

Remember December:

- December 1 - World AIDS Day, recognized by the UN
- December 2 - International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, recognized by the UN
- December 3 - International Day of Persons with Disabilities, recognized by the UN
- December 9 - The International Day against Corruption, recognized by the UN
- December 10 - Human Rights Day, recognized by the UN
- December 20 - International Human Solidarity Day, recognized by the UN
- December 25 - Christmas; International Day to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ

December is an important month; many special days are recognized by the United Nations and governments around the world. Most of these mark major global issues that need to be remembered and require action. What about the recognition of the birth of Jesus Christ? What is its significance for the world today and for individual? Let's look at some of the December days.

World AIDS Day reminds us of a global pandemic. According to "Wikipedia": "AIDS has killed more than 25 million people between 1981 and 2007,^[1] and an estimated 33.2 million people worldwide live with HIV as of 2007,^[2] making it one of the most destructive epidemics in recorded history. Despite recent, improved access to antiretroviral treatment and care in many regions of the world, the AIDS epidemic claimed an estimated 2 million lives in 2007,^[3] of which about 270,000 were children."^[4]



Early 2007 I attended a conference about HIV/AIDS in Uganda and visited projects working with AIDS patients. In some places I realized that all the people I talked to had AIDS. There were some who served food, worked in administration, sang in the choir or held a presentation. They all had AIDS but also had hope because of the medication they could now receive giving them new dignity. I was impressed by their courage and often their faith in a loving God despite rejection, bias, superstition and sometimes even condemnation by church people. I imagined Jesus would walk amongst them and love them unconditionally.

The abolition of slavery is remembered in Africa, among African Americans in the USA and islands in the Caribbean. I visited historical slave fortresses in Ghana and Senegal and lived in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a safe haven for freed slaves. One humbling experience was standing on the steps of "El Mina" castle (see photo), a slave trading post on the coast of Ghana. A plaque was chiseled in Dutch to remember the governor who died from malaria; he came from Zeeland, my home province, with the main objective to make money in the slave trade. We, as 'Westerners', have not always left a good heritage in Africa. One day I was privileged to participate in a reconciliation meeting at the El Mina castle in which descendants of slave traders, merchant seamen, American slave owners and descendents from tribes who sold other Africans all confessed the sins of their ancestors. We all asked for forgiveness and celebrated reconciliation. I can imagine Jesus reaching out to the outcasts, urging us to set the captives free. And even today as human trafficking and new forms of slavery still exist, we are called into action.



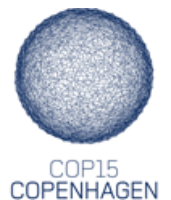
The International Day of persons with disabilities is close to my heart. It is estimated that 10 % of the world's population has some form of disability; that could be as many as 650 million people of which approximately 80 % live in developing countries. In Sierra Leone we worked with hundreds of polio victims who with time became victors over illiteracy and poverty. We assisted amputees who conquered challenges to become football players. The deputy director of our rehabilitation centre walked with crutches as a result of polio. He is one of my heroes; an advocate who a couple of years ago represented persons with disabilities on behalf of Sierra Leone at the UN in Geneva. I imagine Jesus healing the blind, the deaf, lifting up the lame, and loving the unlovable.



I could go on about the other major December Days: the battle against *corruption*, one of the major causes of poor people staying poor. Where is the aid money going; to relief and development projects or to fill pockets of corrupt individuals? I imagine Jesus overturning the tables of moneychangers in the temple... what would he do with the unjust use of money today?

Human Rights Day and *International Human Solidarity Day* follow similar themes of focusing on the rights of the poor, the refugees, the downtrodden, those who are vulnerable and the rejects, those on the margin of human existence.

As I write this article, the Copenhagen Climate summit is going on – the host city has even been named “*Hopenhagen*”. It looks like the world is looking for a savior – someone who can turn down the thermostat and prevent an overheating disaster. NGO’s jump on the climate train/bandwagon; there may be money in “climate projects”; it’s trendy, fashionable even for global warming skeptics to come out and heat up the hype and debate. What does it mean for us? We should try to “beat the heat” and be careful with how much energy and resources we consume; after all God created man to be good stewards over creation.



Back to December Days to remember our good causes... *Christmas, December 25th* – not even the real birth date of Jesus Christ. What is still “recognized” about the *birth of Jesus*? The real “reason for the season” has become diluted; it’s not about the tree, the lights, the gifts, the food, and it’s not about the snow, the sleigh, the Santa. It’s not even about the shepherds, the sheep, the stars and the stable. What is the essence of December 25?

A theme I love about the birth of Jesus is that He is God who became man, just like us. He was not an executive or a politician, He was a refugee when he fled to Egypt (see picture), later became a carpenter. He did not aspire to become a “star”, He became a teacher, a man with love and compassion for the sick, the poor, the lost, those who needed saving. He is “Immanuel” – God with us (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). The need for all the special December Days shows us a world that is lost; mankind that is “missing the mark” and “going off course” which are original meanings of the unpopular word “sin”. So when Jesus came as Immanuel, He hit the target where we missed it. When we admit our failures and faults He took those failures on His back and to the cross. The crib led to the cross, and as Immanuel He died as one man for us all. We can fill in our failures one by one but He took them and bridged the gap of separation between man and God. He restores us to our destiny, to love God and to love our “neighbor”. In the name of Immanuel we make a difference as we follow Him and take His mission of love, forgiveness and change to the world. In His name we work against disease, slavery and disability, abuse of human rights and towards better stewardship over the world.

