

November 2011

Pastor-Advisory Board

Rev. Bill Bates
Destiny Christian Center, Centralia

Rev. Earl Bradley
Capital Region Ministries, Olympia

Rev. Randy Burtis
Luis Palau Crusades

Rev. Mike Fogaras
Gateway Christian Center, Olympia

Dr. Stephen Hammond
Cornerstone Bible Church, Enumclaw

Rev. Ted Hanson
Abundant Life Fellowship, Bellingham

Rev. Scott Manley
Flood The Sound, Olympia

Rev. Scott Montagne
Bayside Community Church, Kingston

Rev. Jon Oletske
Stone Church, Yakima

Rev. Ken Parsley
Church on the Move, Yakima

Rev. Jim Ripley
Neighborhood Christian Cntr, Tumwater

Rev. Reuben Sapien
The Sanctuary Church, Lynnwood

Rev. Dan Secrist
Faith Assembly of Lacey

Rev. Tim Taylor
Watchman Ministries International

Rev. Dwain Wolfe
New Horizons Christian Center, Fife

Board of Directors

Paul Middleton
Chairman, Olympia

Jim Winterstein
Secretary/Treas., Olympia

Scott Blanton
Vancouver

Bob Higley
Olympia

Dorsey Holt
Shelton

Jere Irwin
Yakima

Peggy Kirk
Montesano

Dick Raport
Camano Island

Jim Robinson
Spokane

Fred Weiss
Bellevue

Rick Forcier
Executive Director

Staff

George Gauntlett
Data Administration

Beth Davis
Accounting

Julie Gallagher
Prayer Coordinator

Rusty Howell
Field Director

Steve Matthews
Field Director

“Holiday Trees” and Rum Punches

Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. --Luke 2:17-18

The lead story on the *Explorer* web browser this morning reads: “RI governor defends ‘holiday tree’ in Statehouse.” Critics of Gov. Lincoln Chafee say he is defying the will of the Legislature by refusing to call the prominent Colorado blue spruce staged in the Statehouse a “Christmas tree.” In January, the Rhode Island House of Representatives passed a symbolic resolution declaring that the tree customarily erected this time of year be referred to as a “Christmas tree” rather than “holiday tree.”

According to the governor, calling the tree a “holiday tree” instead of a “Christmas tree” is in keeping with Rhode Island’s founding in 1636 by religious dissident Roger Williams as a haven for tolerance, where government and religion were kept separate. Perhaps a better characterization of Williams, however, is that of a religious zealot rather than dissident.

Roger Williams, a 28-year-old Puritan preacher arrived in the “Bay Colony” in 1631 and was very much liked by William Bradford, John Winthrop, and Cotton Mather. Peers described him as “Charming, sweet-tempered, winning, courageous, selfless, God-intoxicated—and stubborn.”¹ Unfortunately, “he was so obsessed with being doctrinally and ecclesiastically pure that not even the Puritans were pure enough for him.” It was only a matter of time before he would need to “found” a colony of his own. And, most certainly, Roger Williams would not have championed either a Christmas, or “holiday tree,” in any statehouse.

While the Christmas holiday was first observed in the colonies among the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Moravians, who settled predominantly in the Mid-Atlantic regions and the South, the fact is, it was slow to be recognized in Williams’ Rhode Island and elsewhere in New England.

Historian Donald Moran notes that in the early part of the 16th century, “the Puritans in England, under Oliver Cromwell, outlawed the celebration of Christmas, calling it ‘Popish’ (Roman Catholic) and considered the secular celebration a continuation of pagan beliefs.”² Clearly, New England colonial authorities were influenced by Puritan and Calvinist beliefs of the day, and likewise, banned Christmas from 1649 until 1658. The “Assembly of Connecticut forbade the reading of the Book of Common Prayer, the keeping of Christmas and saints days, the making of mince pies, the playing of cards, or performing on any musical instruments.”³ Moreover, such activities drew a fine of five shillings per occurrence in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Moran writes: “Although Christmas wasn’t outlawed outside of New England, several denominations, mostly found in the middle colonies, were [also] opposed to the celebration. In 1749, a visitor among the Quakers in Philadelphia noted that: ‘Christmas Day. . . The Quakers did not regard this day any more remarkable than other days. Stores were open. . . There was no more baking of bread for the Christmas festival than for other days; and no Christmas porridge on Christmas Eve!’” [And] “At first the Presbyterians did not care much for celebrating Christmas, but when they saw most of their members going to the Anglican Church on that day, they also started to have services...”

“The celebration of the Christmas season in the southern colonies,” says Moran, “consisted of parties, hunts, visiting, feasts and church services. Christmas decorations generally consisted of holly and ivy strung throughout the house, with a sprig of mistletoe prominently displayed...”

“The traditional feast varied from household to household... but generally, consisted of wines, rum punches, hams, beef, goose, turkey, oysters, mincemeat pies, and various other treats. The season was considered a grown-up celebration, but presents would generally be given to children.”⁴

“Interestingly, Massachusetts was the first state to declare Christmas a legal holiday—in 1856. Within a few years, most of our shared national traditions were set, and Christmas became a federal holiday under President Ulysses S. Grant in 1870.”⁵ But back to “Christmas trees.”

Though German immigrants introduced the tradition to America in the 18th century, it took about 100 years for the practice to spread to other American households—and then, mostly in homes with young children. Presidents Grant and Cleveland had young children and both displayed “Christmas trees” in the White House.

But up to President Theodore Roosevelt’s time in office, there was still plenty of public opposition to the practice of cutting trees for the purpose of temporary displays. The U.S. Forest Service placed editorials in newspapers calling the practice injurious to forests and a waste of resources. However, by 1907, the tide was turning and even Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot was urging the creation of businesses specifically for growing Christmas trees.

Although “Teddy” didn’t permit a Christmas tree in the White House, the Roosevelt children enjoyed a tree at their cousin’s house. However, in 1902, eight-year-old Archie is said to have stashed a tree in a closet, and, with the help of a staff electrician, rigged it with lights and decorations—surprising the “First Family” on Christmas day. One account (attributed to *Ladies Home Journal*, December, 1903) says Roosevelt discussed the tree in a letter written the next day but did not offer his reaction.⁶

It is interesting that in colonial America, Christian fundamentalists were militantly opposed to gratuitous displays of merriment at Christmas, preferring a day to be set apart for somber observance, and as recent as 100-plus years ago, American’s were only minimally receptive to the whole idea of Christmas trees. Now, it seems, fundamentalists (please call us evangelicals) are staunch defenders of both. But, hey, we bring some good tidings of great joy!

While fir boughs, tinsel, puddings, and rum punches are delightful in their occasions, we suspect the matter with Governor Chafee has much to do with respect for our traditions and beliefs. But mindful that neither did the world respect the King of the Jews, can’t we just enjoy God and enjoy the season anyway? Here is Dr. Luke’s account of some people who did just that:

“Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, goodwill toward men!

“So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.” --Luke 2:8-20

We, too, glorify and praise God for all the things that we have heard and seen. *Merry Christmas!*

Rick Forcier

¹ Marshall, Peter, *The Light and the Glory*, 1977, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, NJ, pg.192

² Moran, Donald N., *Christmas in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, *Liberty Tree Newsletter*, Dec, 2001, www.revolutionarywar.archives.org/christmasthen.html

³ Alexander, Mark, “The Shepherd’s Christmas,” *Patriot Post*, 12/2007

⁴ Moran, Donald N., *Christmas in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, *Liberty Tree Newsletter*, Dec, 2001

⁵ Alexander, Mark, “The Shepherd’s Christmas,” *Patriot Post*, 12/2007

⁶ Lewis, Jamie, “President bans Christmas tree from White,” 12/19/2008