

# *The Messenger*

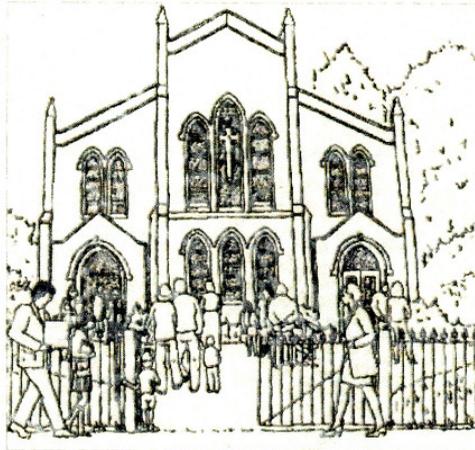
*and Mayflower Hall News*

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## *Billericay United Reformed Church*

*Joint Pastorate with Brentwood and Ingatestone URCS*

*MEMBER OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BILLERICAY*



Billericay United Reformed Church  
wishes you and your family

*A Very Happy  
and Blessed Christmas*

*"Today a Saviour has been born to you"*

*December 2007 / January 2008*

## Pictures of the Month



ARK's high pressure salespeople for its 2008 Calendar, featuring its own artwork and pictures of the members. A snip at £3, in aid of HHI

CTB organised a week's Prayer Vigil in the prayer corner of St Mary's for an end to World Poverty. Our members took a day to pray for the work for Climate Change. Margaret was joined on the beanbags by Hazel Pikett of Queen's Park Community Church.



The Bazaar took children's stories as its theme this year, specially featuring Willy Wonka with Oompa Loompa.



## **A Christmas Message from Kathleen Martin**

*Dear Friends,*

Is it too early to wish you a happy Christmas? We make much of Lent as a time of preparation for Easter, but there doesn't seem to be quite the same preparation in Advent for the all important coming of the Christ child. Each year we comment on the way the real reason for Christmas is overshadowed by our western life-style for more, bigger and better presents. So we often lose sight of what Christmas is meant to be, the Christian message of peace, joy, love and hope. How can we make such ideals a reality? So much is superficial, one might say artificial that even the greatest virtue of all seems to have been devalued. This looks pessimistic at a time when there should be much happiness, and indeed there is. There is the joy registered in the faces of children, the joyous singing of carols and the giving and receiving of presents. All very real when carried out in the name of the Prince of Peace.

There are many stories of nativity plays and I am sure we have our favourites from our own churches. Mine is recounted by the actress Wendy Craig. The children did not have to learn lines, but just ad lib. So the shepherds, dressed in their teatowels and blankets and carrying their woolly sheep made their way to the manger. They peered in, shuffled from foot to foot, but they were all tongue-tied. Then one shepherd, braver than the rest, called out in a loud piping voice "Coo, don't he look like his Dad!" In the simplicity of a child he had made a profound statement. He had declared the message of Christmas, the mystery of God incarnate. Jesus has certainly come to show us the way, to reveal the Father to us, so that, through the Son we might know the Father.

When we look on Jesus, not just as a baby, but in the maturity of manhood, we see what as his children we should strive to attain. It is then that we can become worthy children of the family of God. Then we can say with sincerity "**Happy Christmas**" and know there will be real joy as we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace.

**Happy Christmas, everybody!**

*Kathleen*

# Will the Age of Gold really come round again? .....and Where are the Shepherds?

## *Some thoughts on Christmas Carols*

When we come to singing those well known Christmas hymns and carols, how far do we pay attention to the words, or are we just carried away by familiar images and favourite tunes? Let's take one or two examples.



### 144

Noel DCM

English traditional melody  
extended and adpt. ARTHUR SULLIVAN (1842–1900)



### **It came upon a Midnight Clear**

This is a Christmas hymn we love to sing, although it omits much of the Nativity story. It abounds in rich colour and melodious music from hovering angels (though no shepherds) against a brilliantly illuminated skyscape. No midnight was ever so clear. But the more we examine these words, the less biblical they turn out to be. To emphasise the sweetness of the heavenly music the angels are strumming on their harps – harps of gold, of course! Dear old Luke forgot to put in the harps, so the writer supplies them!

Its most daring departure from scripture comes in the final verse when the 'prophet bards' foretell the coming again of the 'age of gold'. Biblical prophets were more often than not fiery awkward creatures setting themselves up against injustice and corruption, and certainly

not the troubadours this hymn would have them be. So where does this age of gold, with its image of the years circling carousel-like come from? We don't find it in the Bible.

The Age of Gold does not belong to the Judaic tradition, but comes from the classical Greek. It was the age of Saturn, an age of innocent happiness, when men lived without strife or labour or injustice, when the earth yielded its fruits in abundance and of its own accord. In Greek tradition it was followed by the Silver and then the Bronze age, when men destroyed each another in war, finally reaching the Iron Age, the worst of all ages. The writer of this hymn Edmund Sears was American and grew up in the benign Massachusetts landscape. He told a friend that as a child he fancied the hilltops rising to heaven where, 'bright-robed messengers alighted and rested, as they came and went on their errands of love'. It was only a short step in his imagination then to relocate the hovering angels to the Palestine landscape, even though the grass was not so lush, and the only humans were the outcast shepherds.

The darker third verse of this hymn, with its woes of sin and strife and its mention of bitter war were also real enough for Sears as America had recently experienced war, and the hymn was born of deeply felt depression. But it makes no mention of the Incarnation, the shepherds, the Christ child, or Mary and Joseph, it simply takes up the angel's promise of 'peace on earth' and lays the blame on us for our failure to attend to the harp music. It does not address the need to deal in human terms with the human wickedness which causes peace to be so elusive.

**Who would think that what was needed..?**

Turn now to a modern Christmas Hymn (178), much less well known and miles away from golden harps and angel choirs. John Bell and Graham Maule who wrote it are associated with the Iona community. It has the short refrain 'God surprises earth with



heaven, coming here on Christmas Day', but it surprises us not by the impact of a Hollywood-style aerial production number, but by the apparent anti-climactic everydayness of the happening: Who would think... that a child would lead the way?

This hymn too cannot avoid the reality of war. It marvels that what is needed might not be a plan or army, and far from putting its trust in the ever circling years bringing round another age of gold, it is saddened that experience questions whether the modern scientific progress we boast of actually improves us morally or spiritually. If there is any circling in this hymn, then it is by our unredeemed world in a downward spiral. The hymn's paradoxical lesson is the vindication of weakness: 'Such a place as none would reckon, hosts a holy helpless thing'. Though angels do get a mention they are not tricked out in theatrical garb, but are plain messengers with the news that God has turned the world upside down.

It is fascinating to follow this theme of lowliness and fragility through the carol book. Phrases such as Infant lowly, infant holy, or watch with humble eyes, like Mary, pure and wise, or outcast and stranger, or see in yonder manger low, all emphasise that the incarnation is not about celestial fireworks, but about God's love touching man's lowliness and giving it value. Is it time perhaps to apply more discrimination to our choice of carols we sing, and to dig beneath the clichéd words and images to set our minds and hearts to celebrating the true meaning of Christmas?

*Robin Derbyshire*



# Pictures to remind us of the High Spots of the Year



Trevor leads us in our Studies of the Big Issues

Mass participation at our Festival in May



Muslims form the South-East Essex Cultural Centre drop in on our Sunday service

Kathleen cuts her special Birthday Cake





Kenton and Tina tie the knot

Kathy and Bob Riester spend two happy months with us



Hazel celebrates 60 years of Church membership



Laura crosses the Atlantic with her parents for a Blessing from Kathleen



***.....so what awaits us in 2008?***



## The Millennium Goals - How are we doing?

*In the heady days of 2000, when there was much optimism about, the United Nations formulated eight Millennium Development Goals.*

*By 2015 all member states pledged themselves to:*

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality
4. Reduce child mortality by two thirds
5. Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality rate
6. Halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDs, Malaria and other major diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop an open trading system, reduce debt, improve access to affordable drugs, and to new technologies.

*2015 – we're halfway there! Are we making the necessary progress to meet the targets? This taken from a UN report for 2007:*

1. **Poverty:** The target is to halve the numbers living on less than a dollar a day. In sub-Saharan Africa 41% of the population still live on less than a dollar a day, but this is a drop from 48%. Parts of Asia, including India and China have greatly improved, but in the countries of the former Soviet Union the position is worse.
2. **Primary Education:** 88 per cent of children globally have primary education, but in sub-Saharan Africa the figure is only 70 per cent.
3. **Empowering Women:** In parts of Africa and Asia only 20-30% of women are in paid non-agricultural employment.
4. **Child Mortality:** In Sub-Saharan Africa under-five mortality rates are 166 per 1000. In parts of Asia around 70 per thousand. (For the UK the figure is 5 per 1000).

5. **Maternal Mortality:** Half a million women still die each year during childbirth, almost all of them in Sub-Saharan Africa or Asia, where only up to half of deliveries are attended by skilled health personnel.
6. **Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases:** By the end of 2006 an estimated 39.5 million people were living with HIV (up from 32.9 million in 2001), mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Malaria control efforts are improving, as more people sleep under insecticide-treated bednets. Reaching global targets for tuberculosis control will require better progress than at present, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union.
7. **The Environment:** Between 1990 and 2005 the world lost 3 per cent of its forests. Although efforts are being made to protect earth and marine environments the number of species threatened with extinction has increased. Only 22 per cent of the world's fisheries are sustainable, compared with 40 per cent in 1975. Emissions of C<sup>O</sup>2 doubled in developing countries between 1990 and 2004. An estimated 1.6 million people will need access to improved sanitation to meet the 2015 target, but on present trends the target will be missed by 600 million people.
8. **Developing a fair trading system, dealing with debt and sharing medicines and technology:** Aid to the poorest countries has not increased, and the rich countries, who promised more aid, have not kept their promises. Trade agreements to allow the goods from poorer countries to be exported duty-free have not developed as hoped for. Many debtor countries have experienced a decrease in their indebtedness, which has enabled them to spend the money on health and education.

## **Conclusion**

*At the half way mark we are lagging behind, and will have to increase our efforts if we are to improve the lives of more of the world's population as we hoped to do in 2000!*

## Children's Films - Bazaar Pictures



Willy Wonka's  
Chocolate Factory

Children's  
Fancy Dress  
Competition



Can it be Batwoman selling  
ARK Calendars,  
with her intrepid assistant?!

It's Harry Potter and friends  
selling handicrafts

