



NEWS & NOTES

Looking back at 2016, some positive developments include: 1) Homelessness declining by one-third in a decade; 2) Maternal deaths dropping worldwide by nearly half since 1990; 3) Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, declining by nearly a quarter since 2000; 4) Malaria deaths falling 60% globally and 71% among African children under five since 2000; 5) Measles eliminated in the Americas for the first time; 6) Global hunger falling to a record low of 11.3%; 7) U.S. finally banning imports of goods produced by slavery and child labor; 8) 19 states passing 60 restrictions on abortion in 2016; and 9) Southern Baptists giving a record \$165.8 million in the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. The Weekly, 12/30

A U.S. district judge in Texas has issued a nationwide injunction against a mandate from the Depart-

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ment of Health and Human Services (HHS) that would have forced doctors and faith-based hospitals to perform transgender health services, including sex-change surgeries, even if doing so would violate their morals or religious beliefs. According to the lawsuit brought by three medical groups and eight states, "Under the new Regulation, a doctor must perform these procedures even when they are contrary to the doctor's medical judgment and could result in significant, long-term medical harm." Judge Reed O'Connor said the mandate violated the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), since it did not allow for any religious exemptions. The decision will be appealed, but the injunction prevented the mandate from going into effect at its scheduled date of activation, Jan 1, 2017. The Trump administration's HHS may also choose to remove the mandate, which would make continuation of the lawsuits unnecessary. FACT, 1/7; The Weekly, 12/30

Louisiana Gov. John Edwards tried to make sexual orientation and gender identity protected classes in the state's anti-discrimination laws through executive order but was stopped by a district court judge. Louisiana's attorney general filed the lawsuit against the governor for exceeding his executive branch powers in attempting

to bypass the Legislature.

In December, the North Carolina Legislature met in a special legislative session called to repeal HB 2, the bill requiring bathrooms in schools and public accommodations be separated on the basis of biological sex. The session ended when the repeal effort failed in the Senate, with 16 senators voting to repeal and 32 voting against repeal. FACT, 12/23

After receiving thousands of complaints from sailors about job titles changing to gender neutral ones, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson issued a memo explaining to Navy personnel that all rating names would be restored. FACT, 12/30

The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) surveyed a group of 27,715 self-described "trans-genders" in 2015 and discovered that 40% attempted suicide, 47% had been sexually assaulted sometime in their lives, and 30% experienced homelessness, among other grave statistics. In spite of the depressing statistics, National Geographic is featuring a 9-year-old "trans-gender" child in the January issue and calls him "strong" and "proud." FACT, 12/23

With recent decisions like Obergefell v. Hodges that allowed same-sex couples to "marry," who is to say people in the future

shouldn't just "marry" themselves? In fact, Good House-keeping recently published an article about self "marriage," a small but growing trend among single women. FACT, 12/30

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the Death with Dignity Act, adding D.C. to five states that have legalized physician-assisted suicide. A recent survey by LifeWay Research reported that 67 percent of Americans, including a majority of those identifying as Christian, think it's morally acceptable for a terminally ill patient to ask a physician to assist in terminating his or her life. FACT, 12/30

This is the second consecutive year that Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin has declared the "year of the Bible" for the state. Leaders in each county were tasked with reading through the entire Bible out loud as part of the state's Bible Reading Marathon that started on January 1st and lasted for about three and one half days. FACT, 1/7

A dancer with the Rockettes and a singer with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir have refused to perform at Trump's Inauguration because doing so would violate their conscience. The performers have been greeted with a much different response than cake bakers and florists who refuse to participate in same-sex weddings. FACT, 1/7

Health educator Karen Alexia Palma was initially granted a religious exemption for a small portion of the health classes she teaches at Legacy Community Health so that she didn't have to promote contraception, something she felt as a devout Catholic she couldn't teach. But the new management then required her to teach about birth control and also attend birth control training at Planned Parenthood. Because Palma refused to violate her faith, she was fired. First Liberty Institute has filed a claim on her behalf with the EEOC. FACT, 12/30

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) annual report on sexually transmitted diseases notes an astounding increase in STDs, yet does not explain that one obvious way to reduce the risk for such diseases is saving sex for marriage. In fact, the CDC's study doesn't mention marriage at all and only recommends more funding for it-

self and that individuals "talk openly about STDs" and "use condoms." Since 1983, rates of Chlamydia have increased over 20,000 percent. FACT, 12/30

New federal statistics show that the rate of drunken driving in the United States fell to a 13-year low. Even so, 11 percent of Americans 16 or older told federal interviewers they had driven under the influence of alcohol in the past year. This is down from 15 percent who admitted the same on 2002. In 2015, 10,265 people were killed in crashes involving alcohol impaired vehicle driver. Young adults - particularly men ages 21 to 25 - had by far the highest impaired driving rates. Wash. Post, 12/30

The share of U.S. adults who describe themselves as Christians has been declining for decades to 71%, but the U.S. Congress is about as Christian today as it was in the early 1960s, according to a new analysis by Pew Research Center. Indeed,

Make me Thy Fuel, Flame of God.' God, I pray thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus." — JIM ELLIOT

Jim Elliot wrote these words in his prayer journal as a senior at Wheaton College. A few years later, he and four other missionaries reached out to an unreached people, the Auca Indians. After a three-month campaign, they finally established face-to-face contact in early January, 1956. While the initial meetings were friendly something went wrong in a meeting on January 8th, and all five of the missionaries were speared to death. His wife, Elisabeth remained in Ecuador, established peaceful contact with the Indians, lived in their midst for two years and eventually saw their conversion to Christ.

among members of the new, 115th Congress, 91% describe themselves as Christians, down slightly from 92% in the last Congress. As with Republicans in the general public, Republican members of Congress are overwhelmingly Christian (99%). Fully two-thirds of Republicans in the new Congress (67%) are Protestant, while 27% are Catholic. On the other side of the aisle, 42% of the Democratic members are Protestants and 37% are Catholics; the rest are a mix including 10 Democratic members of Congress who decline to state their religious affiliation.

Pew, 1/3

■ A Gallup survey finds that Americans trust their healthcare providers to be honest and ethical, with nurses at the top of the list at 84% rating as “high” or “very high.” Apart from engineers (65%) and police officers (58%) using the same criteria, other professions fell below 50% with members of Congress (8%) at the bottom, just below car salesmen (9%). Americans’ “high” or “very high” ratings of the clergy slipped to 44%, its lowest point since Gallup

first asked the question in 1977. Gallup, 12/19

■ While other cable channels are trying to seduce viewers with provocative content, Hallmark has stood by its family friendly original programming and the efforts have paid off. Hallmark’s viewership increased by 46 percent this year.

FACT, 12/23

■ While war in the Middle East dominated international headlines, Islamic extremists in the shadows were taking jihad to Christian civilians in Africa with unprecedented intensity in 2016. In Nigeria, Muslim ethnic Fulanis looked less like nomadic herdsman and more like well-armed, well-funded jihadist militants. Close Muslim relatives and Islamist village mobs attacked their Christian kin in Uganda, while Somalia’s Al Shabaab rebels intensified their campaign to drive Christians from northern Kenya. At the same time, courts in Turkey and Pakistan made history in 2016 by finally providing some measure of justice in cases of slain Christian martyrs. Five Turkish men were finally sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of pa-

role for the murder of three Christians in southeast Turkey in 2007. Six Pakistani Muslims were sentenced to death for three murders in 2016, with one convicted killer executed.

Morning Star News, 1/6

■ During nearly 70 years of Soviet rule, religious practice had been gradually forced out of public and private life. Faith leaders were sent to labor camps and sacred buildings fell into disrepair. But 25 years ago, the tide was turning. Newly established constitutions protected religious freedom and sought to create environments where churches and the state could thrive. Leaders recognized “the positive contribution religion could make to the building of new countries,” said Brian Grim, who worked in the region. But this optimism soon gave way to paranoia due to pressure from Orthodox Christian leaders and the rise of religiously motivated terrorism in surrounding countries. Half of the 15 former Soviet countries were called out this year by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for their problematic religious freedom policies. Orthodox leaders have become major political players, pushing for policies that can discourage the growth of newer faith groups. In countries like Russia and Uzbekistan, strict registration requirements and other forms of government interference plague religious communities.

Deseret News, 12/29

SHINE THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

The Magi, the Epiphany, and Ben Hur

by John Stonestreet

January 6 is a major Christian holiday that most Americans know little about: the *Feast of the Epiphany*. From the Greek word meaning “manifestation,” it celebrates the visitation of the Magi to the infant Jesus and his family in Bethlehem.

Until recently, in much of the Christian world, gifts were exchanged on Epiphany, not Christmas day. A colleague of mine, who lived in Puerto Rico when he was kid, recalls neighborhood children leaving straw out for the Magi’s camels on the night before Epiphany.

While people in Puerto Rico, like people elsewhere, have shifted their gift-giving to December 25, Epiphany still remains central to our Christian faith and is worthy of our attention.

Among those who understood this was Lew Wallace. Few, if any, Americans have lived as eventful a life as Wallace did. Civil War buffs will tell you he may have saved the Union at the Battle of Monocacy in 1864. His forces delayed Confederate General Jubal Early long enough to prevent him from possibly capturing Washington, D.C.

Later, as territorial governor of New Mexico, Wallace dealt with the likes of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid.

But it was a reunion of Civil War veterans that led to the action for which Wallace is best known today. John Murray, head of the Central Christian School in St. Louis and a commissioned Colson Fellow, told the story a few years ago at the Fox News website.

On a train ride to an 1876 reunion in Indianapolis, Wallace was reunited with Colonel Robert Ingersoll, who was known as the “great agnostic.” Ingersoll traveled across the country deriding and challenging people of faith.

Ingersoll didn’t spare his old comrade-in-arms, even though Wallace, at the time, was at best “indifferent” to his own Christian

faith. Wallace later wrote, “To lift me out of my indifference, one would think only strong affirmations of things regarded holiest would do. Yet here was I now moved as never before, and by what? The most outright denials of all human knowledge of God, Christ, Heaven, and the Hereafter which figures so in the hope and faith of the believing everywhere. Was the Colonel right?”

Determined to prove Ingersoll wrong, Wallace returned to a short story he had written during the Civil War. The story centered on the Magi, “who had captured his attention as a young boy -- taking a ‘lasting hold on his imagination.’”

Wallace asked “Who were they? Whence did they come?” Above all, “what led them to Jerusalem asking of all they met the strange question, ‘Where is he that is born King of the Jews?’”

Starting with this meditation on the Epiphany, Wallace expanded his story over the years, adding more and more meditations on the life of Christ.

And eventually, in 1880, he published his finished work. Perhaps, you’ve heard of it: “Ben Hur: The Tale of the Christ.” The story about a fictitious Jewish prince named Judah Ben-Hur was the means by which Wallace “showed the necessity of a Savior.”

It remained the best-selling American novel until “Gone with the Wind” in 1936. And of course it was the basis of the 1959 film starring Charlton Heston, which won a record 11 Oscars.

By the time Wallace died in 1905, he believed he had met Ingersoll’s challenge. Millions of Americans agreed. And it all began with his reflecting on the visit of the Magi.

A reflection that led Wallace, like the Magi before him, to take the light of Christ to those around him. Not just to Ingersoll but to the millions who read “Ben Hur.”

ENTERTAINMENT NOTES

★★NEW MOVIES

	Quality	Moral	Age
<i>Sing</i>	PG	+4	+1 All
<i>Hidden Figures</i>	PG-13	+4	-1 12+
<i>A Monster Calls</i>	PG-13	+4	-1 T/A
<i>Passengers</i>	PG-13	+3	-2 T/A
<i>Fences</i>	PG-13	+3	-2 A
<i>Assassin’s Creed</i>	PG-13	+2	-4 T/A

A- Adult, T-Teen, OT- Older Teen

Film “Quality” is an estimate (+1 to +4) of appeal for the intended audience or age group. “Moral” rating ranges from extremely objectionable (-4) to very good (+4). movieguide.org; pluggedin.com