

## **Christmas Messages from Leaders of the Christian Churches in Australia**

### **ANGLICAN CHURCH**

Archbishop Freier, Primate

Please click here to view: <https://youtu.be/3Ojxl7x-Y0E>

### **ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

Archbishop Paul Saliba, Archdiocese of Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines



Our Saviour, dearly-beloved, was born today: let us be glad. For there is no proper place for sadness when we keep the birthday of the Life, which destroys the fear of mortality and brings to us the joy of promised eternity. No one is kept from sharing in this happiness. There is for all one common measure of joy, because as our Lord, the destroyer of sin and death, finds none free from the charge, so He comes to free us all. Let the saint exult in that he draws near to victory. Let the sinner be glad in that he is invited to being pardoned. Let the Gentile take courage in that he is called to life. For the Son of God in the fullness of time which the inscrutable depth of the

Divine counsel has determined, has taken on Him the nature of man, thereby to reconcile it to its Author: in order that the inventor of death, the devil, might be conquered.

I pray that the New Born, our Lord and God would grant all the faithful of our Archdiocese and the people of this great Nation His peace and happiness.

In anticipation of the feast: Christ is born! Glorify Him!

### **ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST**

Archbishop Mar Meelis Zaia, Archbishop of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon

Every year, Christians all over the world celebrate the Holy Feast of the Birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Christians come together in love and thanksgiving and offer prayers to Almighty God for His everlasting grace and peace unto humankind.

During this Holy Season, we remember our fellow brethren dwelling in the Middle East and other countries facing oppression and persecution. Though in hardships, they continue in prayer and supplication - remembering God's grace and knowing that His Son too suffered and was persecuted "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Although he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich" 2 Cor 8:9

Let us unite with them in spirit and continue in prayer for our afflicted brothers and sisters that their salvation come soon, "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." 2 Thess 2:16-17

We wish all our sister churches a blessed feast of the Nativity and a happy and prosperous new year. We further pray our Lord's grace is poured upon all who call His name, now and always. Amen.

## **AUSTRALIAN BAPTIST CHURCHES**

Rev Keith Jobberns, National Ministries Director, Australian Baptist Ministries

### **Carols by Candlelight again this year?**

It is a puzzle isn't it? Why do the carols by candlelight events attract such crowds? Or to say it another way, why do people who show little inclination to be associated with formal religion enjoy attending Christmas Carol events? After all, the songs are primarily expressions of gratitude to God the Father for the birth of His son Jesus. What it is that engenders a desire to participate in such an overtly spiritual event?

It is difficult to point to one primary reason. Yes it is a fun community activity and yes the kids do enjoy it. And yes the ubiquitous fireworks are extraordinary. And it is a nice tradition.

However one wonders if there isn't a small niggling in the psyche of attendees of the unfamiliar desire to get touch with the great Other. Is there, even in the most cynical of us a quest for something beyond ourselves; something beyond our own manipulative and controlling tendencies? The quest for something "bigger than all of this"?

If this is the case, then God certainly knows how to cater for a desire of the mystique. The drama, danger and dreams, intrigue and miracles that accompanied the first Christmas do catch the imagination. The notion that the infinite God would choose to reveal himself in the life of a vulnerable baby almost beggars belief. But that is what the songs ring out at each Christmas carol event.

Is this why we go to the Carols in the park? Deep in our hearts is the longing for the Divine, for the wonder of the mystery that is God, for the hope that there is a divine plan that will finally override the chaos of our anxiety plagued world. That in the midst of the gloom there is a ray of light.

John in his Gospel in the Bible sees it that way when he writes about the coming of Jesus...in him was life and that life was the light of mankind. (John chapter 1:4)

The invitation offered to the shepherds who were captured by the mystique in the first Christmas season is repeated every Christmas to us all. Come and experience the hope that fulfils the deep unspoken quest for something that is greater than our own rational construct.

## **AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

Wayne Alcorn, ACC National President

*"It's the most wonderful time of the year"*. The words of this well-known Christmas song point us to consider the amazing spirit of giving that prevails over this festive season.

It was inspiring to hear that the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, recently announced that he would give 99 per cent of his personal shares to fund charitable causes. The birth of his first child was his motivation, in an attempt to solve the world problems, advance human potential and promote equality.

Such generosity has a familiar ring to it. The very first Christmas was marked by the purposeful generosity of a loving Father and the birth of a baby – a loving God who gave His only son for three significant reasons: to solve the world's greatest problem (sin); to advance human potential (by giving abundant life); and to promote equality (no boundaries of race or gender).

How amazing that the birth of one baby can have such a far-reaching impact on the lives of so many. Take the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem who were tending their sheep that first Christmas night. Their encounter with an angel proved to be a life-changing, pivotal moment in their lives that led them to Jesus.

*"But the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!", he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." (Luke 2:10 NLT)*

Interestingly the first words the angel spoke addressed their fears: *"Don't be afraid!"* We are living in days when people are feeling insecure and fearful about the future. The birth of the one known as the Prince of Peace can bring faith and hope where there is fear.

The angel went on to speak about the *"good news that will bring great joy"*. That first Christmas was set in the midst of turbulent times, not unlike the present day when we are bombarded by breaking news that is tragic, alarming or shocking. The birth of Jesus wasn't about starting a new religion but the good news is that through Him, we can have a relationship with a loving God.

The final words of the angel referred to *"all people"*. The Christmas message is not exclusive, but inclusive. Jesus has broken down every wall and there are no barriers – it is a message for everyone.

Our prayer for you this Christmas is that you will encounter and receive the wonderful, life-changing gift that God has given each and every one of us – His son, Jesus.

## **CHINESE METHODIST CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA**

Bishop Dr James Kwang



When the angels announced the birth of our Lord Jesus, they proclaimed this message from heaven, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14). True and lasting peace belongs to us only when our aim in life is to glorify God and please Him.

As we celebrate the birth of our Lord, let us as the chosen people of God take up our roles seriously to be God's ambassadors of peace and reconciliation. It is certainly our Christian duty, but also our honour as God's children, to call upon the people of our desperately broken and divided world back to God, back to our purpose of glorifying God in all we say or do. We cannot gain lasting peace simply by winning wars! We recognize that the Son of God brought peace to us at a terrible cost to himself, by dying on the cross for our sins and reconciling God to us in his own body. Only when we have peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins can we have peace with each other. Only when we enter into the New Covenant to live by the holy example and grace of the Lord Jesus can we live a life that is pleasing to God and a blessing to one another. Let us proclaim this gospel message with our lips and also with our loving action and holy lifestyle.

Wish all of you have a Merry Christmas and a Meaningful New Year!

## CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN AUSTRALIA

Reverend Janet Woodlock, Federal Coordinator



Luke records the message of the angels at the time of the birth of Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men."

God's plan for peace on Earth seemed like folly: a helpless and vulnerable baby, whose family was forced to flee their country in fear for his life. When this baby grew into a man he did not establish a kingdom by force; instead he established a relay of love. Those who were touched most deeply by his life fed the poor, cared for the sick, and shared a message of hope and new life. This flame of love passed from one soul to another, like a candle lighting ceremony on a breathtaking scale. Within a few centuries, a small number of people began a revolution: literally millions of people became followers of

this Way, this Person, this Light, this Love.

Receiving and relaying love changes the world; indeed, it's the only thing that can bring true peace on Earth. May you and your families receive and share this love this Christmas time.

## CONGREGATIONAL FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Dr Joe Goodall, Moderator



Our Christmas traditions largely come from Western Europe, where Christmas falls in the depths of what can be a bitter mid-Winter, where pre-industrial communities were trapped, isolated, by impassable roads and deadly cold. Days were short and dull. Nights were long and dark. And then, like a flash of light, came the season of Christmas. It wasn't the couple of days we celebrate now, but a couple of weeks of parties and celebrations, culminating in Twelfth Night when the "world turned upside-down". It is remarkable that in all that gloom, people found something to celebrate.

Of course, as the rather dour Puritans of the Reformation pointed out, there was not much that was Christian in all these celebrations. So the idea that the Christian Christmas has been hijacked is not new.

On the other hand, the winter of despair has not passed. Here where we live there may be blazing sunshine, but our hearts may be living in a winter. It may be a winter of the fear of religious conflict, a divided community, natural disaster or personal grief.

Like our northern European ancestors, we could do with a shot of joy when times are hard. We need to relieve ourselves of the burdens on our shoulders for a while, to forget the cold and the gloom. We need to eat and give presents, decorate our homes and welcome guests. None of this will drive the shadows away, but it will make us more capable of dealing with them. Let's not underestimate the importance of celebration in our lives.

For Christians celebrating the birth of Christ the Saviour the celebration is particularly potent. As Phillips Brooks wrote in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

May Christians give the gifts of joy and hope at Christmas to all people. May we all be able to stop and think of the good things we have, no matter how many gloomy shadows surround us. May we all use the pause that Christmas brings to revitalise ourselves ready to face the challenges in our lives, no matter what they are.

### COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

Bishop Daniel, Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church-Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions

**"Do not be afraid, I bring you good tidings and great joy." (Luke 2:10).**

It is our pleasure to wish all of you a blessed and joyful Feast of the Nativity, the birth of Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer.

Christ came to our world to remove fear from our hearts and grant us His peace which surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Christ came to cure the main cause of fear in human life, which is separation of man from God. Man was alienated from God but became a son of God only through the Incarnation of Christ, "But now in Christ Jesus", says Paul, "you, who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for He Himself is our peace who made both one." (Ephesians 2:13-14).

Despite the fear and anxiety that prevails in the world, we look unto the Saviour of the world who said, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), to dispel fear from our lives, society and world.

We pray for all people around the globe, inflamed with war, violence and terrorism, particularly the people of Syria, Iraq, Nigeria and France. Christ came to heal and restore broken humanity.

May Christ our Lord, born in Bethlehem, bless our beloved country Australia, fill us with inner peace, comfort and joy.

### GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

+ Bishop Stylianos, Primate

As we celebrate Christmas once again this year, in other words the Mystery of the Incarnation of God the Word (Logos), we are invited to approach God as Infant in the manger with **humility** and **gratitude**, in order that we might experience "*according to the measure of the gift of Christ*" (Eph. 4:7), the peace of God "*which transcends all understanding*" (Phil. 4:7).

**Humility** is imperative here because it relates to the "great Mystery of godliness", as the Apostle Paul preaches with devoutness (1 Tim. 3:16).

**Gratitude** is also self-understood, because this Mystery concerns the human person directly; every human who was created "in the image of God" in order to approach "the likeness of God" (see Genesis 1:26).

If the Incarnation of God the Word, for St Paul, constitutes the great Mystery of godliness, for St John the Evangelist this Mystery is illumined by the abundant light of God's **love**, which is the only

cause and source of Creation and the salvation of the world and humanity.

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn. 3:16)*

Having now identified the **Love** of God as the pre-eminent cause of the divine Incarnation, we must not forget that this Love has two characteristic features which distinguish it from any other meaning of love.

It is primarily **general** in that it is directed to “every person who comes into the world”, and secondly, it is **unreturnable**, in that it does not presuppose some exchange, but is offered **free**. For this reason, it is called **Grace**, because it is offered as a gift to every person, so long as one does not reject it, denying the gift.

St Maximus the Confessor who was the most mystical and profound Theologian of Byzantium says to us that, just as Mary the Theotokos gestated God the Word by the Holy Spirit, in the same way, every faithful is able to “gestate” the Word of God, becoming one’s self a “God-bearer” and a “Christ-bearer”.

However, as much as this teaching of St Maximus might sound irreverent, even “blasphemous”, we should recall that centuries before him St Paul had preached to all the nations that unprecedented point of his theology, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Of course, it is not only St. Maximus who consistently insisted on this **experiential** character of Christian theology. Other Fathers of the Ancient Church called the Incarnation of God the Word a “Second Creation”, as for example, St Athanasius who taught explicitly that “God became human so that we might become god by grace” and that “He became poor, that we might become rich by his grace”.

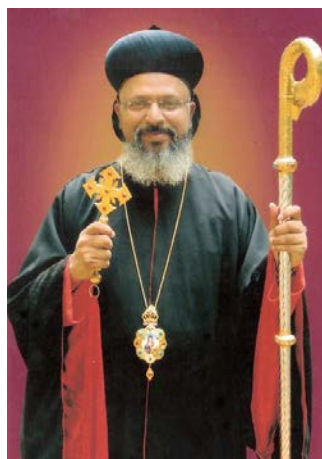
In concluding, we are able to say that the “theology”, not only of Paul, but also of Peter and John, is an extended and precise consequence of the New Testament teaching with regard to Grace, which also constitutes the “**fullness**” of God’s salvific Truth in the history of humankind.

Furthermore, we are able to comprehend even more clearly the deeper meaning of this “**fullness**” from the epigrammatic words of John “for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17).

To God the Word, who became Incarnate for all people, be glory and honour and worship to all ages. Amen!

## INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros, Metropolitan of Madras, Australia and New Zealand



Advent greetings!

Christmas time is on its way, bringing the good tidings to all of us. Heaven and earth are ready to celebrate the birthday of their King. It is the time to cherish peace and goodwill and to be plenteous in mercy. May our heart be lifted in praise for the wonderful gift of Jesus and the joy He brings to our lives.

The dream of each and every human being is to grow into the likeness of God – divinization. This dream is realized not through our

greatness but through the love and humility of God. God humbled himself to our humanity so that we may be raised to His divinity. Gregory of Nyssa states, "God takes on the poverty of my flesh so that I may receive the riches of his godhead". The birth of Jesus in our hearts marks the starting point of the process of divinization in our lives. Through Scripture reading, meditation and Prayer, we can decorate our hearts to be the manger where the birth of the Prince of Peace might take place.

We live in a world of increasing fears – fear of terrorism, fear of religious intolerance, fear of war and fear of economic collapse. The recent activities of terror by militant groups such as the Islamic State have given rise to panic and grief all around the world. Men, women and children have suffered and continue to suffer untold hardship, deprivation and death at the hands of terrorists.

The world desperately needs hope in these hard times. Christmas infuses hope, peace and trustful joy into mankind, torn by the anxiety of deep, bitter sorrow. We all should reflect more deeply on the virtues and ideals which Jesus espoused during his ministry on Earth. Peace and love for others were a constant refrain in the Messiah's teachings and admonitions to humankind. Therefore, as we celebrate birth of Jesus, I urge everyone to offer special prayers for a greater manifestation of divine peace in our World and the vanquishing of all demons of hatred, intolerance and disunity from our midst.

This Advent, may people live in freedom, worshiping as they see fit, loving others. May hunger disappear and terrorists cease their senseless acts. May peace, everlasting peace, reign supreme in this World. We hope that this season ends on a joyful note and continues into a safe and prosperous New Year for all. Sharing with you the Glory, the Wonder and the Miracle of this Holy Season. Have a Blessed Christmas and New Year.

## **LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA**

Rev Mark Lieschke, Bishop Lutheran Church of Australia, NSW District.

It's remarkable that a person can live for 100 years and still enjoy a good meal. And that's after more than 100,000 meals. You'd think a person would become bored with eating long before that! Not so; no matter how enjoyable and fulfilling the last meal was, it's not long before we look forward to another opportunity to eat.

In the same way, we need never become bored with Christmas! Every year we celebrate the birthday of Jesus, and every year we find real joy in listening once again to the Christmas story and singing the well-loved carols.

The story never changes, even though it may be presented in a different way. It's the same thing when we sing the carols; no matter how often we've sung them before, they can be fresh and lively and uplifting each time around.

The reason, of course, is that the message of Christmas is the Good News of the Saviour's birth, the One promised from of old. It is a message of forgiveness of sin, victory over death, and freedom from the power of the devil – the kind of food the world desperately needs to look forward to and take continually.

May our eager hunger never fade – until we sit down with the Saviour at the heavenly feast.

## **ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

Archbishop Denis Hart, President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

The recent horrors in Paris, Syria and throughout the Middle East show that our world has changed. The dark, foreboding thrall of possible violence, the struggles of nations and the never-ending lines of refugees underline the suffering which is so present in our human condition. It is not surprising that we become anxious and restless, and even when we do get some peace our wounds and memories are a burden to us.

Yet we sense that there must be something more to life. In the midst of this suffering and confusion the Lord comes to us again as a tiny baby. Pope Francis invites us this Christmas to be still and place ourselves at the Manger of Jesus and to ask ourselves, "Do I really allow God to love me? Do I really have the courage to welcome with tenderness the difficulties and problems of those who are near to me?"

If we spend some time in prayer then we will see the answer that God gives. He came to share our human nature, to make sure that we always had hope. Christmas is a time of joy because we know there is something more, that God will never desert us. The light shines, yes in darkness, but it will never be overpowered, because Jesus of Nazareth, the infant, has come once more to let us hold him in our frail arms and lives. He will teach us the way to true humanity, to see the beauty and dignity of each other, to give us his gift of peace.

May the peace of Jesus shine in your hearts and lives, now and always.

## **RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)**

Julian Robertson, Presiding Clerk

The spirit of Christmas was truly present when, at Christmas lunch in 1949, the Rev Frank Byatt in Victoria placed a simple bowl on the table, and encouraged all present to consider their own good fortune, and to share God's blessings of love and friendship in the form of a gift to help people who have fled the horrors of World War Two and were suffering as refugees.

So at this time of joy when our families come together and celebrate Christmas 2015, let us also remember those refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Sudan, Bhutan and Yemen who are desperately trying to find a safe place to bring up their children, and take inspiration from Jesus' example of love in action, as witnessed by Rev Frank Byatt.

## **ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

Bishop Mihail, Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of Australia and New Zealand

Our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ was born today: let us rejoice! The celebration of Christmas is the renewal of all hope and restoration of the creation. For there is no proper place for sadness, when we keep the birthday of the Life, which destroys the fear of mortality and brings to us the joy of promised eternity. Let then all share in this happiness and become beacons of the love of Christ to the entire world. Especially in today's tumultuous times, we must come before the Savior who became man for our salvation and be thankful for his incarnation and joyfully proclaim God's love to all in love and truth. Christ came to all and for all.

As St Leo the Great teaches us, "therefore the Word of God, Himself God, the Son of God who "in the beginning was with God," through whom "all things were made" and "without" whom "was

nothing made” [John 1:1-3], with the purpose of delivering man from eternal death, became man”...and in one person, the divine person of Christ, “majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality: and for the paying off of the debt, belonging to our condition, inviolable nature was united with possible nature, and true God and true man were combined to form one Lord, so that, as suited the needs of our case, one and the same Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, could both die with the one and rise again with the other.”

This is the mystery and at the same time, the reality which we celebrate at Christmas: God’s love for his beloved creation. Let us always keep this in mind and be thankful for all He has given us. May Christ, the Incarnate God, grant to this world peace, light and love and to each one of you, health and all good things.

## THE SALVATION ARMY



Commissioner Floyd Tidd  
Australia Southern



Commissioner James Condon  
Australia Eastern Territory

There is light for the journey! This is the message of Christmas.

The words of Isaiah are a welcomed and relevant message these centuries later; “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” Throughout the Christmas season, lights adorn trees, rooflines, and wreaths – a visual reminder that the Light of the World has been born. As Isaiah had prophesied, the birth of Jesus, born of a virgin, would bring light to those walking in darkness.

There are however, those in our world, our country and our own neighbourhoods who yet walk in darkness. This message of Light is still desperately needed. The declaration of John in his prologue is the message that rings out once again this Christmas - “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” There is light for the journey! Light that cannot be overcome by darkness.

Martin Luther King Jr has been quoted once again in recent weeks reminding us all that, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.” We celebrate, Jesus; the Light of the World, born to drive out the darkness. He invites those who once walked in darkness to now be bearers of the Light that transforms the darkness. The Salvation Army is grateful for the support of so many across Australia who support and partner with us in sharing light and hope.

Throughout this Christmas season and into the years ahead, it is our prayer that you will know and walk in the Light of Christ and reflect his light to those around you.

May you experience the gift of Faith, the blessing of Hope and the Peace of His Love this Christmas and always.

## **SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

His Grace Bishop Irinej, Metropolitan of Australia and New Zealand

### **GOD'S PEACE — CHRIST IS BORN!**

“How can a womb contain Him whom nothing can contain?  
How can He remain in His Father's bosom, yet rest in His mother's arms?  
It is His good pleasure to accomplish this. . . “  
(Orthodox Kathisma Hymn)

Today, as yesterday, observing everything which is happening in our neighbourhoods and in the world, we come to realise that our lives and even beliefs are largely being dictated by this incessantly pulsating Information Age. In such, can the obvious truth of Christ's birth readily be discerned? The person of the New-born Saviour has been reduced and replaced by characters specified by economics which has resulted in such folly and superficiality. It is precisely in this kind of induced fog that the rightful place of the family – that essential, meaningful foundation of our society: marriage, parents and children themselves – is distorted. For every child deserves to be brought up in the manner of Christ, both in the bosom of His Father and the arms of His mother. Today, we Christians who live in Australia and New Zealand are challenged and thereby invited to wholeheartedly fight for this right, for the sanctity of marriage and the family.

In offering prayerful regards that the Lord will open our spiritual senses, may we perceive the meaning of His coming amongst us during this festal season and throughout the forthcoming New Year. In rediscovering our path to salvation, may we welcome each other as heaven greeted the earth, with the voice of the angels, proclaimed the coming of the world's long-awaited Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, by joyfully exclaiming:

**TRULY, HE IS BORN!**

## **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH**

Pastor Ken Vogel, General Secretary

### **Christmas: a time to get to know God**

It shouldn't surprise us, but God's ways are so different from our ways!

And CHRISTMAS is just the time to come to terms with that.

CHRISTMAS reveals the way God fights against sin. God could have wiped sin out by wiping humanity out when we rebelled. But instead He chose to put Himself at ultimate risk so that He could take our place and die for our sins. The climax of this was when God chose to become one with His own creation – and did so beginning at the most vulnerable stage of human existence, a baby. That is why to have a genuine Christmas you have to put Jesus in the picture.

Yes, Christmas is a time to remember God's extraordinary act of becoming a vulnerable human so that He could save us. He is a real person in history. It is worth remembering that this Jesus who came in such a humble manner is, in fact, the King of kings.

Yet He is much more than that. He is the Creator. Our Creator came in humility as one of us and then died for our sins. Amazing! And the result is that we can find forgiveness through Him – in fact, it is the only way people can find forgiveness.

Let us, this Christmas, humble ourselves before such a wonderfully gracious God and seek forgiveness through Jesus. He is so eager to forgive. And in forgiveness you will receive a peace that passes all understanding!

God's ways are so different from our ways! And aren't we glad they are!

## **UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA**

Stuart McMillan, President



### **They Will Call Him Immanuel**

Greetings to you and your loved ones this Christmas from the Uniting Church in Australia.

Matthew's gospel account of Jesus' birth declares: "They will call him Immanuel, which means, God with us." Jesus' birth is a sign to Christians that God is at work in the world, walking with people, among us in our celebrations of life and in our suffering. Jesus is a sign of hope, and those who follow him are to be signs of that hope, bearers of light and love. We are called to walk with, sit with, cry with, laugh with, work alongside and listen attentively to others in their times of need and of celebration, just as Jesus did.

This year in the Middle East, Uniting Church ministers have walked alongside the Palestinian people as part of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel.

In a place of unending conflict and distress we have tried to be a sign of hope.

First Australians in our Church have invited us the second peoples to walk with them, to listen attentively and to share stories of God. We are also enriched by the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian community. Our Church seeks to provide what we call a "space for grace", making space for God and space for others whose cultural understandings may be different to our own.

At this time of year though, our hearts go first to those suffering pain and loss. Across the world people are fleeing persecution in record numbers, in Syria and Iraq, in the South Sudan and across Europe where more than three-quarters of a million people are seeking refuge as winter sets in. Many refugees continue to face unbearable situations, including – to our shame - in Australian Government detention centres. Please spare a thought for these people at this time.

Many of you have loved ones at home who are suffering in their own way – from mental or physical illness or disability. Others face religious intolerance, racial abuse, domestic violence.

While we often describe Christmas as a season of giving there are so many who need to receive support and reassurance. Sometimes the greatest gift you can give to another human being is to be present for them, in this we discover we are not abandoned or alone, and we discover afresh we are truly loved.

This Christmas and into the New Year I ask people of all faiths and none to be signs of hope in the world. Let us be present for one another in such a way that there are no strangers, that all people

will experience welcome and know that they are valued and loved, for this is God's grace through Jesus shared among us. On behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia may the peace of God be with you.

## **WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary

“Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.”

– Matthew 2:14

“...and the mother with her child is driven into foreign lands.”

– St John Chrysostom on Matthew 2:14, as quoted by St Thomas Aquinas

The miracle of Christmas is illuminated by God's glory and orchestrated with glad songs of joy. In Matthew's gospel we read of Magi following a star, learning of biblical prophecy, carrying lavish gifts for a child born to be king. The pilgrimage of the Magi brought them at last to “the place where the child lay”, a peaceful place where they paused in wonder; then, their journey continued along a new and different route as they told their story on the homeward way.

Amid the glory and perfect goodness of this great Good News, the gospel writer reminds us that the image of the Nativity is drawn against the backdrop of the often brutal world we know. Following the Magi's farewell to the Holy Family, Matthew tells us (2:13-14),

“...an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt”.

The guiding of the star at Christ's birth is succeeded in short order by the Flight into Egypt. The story of Christmas and Epiphany is incomplete if we fail to remember the Refugees... refugees sent forth with the whispered benediction of an angel, assuring them of God's abiding care.

In this Year of our Lord 2015, the number of refugees and other displaced persons in our world is greater than ever before. According to the annual report of UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, the number of human beings forcibly displaced from their homes is at least 59.5 million, up from 51.2 million in mid-2014 and 37.5 million just a decade ago. These daunting figures represent tens of millions of women like Mary, men like Joseph and children like the infant Jesus.

Reasons for displacement are many, and terrible in themselves. Warfare, injustice, persecution, disease and other natural catastrophes, as well as the consequences of climate change, are among the reasons for world-wide distress and human suffering. Root causes must be addressed, even as we seek to aid one another in ministries of care and recovery.



Throughout the past year, I have had opportunities to visit refugees and people in churches and agencies who are accompanying them in their trials. I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of spirit and affirmations of human dignity on every side. We have much to offer one another, including the qualities of dignity, compassion, hope and love. This is a critical moment in the lives of churches and societies on every continent and in every region.

In a recent communiqué on the refugee crisis, church leaders in Europe made these observations:

“As Christians we share the belief that we see in the other the image of Christ himself (Matthew 25:31-46) ... The experience of migration and crossing of borders is known to the Church of Christ. The Holy Family were refugees; the very Incarnation of Our Lord is a crossing of the border between the Human and the Divine.”

The same religious representatives concluded, in part,

“As churches this is an opportunity to share more widely experience and expertise in offering spiritual and pastoral support, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation and building bridges between diverse communities.”

At this time of the Christian year, we remember God’s great love for the world in the gift of Jesus Christ. And we read once again of the flight of his family in search of a safer place than home. We also remember the Master’s later teaching, as recorded in Matthew 25:40,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

In this festival season celebrating the Incarnation in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, let us honour every gift we receive from God in Creation, and let us respect every member of the human family!

May all the blessings of Christmas be yours, and may they be yours to share,