



“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. ... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
Isaiah 9:2, 6 (NRSV)

PARTNER CHURCHES AND ORGANISATIONS

In this edition we hear from several of our mission partners about how Christmas is celebrated in different places around the world.

Sharing ‘Boxes of Love’ in Colombia



Vera Lacey explains how the Church in Colombia ensures that no one is left out during Christmas celebrations

The beginning of the Christmas season in Colombia is marked by Candle Night celebrations on 7 December. Impressive fireworks start the season and ‘festivals of light’ illuminate major cities. In less prosperous neighbourhoods mini-explosions from gun powder are the preferred choice!

enjoy each other’s company. In order for no one to be left out, as could easily happen in a country with seven million internally displaced people, many churches open their doors and invite people from the streets to share in carol singing, and small presents are given to children. Shared dinners are

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Traditionally, nine days before Christmas families meet to sing Christmas songs, read the Bible and

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PARTNER CHURCHES AND ORGANISATIONS

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organised for those who do not have extended family close by. So as foreigners, we have also been invited to such an evening by the school's priest.

People's generosity is even more visible at this time of year. At traffic lights, where vendors of lollipops and fruit and artists of all kinds try to make a living, you can see car drivers stopping to hand out food or small amounts of cash.

Last year, we joined the campaign of our girls' school, and filled up a Christmas box for a family living in one of the many *comunas* (slums) in Medellin, where 1 in 7 people live in poverty. The so-called Box of Love contains a present but



Christmas lights in Bucaramanga, Colombia

also useful items such as sugar, rice, dry beans, soap and oil. Last Christmas, 2,500 Boxes of Love let people know they were not forgotten.

Next year we'll be able to tell you how Christmas is celebrated here by the hundreds of thousands

of Venezuelan migrants who have fled their country's massive inflation, poor living conditions and food shortages. You could help them too, by donating to the Methodist Church of Columbia's campaign at www.icmetodista.org/en/venezuela

Christmas without the baggage

Keith and Ida Waddell explain the simplicity of Zambia's festivities

In Zambia the main celebration takes place on Christmas Day with most main-stream churches having also acknowledged the Four Sundays of Advent.

Christmas here is simply the celebration of Christ's birth without the 'Saturnalian-Yuletide baggage' of the European and North American versions. However, in Zambia's cities and recently-built shopping malls, there is a creeping commercialisation. People do send each other Christmas cards but there are very few decorations apart from in churches and shopping centres.



A decorated baobab tree in a shopping mall, Zambia

Christmas gifts are exchanged at home amongst family and friends, with Zambian children often receiving new clothes. This is when their new outfit, or Sunday best for the coming year is first worn. Our Christmas Service in

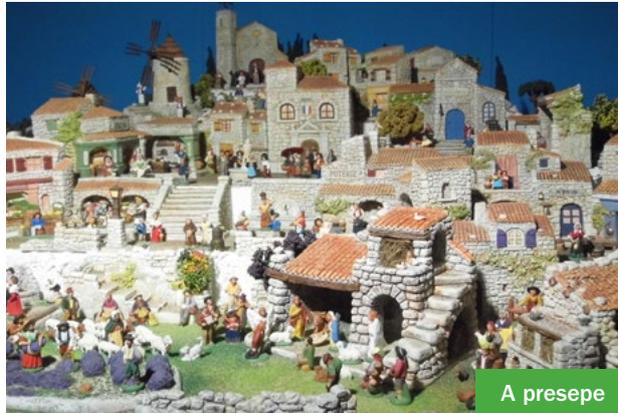
Lusaka begins at 8.30am. If you attend a local language service, you will find very few of the familiar Christmas carols or tunes we in the West are accustomed to. There are now traditional Zambian-language Christmas hymns and choruses.

Later in the day, the family with members who have travelled for the holiday eat fried chicken and boiled rice with coleslaw, onion and tomato sauce. Drinks are non-alcoholic maize beer (*maheu*), Mazoe (orange squash) or a Coke or Fanta and some cake or buns for pudding.

Christmas in Rome

Angela McQuiban describes a tradition from the churches in Italy

Over the Christmas period most churches set up *presepe*, or nativity scenes, with the Holy Family surrounded by many figures going about their daily life and work. St Francis of Assisi began the tradition



A presepe

in the 13th century and most of the *presepe* today traditionally depict characters dressed in the Neapolitan style of the 16th and 17th centuries. The scenes can be so crowded with people, animals, buildings and natural features that it is not always easy

to spot Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in the stable!

Some scenes are fairly simple; others more elaborate with flights of angels suspended above, maybe a small stream or waterfall and even moving

characters grooming a donkey, doing the washing or making bread. One church has a model of Pope Francis entering the scene beneath an arch. The *presepe* in St Peter's Square is much larger, with life-size figures and a two-storey inn.

We love to see the star, always depicted as a comet with a tail. When lit up, these *presepe* have a magical quality and attract many visitors and worshippers who often spend quite a while taking in the scene, where the Christ child comes again amidst our daily lives.

Comfort and confusion

Jane and Steve Day reflect from South Africa on Christmas in another culture

Christmas in another culture offers comfort and confusion. There is the comfort in celebrating the birth of Jesus with sisters and brothers from another continent. There is confusion when the climate is 31°C and the music in the shops is "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas"!

In South Africa, where we serve as mission partners, family is everything. We remember our first Christmas here when the church attendance dropped by about 70 per cent. In the words of one of our Zimbabwean members, "home

is home and Africans need to be with family at Christmas." Many of our congregation go to their rural villages for Christmas, whilst others travel back to Zimbabwe. They all face long and sometimes stressful journeys. One member told us how they ended up sleeping in their car on Christmas Eve due to border queues.

On Christmas Day we will lead the worship service with a smaller attendance than usual. Jane is already practicing on her Djembe drum so she can help lead the Christmas carols. Steve will



Astonishment and Bridgety – two of Jane and Steve's Zimbabwean congregation members

start to practice saying "Happy Christmas" in six languages so he can greet everyone – in Zulu, Shona, Xhosa, Sotho, Afrikaans and English – on Christmas morning!

Happy Christmas from Germiston, South Africa!

Celebrate the true meaning of Christmas

The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka is encouraging celebration with reverence this Christmas

In its specially-produced leaflet, the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka offers suggestions and recommendations for rediscovering the true meaning of Christmas. These include sections for congregations, families and Sunday schools. Go to the Methodist Church World Church News webpage to view the leaflet at www.methodist.org.uk/worldchurch



O little town of Bethlehem

Deacon Angleena Keizer, our mission partner in the Holy Land, reflects on how the message of the first Christmas is experienced and lived out by Palestinian Christians



Hundreds of thousands, throughout the year, come from all over the world to visit Bayt Sahur (which means house of the watchers) and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They visit the place believed to be where the Prince of Peace was born.

Since the first Christmas, Palestinian Christians have shared the good news of Christ's birth. They share their experience that the Light of the World still shines in the midst of the darkness of persecution, conflict and injustice. They testify to the world that they have beheld Christ's glory and continue to put their faith and trust in the One and Only, full of

grace and truth. They tell the world by their presence here in Bethlehem and surrounding areas: "Immanuel, God is with us."

God has not forsaken them or deserted them, so they turn their backs on occupation and turn their faces to behold God's glory. They invite the world to come and see, and go and tell just like the shepherds did. Not only to come and see the physical stones that are there as a marker to Christ's coming, but also the 'living stones' who continue to believe, and testify, that this is the place where the Only Begotten of the Father came.

Like the Palestinian Christians, Jesus was born during a time of occupation, in the midst of injustice. Like the shepherds, the glory of the Lord surrounds them and they have a message to spread.

May they, we and all peoples, join with the heavenly host to declare: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (Luke 2:14, NRSV)

And then together we pray:

Lord, just like Mary, may the Holy Spirit overshadow us. May the Holy One be conceived in our hearts. May we, like Joseph, be obedient, to trust and follow you. Like the shepherds may we tell the good news of the birth of Christ. May we bow down and offer our gifts to Christ, as the wise ones who journeyed from afar following the light of the star did. And may we rise up, to continue our life's journey wherever you lead us. Amen.



Women of the Methodist Church in Milan

Gathering from the nations

Grace Morris-Chapman tells us about the international flavor of Christmas celebrations in Milan

The community of the Methodist Church in Milan is made up of more than ten nationalities. It begins its Christmas celebrations on the first Sunday in December with a service specially dedicated to, and led by, the women of the church. This is followed by a Sunday school-led Christmas service which often consists of a play and prayers led by the children.

In early December there is also a day dedicated to our young people spent playing games, making Christmas decorations and Christmas baking following the German and Swiss tradition of making biscuits for Christmas. Some of these actually end up as Christmas decorations.

As part of its outreach to the community during the Christmas season this year, our church is planning a morning of Christmas fun and creative activities for children living in the area.

The church also has an evening of carol singing outside the building in collaboration with Breakfast Time (a church group which serves breakfast to homeless people every Sunday throughout the year – providing clothes and basic necessities as well as food).

On the 24 December we have a Christmas vigil service. During this service there is a special moment when all the lights are switched off and we set alight tea lights which are placed in special jars painted and decorated by the children of the community.

Then we all hold up our candles as we sing about Jesus, the Light of the World. During the service an offering is taken for charitable causes (such as Mediterranean Hope – which works with migrants). After the service there is a community party where people exchange gifts, play games and eat Christmas food from all over the world.

All these celebrations culminate on Christmas Day when we gather together to celebrate God's amazing gift to us in Christ Jesus.

Would you like a speaker for a World Church event or service?



If you would like to invite a speaker to your event, please get in touch with Carolyn Lawrence at World Church Relationships.

lawrencec@methodistchurch.org.uk

Note: We apologise that this email address was incorrect in last month's edition so if you have tried emailing Carolyn and haven't had a reply, please try again using this address.



Living Christianity in the Holy Land

A 12-day experience of Christianity in Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Galilee, led by former Methodist mission partner the Revd John Howard.

14-25 February 2019

This is different to a traditional pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We will visit some of the holy sites, but the emphasis is a lot more upon meeting the people and hearing of their lives. This will include doing some voluntary work.

For further details, contact John Howard at John_d_howard@hotmail.com

Overseas Opportunities

There are now several opportunities for overseas mission with the Methodist Church in Britain.

These include:

- **Mission Partner** – long term overseas mission programme.
- **Encounter Worldwide** – short term overseas programme for self-funded volunteers. Some funding may be available to support those between 18 and 26-years old.
- **Sabbaticals** – for ministers who feel called to some overseas work for a month or more of their sabbatical.

If you feel God might be calling you to serve overseas in some capacity do get in touch with us to find out more about these and other opportunities.

We look forward to hearing from you. Email us at: WCR.Admin@methodistchurch.org.uk



PRAYER POINTS

Pray for our mission partners as they celebrate Christmas far away from their families and embrace new customs and traditions.

Pray for the people in Colombia who will be receiving the Christmas Boxes of Love.

Pray for the Zimbabwean Christians travelling to their home villages for Christmas.

Pray for the international congregation sharing the light of Jesus in Milan.

Pray for our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters as they seek to show the love of Jesus despite the difficulties of the occupation.

Pray for the World Church Relationships Team seeking new ways to engage the Church in Britain and Ireland with Methodist life around the world.

Pray that each of us will be touched afresh by the message of Immanuel – God with us this Christmas.