

Through a beloved Advent festival a Covenant church celebrates its heritage and its future.

# Lighting the Way Forward

MARK SAFSTROM AND JOHANNA KNUDSEN

Every year at First Covenant Church in Seattle, the beginning of the Advent season is ushered in by a frantic surge of activity. Garlands and trees are decorated with straw ornaments in the shape of the Star of David, and large black iron candelabras frame the elegant chancel of First Covenant's unique round sanctuary. The youth choir works hard to learn the Swedish lyrics of Christmas songs about gingerbread people and their livestock, as well as lullabies for the Christ child. The smell of fresh-baked, almond-flavored spritz cookies fills the fellowship hall. One high-school girl practices balancing a crown of seven candles on her head as she commemorates the 1,700-year-old story of the martyred St. Lucia. She also braces herself to bear the pain of the hot wax that will inevitably run down her face as she tries to sing her solo.

Christmas traditions are indeed bizarre—and wonderful!

This is how Advent has begun here in Seattle for the past fifty years, preparing for the Julfest, an evening service of lessons and carols. The annual event involves some of the beloved hymns from the early Mission Covenant Church, as well as the former Augustana Lutheran Church and the national Lutheran churches of Scandinavia, played by string band and bells, and sung

by a festival choir. If you find yourself within driving distance of Seattle on Sunday, December 7, you are welcome to attend this unique, bilingual Christmas celebration. Come early, though, if you want a seat!

Every year, the preparation for this service prompts reflection on several levels, as we inevitably ask ourselves why we go to such great lengths to put on a program of this scale and this theme. Every year, the answers seem to change slightly. In the course of the past half century, the reasons for putting on the Julfest have indeed changed.

First Covenant, like other Covenant churches of its vintage, began as a Swedish-speaking congregation. Founded in 1889, the church preached the gospel in Swedish language to often packed-out crowds until the 1930s, when immigration from Scandinavia slowed to a trickle. The gradual, and understandably difficult, transition to English services was completed in 1940. By then, First Covenant's fo-

Throughout Christian history, believers have looked to tradition and heritage for inspiration. This is the reason why we share our Christian testimonies in our small groups and at our summer camps. This is the reason why we as Covenanters explore race relations in our Sankofa journeys, with the hope of "looking back in order to move forward." The Julfest program was born out of just such a twofold vi-

dinner party at the home of Blanche and Hjalmer Lindberg, a plan was launched for a festival that would be an outreach event. Reminiscing about the songs and traditions of their childhood, they and their guests, which included Winston Johnson and Helen Blomgren, mapped out a plan for the next year's event. Little did they know that their Christmas program would last a half century.

The fifty-year run of the program has ebbed and flowed as any such program will. The Julfest has increasingly included English language since the late 1970s, as the number of native Swedish speakers in the Seattle area has diminished. Now the direction of the program has been fully passed on to a generation of polyglot church members who have English as their mother tongue, and who courageously fumble their way through the Swedish prayers and hymns.

Every year brings change, as the par-



Clockwise from top: Delores Peterson and her attendants in the first Julfest at First Covenant in 1958. The festival choir circa 1970 in the round sanctuary. The Lucia procession lights up a dark sanctuary.

cus had shifted to a primarily English-speaking mission field.

However, such clean transitions in history are never very believable. People are not robots and rarely make such drastic, about-face changes. We come with baggage, and sentimentality calls us to reflect on the past as we ponder the possibilities of an unknown future.

sion for ministry, a chance to share old testimonies and preach a fresh gospel.

The first Julfest was the brainchild of several church members who realized the potential for ministry that lay in a music festival of Scandinavian Lutheran heritage. In 1957, at a Christmas

participants continue to reflect on the traditions and the stories behind them. In recent years, the girls interested in being chosen as the "Lucia bride" have been asked to complete a service project and relate it to the story of the historical St. Lucia. We have been very impressed by all of the thoughtful reflections on community service that our girls have written, as well as the maturity of their

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**This year's Julfest will be held Sunday, December 7 at 4 p.m. The church is located at 400 East Pike Street in Seattle. For more information, contact the church at (206) 322-7411; [www.seattlefirstcovenant.org](http://www.seattlefirstcovenant.org).**

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faith demonstrated in their service projects.

Despite all of the changes over the years, there is a remarkably strong sense of ownership of the event among young and old alike. This intergenerational appeal of the program seems to be one of the reasons why it has been popular for so long. The music and traditions have continued to communicate a legacy of Christian faith that extends beyond Seattle of the twenty-first century, connecting a modern-day congregation to the activity of nineteenth-century Lutheran Pietists in Scandinavia, as well as the ancient, apostolic church. While the program has a definite ethnic element to it, this heritage is not the property of a single ethnic group, but of any and all Christians who find inspiration in it. As several church members have often remarked, the Julfest is an “easy invite” for their co-workers and neighbors who are unchurched. It is in this more-the-merrier spirit of Christian fellowship and evangelism that the Julfest team has prepared for the service once again this year.

The Evangelical Covenant Church’s remarkable growth in recent years and especially its broadened ethnic base is both exciting and perplexing. It would be easy to become overwhelmed by questions of how an increasingly diverse Covenant can hang together. “New” Covenanters may be confused by “old” Covenanters who appear obsessed with St. Lucia or the hymns of Lina Sandell, Nils Frykman, or A.L. Skoog. Old timers will wonder if newcomers will appreciate the zeal and genius of founders like David Nyvall or P.P. Waldenström.

It is our hope that in the ongoing process of building our Covenant the church will continue to draw from its rich heritage as it casts visions for the future. Our notions of what constitutes Covenant heritage will need to be elastic, and learning from each other’s diverse histories will undoubtedly be crucial. It is with this in mind that we say, “Welcome to the golden jubilee Julfest in Seattle!” □