

Dear Church Family,

Considering everything that all of us have had to face throughout the course of this year, my hope more than ever before is that this finds you and your family healthy, well and blessed as we near yet another Holiday Season. Thanksgiving Day is a mere ten days away and Christmas Day will be here in a little more than five weeks from now, as I sit here and write this column. I'm reminded with the approach of both of these holidays that in spite of all of the challenges, uncertainty and anxiety that 2020 has brought with it we still have so very much to be thankful for and to celebrate during this year, as well as any time of any year – yes, even 2020. This is because, come what may, we who are followers of the Christ of Christmas have the person, power and presence of Jesus Christ in our lives every moment of every day of every year!

One of the things I'm most thankful for during this time of year, even here in 2020 – especially here in 2020, is that this season provides us with an opportunity to refocus ourselves as well as those in each of our various life's circles on the “good news of great joy for all the world.” In a world where we seem to be continually bombarded more than ever with bad news and fake news and in a nation where we continue to deal with social and cultural turbulence, it's good to have a season of each year that serves as a reminder that in the Christ of Christmas we find a love, a hope, a peace and a strength that has been tried, tested, and found to be true since that very first Christmas! Paul reminds us of the foundational truth of this love, hope, peace and strength we find through Jesus when he writes in Romans 5:6 – “When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.” In a year that has been filled with more than its fair share of bad news and trying times, it's so very good to know that the truth of this everlasting good news remains the same!

Part of the hope and promise of this “good news” of the Christ of Christmas can be found in the fact that by His good news He seeks to make all things new for each and every one of us! Again, Paul reminds us of this fact by writing in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun.” If there's ever been a year where we needed to be reminded and assured of this truth, 2020 is most certainly that year! And just as He did when He stepped onto the scene on that very first Christmas over 2000 years ago, the Christ of Christmas seeks to step onto the stage of our life, our town, our church, our nation and our world bringing with Him healing for our wounds, mending for our brokenness, renewal for our exhaustion and restoration for our fatigue!

The Christ of Christmas doesn't just bring transformational change to our lives or our town, or our church or our nation; no, He seeks to change everyone and everything He touches for the better – and actually even better than better, He seeks to transform people, places and things for the very best! Where there is darkness, He brings light. Where there is despair, He brings hope. Where there is confusion, He bring wisdom. Where there is brokenness, He brings wholeness. Where there is inequality, He brings equality. Where there is sin, He brings forgiveness. Where there is death, He brings life! Jesus, Himself said in John 10:10 – “...I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it to the full.” If you've yet to experience the fullness of life that can only be found in and through a personal relationship with the Christ of Christmas, I encourage you to begin the experience of that life changing relationship today. And if you've allowed the circumstances of 2020 to steal the joy and peace that you've experienced through your personal relationship with the Christ of Christmas in years gone by, I invite you to take a moment to allow His Holy Spirit to refocus and renew your heart and soul with the promise of His love, peace, healing and joy!

During this Christmas Season, the Church of God here in North America will be joining together once again to do our part toward advancing the mission of ensuring that this “good news of great joy,” the newness of life found through this World Changer; this Christ of Christmas alone – comes to be known by everyone across our nation, our continent and our world. We will specifically seek to do this during the four weeks of Advent by reflecting on weekly Advent readings during Sunday services, by intentionally praying for the ministries of the church locally and around the world and by giving cheerfully to the Christ's Birthday Observance Offering.

This annual observance in monetary giving is organized by Christian Women Connection of the Church of God out of Anderson. The 2020 Christ Birthday Observance will be used to support frontline ministries of the church on a local, national and global level. The goal for the North American Church for this year's Observance is once again \$1,000,000.00. The goal for our local congregation here at South Memorial Church for the 2020 Observance \$4,000.00. I trust that many of us have been saving toward this cause for the last several months by setting aside weekly or monthly funds in the manila envelopes that our local Christian Women Connection Group provided us all with at the start of this year. Now I ask that each of us prayerfully consider what we should add to that total and be prepared to generously give toward the cause of local and global mission when the 2020 Christ's Birthday Observance Offering will be collected just a little over a month from now.

Our congregation's collective "undesignated" gift will be combined with countless others from across North America to help support the coordination and administration of missions both within North America as well as across the globe. These funds will also be used to train future spiritual leaders within our Church of God colleges, to aid the continued work of church agencies such as Servant Solutions and Leadership Focus, to provide funds for disaster relief and CARE initiatives, and to create curriculum and programming that will disciple and equip followers of Christ at the local congregational level. In other words, the financial gifts we collect through the 2020 Christ Birthday Observance will be used to build up and further the work of the Church! It will be used to equip the Body of Christ to serve as His Salt and Light; His change-agents to help broaden the message and effect of the tested, tried and true transformational "good news" of the Christ of Christmas to all people – helping to communicate this life changing news across our entire globe!

This year's Christ's Birthday Offering will be collected on Sunday morning, December 20, during our annual Candles and Carols Christmas service. Due to the ongoing issues with the Coronavirus pandemic, this offering will be collected in a slightly different way than normal for those who attend worship gathering that morning. For those who feel uncomfortable with attending the Candles and Carols Christmas service in person, we would encourage you to give toward this year's Christ's Birthday Observance Offering by either mailing your gift to the church, dropping your gift by the church during office hours or by giving online. If writing a check, please make the check out to South Memorial and simply write "Christ's Birthday Observance" in the memo line. Please join me over these coming weeks between now and then in praying for and seeking out the Lord's guidance as to what He would have each of us to give toward this annual offering in the life of our local church and in the life of the Church of God in North America. The Holy Spirit can use this unique annual opportunity as one of the many ways by which we can do our part in being change-agents of the Christ of Christmas – advancing the message and mission of the "good news" in our society, our culture and our world!

As I close, allow me to thank each of you as our church family for all of your love and encouragement that you have showered upon my family and me over these past thirteen plus years. I continue to count the opportunity I've been given to partner with each of you in life and in the fulfillment of the mission and purpose of Jesus Christ here at South Memorial Church of God as one of my life's greatest blessings! May each of us seek to be better change-agents of the "good news" of the Christ of Christmas throughout the upcoming Advent season as well as in the New Year ahead! I look forward to the joy and excitement of celebrating the Advent of our Savior and the love, joy, peace and hope of His coming with our South Memorial Church family for another Christmas season. From my family to yours, may God bless and keep each and every one of you, know that we love and appreciate each one of you so very much, and we wish each of you the merriest of Christmases and a very happy, and hopefully much better, New Year ahead!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pastor Chris".