I had just finished the household chores and was preparing for bed when a noise startled me. I cautiously opened the door to the front room. To my

amazement, Santa Claus stepped from behind the Christmas tree! He placed one finger over his mouth so I would not cry out.

“What are you doing here?” I exclaimed. Then I realized that Santa had tears in his eyes. His usual jolly manner was gone. The eager, boisterous soul we all know was very sad. Santa offered one, simple statement, “**TEACH THE CHILDREN!**” I was puzzled—what did he mean? Anticipating my question, with one quick movement he brought forth a great bag from behind the tree.

I stood there bewildered. Santa explained, “Teach the Children! Teach them the old meaning of Christmas. So many people today have forgotten what Christmas is really about!”

Santa then reached into his bag, pulled out a tiny **FIR TREE**, and placed it on the mantle. “Teach the Children that the stately fir tree remains green all year round, showing the everlasting hope of mankind. The needles point heavenward, making it a symbol of our prayers that always reach God.”

Santa again reached into his sack and pulled out a brilliant **STAR**. “Teach the Children that the Bethlehem star was the sign of promises long ago. God promised to send a Savior to deliver the world. The bright star pointed to

the fulfillment of that promise—God’s only Son had been born!”

Next, Santa pulled a **CANDLE** from his bag. “Teach the Children that the candle symbolizes that Jesus, God’s Son, is the light of the world. When we see this light remember the One who overcomes the darkness.”

Once again Santa reached into his sack. This time he removed a **WREATH** and placed it on the tree. “Teach the Children that the wreath reveals the endless nature of God’s love. Real love never ceases. Nothing can stop God’s amazing love.”

Santa then pulled from his bag an ornament of **HIMSELF**. “Teach the Children that Santa Claus symbolizes the generosity and good will we show to others because God has given us His very special Son. Don’t forget to tell the Children that Saint Nicolas was not part of the first Christmas in Bethlehem.”

Santa then reached into his sack and carefully placed a **CANDY CANE** on the tree. “Teach the Children that the candy cane represents the shepherd’s staff. The crook on the staff rescues sheep who have strayed from the flock. God never gives up on people who wander from Him.”

Next, He removed a delicate **ANGEL** and lifted it to the very top of the tree. “Teach the Children that angels shouted the glorious news of the

Savior's birth. These heavenly messengers sang 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace and good will to everyone on earth!'"

Finally, Santa pulled out a beautifully wrapped **GIFT**. He said, "Teach the Children that God deeply loves people, so He gave them His most precious gift—Jesus, His only Son. When the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, they bowed before the Child and presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is why we give gifts to others each Christmas."

Then Santa paused. He stared at the tree and seemed to be pleased. I saw that the twinkle had returned to his eyes. He turned, looked at me, and smiled. Santa offered these final words, "Remember to teach the Children the true meaning of Christmas. Please don't put me in the center, for I am but a humble servant. Jesus Christ is the real reason for the Christmas season. I am glad to join all others who bow down and worship Him, our Lord and God."

—Author Unknown (please note: there are a number of versions of this story available online; this one comes from <http://www.discipleblog.com/2011/12/teach-children-the-real-meaning-of-christmas/>)

.....submitted by Don Reid

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Excerpts from the Christmas Cantata:

"What Child is This?"

by Joel Rainey

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

*What did Mary think, the night he was born,
lying there in her arms in human form?
Who was this child with deep searching eyes
filling the night with his newborn cries?*

*She'd waited so long to see his face;
to welcome her son to this earthly place.*

*A promise fulfilled from heaven above,
the bearer of joy, hope, peace, and love
lying there in her arms, in human form.
What did Mary think, the night he was born?*

THE MANY COLORS OF CHRISTMAS

*We celebrate Christmas with music:
with choirs, and carollers, and
flash mobs in the mall singing the
"Hallelujah Chorus".*

*We celebrate Christmas with memories:
of family gatherings, wonderful food,
and hanging stockings by warm
glowing fireplaces.*

*We celebrate Christmas with gifts:
tokens of appreciation for the people
we love and cherish.*

*We celebrate Christmas with beauty:
we deck our halls, trim our trees, and
make our world sparkle with light.*

*And we celebrate Christmas with bells:
bells on Christmas trees, bells hanging
from city lamp posts, bells rung in the
churches and in the steeples, all
pealing forth the news that the Child
has been born.*

***Jesus, Emmanuel, the Prince of
Peace!***

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Christmas Events

Ring in the 2015 holiday season in Medicine Hat with the first AgeCare Valleyview Christmas **Festival of Lights and Trees.** (65 Valleyview Drive SW). The festival runs until December 22nd. The public is invited to come and see the trees located in our foyer. Free Hot Chocolate!

The Medicine Hat Concert Band Society, directed by Bill Wahl, invites you to visit a **WINTER WONDERLAND**, featuring special guests from **Limelitez Dance Studio**; on Saturday, December 12th at 7:30 pm at **The Esplanade** . Tickets: Adults \$20, Youth/Child \$10 at the Esplanade Box office or www.tixx.ca.

Sunday School Pageant...."Camel Tales" on Sunday, December 13th at 10:25 am.

Carolfest at Fifth Avenue Memorial United Church 476 - 4 St SE on Sunday, December 13th starting at 7pm. An evening of carol singing and enjoying music from several of the choirs from Medicine Hat. The program will be followed with a time of refreshments and conversation. Free admission. For more information please call 403-526-2237.

Singers and Strings...an evening of Christmas music performed by the vocal and orchestral academy students of the MHC Conservatory on Monday, December 14th at 7:30 pm at St. Patrick's Church.

Irvine Peace United Church **Cookie Walk and Trade Show** December 15, 11:00 am – 4:00 pm. Buy a box for \$10 and fill with yummy cookies! Enjoy the wares from the different vendors. Join us for homemade soup for \$5/bowl.

Westminster Choir Christmas Cantata –“What Child is This?”
Sunday, December 20, 2015 at 10:25 am.

Christmas in the Country: Sunday, December 20th at 4 pm at Peace United Church in Irvine. Pot luck turkey dinner to follow.

Christmas Eve Services:

Peace United Church in Irvine: 4 pm

Westminster United Church:

7 pm (Family Service)

Gordon Memorial United Church

(Redcliff): 7 pm

Westminster United Church:

9 pm (Communion)

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Barnabas' Corner

Thank you to Faye Moria for her beautiful drawing of our Westminster Family Tree. Be sure to add your fingerprints to this wonderful creation!

Welcome to Kimmie Goodwin, the newest member of our staff team! Kimmie started as Westminster's nursery attendant on November 15. She loves kids, they love her, and we're so glad she has joined us.

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