



# Making Christmas REAL

By Susanna Aughtmon

**I**t's the middle of summer on the cramped lamp-lit streets of the Red Light District in Amsterdam, Netherlands. I'm new to the Shining Light ministry of Youth With a Mission as I shadow my cousin, Alys, a staffer.

We whisper prayers and grip baskets filled with butter cookies, thermoses of tea, emery boards, and nail polish. Offering gifts from our baskets, we talk to girls who seem impossibly young, yet have already lived a life's worth of degradation. We listen to their stories. If we find favor, they invite us to join them in their windows where they sit waiting for their next customer.

With bold strokes of pink and red, we hold their

hands and talk about Jesus. You might wonder how painting a prostitute's nails could be Christmas, but it is. Despite the summer heat, the complete lack of Christmas festivities, and surroundings that couldn't feel farther from the gospel, Alys and I are celebrating the nativity to a degree we never did as children searching for gifts under a tree.

We are shining Christ's light into a dark place. Isn't that what Christmas is all about?

### **The birth of hope**

What is a real Christmas? The first Christmas was wrapped in hardship. Joseph and Mary's circumstances were harsh. Mary shouldered the burden of having her baby far from home. She



and Joseph had just completed a difficult journey to register in a tax census under an oppressive government.

Mary's first birthing experience was probably accompanied by a host of unsavory smells, animal sounds, and all the ambiance of a truck stop. Joseph had the task of caring for her and the Baby when no one would take them in.

Alone, far from family, stuck in a stinky barn, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Therein lies the beauty our hope hinges upon. The beauty of Christmas is that God chose to put on skin and step into the unsanitary, smelly mess of this world. Emmanuel, God with us.

On Christmas night, a sharp bright hope cracked

the sky. Our salvation, the hope of all ages, became a reality. That is real Christmas.

We can offer that same hope-birthing Christmas to our imperfect world. It may be a bit messy, cold or inconvenient. It may not look or smell like a holiday. But there are people and places needing a bit of hope and light rained down upon them.

There are Christ-followers doing just that, sharing Jesus and Christmas in a tangible way. Their methods are as individual as a winter snowflake.

### A Christmas carol

On a crisp December afternoon in Eugene, Ore., the gym at Willamette Christian Center begins to fill. Couple by couple, family by family, folks make their way to the bleachers. High school kids cluster in the corner, laughing. Excited children lap the basketball court. The rehearsal starts.

The sound of voices almost 200 strong, child and adult, high and low, echo as they practice five carols. The group breaks into teams that grab boom boxes loaded with accompaniment music and pile into cars. Within minutes, these carolers are ringing doorbells and crowding into nursing home multipurpose rooms.

The quiet halls of care facilities and the homes of shut-ins ring with song. Five songs proclaim the Baby who came to change the world. Hand-signed Christmas cards are slipped into frail hands along with a squeeze and a smile.

Regrouping at the gym, nursing bowls of turkey soup and eating warm biscuits, families recount their stories and the surprising joy found in offering up their voices, even shaky ones, in Christmas song.

It's not so much about carrying a tune as it is about chasing away loneliness. They feel the shift from the everyday to the eternal. Shining light into dark places. Real Christmas.

### The gift of Christmas

In a small house on a tree-lined street, the families of Pathway Church, a fledgling church plant focused on reaching Palo Alto, Calif., gather on a Sunday morning to talk about Jesus and how they can follow Him better. They have each brought shiny foil-wrapped presents to put under the church's Christmas tree.

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While the church is only 20 strong, their small mountain of gifts waits for New Creation Home, a facility for teenage mothers located in East Palo Alto. The community is a hard place to grow up — a harder place to raise a baby.

But New Creation Home offers a new life to these young moms, giving them a place to learn, grow and soak up the love of Jesus.

With some excitement, the Pathway members load the gifts into a van and deliver them, incognito, so the young women can enjoy the gifts with their little ones on Christmas morning. Gifts of diapers and diaper wipes. Gifts of toys. There is love and hope wrapped up in those gifts. Real Christmas.

## Away in a manger

In downtown Washington, D.C., at Capitol Hill's Lincoln Park, setup begins. There is the sound system, the hospitality center, the area for the live animals. National Community Church is prepping for its live nativity outreach.

In the midst of a town known for scandal and power plays, NCC members are getting ready to tell the most powerful story of all to their community. They have dropped fliers at local schools and advertised in the *Hill Rag*, a Capitol Hill newspaper.

As strains of Christmas carols cut through the biting air, people start to wander in. Families. Staffers. Neighbors. Handed a copy of the Christmas story, visitors stroll by the angel choir, shepherds, Wise Men, and baby animals.

At the end of the path in the hospitality center, guests are greeted with steaming cups of cocoa and the chance to mingle with NCC representatives. Like the shepherds who told the story of the first Christmas, NCC's families are spreading the word. Real Christmas.

## Creating a family

In San Francisco's Tenderloin, an area known for its homelessness and hopelessness, City Impact is readying 500 volunteers for a neighborhood outreach. Workers are cooking food, prepping bags of groceries, and assembling individual meals. These will be delivered to hundreds of shut-ins in the apartment buildings surrounding the Tenderloin.

Thousands of people reside there, many elderly and without families. Others are living with drug

addiction or AIDS. Entire families live in one-bedroom apartments, struggling to make ends meet. Forty-five of these families have been adopted for Christmas.

Business people and churchgoers alike fill bags with nonperishables and presents. Along with the gifts, they will be sharing the story of Christmas.

Last year, City Impact adopted a family that had been hostile towards the ministry and the message of Jesus. The father was diagnosed with brain cancer. The family was in a desperate situation, living in a one-bedroom apartment.

City Impact members arrived bringing gifts, food and a tiny Christmas tree. After opening presents and telling the story of how Jesus came to bring the gift of salvation, the volunteers got ready to go.

Before leaving, a team member asked the mother, Pamela, if there was anything in particular she had hoped for this Christmas — a gift she hadn't received. Pamela was exhausted. She worked endlessly to provide what little she could for her family. It had been a long time since she experienced any pampering.

"A fluffy robe," she replied, "a big, white, fluffy robe."

At that, one of her children announced, "Hey, there's one more present to open."

When Pamela opened the box she found a pure white, fluffy robe.

Sometimes real Christmas is a song sung in the corridor of a nursing home, a box of diapers for a newborn baby, or a cup of cocoa and the chance to hear the Baby's story one more time. Sometimes real Christmas is a white, fluffy robe.

But whenever and wherever it is expressed, real Christmas is a miracle. The miracle of knowing God is real.

He is here. He is willing to step down from the heavens into the mess of broken lives. Real Christmas is shining light in the darkest of places, pouring hope into the hearts of a shattered world. Emmanuel. God with us. **tpe**

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